The Polarizing Abortion Debate on TikTok

An idea analysis of the abortion debate on TikTok and political polarization in the United States

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Abstract

The rise of TikTok as one of the most popular social media platforms has created a new space for political debates, such as the debate surrounding abortion, to grow and evolve. In a politically polarized and divided society such as the United States, the impacts of new social media platforms are relatively unknown. Through an analysis of 40 videos posted to TikTok, this research paper has tracked the changes within the abortion debate that occurred from January 2020 to May 2023. With the creation of ideal types that define the extreme views held by supporters for and against abortion changes within affective polarization as well as political antagonism are analyzed. Contrary to other political debates in the United States the abortion debate on TikTok demonstrates a lack of polarization and users' views regarding abortion have stayed consistent over the measured time period. Other patterns regarding the use of religion, gender dynamics, and the use of scientific evidence became evident through the analysis creating a clear view of how the abortion debate has developed on the two opposing sides.

Keywords: affective polarization, political antagonism, TikTok, abortion

Word count: 9459

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

Political polarization has increased in the United States since Donald Trump gained popularity and was elected president in 2016. As the political divide between the Democrats and the Republicans continues to grow, some people say that more moderate policies and viewpoints are being ignored (Bump, 2021). It is becoming harder for people on opposite sides of the political spectrum to discuss and understand the opposing party's views, leading to intense debates and growing social divides.

At the same time as the political climate is changing, social media has continued its influence over young people's lives and is becoming interwoven into every aspect of life. The video-based social media app TikTok launched in 2018 and gained immense popularity in 2020. It became the most downloaded app of 2022 with 672 million downloads (Koetsier, 2023). Due to its impressive algorithm, TikTok picks up on users' interests through their interaction with videos on the app and shows the user similar videos on the neverending "For You Page", the platform's main feed (Hern, 2022). As users begin broadcasting their political views on the app, through posting their own videos or liking and commenting on videos they identify with, their feed will become curated to match these opinions and continue showing videos created by similarly-minded users. Users are seeing their political views and beliefs be confirmed over and over again thanks to the app's algorithm, whilst also neglecting the opposing views as TikTok does not attempt to show videos of this kind. As TikToks popularity and polarizing political views amongst young Americans have increased simultaneously there is a possible connection between the two that needs to be understood.

The research question for this paper is as follows:

RQ: *How has TikTok contributed to increased political polarization within the debate surrounding abortion amongst young people in the United States?*

1.1 Background

TikTok has become one of the largest social media platforms and is one of the main ways in which many young people obtain information about the world. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, around 10% of Americans in 2020 obtained their news from TikTok. An already high number which grows even further specifically within the 18-29 age group where it reaches 26% (Matsa, 2022). It is important to understand the impact this has on people, especially younger generations as they will shape the world in the future. If an app has the power to further polarize an already divided country it is necessary to understand this phenomenon and its impact on politics.

In order to understand this potential connection a set number of videos on TikTok will be selected to be analyzed and then evaluated to see if political polarization has increased. The selection of videos and data collection process will be explained in a later section of this paper. In order to measure political polarization there will be a focus on one political debate and using that as the base for the research. Ideal types of the two different political extremes raised by this issue will then be created and the collected TikTok videos will be used to evaluate if people's opinions are moving closer to the created ideal types over time.

As the single issue that will be focused on is the starting point for the research it needs to have been a topic that has been relevant for the past four years as it otherwise will not be an active discussion on TikTok. The abortion debate has been active in the United States for many years despite Roe v Wade protecting the right to abortion since the 1970s. When Donald Trump was elected as President in 2016 many conservative beliefs gained popularity in the media, abortion being one of them. In 2020 abortion became a growing topic as Amy Coney Barrett was sworn into the Supreme Court. Her conservative views changed the constellation of the Supreme Court and it became more right-leaning compared to the previous years. This opened up the abortion debate at the highest level and in 2022 Roe v. Wade was overturned and the right to abortion was no longer protected by the federal government (Totenberg and McCammon, 2022).

Abortion is a topic that evokes strong feelings on both sides of the political spectrum and has split the American people into either being a part of the pro-choice or pro-life movements. In a recent study by NBC News, they found that 43% of Americans consider abortion to be one

of the most critical political issues currently (NBC News, 2023). There does not currently seem to be a middle ground where the two political parties can reach a compromise, making this an optimal case to study in terms of political polarization in the United States. The topic is popular amongst young people and discourse surrounding it can be easily found on TikTok. Videos posted on TikTok with the hashtag abortion collectively have over 5 billion views (www.tiktok.com). The issue is discussed openly on TikTok by young women sharing their experiences but also people sharing their beliefs against it. There is a wide array of videos spanning the entire political spectrum on TikTok. An issue where one side believes something is a human right and the other believes it is murder has the opportunity to guide the politics of the whole nation.

This particular study is relevant for the academic community as there is a distinctive lack of political studies with TikTok as the base of the research. It becomes evident that this is a field that requires much more extensive study than has been previously done, especially as it is a phenomenon that mainly affects young people. When a large group of future voters is spending several hours a day on a social media app it is an influence that needs to be studied. The academic community has many steps to take before it can fully understand the effects of this kind of social media on American politics. Currently, research regarding TikTok has been limited to immediate effects and since the app is so new there has not been the opportunity to understand its long-term effects yet. This research will represent a small step in the right direction of understanding TikTok's influence in the American political arena.

2 Previous literature

American society being politically divided has been researched many times before and the effects of political polarization has been a topic of interest for many scholars. Palonen at the University of Helsinki describes polarization as a political tool that creates two clear groups through a demarcation of a frontier between them. This political frontier "creates a point of identification and confrontation in the political system, where consensus is found only within the political camps themselves" (Palonen, 2009). According to Palonen, in polarization, there will never be a middle ground and everyone has to eventually choose a side.

As the animosity between parties grows it becomes what researchers refer to as affective polarization. In the United States, this is shown through Democrats and Republicans

attacking the other side calling them hypocritical and self-centered, being unwilling to socialize across party lines, and even going as far as refusing to work together with someone of the opposing party (Iyengar et al., 2018). Studies have shown that affective polarization has increased in the United States in the last decades (Renström, Bäck, and Schmeisser, 2020). It has been shown that this divide of people into political in- and outgroups has made it easier for people to draw broad conclusions and create stereotypes about the outgroup despite not having concrete evidence to back it up (Iyengar et al., 2018).

Partisan divides have escalated in the United States to not just be a reflection of one's political beliefs but a reflection of who you are as a person. American political scientist Kathy Cramer explored the politics of resentment in her 2016 book *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. In her book, she dives into the hatred that has been growing between parties. Instead of viewing this as an ignorant way to behave, Cramer works to understand how the politics of resentment is grounded in fundamental identities and can create real problems in the United States. According to Cramer in politics of resentment, it is fellow citizens that stand at the center and it arises from a combination of social identities, the emotion of resentment, and economic insecurity (Cramer, 2016).

Social media has been a prevalent part of people's lives for many years and its influence over society and specifically politics has increased rapidly. Along with its growing influence, research on the subject is constantly evolving and has been conducted in many ways. In his article "The Digital Architectures of Social Media" published in 2018, Bossetta attempts to understand the way a social media platform's format influences the norms of interaction among users. He finds that a lack of research regarding the design features of social media has led to political actors in the United States using social media as a part of their campaigning without knowing enough about how this can shape elections (Bossetta, 2018). Researchers have had a tendency to focus on "single platform studies" but Bossetta finds that in today's political climate and the increasing use of technology, these types of studies are no longer good enough to asses "the complexity of contemporary 'hybrid political communication systems'" and there is a large gap in the research (Bossetta, 2018).

Barberá, at the University of Southern California, takes the aspect of social media in politics further and discusses the connection to political polarization in the article "Social Media,

Echo Chambers, and Political Polarization". Beginning by emphasizing the creation of echo chambers on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, Barberá states that the outcome of such behavior is a society that is divided among party lines and people becoming more hyper-aware of their political identities on social media. As a result of this reinforcement of social and political identities on social media people start to believe that the differences between their own ideals and the ideals of the outgroup are getting bigger, contributing to negative feelings and stereotyping of the outgroup (Barberá, 2020). Further research on the connection between social media and political polarization has been done by Kreiss and McGregor using Facebook as a research platform. They found that while social media contributes to a growing political divide it is because there is a disconnect between social media and real life. Those who hold extreme political views are more vocal on social media which in turn makes them more visible. As many social media platforms have a tendency to amplify popular voices the perception of how polarized America is gets skewed (Kreiss and McGregor, 2023).

3 Theory

3.1 Affective polarization

This research is centered around political polarization, the theory that refers to "the divergence of political attitudes to ideological extremes" (European Center for Populism Studies). Most often this is found within political parties such as the American system where there is tension between binary political ideologies. The basis of this research relies on the theory of political polarization, but a form of polarization known as affective polarization can explain the divide among young people on TikTok even further. Affective polarization explains the behaviors amongst Americans where members of opposing political parties are unwilling to socialize across parties and attack the opposition as being selfish and close-minded (Iyengar et al., 2018). Iyengar et. al argues that it is recent changes within the media and contemporary politics that have taken the political divide to such extremes (Iyengar et al., 2018).

Affective polarization can be measured in a number of different ways. Most commonly it is done through survey self-reports and tests of partisan bias. It can also be done through behavioral measures of interpersonal trust and group favoritism/discrimination (Iyengar et al., 2018). This is relevant for this research paper as it shows how partisanship has spread to

situations outside of purely political settings, taking over all aspects of life. Ordinary people are being faced with situations that are related to political partisanship every day, even on social media apps such as TikTok. As political behavior has moved into the private sphere affective polarization only continues to grow.

3.2 Political antagonism

Another theory that is relevant to this research is political antagonism. As the United States is a two-party system it is built in a way that creates a clear "us" vs "them", Democrats vs Republicans. The creation of an "us" vs "them" dynamic and the natural tension between them often leads to the two groups fighting for dominance and essentially threatening the existence of the out-group. This is the basis for antagonism and it is a constant possibility within the American political system (Mouffe, 1999). Within antagonistic politics, the two opposing groups see each other as enemies that need to be destroyed. This is reflected in the political discourse that is very prevalent on TikTok where people constantly attack and insult the other side. Democrats and Republicans often try to diminish and belittle the other group. When neither group is open to even trying to understand the opposing viewpoints American politics will only continue to become further divided.

3.3 Filter bubbles

Another theoretical concept that is relevant to this research is filter bubbles, a phrase coined by internet activist Eli Pariser. A filter bubble is "a state of intellectual or ideological isolation that may result from algorithms feeding us information we agree with, based on our past behavior and search history" (Fletcher, 2020). On social media people are only being shown information that already coincides with their existing beliefs and it is narrowing their view of out-groups. Apps like TikTok thrive off of this kind of behavior and people continue to use the app because it constantly gives them videos they will enjoy, all because of filter bubbles allowing for this behavior. Filter bubbles are not only prevalent on TikTok but spread across all social media platforms. It is however the most relevant for TikTok as it is the only platform that allows users to continuously scroll without ever running out of content to consume, never creating a natural break in the bubble.

There are however scholars who do not agree with the existence of filter bubbles and argue that this phenomenon has been blown out of proportion. The argument against filter bubbles proposes that since most people do not only get their news from one source the supposed

"bubble" will burst once they consume media from another source (Dubois and Blank, 2018). Many studies trying to understand filter bubbles only study a single social media platform which some scholars argue is not an accurate representation of how people receive information, therefore creating a problem for the accuracy of filter bubble theories (Dubois and Blank, 2018).

4 Method

This will be a qualitative analysis as the research focuses on understanding the content of a set number of videos, not analyzing a large quantity. Qualitative analysis is a useful method in this case as it allows for a careful study of the material. Each video that will be analyzed will have unique qualities that require either more or less attention in order to review it fully which a qualitative analysis allows for (Esaiasson et.al., 2017 p. 211). A qualitative analysis will allow for an analysis that aims to understand how people view the world and specifically from a personal perspective (Teorell and Svensson, 2019 p. 265). This study is looking at how individual people present their views on social media and uses that to create a generalization of what young Americans are thinking in regard to a specific topic.

4.1 Idea analysis

The methodological approach for this research will be an idea analysis. The goal is to determine ideal types of positions on abortion the extreme left and extreme right within American politics take and then measure how TikTok has contributed to people moving further away from or closer to these ideal types. An idea analysis is the relevant methodological approach here as it is a study of differentiating political stances. There are three different types of studies that an idea analysis allows for: describing, explaining, or taking a stance toward an idea (Beckman, 2019 p. 14). This study will take an explaining approach to the subject as well as be an actor-centered idea analysis.

An explaining idea analysis focuses on the causes and consequences of a political problem as well as explaining how a political context can be the result of social, economic, or intellectual processes in a society (Beckman, 2019 p. 81). This methodological approach will be helpful in this study as it is partially trying to explain how the TikTok phenomenon has contributed to the abortion debate. An actor-centered analysis allows for a study that stems from the individuals presenting a political ideology or standpoint, as opposed to the idea-centered

theories which only focus on the idea presented (Beckman, 2019 p. 17). As this study is trying to understand how individuals have begun to move towards extreme political ideologies this is a fitting methodological approach.

Another facet of the idea analysis that will be used in this study is an argumentation analysis as it will be centered around the political debate about abortion. An argumentation analysis is a technique used to systematically describe the arguments that arise in debates surrounding a specific topic (Beckman, 2019 p. 38). The goal is not to describe the quality and strength of the arguments presented in the debate but to understand how they are formed and the relation between the opposing sides (Beckman, 2019 p. 39).

5 Material

5.1 Data collection

The data used for this research will be provided in the form of videos from the social media platform TikTok. These videos can range in length from 15 seconds to as long as 10 minutes. The material will be collected through the creation of two separate accounts on TikTok. One account will be created that will search for pro-choice videos and videos stating left-leaning political opinions. The other account will search for videos supporting the pro-life movement and videos made by people with right-leaning political opinions. In order to curate a "For You Page" for each account that reflects the two polarizing beliefs several searches will be made using specific keywords to find videos that reflect each viewpoint. The key terms that will be separately put into the search bar to find pro-life videos will be: prolife, roevwade prolife, abortion conservative, and abortion murder. The key terms that will be put into the search bar to find pro-choice videos will be: prochoice, roevwade prochoice, abortion liberal, and legal abortion. As a result of TikToks algorithm, the search results will produce videos that have used the search words as hashtags, have them written in the caption, or videos that the algorithm finds relevant for other reasons. Due to the vast amount of videos that have been posted to TikTok, it is necessary to use the search bar as a guide to find videos that are relevant to this research. 5 videos from each search will be selected leading to a total of 40 videos overall. To ensure that the videos will allow for an analysis that will track potential changes over time, only videos that have been posted between January 2020 up until May 2023 will be saved.

The selected videos will come from the top ten videos that appear after every search term. This means that they are the videos with the most views, most likes or comments, or videos that the TikTok algorithm deems are the most relevant. As they will be the videos with the most views or comments and likes it means that they are the videos people are interacting with the most. If they are videos with a large audience reach then it is because people resonate with the content, making the videos a representative selection of the two sides of the abortion debate present on TikTok. The top videos coming from pro-life and pro-choice search terms represent what the majority of users on TikTok believe is either right or wrong.

Once the videos have been selected they will be downloaded so that they can be organized and analyzed. The videos need to have been posted on public accounts in order for this function to be available which means that they can be viewed even without following the creator of the video. Videos posted on public accounts are considered public domain as the users have chosen to post them publicly (Duplichecker.com, 2023). This means that the videos are allowed to be used for any purpose, including being analyzed in this type of study. It is legal to download videos that creators have approved for public use. Not all videos are posted on public accounts which is a potential limitation for this research there will then not be access to all content on TikTok. However, this limitation is not relevant to the research as the goal is only to analyze all videos posted on TikTok within the relevant subject and only focus on a set number of videos.

5.2 Temporal and spatial parameters

The time frame for the selected data will be videos posted between January 2020 and May 2023. As TikTok did not become as popular as it is today until 2020, the majority of the videos on the platform have been posted since the beginning of 2020. The data available before that time is therefore very limited and hard to find on the app. The time frame is also based on the debate surrounding abortion in the United States. As this research will focus on the political polarization surrounding that one singular issue it is important that the videos are relevant to the debate.

When Donald Trump campaigned in 2016 one of his goals was to appoint Supreme Court justices who would overturn Roe v. Wade. He accomplished this by appointing Amy Coney

Barrett in 2020, a devout Catholic judge who consistently votes conservatively specifically within the debate surrounding abortion (McCammon, 2020). The addition of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court reignited the spark surrounding the abortion debate which is why it is the start of the time frame for this research. As Roe v. Wade was overturned in 2022 the debate has clearly continued and the goal of this research is to capture data created both before and after this momentous event in order to see the reactions of young Americans both before and after the ruling.

The geographical parameters of the collected data are harder to determine as TikTok does not allow videos to have a geotag which would show the location of the creator. The goal is only to find videos posted in the United States as America is a unique case in terms of political polarization. According to Carothers and O'Donohue in a Foreign Affairs article, a "powerful alignment of ideology, race, and religion renders America's divisions unusually encompassing and profound" (Carothers and O'Donohue, 2019). However, due to the structure of TikTok, it will be very hard to confirm the geographical parameter for every selected video. Through statements made in the video, the video caption, and potential hashtags there might be some information regarding the location but it is not something that can be expected for every video. This is a clear limitation of the collected data and not something that can be controlled. As this is the nature of videos on TikTok the limitation is acknowledged and is something that will be kept in mind when analyzing the selected videos however there is nothing that can be done to correct the problem.

6 Analysis

6.1 Ideal types

As previously stated the research will be based on an idea analysis and the creation of ideal types that will create a way to measure if people's stances on abortion are becoming more extreme. The ideal types for each side of the abortion debate will consist of two main points, what each side considers to be a human baby and then an additional argument that each side uses to further explain their stance.

The ideal type that will represent an extremely liberal and left-leaning stance on abortion will be based on human rights arguments as well as medical arguments for what is considered a

human being. According to several international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and the Center for Reproductive Rights, access to safe and legal abortions is a human right. Both in terms of women having a right to medical care as well as control and autonomy over their own bodies (Center For Reproductive Rights, 2004). This viewpoint is shared in many countries and will be complemented by a radical stance on what is considered a human being in order to create the ideal type. Medical arguments have been presented that consider a fetus to only be a complex of cellular elements and therefore not a human being up to as old as 20 weeks (Dabbagh, 2009). This view of a fetus not being considered a human being and therefore not something that is ethically wrong to remove represents one side of the ideal type of a stance on abortion. By taking a step further than just claiming women should have autonomy over their own bodies and the right to choose the idea that an abortion only removes cells takes the ideal type to the extreme left.

The ideal type for an extremely conservative and right-leaning stance on abortion will be based on the belief that abortion is murder. Republican lawmakers in Arkansas**,** Texas, Kentucky, and South Carolina are pushing for a fertilized egg or embryo to be considered a person, essentially saying that life begins at conception. As well as this they are pushing for abortion to be considered homicide. The states these lawmakers come from all have the death penalty as punishment for homicide (Noor, 2023). Considering abortion to be worthy of murder charges as it is killing a person represents the other ideal type of a stance on abortion. The common abortion is murder standpoint is here taken to the extreme by believing that homicide charges should be issued to the women who chose to still have an abortion.

6.2 Tiktok videos

The 20 videos collected using anti-abortion hashtags and keywords and the 20 videos collected using pro-choice hashtags and keywords showed several patterns that exist within the posted content based on the previously outlined hashtags and search terms as well as careful analysis of the videos. Certain keywords showed more prominent patterns whereas other keywords did not show the predicted patterns and polarization that was expected. What has become the most evident are the clear standpoints that each side has and the way they do not shift significantly over the researched time period.

6.2.1 *Religion*

The topic of religion is often connected to abortion in the United States as the large number of Catholics in the country have very divisive stances on the issue. According to the Pew Research Center in 2019 56% of U.S. Catholics believed abortions should be legal while 42% believed it should be illegal (Fahmy, 2020). Out of the 40 videos collected from TikTok 6 of them mention religion. 4 of the videos use religion and God as an argument for why abortion is wrong while 2 videos are using specifically Catholic teachings to argue why abortion is not wrong.

While the videos on TikTok do not bring up the topic of religion as often as initially predicted it is still a topic that is a part of the online conversation. On the pro-life side of the argument video #26 and video #34 highlight the key arguments that God is against abortion because it is shameful and wrong to commit murder. As well as arguing that abortion is murder both videos bring up Christian values and discuss the need for other options that can replace the need for abortions to become more accessible. For example, more adoption and Christians opening their homes to children that would have otherwise been aborted. The two videos on the pro-choice side (video #10 and video #12) highlight Christian beliefs that can be used as arguments for why abortion should be legal. The teachings of free will are brought up in both videos, advocating that as Christians one should listen to God's belief in making free choices and that this means one should be pro-choice and leave the choice up to individuals. Both sides of the argument bring up points and beliefs within Christianity to further their argument.

6.2.2 *Gender*

Abortion is often discussed as a women's issue and it is referred to as a debate over women's reproductive rights. This observation is reflected on TikTok on both sides of the spectrum. Out of the 20 videos arguing for pro-life, as reflected below in diagram 1, 12 videos were posted by female presenting content creators. The rest of the videos consisted of 6 videos by male presenting content creators and 2 videos (video #26 and video #39) that did not feature anything that signified the gender of the content creator or had multiple participants of varying gender. On the other side of the spectrum, as reflected below in diagram 2, 17 of the 20 videos were posted by female presenting content creators and only 3 were posted by male presenting content creators.
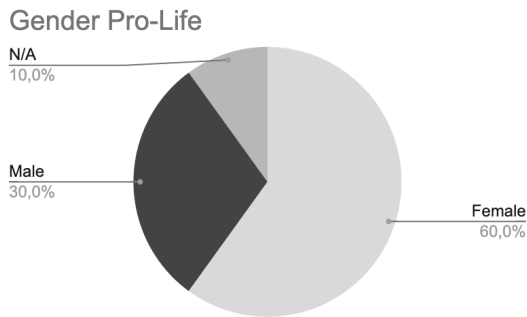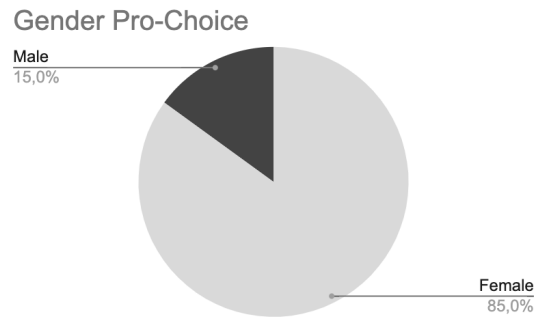
Diagram 1

Diagram 2

6.2.3 *Party politics*

Measuring the polarization of the two sides of the abortion debate is partially based on the American political system that splits voters into two groups, Democrats and Republicans. Republicans most often lean towards supporting the pro-life argument whilst Democrats tend to support pro-choice. This was partially evident on TikTok but required specific hashtags in order to find videos that reflected party politics. Two of the predetermined hashtags that were going to be used to find videos were #abortionconservative and #abortionliberal. When these two hashtags were put into the search bar it did indeed show videos that mentioned support or agreement with a political party, but not to the extent that was predicted.

The videos that mentioned support or agreement with a corresponding political party were hypothesized to be more commonly posted during 2020 when the U.S. had its most recent election year. This however was not as evident as predicted and is shown in diagram 3 below.
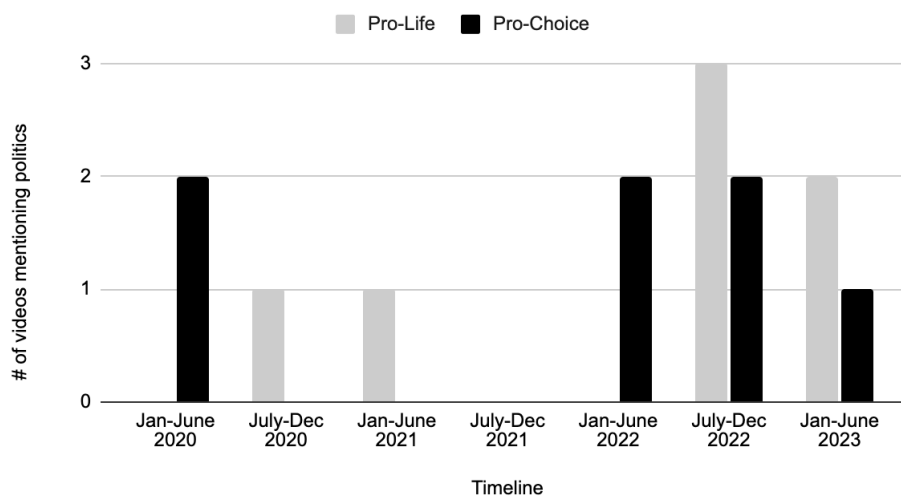

Diagram 3

As shown in the diagram, party politics were only mentioned by videos posted from the pro-choice side in the first six months of 2020 and then were not discussed until 2022. Of the 20 collected videos that represent the pro-life side, party politics were only mentioned twice in the two-year period between January 2020 and December 2021. In 2022 the discussion regarding party politics begins again on both sides of the spectrum. In the time span between January 2022 and the present day the amount of times party politics are mentioned is divided evenly between the pro-life and pro-choice videos. The increase in party political discussions since 2022 is most likely corresponding to the Supreme Court's ruling to overturn Roe v Wade that occurred in June 2022. The videos that mention party politics posted since January 2022 from the pro-choice collection of videos all also mention Roe v Wade and the further laws that Republican lawmakers are attempting to pass in several different states.

6.2.4 *Scientific evidence and data*

As previously stated the ideal type for a pro-life argument is based on abortion being murder as supporters of this believe that life begins at conception and an embryo is considered a human life. This argument is based on scientific facts regarding what is considered a human life and therefore the expectation was that this would be backed up by scientific facts or data when argued for. This expectation was not supported by the material collected from TikTok as only 2 of the 17 videos that argued for abortion being equivalent to murder mentioned scientific evidence to support the argument. Video #36 and video #40 both bring up the common pro-choice arguments that abortion only gets rid of "a clump of cells" and the content creators then argue against this stance. Stating that these "clumps of cells" still have a genetic code and individual DNA which makes them equivalent to human beings.

In regards to the ideal type for pro-choice supporters, the first point is based on abortion being considered health care and critical for a woman's health and safety. The second part is based on what is considered a human life and argues that what is being aborted is merely a complex of cellular elements. Both of these statements are backed up by scientific evidence and data in videos collected from TikTok, however, it is still a fairly small number compared to what was predicted. Only 6 of the videos that were collected from the pro-choice side used scientific evidence or data to support their argument, 5 of these also argued for abortions being a health and safety issue whilst only 1 argued for abortion only being the removal of a complex of cellular elements.

Video #18 showed a photo of what many people believe an aborted baby looks like, a fully grown child with distinct human features, and then showed a second photo of what actually gets aborted most of the time. This photo featured a clump of a white substance in a petri dish and ruler showing that it is not larger than an inch wide. Videos #17, #14, and #5 all used real-life news stories about what happens to women and young girls if they do not have access to safe abortions. They bring up personal stories where girls under the age of 15 had been assaulted and then forced to carry their pregnancy to term, as well as a story about what a woman might go through if she lives in a state that no longer provides abortions. The videos bring up specific statistics as well to prove that these instances are not isolated and occur more often than one might think.

6.2.5 *Safety argument*

Considering abortion to be an important part of women's health care and a critical pillar in the overall safety and well-being of women and young girls is the most common theme found amongst the 20 collected videos that represent the pro-choice side. As shown in diagram 4 below, 12 of the 20 videos argue that legal abortions are necessary as they are considered a health and safety issue. Several videos bring up specific cases where abortions have been lifesaving or where the lack of legal abortions has led to negative medical consequences for the women seeking help (video #5 and video #11). There is no change within the observed time frame and the videos making health and safety arguments are spread out throughout the entire time period, leading to assumptions that the argument has been and will continue to be a core belief among the pro-choice supporters.

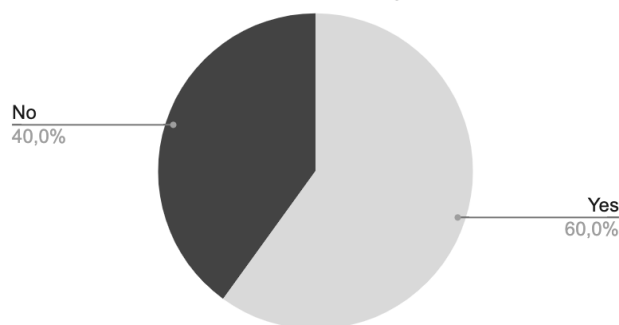
Abortion is a health & safety issue

No
40,0%

Yes
60,0%

Diagram 4

6.2.6 *Murder argument*

The argument that abortion is and should be legally considered murder is the argument that was observed the most times out of all the collected videos. Pro-life supporters seem to present a united front that pushes the "abortion is murder" argument to the forefront of their side of the debate. As shown in diagram 5 below, 17 out of the 20 videos collected from the pro-life-related hashtags mention and support the "abortion is murder" argument. The statement is supported by a variety of arguments and evidence. For example, videos #26 and #34 argue that God is against abortions and base their statements on religious reasons. Other videos such as videos #28 and #29 use scientific evidence to prove that abortion is considered murder.
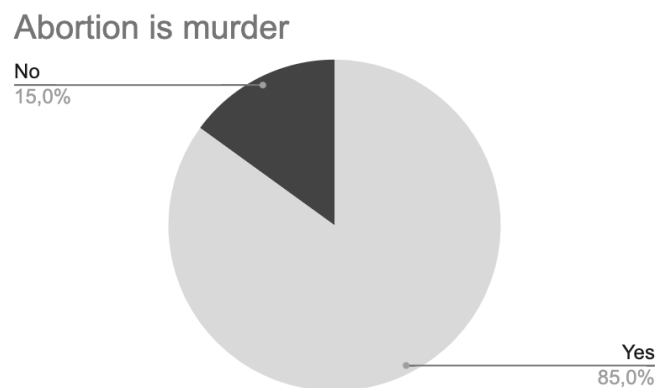
Diagram 5

It becomes overwhelmingly clear that the ideal type for pro-life supporters is correctly hypothesized to be represented by the idea that abortion is considered murder and should be punished as committing homicide. However, the collected material does not show any increasing polarization over the observed time period. The videos collected from 2020 contain very similar arguments to the videos collected from 2023 and therefore it is not evident that pro-life supporters are moving towards an extreme ideal type. The created ideal type seems to be aligned with most of the videos that claim to be pro-life.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Results

The collection of videos posted to TikTok that were analyzed in this study revealed existing patterns within the discussion surrounding abortion that is prevalent on TikTok. The two sides of the debate both have consistent narratives that have not been drastically changed within the observed time period. Despite monumental changes to abortion laws in the United States the arguments for and against abortion seem to have stayed the same on TikTok.

After analyzing the arguments and statements made in the collected TikTok videos there does not seem to be any changes in the degrees of affective polarization. Based on the previously presented theories the prediction of a trend of increasing polarization through antagonizing statements on TikTok does not seem to be correct. The created ideal types for pro-life and pro-choice arguments that were predicted to become more visible on TikTok at the tail end of the observed time period are observable over the entire course of the three-year time span. Both of the ideal types consist of two traits each and for both sides, only one of the two traits was consistently shown on TikTok.

The pro-life belief that abortion is a form of murder is a consistent argument that is used as a motivator for a large amount of the videos posted under the #prolife tag on TikTok. The second part of the pro-life ideal type that features punishing women who get abortions with jail time and charging them with committing homicide does not seem to be brought up as often and clearly as predicted in the videos condemning abortions. Despite clearly calling abortion murder most videos with this ideology do not discuss taking the next step of punishing the women. This deviation from the created ideal type leads to a problem when attempting to track the affective polarization of the issue. For this reason, there does not seem to be any recognizable affective polarization on the pro-life side that is featured on TikTok.

Videos collected using the #prochoice tag, as well as the others previously mentioned, showed a consistent use of the women's safety and physical and mental well-being argument for why abortion should be legal. This argument was featured in videos posted across the three-year time span and did not spike towards the middle of 2022 when Roe v Wade was overturned as was the initial prediction. Many pro-choice advocates talked about abortion

being an essential part of women's health care and this aligns with one part of the ideal type for pro-choice arguments. However, once again this side also lacked evidence of the other part of the ideal type being featured on TikTok. Only 1 out of the 20 collected videos mentioned the argument that abortion is only the removal of a complex group of cells. As one video is not enough to show a pattern regarding this belief the pro-choice videos did not show an apparent increase in affective polarization on TikTok.

The lack of increasing polarization found on TikTok means that people's opinions on abortion have not changed much over the past three years. The people supporting and advocating for pro-life in 2023 seem to hold the same ideals as the people supporting pro-life in 2020, and the same trend goes for the pro-choice advocates. Despite the overruling of Roe v Wade in 2022, the American youth on TikTok have not become more extreme in their political opinions. People became more vocal over their views on abortion when it once again became a national conversation topic but they were still using the same arguments as presented before. This is perhaps a positive sign for the United States that groups with two opposing political viewpoints can stay consistent with their arguments and not turn aggressive toward the opposition. If this is possible for one political topic then it should be possible for other topics that are dividing the country.

7.2 Patterns

Despite the lack of evidence for an increase in affective polarization on TikTok over the three-year time span there were interesting patterns that did appear. Both sides of the debate showed trends that can explain certain behaviors that are commonly attributed to pro-life and pro-choice supporters. Certain stereotypes about abortion arguments were proven to be true and videos on TikTok reflect what the media often portrays. However, there were also certain patterns that were not predicted which show how layered and nuanced the abortion debate is. There is a mix of emotions and facts that present compelling arguments from both sides which explains why abortion is such a divisive and polarizing issue.

Religion was featured on both sides of the debate in similar ways which may seem contradictory as they are arguing for very different beliefs. In the United States, it is mainly Christian followers who use religion as an argument against religion stating that it is morally wrong, and this was clear through the analysis based on the videos from TikTok (Fahmy,

2020). The belief that God is against abortions because one should not take another's life was brought up multiple times. However, surprisingly the pro-choice side also used God and quotes from the Bible to advocate for being pro-choice. Here the argument that God believed in free will and never wanted to force beliefs onto anyone is used to describe exactly what pro-choice is (video #10 and video #12). These videos show how within the abortion debate Christian beliefs do not necessarily always need to align with one side and can instead be used for all arguments. It pokes a clear hole in the pro-life argument that is oftentimes very religious and focused on what God believes is right and wrong.

Abortion is an issue that only affects people who have the ability to be pregnant which means the gender dynamics regarding who is speaking up both for and against abortions is necessary to study. As a result of the material collected from TikTok, it seems as if the gender ratio is more even on the pro-life than the pro-choice side. More men are speaking out on the side of being against abortions instead of helping women advocate for the right to get an abortion. It is overwhelmingly women who seem to feel compelled to use TikTok as a platform to spread their views of being pro-choice. When women are the ones using their voice to advocate for an issue that mainly affects women's health it can lead to the issue becoming a purely "feminist" issue and subsequently not seem as important to men. This can become very harmful when the majority of political figures in a country are men who then do not understand all of the arguments surrounding a women's health issue. It is harmful to the pro-choice movement that more men are not advocating for abortion rights, especially when the pro-life advocates seem to be more evenly split in terms of gender.

As shown previously in diagram 3, the collected TikTok videos mentioned specific political party affiliations fairly evenly over the second half of the recorded time span. This is the period when the Supreme Court began reevaluating Roe v Wade and then eventually ruling to overturn it in June of 2022. There was a spike in videos posted in June and July of 2022 which makes sense as the topic of abortion was extremely relevant at that time. The videos from the pro-life side were in support of the Republican lawmakers whilst the pro-choice side only mentioned party politics when condemning the opposing side.

This is a clear example of the politics of resentment that is introduced in the previous literature section, a theory developed by Cramer. As a result of the overturning of Roe v Wade Republican lawmakers have seized the opportunity to introduce harsh measures against

abortions that were heavily criticized by pro-choice advocates on TikTok (videos #9, #14, and #17). When the beliefs held by pro-choice advocates are so blatantly attacked it introduces strong resentment towards the other side and their reactions, as Cramer mentions, are driven by emotions that result from their resentment (Cramer, 2016). Since the pro-choice argument heavily focuses on safety, fear for one's own life as well as that of other women is a natural reaction. Also mentioned by Cramer is the impact economic insecurity has on the politics of resentment (Cramer, 2016). This is applicable here as women with a lower income will not be able to leave their state and travel far to receive an abortion while upper-class women might have that opportunity. This adds another layer to the pro-choice argument where they are not only advocating for women's rights but the rights of women from all social classes.

7.3 Theories

Changes within modern news and media have been attributed to an increase in affective polarization according to certain scholars (Iyengar et al., 2018). The constant stream of news that reaches people through social media means that it has become almost impossible to not be confronted with the state of your country's politics. This is particularly true for TikTok where the content you are shown is not based on who you personally decide to follow but based on what an algorithm has predicted you want to see. While TikTok has made news more accessible it does not seem to be contributing to affective polarization in the way that was predicted.

Creators on TikTok are not using the platform to post content to attack the opposition, instead, they are posting videos that are meant to spread their message. The aspect of affective polarization where there is a lack of socializing across the in and out-group is present as users do not seem to be trying to target or debate with the other group, however, attacks across the spectrum are limited. The most popular videos under the guiding hashtags are not of an argumentative nature which contradicts what was expected based on the researched theories, specifically political antagonism. The views of both the pro-life and pro-choice sides stray towards the extreme but they stick to their own sides.

Pitting two groups against one another where one side believes an act is murder and the other believes it is a legal right will naturally cause a strong rift between the sides. The idea of political antagonism where an us vs them dynamic leads to a fight for dominance with a

complete disregard for the other side is shown on TikTok but not as much as the theory indicates there should be (Mouffe, 1999). The basis of political antagonism implies that in a situation such as this where there are two clear groups pitted against each other, there should be a need to destroy and belittle each other. The material collected on TikTok shows nothing to this extent. The videos show a clear us vs them and the users talk from a point of view of being morally superior to the other side because they believe the other side is wrong, but the attacks against each other are limited. It appears that the main goal for both sides of the debate is to spread one's message and hope to be able to convert more people to one's side so that they can increase their influence. Perhaps fighting and attacking one another occurs outside of social media where there one will get a more immediate response. When content is posted to social media that is made to hurt and attack someone it allows the person or group to create well-thought-out responses and the opportunity to hide behind a screen.

It is also possible that the lack of political antagonism within the abortion debate on TikTok can be due to the app itself and its community guidelines. The app aims to "create an environment where everyone feels welcome and safe" and does not condone any sort of harassment (TikTok, 2023). Videos that do not meet these standards are reported and taken down by the app. If the app does not allow for a platform where the two groups can attack each other then there will of course not be any observable antagonism.

The TikTok algorithm feeds into the idea of filter bubbles where the content shown is based on behavior and search history (Fletcher, 2020). When searching for material to analyze this was a helpful mechanism, however in the real world this does lead to isolation from opposing views. The videos that came up when searching for terms such as #prochoice and #prolife were aligned with the views of the search terms. Not only were the videos aligned but the comment section of the videos were predominantly filled with support and agreement. There was the occasional outlier where a user disagreed and tried to start an argument with the content creator, however, generally the comment section was not filled with as much hate and disagreement that has become known on social media. This seems to be a result of filter bubbles on TikTok as well as the elusive algorithm, which leads to certain dangers. Users seem to only view and react to videos that are on the same side of the debate as themselves, which does create a less hostile atmosphere on the app, but they are not learning of the arguments the other side brings. While there are clear filter bubbles on TikTok it does not seem to contribute to much polarization or extreme viewpoints. Users who post videos that

feature generic and mainstream beliefs get more responses, such as views and likes, which means that on an app such as TikTok, their voice is getting heard the most. The filter bubbles do not contribute to an increase in extremism but instead further push the mainstream narrative, whether it be pro-life or pro-choice.

7.4 Summary

The videos collected from TikTok revealed existing patterns within the abortion debate that have created a clearer picture of how the debate has been affected over the past three years. Within the past three years, the United States has gone from protecting abortions to overruling the law and allowing states to ban abortions. TikTok is a space where, primarily, young people are posting and watching content that spans from personal hobbies to international politics. The constant stream of political content that is available on social media allows for new perspectives to emerge that are not constrained to traditional media. TikTok is one of the newest social media platforms to become so successful which means that there is still a lot left to learn in regards to the effects it has on its users.

The United States is a country that is divided on many political issues and the two-party system allows for this divide to occur naturally. The issue of abortion has two very clear sides, pro-life or pro-choice. One side believes that having an abortion is considered murder and that the woman should be punished for that crime. The other side advocates for legal abortions on the basis of women's health care and ensuring that women can have control over what happens to their own bodies. As abortion has once again become a very relevant topic in the United States in the past couple of years people are voicing their opinion on it more vocally than before. Through news and new types of social media, this divisive issue has the tendency to become polarized to an extreme.

Understanding how the debate has developed over the past three years on TikTok through the collected 40 videos has shown that it is not as polarized as expected considering the circumstances. With the creation of two ideal types to use as models for the extreme political ideologies on both sides of the abortion debate, the collected videos show that opinions are not becoming more extreme in 2023 than they were in 2020. Despite the changes to the abortion legislature, people are still using the same arguments to pick for or against abortions. The lack of apparent affective polarization and political antagonism is a potentially positive

sign for America. While there does not seem to be any growing understanding between the two sides the divide between the two does not seem to be escalating. If the divide is not growing then there is maybe hope for a compromise in the future. While affective polarization was not as present as predicted on TikTok other noteworthy patterns did emerge through the research. It became very clear that there is one main argument used by the pro-life side and one main argument used by the pro-choice side. As well as showcasing these two main arguments the videos on TikTok also revealed patterns regarding gender, religion, and the involvement of party politics.

TikTok is still a mystery to many scholars and while there is a growing field dedicated to understanding this new form of social media there are many layers left to be uncovered. The impact of constantly being presented with various political opinions through different forms of media, especially for young people growing up with it, has an impact on the world that has yet to be fully understood. TikTok is one example of many platforms where political debates are occuring and important issues such as abortion are being picked apart by its users. Through reviewing the posted content and understanding what is being posted it will become easier to see what the impacts are on the world.

8 Discussion

8.1 Further Research

Despite being one of the most popular social media platforms for the past three years, TikTok is still a mystery in many aspects. The secretive algorithm and connections to Chinese-based companies have caused much controversy regarding TikTok leading to several states in the U.S. debating enforcing complete bans of the app (BBC, 2023). Due to the platform's secrecy, it is hard for researchers to study the intricacies and effects of the app. There are many limitations that appear when trying to use TikTok as a base for research, particularly when trying to focus on a country-specific topic. As mentioned before there is a geographical limitation with TikTok since it does not allow for geo-tagging locations. This allows for easy manipulation for foreign entities to, for example, pretend to be American and post videos that can sway the debates. Understanding the implications of this would be a huge step towards understanding the overall effects of TikTok and something that needs to be studied further.

This study serves as a starting point for the research that can be done regarding politics, specifically the abortion debate, on TikTok. With more time and resources to review not only a larger quantity of videos on TikTok but also other aspects of the app, further understanding of the app's impact would be understood. It is not only the posted videos on TikTok that could lead to further research but also the comment sections. Reviewing and analyzing who comments on certain videos and how they relate to the posted content would lead to a further understanding of the effects TikTok videos have on its users. While videos are posted to TikTok daily, those who post content on TikTok only make up 55% of all active users (Aslam, 2022). As there is a substantial amount of users who do not post content understanding the impact of TikTok on them can not be done through analyzing posted content. Finding ways to research the effect consuming TikTok content has on people would be an enormous step towards understanding the effects such a popular app has on the younger generations.

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