The Effect of Streaming Chat on Perceptions of Debates

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- Three contexts
  - Control (standard NBC broadcast)
  - Expert chat (538 website)
  - Streaming chat (Facebook)

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  - Social media as public opinion

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  - Maybe bad (reinforcing anti-deliberative, discriminatory and even hateful primes)

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  - Can only observe local nodes
  - Bad at discounting representativeness; network structure of social media makes it harder

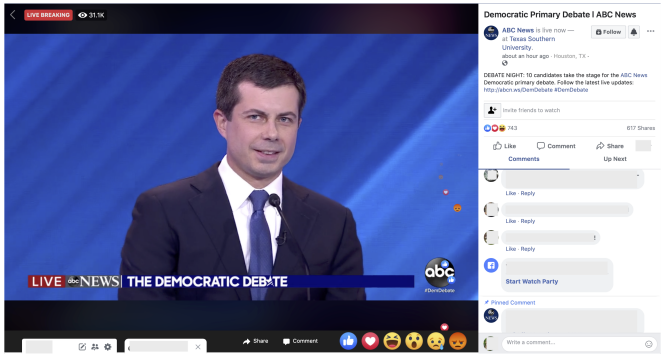
Summary of Theoretical Pathways

How does streaming chat influence perceptions of political events?

- **Frequency**: High volume comments increases distraction and information overload.
- **Content**: Topics discussed serve as primes.
- **Context**: Commenter composition leads to inaccurate inferences of overall public opinion.

Research Design and Sample

Facebook (Social) vs. ABC (Control) vs. FiveThirtyEight (Expert)



Research Design and Sample

Two-Wave Survey September 2019 through MTurk (following Gross, Porter and Wood, 2019).

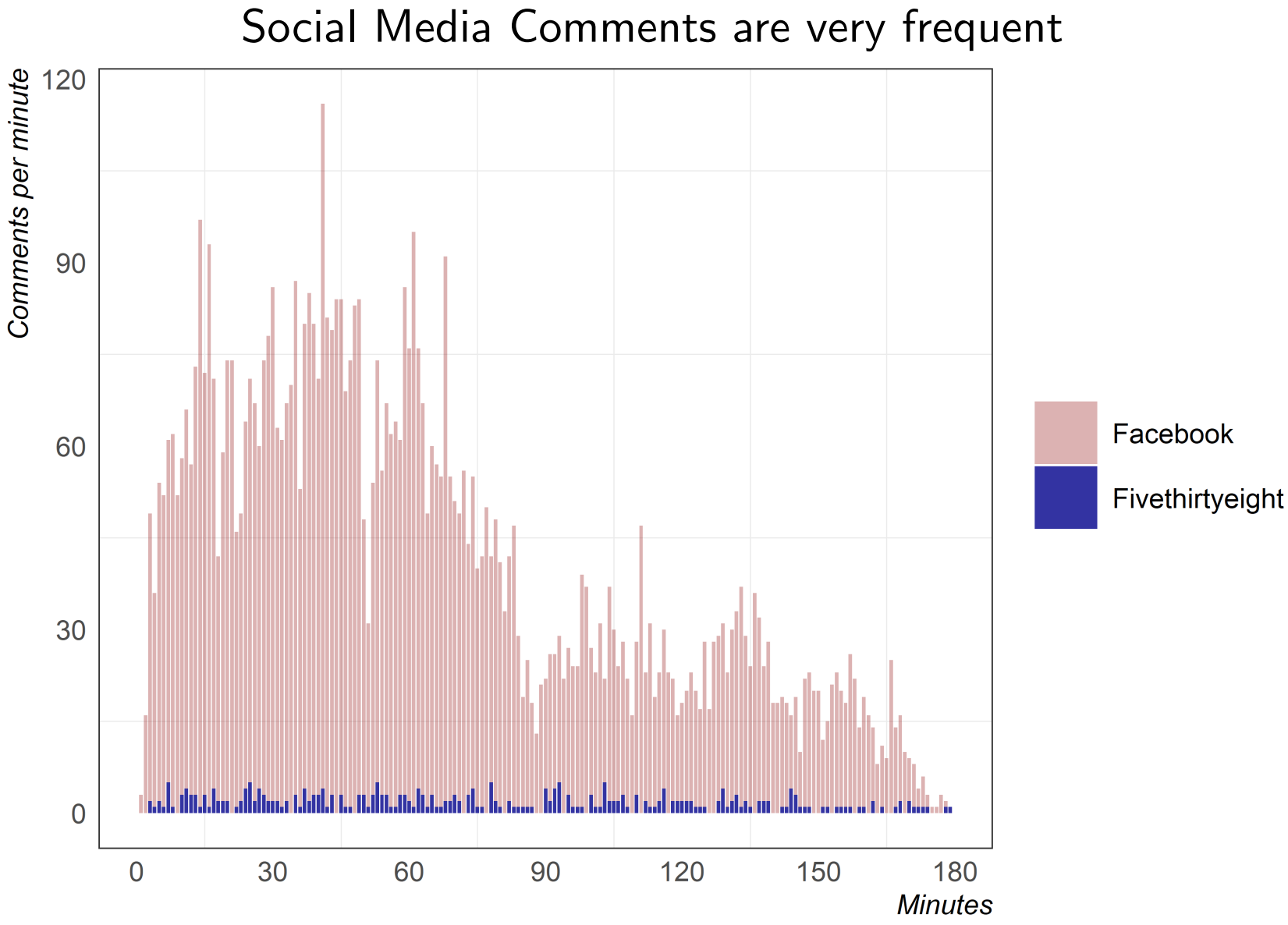
- Wave 1 pre-debate survey with 2352 respondents
  - Identified respondents likely to watch debate, have Facebook account, could watch debate on a computer.
- Encouraged 1095 eligible and interested participants to watch debate on randomly assigned platform.
- Wave 2 survey with 908 respondents
  - Analysis focuses on 576 Wave 2 Democratic respondents (including leaners) who watched at least part of the debate
  - N= 204 (Control), N= 174 (Expert), N= 198 (Social)

Extract and analyze comments from Facebook and FiveThirtyEight streaming chat.

Hypotheses

	Social	Expert
Frequency	(H1) Less enjoyable, informative, but more engaging (H2) More anxious and angry	(H1e) More enjoyable, informative, engaging (H2e) Less anxious and angry
Content	(H3) Comments increase in name recognition (H4) Prominent negative primes decrease candidate evaluations	(H3e) Comments increase in name recognition (H4e) Prominent negative primes decrease candidate evaluations
Context	(H5) Decrease trust (H6) Increase affective polarization (H7) Positive comments increase perception of future performance	(H5e) Increase trust (H6e) Decrease affective polarization (H7e) No change in perception of future performance

Text Analysis: Validating Theoretical Premises



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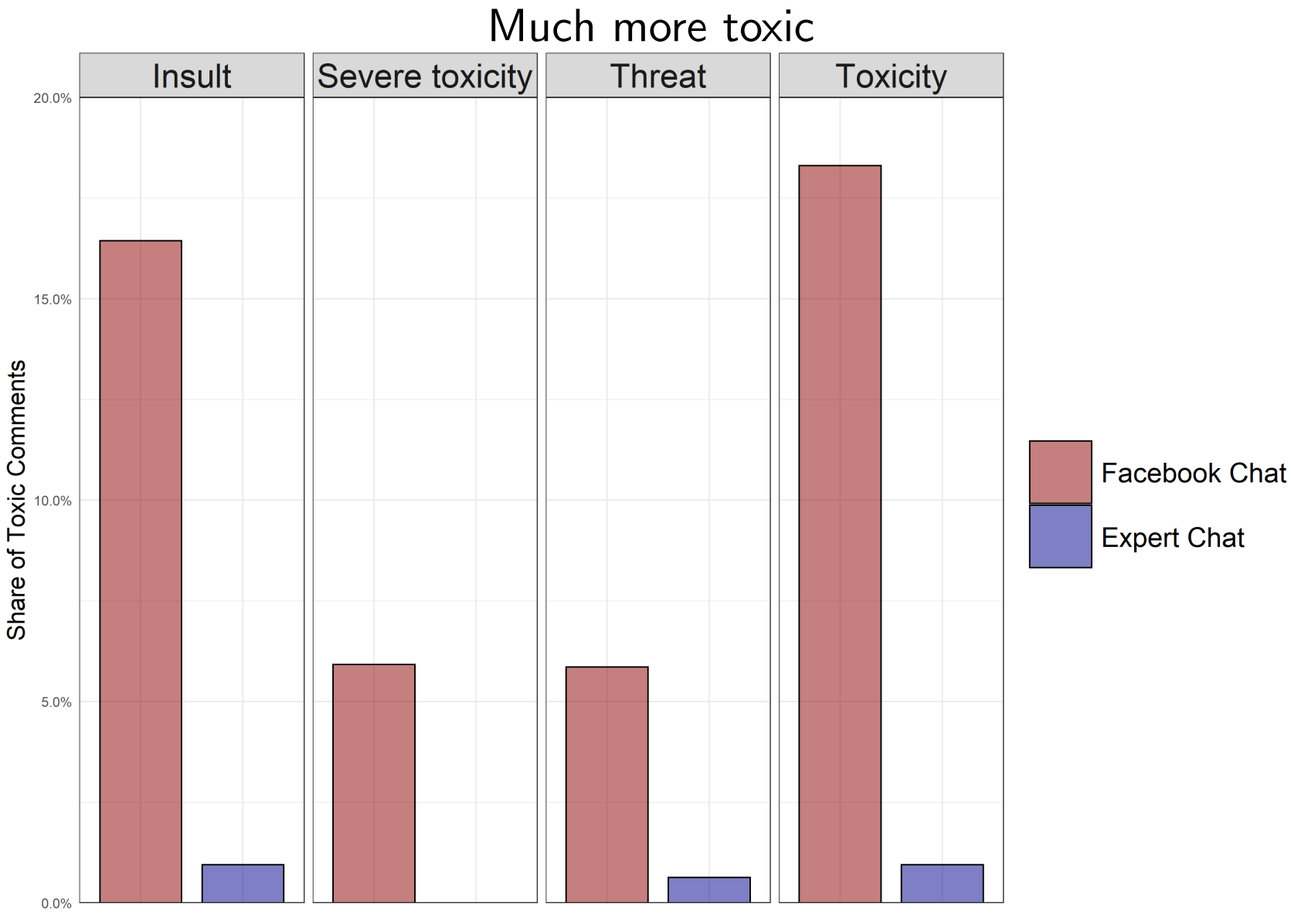

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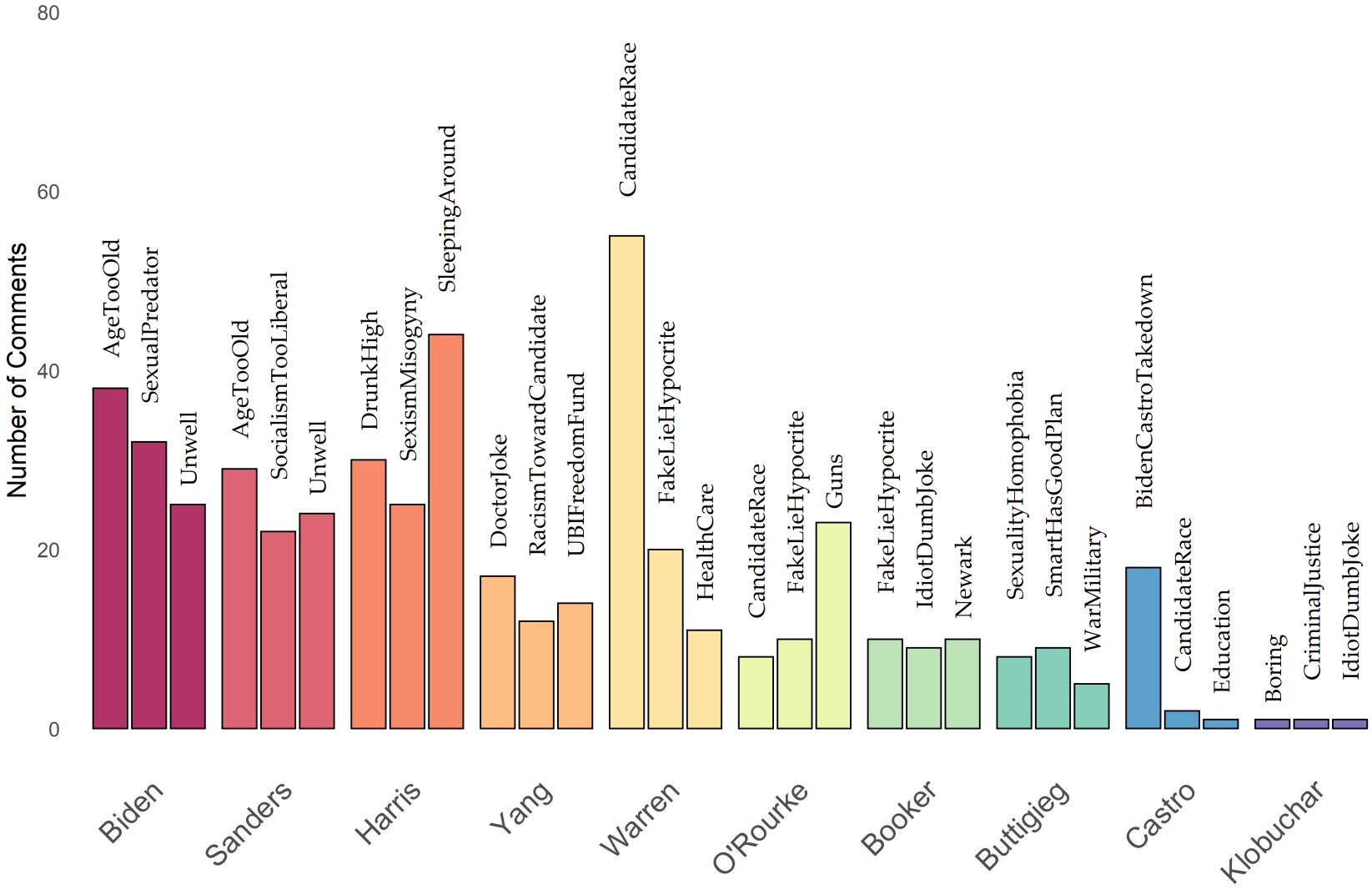
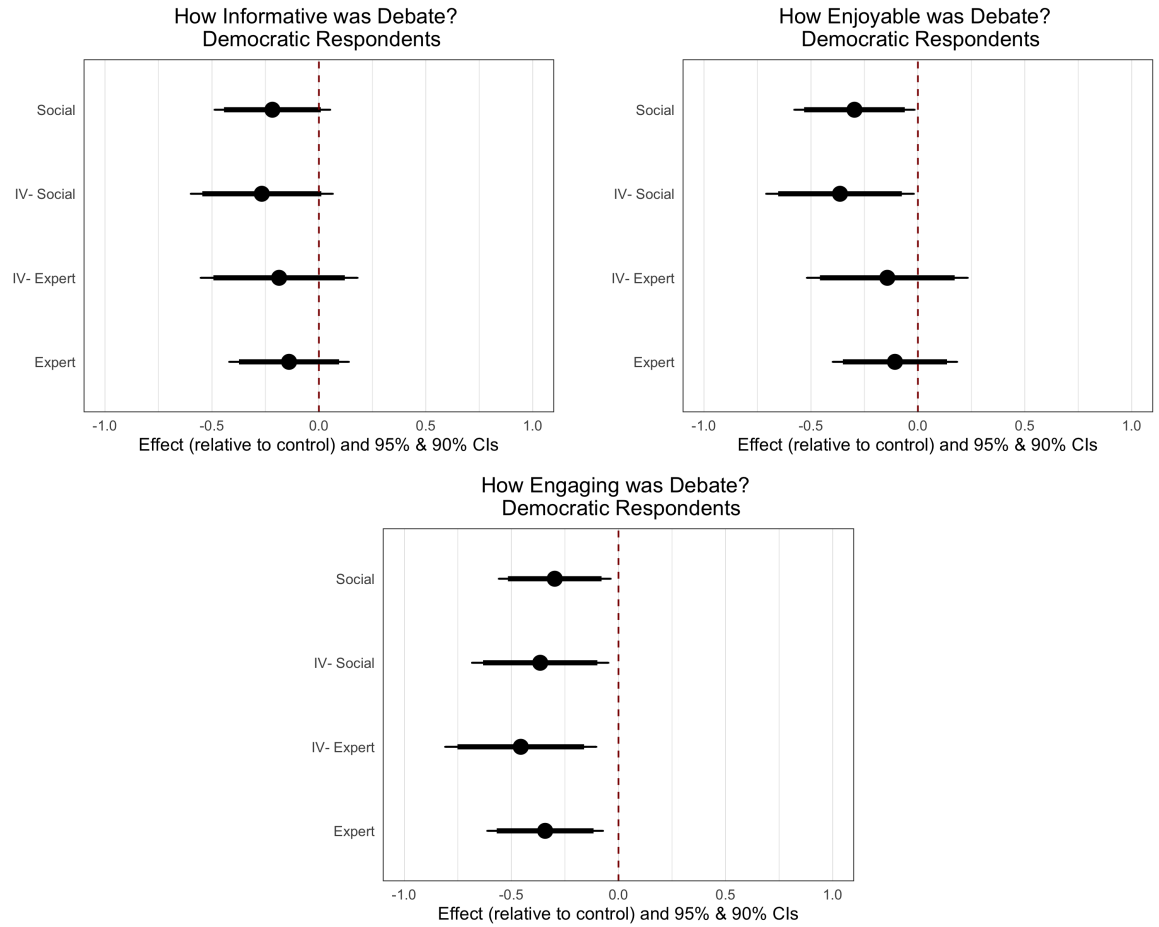
And contain prominent negative primes.



Frequency Hypothesis Key Results

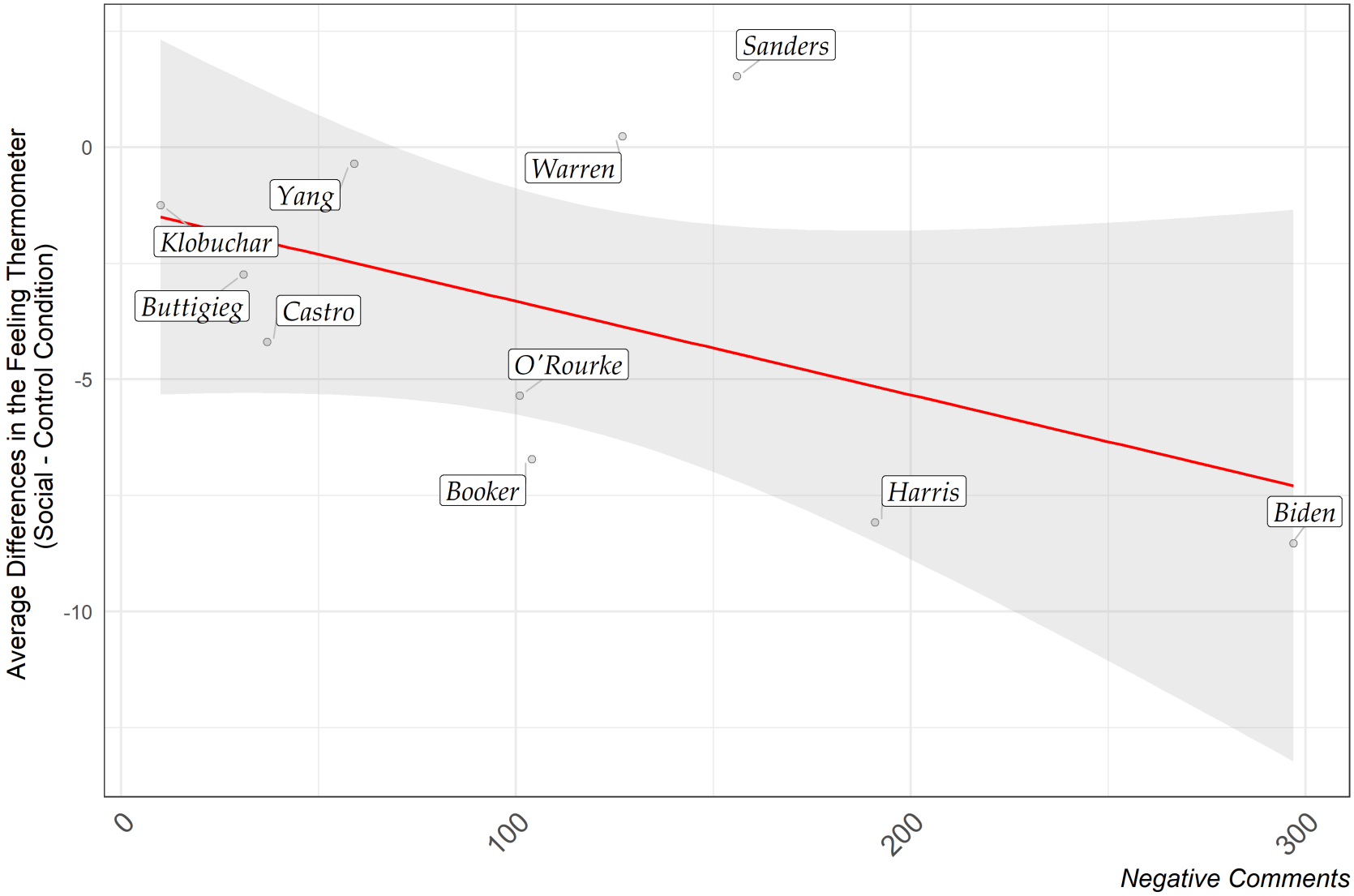
Social chat somewhat less informative, enjoyable, and engaging.



Weak results for anger and anxiety across conditions.

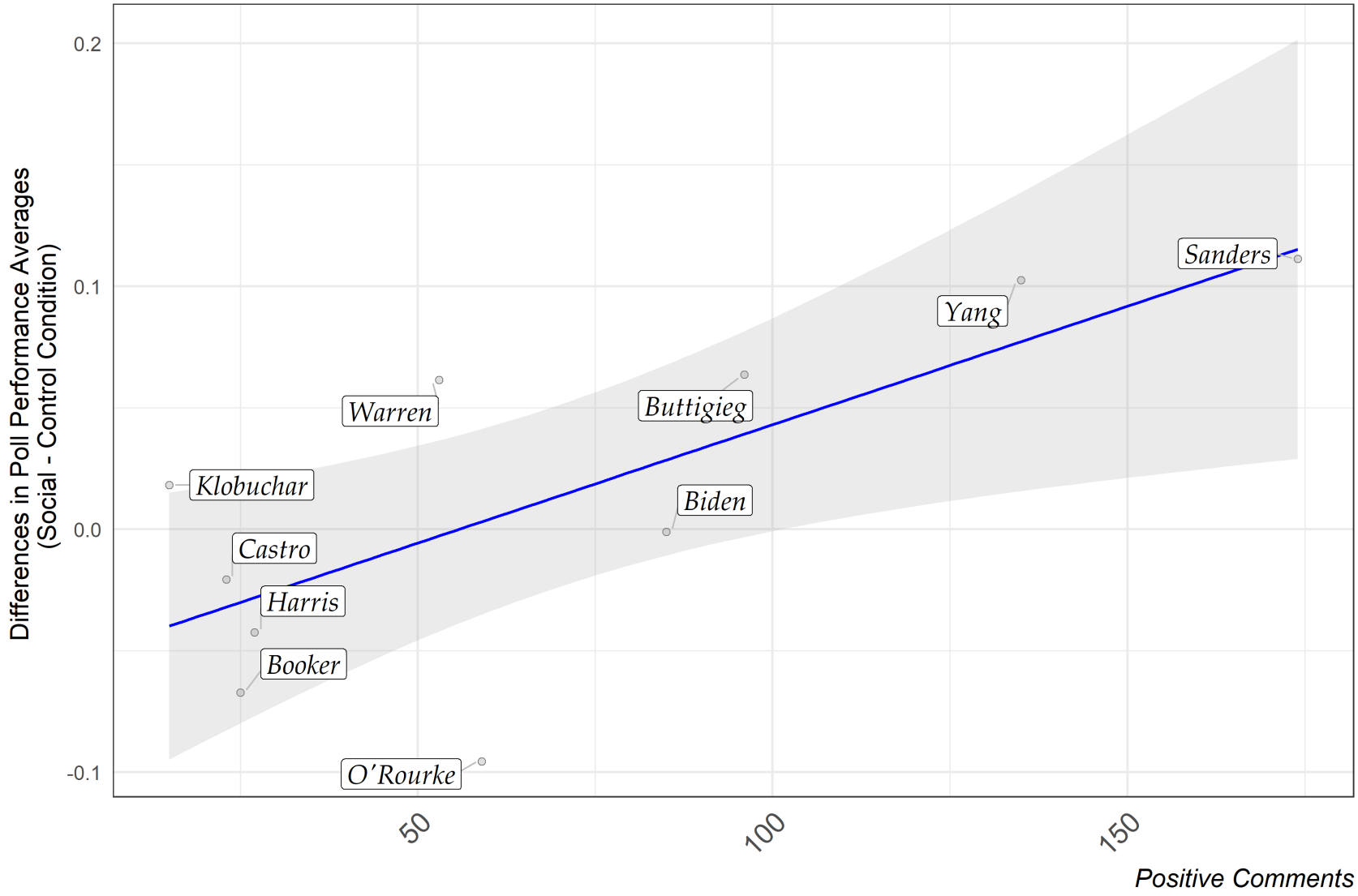
Content Hypothesis Key Results

Negative social chat associated with reduced candidate evaluation.



Context Hypothesis Key Results

Positive social chat associated with projected poll performance.



Summary

Streaming social chat

- Includes more frequent and more negative comments than expert chat.

- Creates worse viewing experience.
- May disproportionately negatively affect certain candidates subject to toxic, negative comments.
- May distort inferences about candidate viability.

- Less impact on overall trust and polarization.
- Less impact on name recognition.

Implications and Next Steps

Dual screening structurally alters study of media effects.

- We identify three key dimensions: frequency, context, content.

Our findings give pause to use of streaming chat in politics.

- Additional stimuli create potential for more interactivity.
- But come at a cost in terms of quality of viewing experience and inferences gained.

Next steps

- Test hypotheses in new electoral contexts.
- Test mechanisms in laboratory setting with tighter control over compliance.