

It's All About Context: Political Polarization on Twitter from a Comparative Perspective

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Polarization on social media is real... maybe... or maybe not?

Some studies suggest that social media users tend to sort themselves into ideologically segregated communities and selectively expose themselves to information that is in line with their views; which, in turn, might lead to increased societal polarization (Bail et al. 2018; Conover et al. 2012; Garimella et al. 2018; Grömping 2014; Hindman 2009; Levendusky 2013; Quattrociocchi, Scala, and Sunstein 2016; Sunstein 2017)

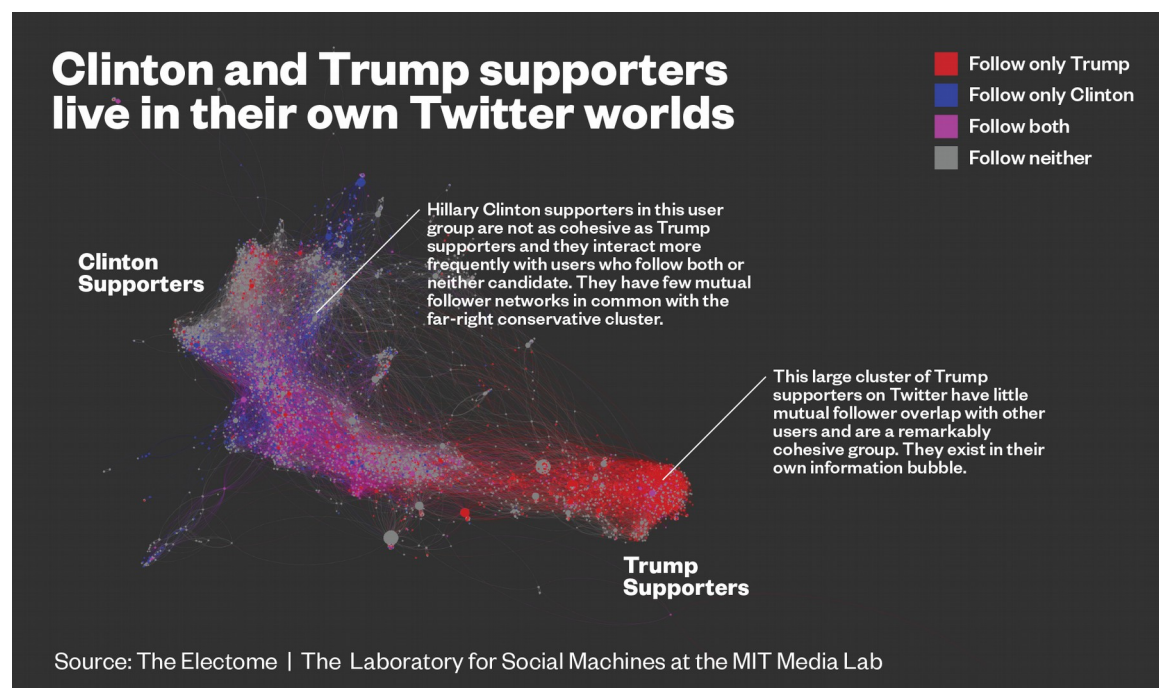


Image source: https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/d3xamx/journalists-and-trump-voters-live-in-separate-online-bubbles-mit-analysis-shows

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But others argue that

- Social media can decrease users' partisanship since they are exposed to ideologically diverse information through weak ties (Barberá 2015)
- Social media “feed” users more crosscutting hard news than they would see if they relied only on the sources they chose to follow themselves (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015)
- Facebook users navigate mostly to several well-known outlets with mostly ideologically diverse audiences (Nelson and Webster 2017)

Is something wrong with the contradictory findings?

Perhaps nothing is. A couple of things to note though...

- The absolute majority of studies that find evidence of increased polarization on social media are from the US – an extremely polarized political system
- Lack of comparative studies (a notable exception – Bright 2018)
- Studies that do not find evidence of selective exposure/increased polarization take into account not only political spheres, but more general media consumption (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Barberá, 2015.; Nelson and Webster 2017)

More comparative studies into polarization on social media are necessary to come up with conclusive and generalizable results!

Main questions

Does polarization on social media vary from one context to another?

If so, is the variance related to electoral rules and party systems?

Study design

Data:

- Twitter data – lists of followers of parliamentary political parties in 16 democratic countries (collected in September-October 2018) with different electoral rules and party systems

Method

- Audience duplication approach (Ksiazek 2016; Webster and Ksiazek 2012) applied to the collected data
- Audience duplication graphs [co-exposure graphs] constructed
- Based on the topology of the graphs, countries' Twitterspheres classified into 5 categories:
 - *Perfectly integrated*
 - *Integrated*
 - *Mixed*
 - *Polarized*
 - *Perfectly polarized*

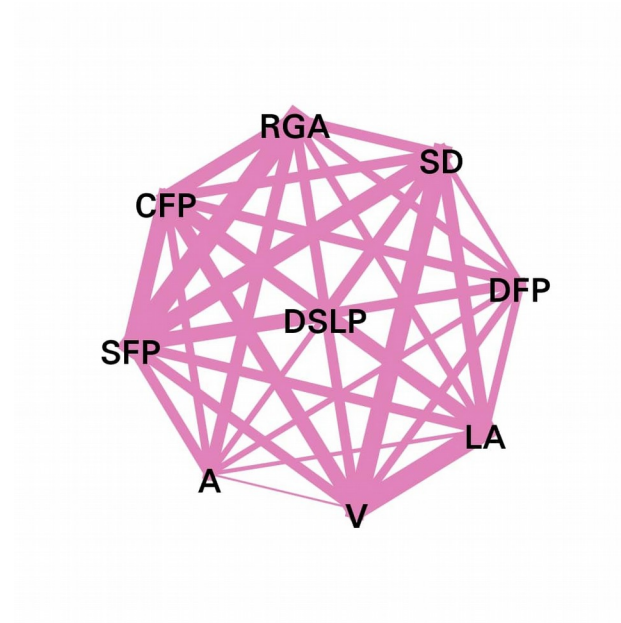
Cases

Country	Electoral System (Parliamentary elections)	Party system (multi-party vs two-party)	Democracy Index Score, 2017	Number of unique users	% of the total population
Sweden	Proportional	Multi	9.39	243473	2.4%
Denmark	Proportional	Multi	9.22	94333	1.6%
Australia	Plurality	Two	9.09	243338	0.98%
Switzerland	Proportional	Multi	9.03	49818	0.59%
Germany	Proportional	Multi	8.61	836718	0.97%
United Kingdom	Plurality	Two	8.53	1271674	1.9%
Austria	Proportional	Multi	8.42	119037	1.4%
Uruguay	Proportional	Two	8.12	101815	2.9%
Spain	Proportional	Multi	8.08	2279866	4.9%
South Korea	Mixed: 253 seats plurality, 47 seats proportional	Two	8.00	349918	0.67%
United States	Plurality	Two	7.98	2698608	0.82%
Italy	Mixed: 193 seats proportional, 116 seats plurality, 6 seats - a quota for Italians residing abroad	Multi	7.98	949410	1.6%
Japan	Mixed: 295 seats plurality, 180 seats proportional	Multi	7.88	397159	0.31%
Portugal	Proportional	Multi	7.84	65365	0.63%
France	Majoritarian (two rounds)	Multi	7.80	835323	1.2%
Jamaica	Plurality	Two	7.29	16979	0.58%

Results

Perfectly integrated - Denmark

The graph is complete

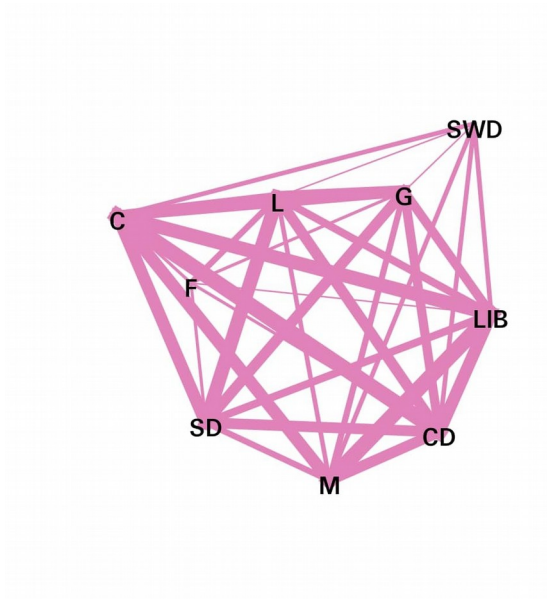


Denmark

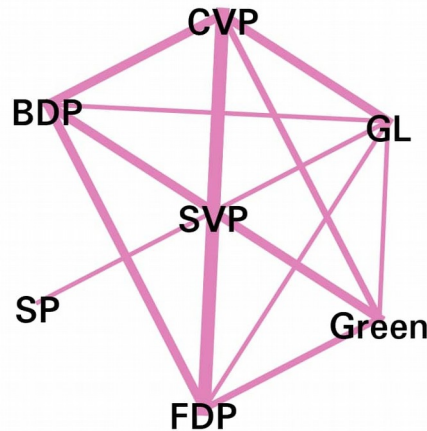
Results

Integrated – Sweden, Switzerland, Germany

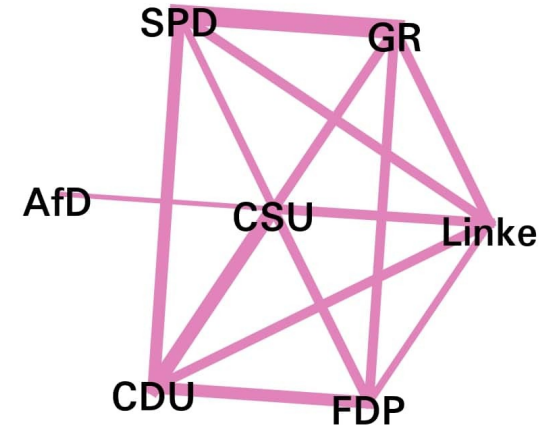
The graph is connected, but not complete



Sweden



Switzerland

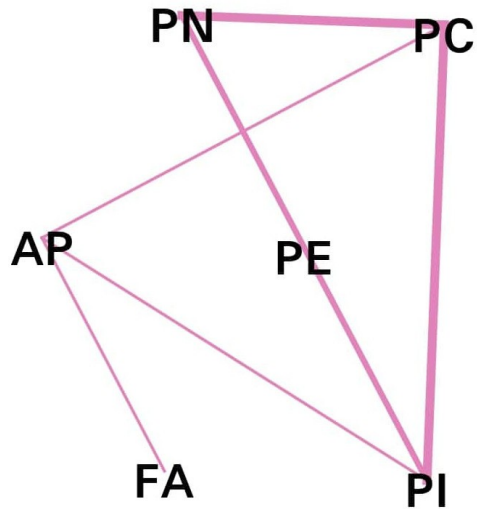


Germany

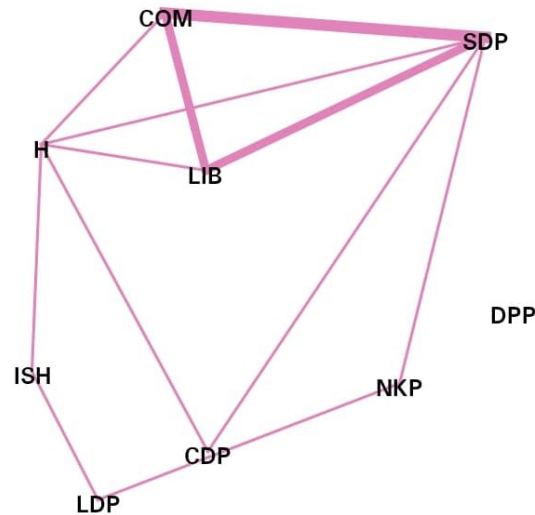
Results

Mixed – Uruguay, Japan, Spain

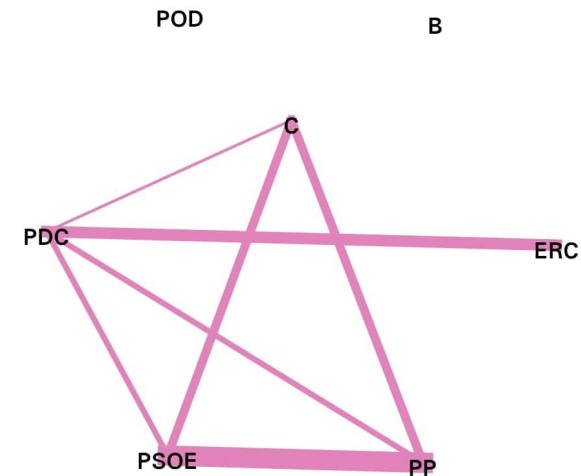
The graph is disconnected, but the nodes representing major political parties are directly connected with each other; alternatively, the graph is connected, but the nodes representing major political parties are not connected with each other.



Uruguay



Japan

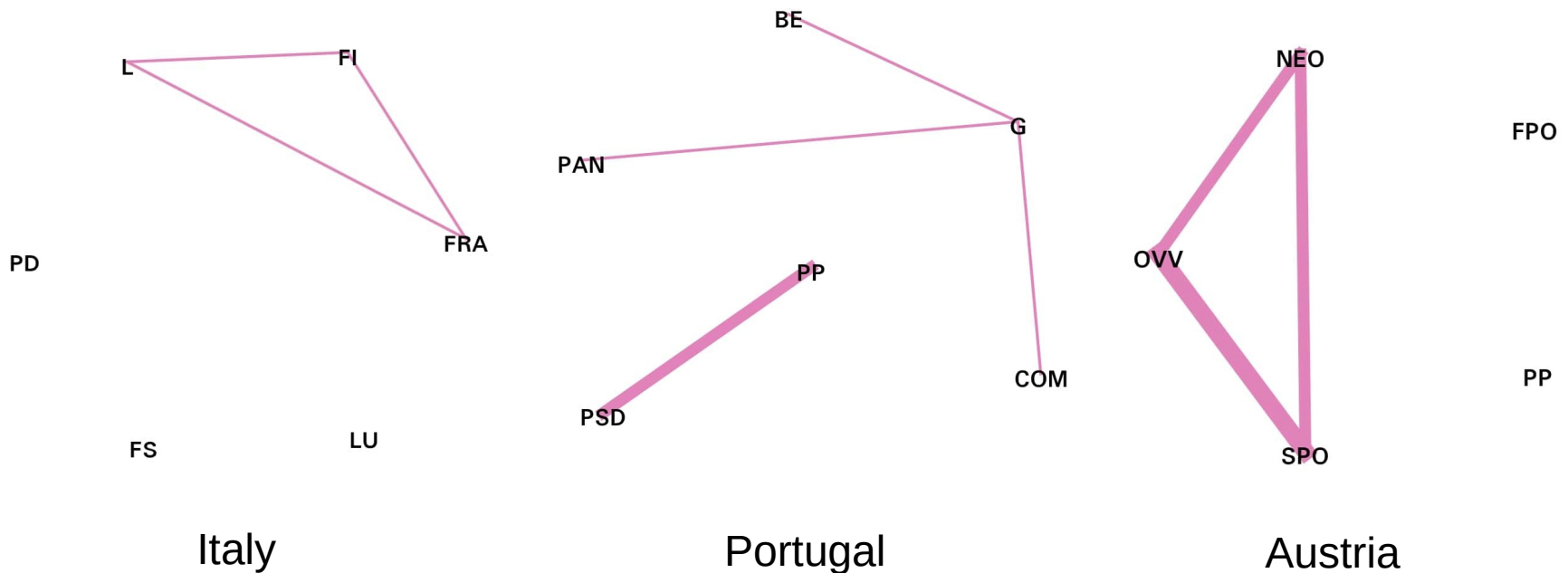


Spain

Results

Polarized – Italy, Portugal, Austria, the UK, Australia, France

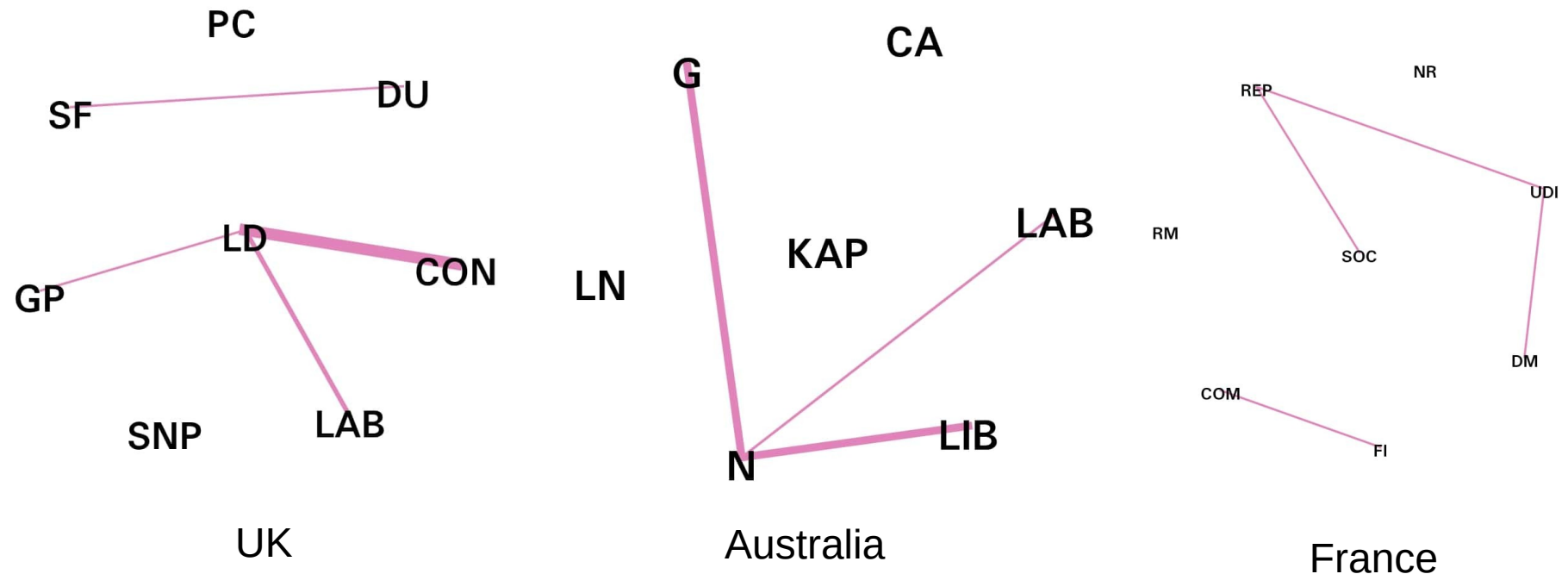
The graph is disconnected and the nodes representing major political parties are not directly connected with each other



Results

Polarized – Italy, Portugal, Austria, the UK, Australia, France

The graph is disconnected and the nodes representing major political parties are not directly connected with each other



Results

Perfectly polarized – the US, South Korea, Jamaica

All nodes are isolated

GOP

DEM

US

BD

MD

MJD

PDP

KPP

JD/S

JU

South Korea

PNP

JLP

Jamaica

Discussion

- Political polarization on Twitter largely varies from country to country
- Electoral rules and party systems might be predictors of polarization intensity: polarization on Twitter is the lowest in the countries with multi-party systems and proportional electoral rules, and the highest in the countries with two-party systems and plurality electoral rules
- The US is not a typical case in terms of polarization on Twitter, so findings from the US are not easily generalizable
- More comparative studies are necessary to get conclusive results

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