

Narratives of Distortion: U.S. Institutional Media and the Polarization of Gaza War Coverage

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ABSTRACT

This study develops a comprehensive framework to analyze U.S. media coverage of the Gaza war at the institutional level. Examining 134,735 news items published by 131 outlets on websites and Facebook during the first year of the war, the analysis uncovers deep and systemic fractures driven by ideological bias in the media. Network “connectomes” of sourcing revealed that partisan outlets overwhelmingly dominated the war narrative, while nonpartisan outlets played a minor role. Highly partisan outlets produced extreme narratives saturated with socio-psychological cues, abstract frames, and negative sentiment, constructing distorted depictions of the conflict. Audience engagement mirrored these divides, with liberals, conservatives, and nonpartisans exhibiting sharply divergent sharing and reaction patterns, and fractures emerging even within ideological camps. These findings demonstrate that institutional U.S. media manufactured partisan Gaza war narratives that entrenched polarization across society, creating pathways of cognitive distortion that reinforced inter-party division while fueling intra-party fragmentation.

Keywords: Institutional Media, Gaza War, Mass Polarization, Partisan Sorting, Affective Polarization, Media Polarization, Ideological Bias, Network Analysis, Audience Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

The latest war between Israel and Hamas-led Palestinian militant groups began on October 7, 2023. Then, the terrorist organization Hamas entered southern Israel from the Gaza Strip and launched a surprise attack. Hamas had committed a series of atrocities that resulted in the deaths of over 1,200 individuals, the injury of hundreds more, instances of sexual assault against women, and the abduction of over 250 hostages (United Nations, 2024). In response, Israel initiated a brutal campaign in Gaza aimed at destroying Hamas (Mackenzie & Lubell, 2023). The conflict spread to the Israeli-occupied West Bank and along the Israel–Lebanon border. This war is the most significant episode of the broader Israeli–Palestinian conflict since the Yom Kippur War 50 years earlier. As of March 2024, more than 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza had been killed, including over 12,000 children (Batra, 2024; Singh, 2024). Several thousand Palestinians were missing. The vast majority of Gaza’s 2.3 million people were internally displaced. In addition, Israel largely blocked Gaza’s access to food, clean water, medicine, electricity, and communications, producing a major humanitarian crisis (Singh, 2024). With most Gazans at increased risk of starvation, accusations emerged in spring 2024 that Israel was using starvation as a weapon of war.

The latest and devastating conflict in Gaza has had a profound impact on American society, exposing and deepening existing fractures. To examine the role of the media in these persistent divisions, this study develops a novel and systematic framework for analyzing U.S. media at the institutional level and examines how outlets of different ideological alignments covered the Gaza war. It further investigates the impact of this coverage on audiences, at a national scale. By integrating a comprehensive analysis of institutional media with audience-level effects, the study provides fresh insights into how national narratives of the Gaza war were crafted and how these narratives shaped citizens’ attitudes toward the conflict.

Mass polarization, elite polarization and intraparty polarization

Public opinion in the United States has been deeply divided—and has shifted over time. Since the outbreak of the Gaza war, Republicans and Democrats have increasingly diverged on the appropriate level of U.S. support for both Israel and the Palestinians. A December 2023 Gallup poll found that 37% of Republicans believed the U.S. was doing “too little” to support Israel, compared to just 15% of Democrats. By contrast, 40% of Democrats said the U.S. was doing “too much” for Israel, versus 26% of Republicans. The partisan gap was even sharper regarding U.S. support for Palestinians: a majority of Republicans (52%) said the U.S. was doing “too much,” compared with only 14% of Democrats; nearly half of Democrats (49%) thought the U.S. was doing “too little,” versus just 16% of Republicans (Brenan, 2024). Likewise, in late 2023, Democrats and Democratic leaners were far more likely than Republicans and Republican leaners to say that Israel’s military operation in Gaza was going “too far” (45% vs. 12%; Pew Research Center, 2023).

In addition to deep societal divisions over the war in Gaza, political elite polarization has also been prominent – the contestation over the Gaza war sits atop a longer arc of U.S. partisan polarization – both between and within parties (i.e. inter- and intraparty polarization). Inter-party divisions are visible both in rhetoric and in legislative behavior. Early in the conflict, the House

adopted a pro-Israel resolution by an overwhelming bipartisan margin, signaling a surface consensus. Yet subsequent floor activity exposed sharper splits—especially within the Democratic Party—between members emphasizing Israeli security and those prioritizing humanitarian constraints and ceasefire demands. A Congressional Research Service compilation of Israel–Hamas–related votes in the 118th Congress documents these patterns and their issue frames (condemnation, censure, aid, humanitarian provisions) (Ferrell and Levy, 2025). At the same time, the principal supplemental appropriations providing military assistance to Israel and humanitarian relief for Gaza ultimately became law, but only after cross-pressures produced nontrivial defections in both parties—underscoring how coalition management now coexists with partisan signaling (Sharp and Zanotti, 2024).

Intra-party split has been more pronounced among Democrats. A small but vocal, progressive bloc publicly pressed for an immediate ceasefire and introduced a House resolution to this effect; the measure attracted only a minority of Democratic cosponsors, illustrating limits to insurgent agenda-setting inside the caucus even as it shaped the party’s rhetorical space (Office of the Clerk, 2023a;2023b). Republicans, by contrast, have displayed stronger cross-member agreement on military support for Israel and opposition to ceasefire measures. However, pockets of “America First” skepticism toward expansive foreign commitments signal a quieter intra-party tension that occasionally surfaces on specific votes and in conservative media debate. CRS’s vote compendium again makes clear that these fissures appear less frequently on the GOP side but are not absent (Ferrell and Levy, 2025).

Outside the roll-call record, symbolic politics have amplified partisan sorting. When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed a Joint Meeting of Congress on July 24, 2024, roughly half of congressional Democrats declined to attend, a highly unusual boycott for a close U.S. ally and a visible marker of elite polarization over the war’s conduct and humanitarian toll (Solender, 2024). Such conspicuous acts of presence and absence function as intra-coalitional signals to primary electorates, donors, and allied movement organizations.

A growing body of research uses text-as-data to trace these elite divides in real time. Rappel-Kroyzer (2025) analyzes more than 50,000 congressional tweets during the 2023–2024 war and finds systematic partisan divergence in framing, along with constituency-linked responsiveness (e.g., districts with larger Jewish populations correlating with more pro-Israel messaging), net of party and interest-group factors. (Rappel-Kroyzer, 2025). Gaza became a national culture-war flashpoint, with elite rhetoric and media incentives reinforcing polarized identities and narrowing cross-party bargaining space. (The Project on Middle East Political Science, 2024). Finally, survey evidence from the Chicago Council–University of Texas “opinion leaders” panel shows pronounced partisan splits among foreign-policy elites, aligning with congressional patterns and suggesting that elite networks beyond elected officials are likewise polarized on Gaza. (Baz et al., 2024).

Media dynamics interact with these elite incentives. Coverage of campus protests risked amplifying the most extreme voices, thereby heightening conflict salience and partisan sorting (Liu, 2024). In practice, party leaders then face simultaneous pressures from attentive publics (Page & Shapiro, 1983), aligned media (Levendusky, 2013; Stroud, 2011), and organized interests (Bawn et al., 2012; Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016), producing stable inter-party

polarization (McCarty et al., 2006) alongside selective—but consequential—within-party rifts over framing (security vs. humanitarianism) (Druckman et al., 2013), policy instruments (unconditional aid vs. conditionality) (Milner & Tingley, 2015), and legislative tactics (symbolic resolutions vs. binding constraints) (Mayhew, 1974; Gray, 2022; Volden & Wiseman, 2014).

Media’s role in polarization over the Gaza war

U.S. news media extensively covered Hamas’s attack, the killing of Israeli civilians, and the suffering of Israeli hostages, alongside the devastation in Gaza and the suffering of Palestinians (Bisset et al., 2025; Reuters, 2023). In addition, student protests denouncing the Gaza invasion received extensive and sustained coverage (Perry et al., 2024; Coulter, 2024; Allen & Singh, 2024). Some conservative outlets framed campus protests as “hate” against Jews or the state of Israel, reporting as well that Black Lives Matter “Chapters [were] Celebrating Hamas Attacks” (Hogstrom, 2024; Singh, 2024). On the other hand, liberal outlets emphasized the toll of the invasion on Palestinians and accusations that Israel was conducting a “genocidal campaign” (Zafra & McClure, 2024).

This extensive and likely divisive coverage by the U.S. media likely triggered robust emotional responses among audiences. Speaking at Stanford Law School on January 18, 2024, Emily Bazelon reflected on how media coverage of campus protests may have amplified the loudest voices: “By amplifying [the issue], the media gives it more life” (Liu, 2024; Cantarow, 2024).

More generally, a growing body of work links partisan media environments to mass-level divisions, but definitions and measures of “polarization” remain uneven (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Building on classic accounts of party-system cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan, 1976) and recent syntheses distinguishing ideological from affective polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), this section distills how partisan media may contribute to both forms of polarization through selection, engagement, and persuasion dynamics.

Does partisan media contribute to mass polarization?

Selective exposure and reinforcement. Partisans tend to choose congenial outlets and narratives that affirm group identities and priors, a dynamic central to Social Identity Theory (SIT) and to reinforcing-spiral accounts of media use (Slater, 2007, 2015; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; West & Iyengar, 2022). Partisan outlets routinely deploy in-group and out-group cues; such out-grouping is associated with higher online diffusion and engagement, creating incentives to produce more divisive content (Rathje et al., 2021). Experimental evidence suggests that out-group scapegoating frames increase engagement and belief change, highlighting a persuasive pathway from intergroup cues to mass attitudes (Bos et al., 2020).

Framing and psychological distance. Construal Level Theory (CLT) explains how framing issues more abstractly or concretely changes what people attend to and how polarized their responses may become (Trope & Liberman, 2010). News coverage often uses low-construal (concrete, proximal) visuals and frames, heightening perceived closeness and threat (Duan et al., 2017). Individual-level work links abstract vs. concrete processing to ideology and threat sensitivity (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2009) and suggests that construal manipulations may shift

prejudice or issue positions, and may sometimes amplify partisan gaps (Luguri et al., 2012; Luguri & Napier, 2013; Chan, 2016; Chu & Yang, 2018).

Engagement as a mediating mechanism. Engagement—attention, time, and actions such as sharing—reflects and amplifies persuasive impact (Cohen et al., 2017; Davis Mersey et al., 2010; Corner, 2017). On social platforms, divisive partisan cues are especially potent engagement drivers (Rathje et al., 2021), while language use and diffusion networks vary by ideological media ecosystems (Bovet & Makse, 2019; Karjus & Cuskley, 2024). These platform dynamics create feedback loops between outlet incentives and audience responses (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Persuasion and perceived polarization. Beyond classic routes to persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Tannenbaum et al., 2015), meta-evidence suggests that pro-attitudinal content and incivility can raise ideological or affective polarization, whereas fact-checking may attenuate it (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Significantly, coverage emphasizing polarization can heighten perceived division and out-party animus (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). Longitudinal evidence during COVID-19 documents growing partisan divides in beliefs and behaviors (Sides et al., 2020; Fridman et al., 2021), consistent with—but not definitive proof of—media’s contributory role (Prior, 2013; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Taken together, these dynamics raise the possibility that partisan media may not merely mirror existing cleavages but may actively participate in shaping them. Through selective exposure, framing, engagement loops, and persuasive cues, outlets may reinforce partisan identities, intensify affective animus, and widen ideological gaps. At the same time, variation in how these mechanisms operate—across issues, platforms, and audiences—underscores the need for more precise conceptualizations and measures of polarization. Clarifying these processes is essential not only for theoretical debates about media effects, but also for understanding how communication environments may accelerate or mitigate divisions in democratic societies.

To further explore the role of the media in the partisan divisions and mass polarization of attitudes vis-à-vis the Gaza war, this study develops a comprehensive framework that integrates an analysis of U.S. media coverage of the war at the institutional level with an analysis of the impact of Gaza war stories on American audiences at a national scale.

We first explored the sourcing of Gaza war stories by the U.S. media and asked whether media outlets of differing ideological biases source their Gaza stories differently. We thus asked our first Research Question (RQ):

RQ1: What is the relationship between media’s ideological bias and Gaza war news sourcing?

To address RQ1, we deployed advanced network modeling to visualize the relationships between news sourcing across media outlets with differing ideological biases. We next asked whether media’s ideological bias influenced key aspects of the Gaza war coverage, both on media websites and Facebook pages. We thus asked two related RQs:

RQ2a: Are there differences in coverage on media websites by conservative, liberal, and nonpartisan media?

RQ2b: Are there differences in coverage on Facebook by conservative, liberal, and nonpartisan media?

To address these questions, we quantified the total volume of coverage and examined its evolution over time, comparing liberal-leaning, conservative-leaning, and nonpartisan media outlets.

We next asked whether media of differing ideologies emphasized particular topics in their Gaza war coverage:

RQ3: How does media bias shape the topical emphasis of Gaza war coverage?

To answer RQ3, we deployed topic modeling strategies to identify the major topics of coverage.

Socio-psychological mechanisms of media-driven mass polarization: Social Identity Theory and Construal Level Theory

Recent scholarship suggests that media can fuel partisan divisions by embedding socio-psychological cues into news content — cues that activate ideological thinking and foster divisiveness. Two prominent theoretical mechanisms are Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Construal Level Theory (CLT). Importantly, these frameworks help explain how media may amplify two distinct forms of mass polarization: *affective polarization* — growing hostility toward out-party members — and *ideological polarization* — the widening of substantive issue-based or value-based divides.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) and affective polarization. SIT posits that people categorize into in-groups and out-groups and seek positive distinctiveness, yielding favoritism toward co-partisans and derogation of opponents (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). In contemporary U.S. politics, partisanship functions as a social identity (West & Iyengar, 2022). Partisan media leverage—and potentially intensify—these identities via out-group blame, moralized conflict, and identity-consistent narratives (Dragojević et al., 2017; Rathje et al., 2021). This suggests that SIT may explain media’s impact on partisan divisions and mass polarization: by eliciting in/out-group thinking, and by strengthening in-group cohesion and out-group divisions, media may exacerbate tensions between out-group partisans in political spaces that consume media content.

Construal Level Theory (CLT) and ideological polarization. CLT links psychological distance to abstract (high-level) vs. concrete (low-level) thinking (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Because liberals and conservatives differ, on average, in abstractness, threat sensitivity, and preferences for change vs. stability (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2009), media choices about construal (e.g., global vs. local frames, long-term principles vs. immediate trade-offs) can differentially mobilize left–right worldviews and shift issue positions (Luguri et al., 2012; Luguri & Napier, 2013; Chan, 2016; Chu & Yang, 2018; Duan et al., 2017). Thus, CLT not only offers a

mechanism for how abstractness in the news may elicit and shift ideological thinking leading to polarization but also provides a tractable scaffold for measuring ideological polarization: encode the abstract/concrete level of issue frames and test how those frames correlate with divergence in policy stances and engagement across partisan audiences.

Taken together, SIT and CLT provide plausible mechanisms through which media can activate socio-psychological and cognitive processes in audiences, reinforcing or reshaping patterns of animosity, ideological sorting, and polarization at the mass level.

To further explore whether sociopsychological cues may contribute to mass polarization through their embedding in the news, we asked whether such cues were embedded in the media coverage of the Gaza war. We thus asked:

RQ4: Is the embedding of partisan and abstract cues in the Gaza war news dependent on media's ideological bias?

We also hypothesized that the most partisan media outlets were more likely to use divisive, out-group partisan cues to craft their Gaza war stories:

H1: The most partisan media outlets were more likely to employ out-group partisan cues when reporting on the Gaza war.

Linking media polarization and audience polarization

In the examples discussed above, the U.S. media were shown to craft partisan news when covering the Gaza war. Using our institutional-level analysis of media outlets and their national audiences, we can further explore whether and how partisan news may lead to divisions among audiences, which may contribute to mass polarization. We asked whether the crafting of Gaza war news by partisan and nonpartisan outlets had any consequences for the engagement patterns of their audiences on Facebook—a platform where we can examine the impact of story crafting on audience engagement via analysis of post reach and engagement. We thus asked:

RQ5: What effects, if any, did the media coverage of the Gaza war on Facebook have on audience engagement?

Based on previous observations that partisan and abstract cues can elicit partisan and ideological thinking, we hypothesized that out-group partisan cues are especially engaging, because they may elicit stronger partisan and emotional signals among audiences:

H2: Gaza war news featuring out-group partisan cues generated higher levels of audience engagement on social media.

Finally, we hypothesized that crafting more abstract stories was associated with higher levels of audience engagement with partisan news, since abstract framing of partisan news may elicit ideological thinking which may be particularly powerful for partisans:

H3: Abstract framing of Gaza news was associated with higher audience engagement on social media.

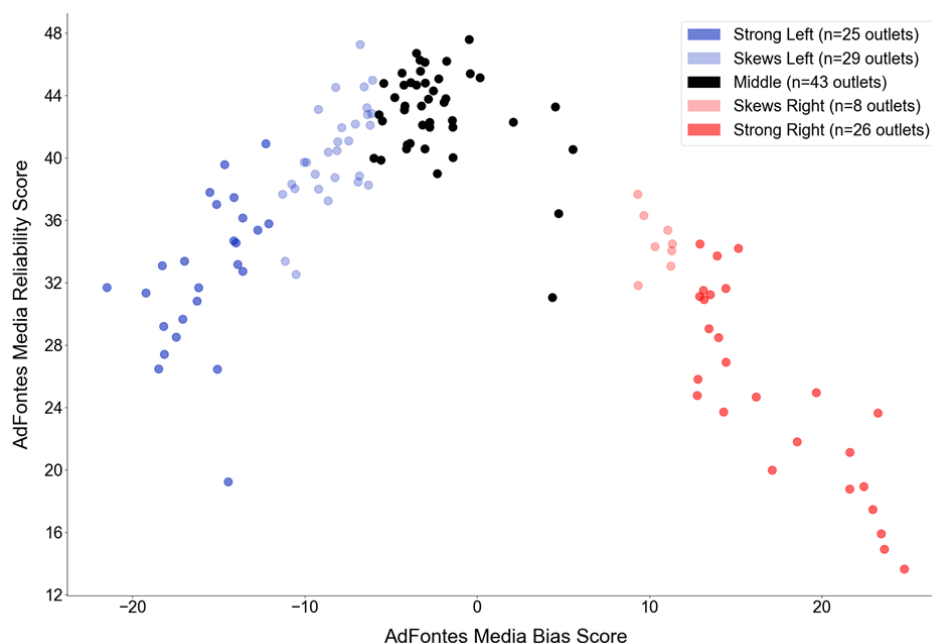
METHODS

Choice and classification of media entities

Media outlets were selected and classified using Ad Fontes Media¹ and AllSides² bias charts, which provide systematic assessments of ideological lean and journalistic reliability. Both organizations combine content analysis with expert review to rate outlets along a left–right spectrum and to evaluate reporting practices such as sourcing, transparency, and adherence to editorial standards. To analyze the role of ideological bias, 131 U.S. news outlets were grouped into five sectors: strong left, skews left, middle (nonpartisan/centric), skews right, and strong right. Unless noted otherwise, references to “liberal” include both strong-left and skews-left outlets, and “conservative” includes strong-right and skews-right outlets; “partisan” refers to either side of the spectrum (Figure M1). The complete outlet list with bias and reliability ratings appears in Supplementary Table 1.

Figure M1

Distribution of Ideological Bias Across Surveyed Media Outlets



¹ For more information about the methodology of Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart’s media political bias and journalistic reliability ratings see <https://adfontesmedia.com/methodology/>

² For more information about the methodology of Allside Media’s political bias rating, see <https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-rating-methods>

Media content retrieval

Closed-vocabulary filters. Computational were developed to detect Gaza-related content in headlines, full texts, and Facebook posts. Following established practice in large-scale communication research (Schwartz & Ungar, 2015), keyword sets were iteratively refined on random samples of 1,000 headlines and 1,000 full articles, validated on new samples of equal size, and then tested on 2,000 Facebook posts. Final filters achieved 96% accuracy on websites and over 97% on Facebook.

News retrieval. Gaza-related news items were first identified in GDELT via Google BigQuery, and full texts were retrieved using BeautifulSoup with the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine API. Facebook posts and associated engagement metrics were bulk-exported from the Meta Content Library (with authorization) and SOMAR. The complete keyword lists are provided in Appendix 1.

Datasets

The website corpus contains 67,133 Gaza-related news articles published between October 7, 2023, and November 5, 2024, by 106 of the 131 outlets; retrieval was limited to 116 outlets accessible via GDELT and the Internet Archive, from which Gaza-related items were identified. The Facebook corpus comprises 67,602 Gaza-related posts from 126 outlets over the same period, collected via the Meta Content Library; all 131 outlets maintained Facebook pages except Infowars, which was banned from the platform.

Network analysis

News networks were constructed with NetworkX and visualized in Gephi 0.10, with nodes representing accounts and directed edges representing name mentions in an article.

Topic modeling

Structured Topic Modeling (STM) was used to inductively identify themes in coverage. STM extends latent Dirichlet allocation to estimate topic prevalence and content while incorporating document-level covariates, including time (Roberts et al., 2016). Model selection balanced interpretability and fit using semantic coherence, held-out likelihood, residuals, and lower bound evidence, prioritizing solutions that maximized coherence and distinctiveness while minimizing residual error.

Construal level of news

Construal (abstract versus concrete language) was measured using the Brysbaert et al. (2014) concreteness norms, which provide human-coded 1–5 ratings for ~40,000 English words. Post- and article-level scores were computed by averaging word ratings, following prior applications to social media text (Aboufoul et al., 2021).

Sentiment of news

Sentiment was estimated with VADER (NLTK) after removing hyperlinks and mentions, yielding continuous scores from -1 (negative) to $+1$ (positive) (Bird et al., 2009).

Identification of social-partisan cues

To code partisan references, name and term lists were constructed for Democratic and Republican actors (e.g., presidents, members of Congress, governors, party labels). The lists were developed through targeted searches and calibrated on a random sample of 2,000 articles; out-of-sample validation on an additional 2,000 articles indicated $>95\%$ accuracy. Final keyword sets appear in Appendix 1.

Mixed-effects models

To address RQ4a–RQ4b, linear mixed-effects models tested whether ideological sector, time, and their interaction predicted coverage characteristics (topic prevalence, sentiment, construal, and partisan mentions) on websites and social media. Monthly observations were nested within outlets, with random intercepts for outlet to account for repeated measures. Sphericity was not assumed; Geisser–Greenhouse corrections were applied. Multiple comparisons across ideological sectors within a month used Tukey-adjusted tests. A complementary post hoc analysis assessed sectoral differences over the full period using emmeans and lmerTest. Where random-effect variance estimates approached zero, reduced models were estimated following standard practice.

Measures of audience engagement

Engagement was operationalized using platform-native interaction metrics. On Facebook, engagement comprised likes, comments, shares, and reaction distributions (love, care, haha, wow, sad, angry). Facebook reach (post visualizations) was used to normalize engagement by exposure, yielding adjusted indicators for comparability across accounts of different sizes.

Zero-inflated beta regression models

To address RQ4, Facebook engagement was modeled using zero-inflated beta regression (gamlss) with the adjusted share rate (shares divided by views) as the dependent variable, appropriate for proportions in $(0,1)$ with excess zeros. The mean (μ) captured expected engagement among nonzero posts, dispersion (σ) captured variability, and the zero-inflation component (ν) modeled the probability of no engagement. Predictors included STM topic proportions (θ), text length, presence of visuals, in-group and out-group partisan cues, construal level, and sentiment. Variance inflation factors were examined to limit multicollinearity; two highly collinear topics (Topics 26 and 21) were excluded. Robustness checks estimated parallel negative binomial models by scaling the adjusted share rate to counts (multiplying by 1,000,000 and rounding). Substantive estimates and significance patterns were consistent across specifications.

Monthly adjusted engagement

For descriptive context, monthly averages of adjusted engagement were plotted by ideological sector, with variability summarized as means $\pm$ SEM. A preferential engagement index compared adjusted engagement for Gaza-related posts to engagement with all other news, computed monthly at the outlet level and aggregated by sector. Reaction-specific outcomes (shares, likes, comments, love, angry, sad, wow) were analyzed analogously.

Qualitative analyses

To complement quantitative results, purposive qualitative analysis examined topics with the largest partisan divergence identified by STM. For each selected topic, 100 representative items were sampled across liberal, conservative, and nonpartisan sources, coded for recurring frames and exemplars. In total, 400 website articles and 400 Facebook posts on Gaza were reviewed. Detailed procedures, topic-specific distributions, and full citations are reported in Appendix 2, with synthesized summaries referenced in the main text.

RESULTS

Global view of Gaza war media coverage

To map interrelationships among U.S. outlets covering the Gaza war and address RQ1, a two-mode network from named individuals mentioned in news stories was mapped (e.g., U.S., Israeli, and Gaza officials; military commanders; politicians; NATO representatives; humanitarian and journalistic actors; and people directly affected by the conflict). The corpus contains 67,062 stories from 126 outlets published between October 7, 2023, and November 5, 2024. The resulting network includes 2,689 nodes and 8,243 edges—that is, outlets linked to 2,563 unique individuals through mention ties. For visualization (Figure 1), this bipartite graph is projected onto an outlet–outlet network where ties reflect shared attention to the same people across coverage.

Figure 1 reveals a polarized structure organized around large partisan hubs. On the conservative side, Fox Online News, Breitbart News, the New York Post, and The Epoch Times anchor densely connected neighborhoods. On the liberal side, CNN (Web News), the Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, and The New York Times occupy similarly prominent positions. Nonpartisan outlets appear comparatively peripheral; among them, U.S. News & World Report shows the most consistent presence, whereas wire services such as the Associated Press contribute fewer person-specific mentions within this network (Figure 1).

Community structure is present but not absolute. The overall modularity is 0.293, indicating above-chance clustering by outlet ideology with noticeable separation between liberal and conservative communities; however, the value also implies nontrivial cross-cutting connections remain.

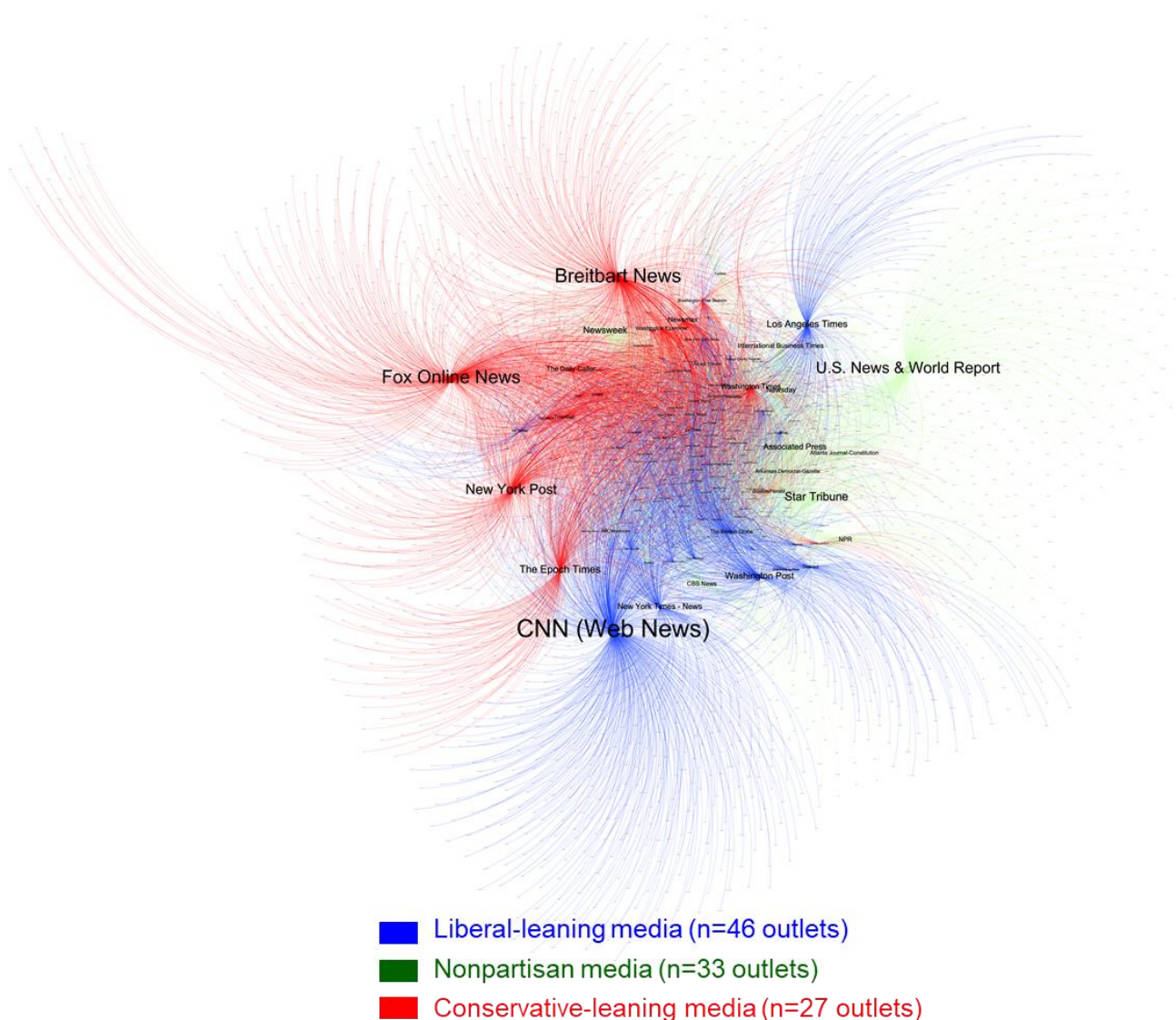
A middle tier of outlets links the major clusters. Some bridge liberal and conservative hubs directly, while others connect partisan hubs to nonpartisan sources. These intermediaries appear

to recirculate, amplify, and combine names first emphasized by partisan outlets and centrist sources, functioning as conduits through which person-focused narratives cross cluster boundaries.

Overall, the network indicates attention flows dominated by partisan centers, with smaller nonpartisan nodes situated nearer the periphery and a set of bridging outlets spanning the divide. This structure suggests that liberal and conservative outlets disproportionately shape the narrative space through their selection of named individuals, while intermediary outlets integrate elements from both sides. Combined with moderate modularity, these patterns imply that cross-ideological circulation of person-based frames occurs principally via intermediaries rather than through dense, direct ties between partisan hubs.

Figure 1

Network analysis of Gaza War Coverage on News Media Websites

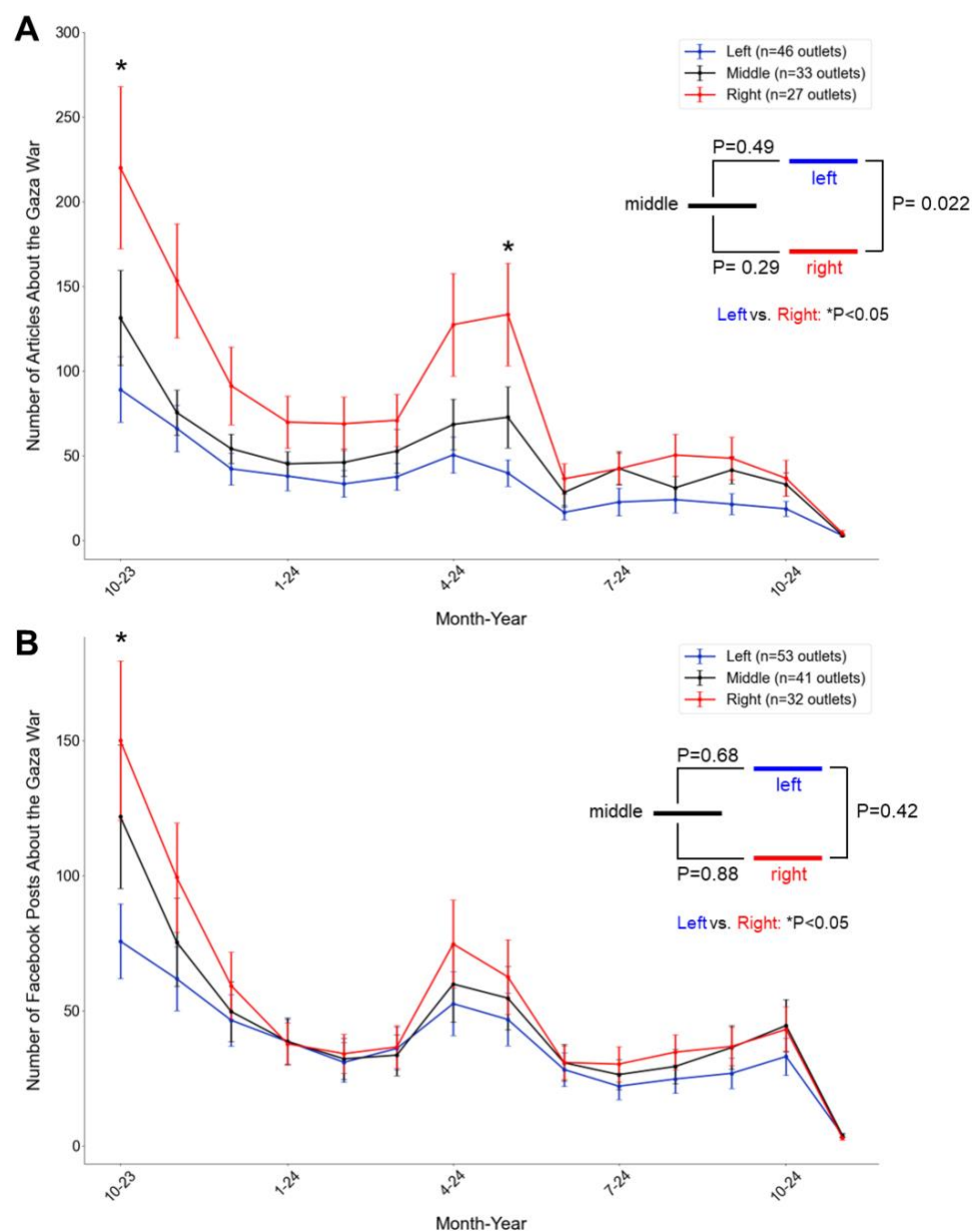


The total volume and relative proportion of war-related content

To answer RQ2a and RQ2b, probing into the differences of volume in news coverage of the Gaza war by partisan media on both website and Facebook, the total volume and relative proportion of war-related coverage was computed. Coverage on outlet websites was heavier among conservative media than among liberal outlets, especially early in the conflict (Figure 2A; $P = 0.022$). Disaggregating the right-leaning sector shows that conservative-leaning outlets produced the highest volume overall, exceeding nonpartisan outlets ($P = 0.019$), strongly liberal outlets ($P = 6 \times 10^{-4}$), and moderately liberal outlets ($P = 0.016$), and trending above strongly conservative outlets ($P = 0.068$) (Figure S1A).

Figure 2

Coverage of the Gaza War on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)

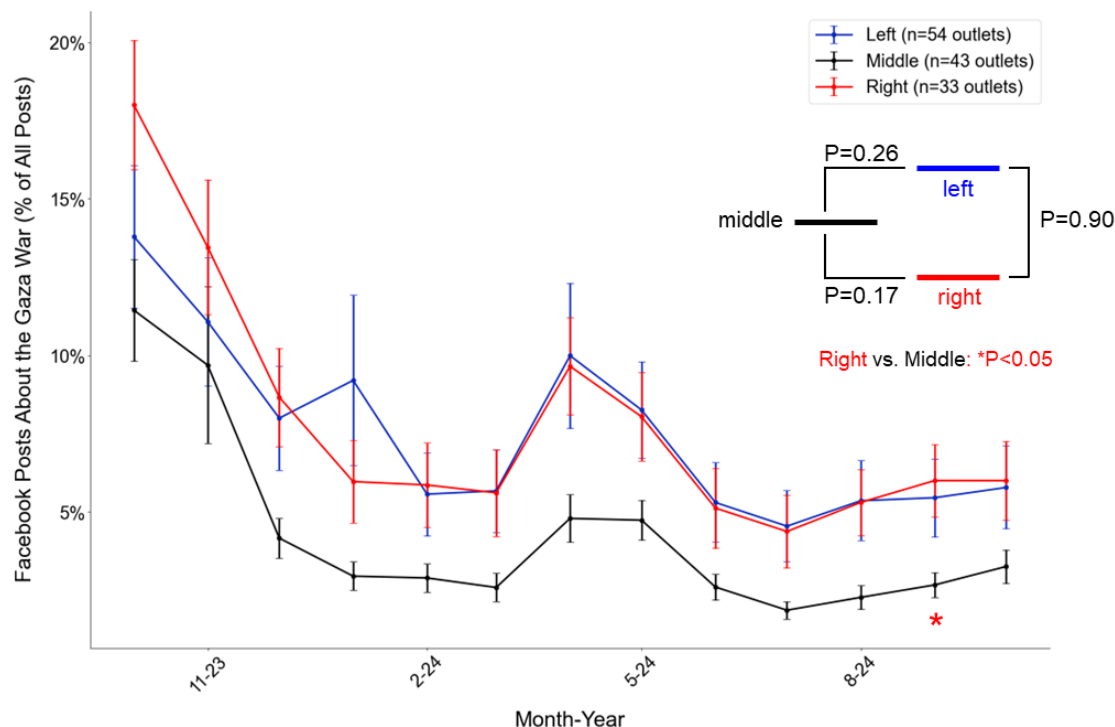


On Facebook, total coverage volume did not differ significantly across ideological sectors (Figure 2B). The main exception is an early drop by liberal outlets in October 2023 (indicated by asterisks in Figure 2B), driven primarily by a sharp decline among strongly liberal outlets (Figure S1B).

Using relative coverage—the share of each outlet’s total posts devoted to Gaza—partisan outlets (liberal and conservative) generally devoted a larger fraction of their output to the conflict than nonpartisan outlets, although the difference is not statistically significant over the full period (Figure 3; Figure S2). A notable exception occurs in September 2024, when conservative outlets allocate a significantly higher share of their posts to Gaza than other sectors (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Relative Coverage of the Gaza War on Facebook



The major topics of coverage on news websites

To address RQ3 and determine whether partisan media bias shaped the topical emphasis of the Gaza war, structured topic modeling (STM) was applied to 67,133 Gaza-war articles published on outlets’ websites between October 7, 2023, and November 5, 2024, to recover the main themes of coverage. Model diagnostics indicated an optimal range of 25–35 topics (Figure S3); a 31-topic specification provided the best overall fit and was retained for analysis (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Coverage of the Gaza War on News Websites: Determining the Optimal Number of Topics

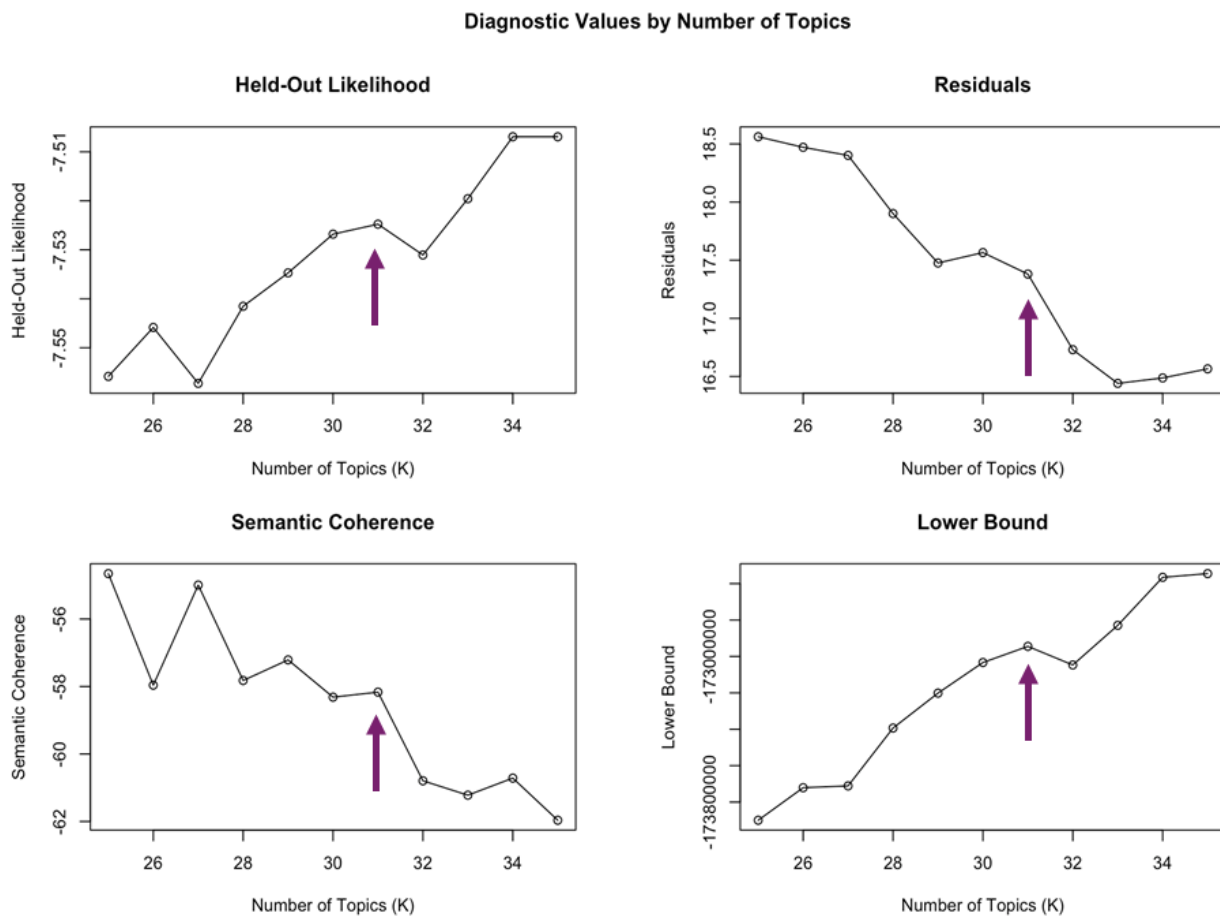
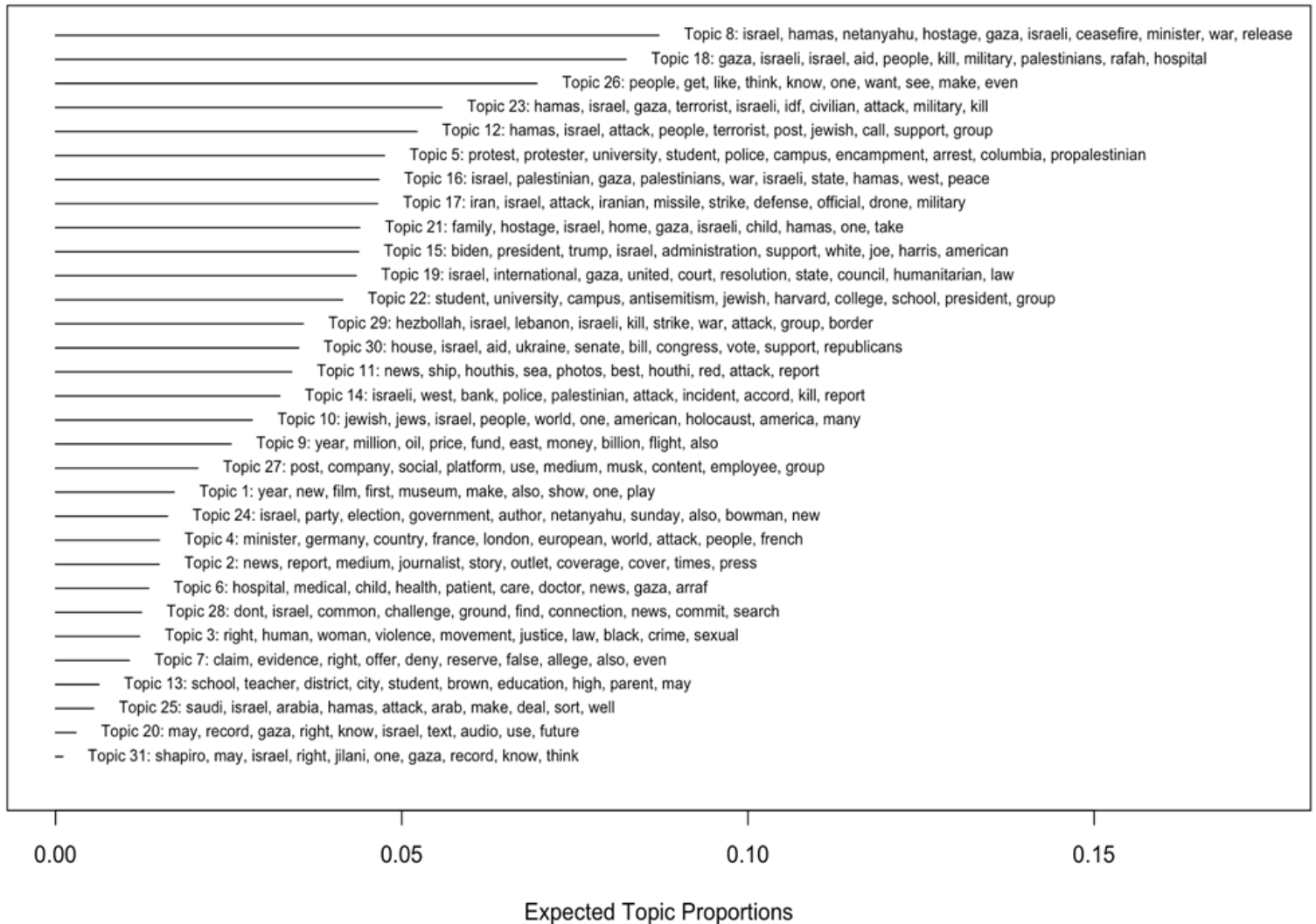


Figure 5 reports the topic structure and salient terms. The most prevalent theme (Topic 8) concerns negotiations between the Netanyahu government and Hamas over a ceasefire and hostage releases. The next most common (Topic 18) focuses on Gaza civilian casualties resulting from Israeli military operations. A third high-frequency theme (Topic 26) comprises human-interest narratives and firsthand perspectives from those directly affected. Another prominent topic (Topic 23) covers IDF–Hamas combat operations and their downstream effects on civilian populations.

Figure 5

Major Topics in Media Coverage of the Gaza War on News Websites

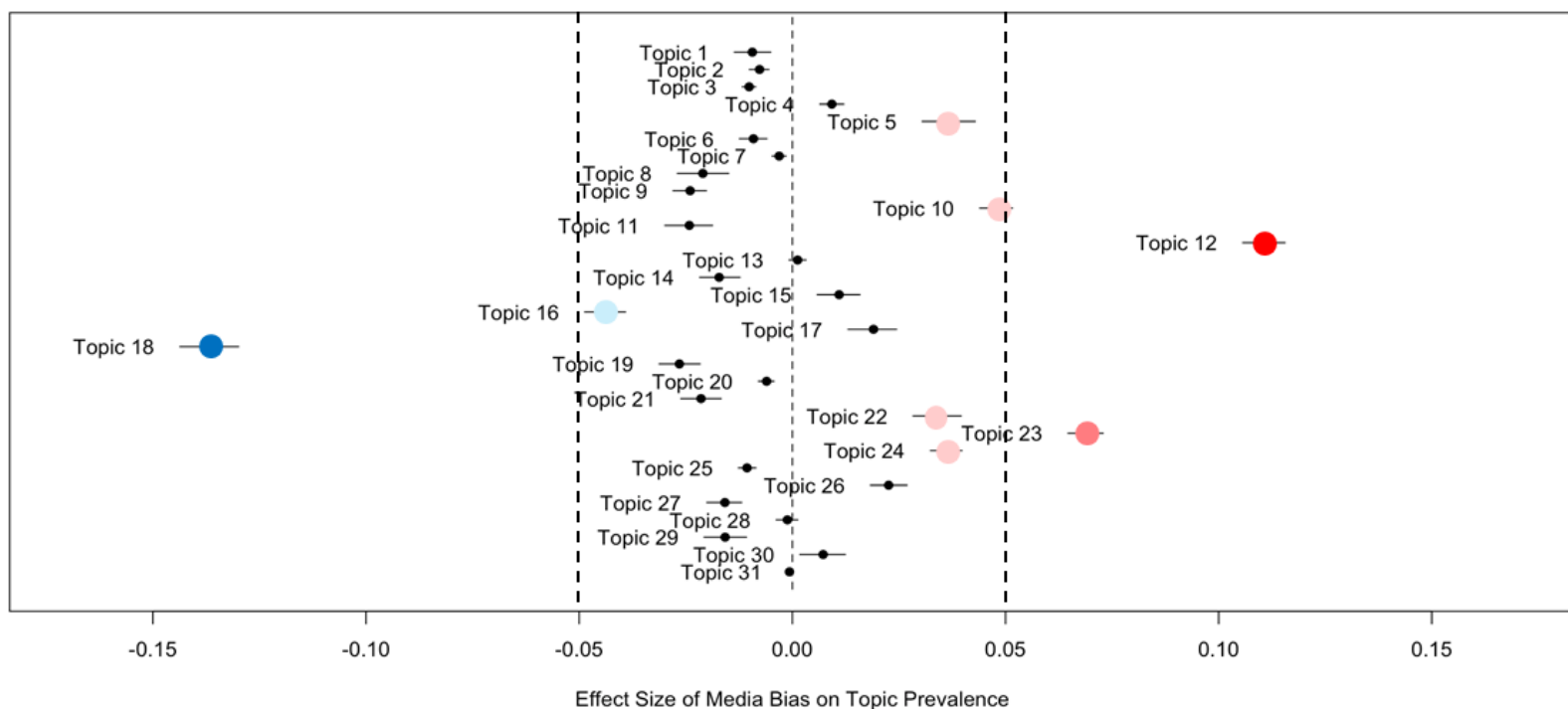


Media ideological bias and topic representation in Gaza war coverage

The STM analysis revealed several topics preferentially covered by either liberal or conservative media (Figure 6). Topic 18 exhibited a strong liberal bias, with more coverage by liberal outlets, while Topic 16 showed a moderate liberal bias. In contrast, Topics 12 and 23 were predominantly covered by conservative media, and Topics 10, 24, 5, and 22 demonstrated a moderate conservative bias in their coverage. The remaining topics showed no strong correlation with media ideological bias (Figure 6). The temporal evolution of Topics 18, 23, 12, and 10, which exhibited the strongest partisan bias in their coverage, is presented in Figure S4 for all media outlets taken together.

Figure 6

Media Ideological Bias and Topic Representation in Gaza War Coverage on Media Websites



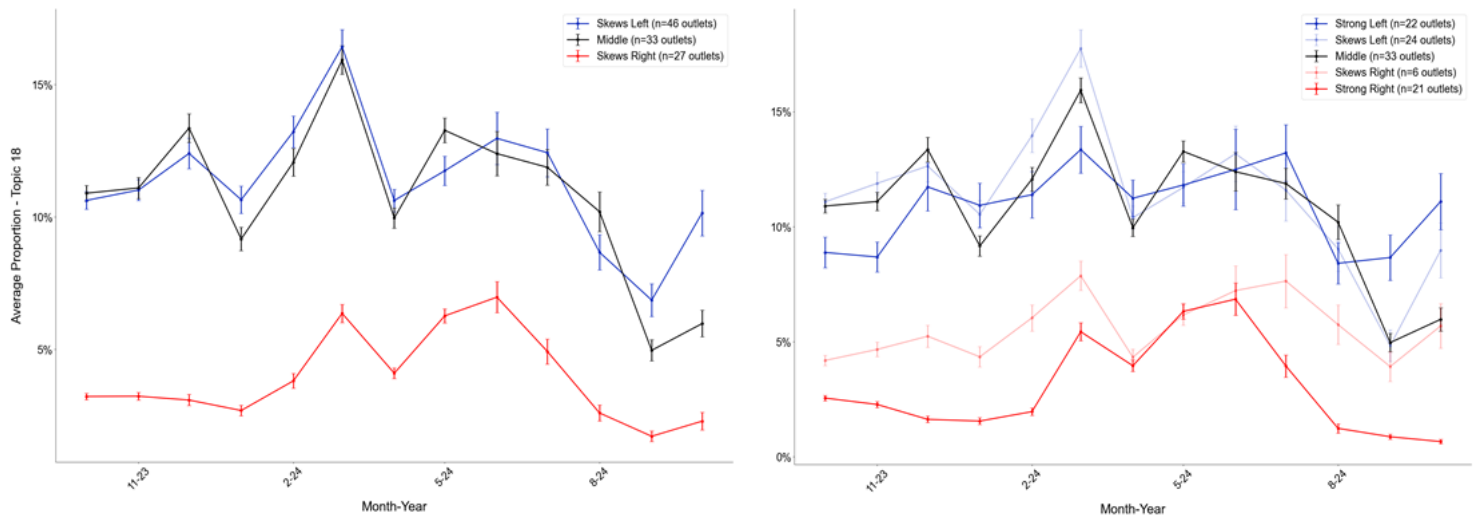
Topics emphasized in Gaza war coverage by liberal media

Topic 18—centered on Palestinian civilian fatalities attributed to Israeli military operations and obstacles to humanitarian access in Gaza—received substantially more attention from liberal and nonpartisan outlets than from conservative outlets across the period (Figure 7, left). Within the right-of-center sector, coverage was lowest among strong-right outlets, with skews-right outlets providing comparatively more but still limited attention (Figure 7, right). Prevalence of Topic 18 declined after July 2024.

Figure 7

Topics Emphasized in Gaza War Coverage on Liberal Media Websites

Topic 18 ●



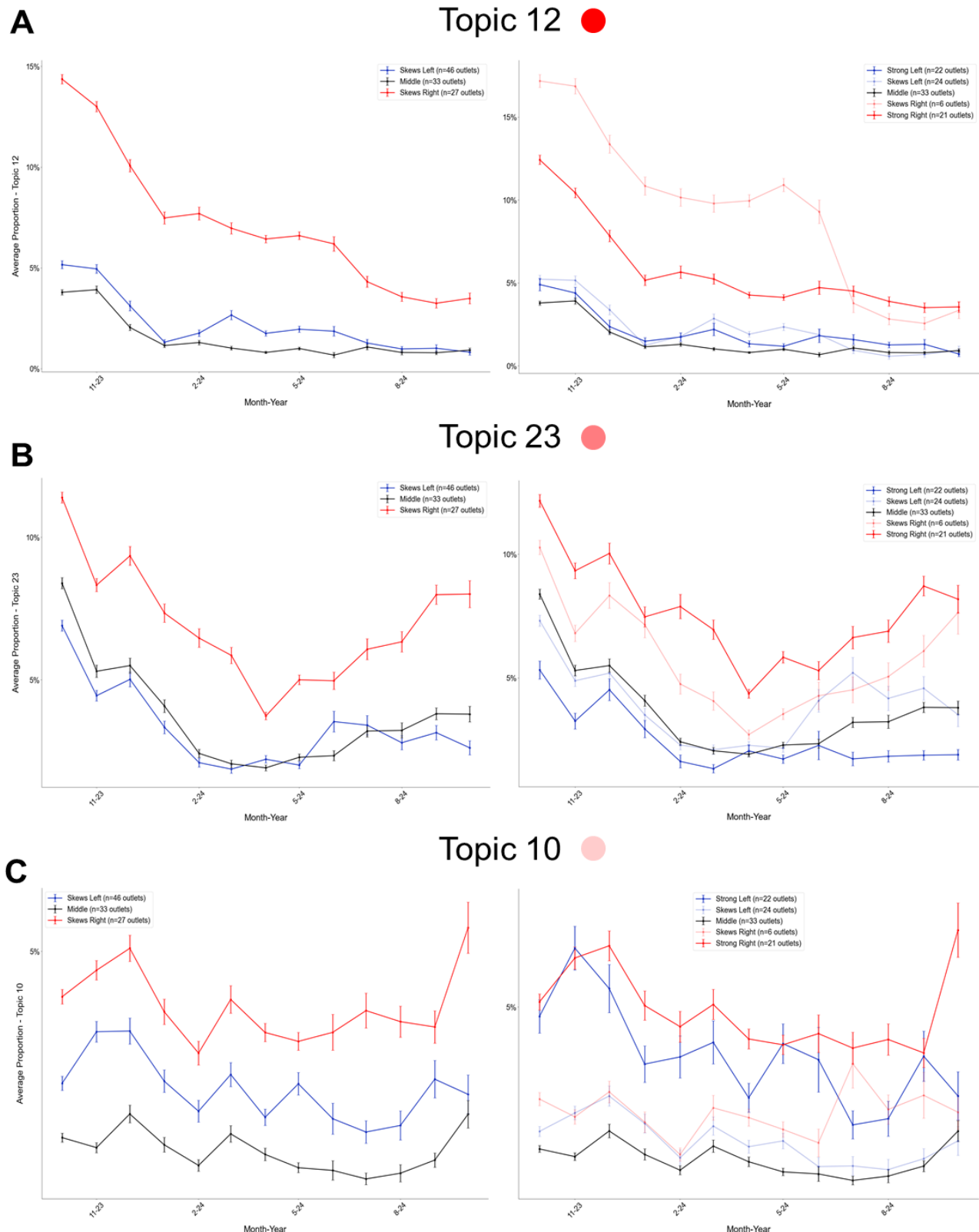
Topics emphasized in Gaza war coverage by conservative media

Topic 12 was concentrated among conservative outlets (Figure 8A, left), with skews-right outlets allocating more coverage than strong-right outlets (Figure 8A, right). Salience peaked in the opening months of the war and declined thereafter. Substantively, this topic centered on U.S. political figures and activists and their involvement in the conflict. Right-leaning coverage frequently highlighted actors associated with the political left—such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, and Black Lives Matter—in connection with their statements on Gaza, and typically evaluates them unfavorably. Conservative outlets also made extensive use of the labels “terrorism” and “terrorist” for Hamas and, at times, for Palestinians more broadly; some articles drew linkages among Palestine, antisemitism, and Nazism. Liberal outlets, in turn, criticized these equivalences and the broader framing.

Topic 23 was concentrated in conservative outlets (Figure 8B, left), with strong-right outlets devoting the most coverage and skews-right outlets somewhat less (Figure 8B, right). Strong-left outlets provided the least coverage, while skews-left and nonpartisan outlets appeared more regularly than the strong-left segment (Figure 8B, right). Salience peaked across sectors in the early months of the war, declined, and then resurged in mid-to-late 2024. Substantively, the topic tracked Israeli military operations—airstrikes and ground incursions—against Hamas, frequently highlighting reported counts of Hamas fighters killed. Language varied by ideology: right-leaning coverage often referred to Palestinian officials as “Hamas terrorists” or “Palestinian terror officials,” whereas centrist outlets more commonly used formulations such as “Hamas targets.”

Figure 8

Topics Emphasized in Gaza War Coverage on Conservative Media Websites



Topic 10 was concentrated among strongly partisan outlets on both the right and the left (Figure 8C, left and right). Skews-right and skews-left outlets devoted less attention than their strong counterparts but more than nonpartisan outlets, which exhibited the lowest levels of coverage. Salience spiked in the initial months of the conflict and rose again to a secondary peak in October 2024, immediately preceding the November 5, 2024, elections.

Substantively, Topic 10 centered on Jewish identity, Zionism, and antisemitism. Right-leaning coverage foregrounded antisemitism and frequently treated anti-Zionism as coextensive with it; some articles invoked religious narratives that situated Jewish return within a providential frame. Conservative framing also cast Jewish figures aligned with the political left in critical terms, emphasizing perceived inconsistency or naiveté. Left-leaning outlets, by contrast, tended to provide broader historical context, distinguishing among forms of antisemitism and anti-Zionism, and presenting a wider range of perspectives on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The major topics of coverage on Facebook

To address RQ3 and determine whether media bias shaped the topical emphasis of the Gaza war on social media, Structured topic modeling (STM) was applied to the Facebook corpus—67,133 Facebook posts published by the surveyed outlets—to unveil the thematic structure of Gaza coverage. Model diagnostics indicated an optimal range of 25–35 topics (Figure S5). A 26-topic specification provided the best balance of coherence and fit and was retained for analysis (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Gaza War Coverage on Facebook: Determining the Optimal Number of Topics

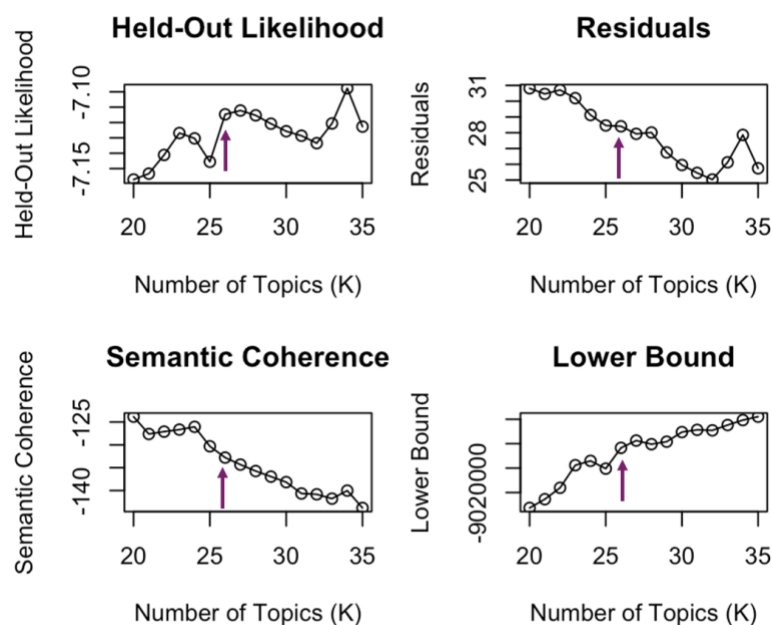
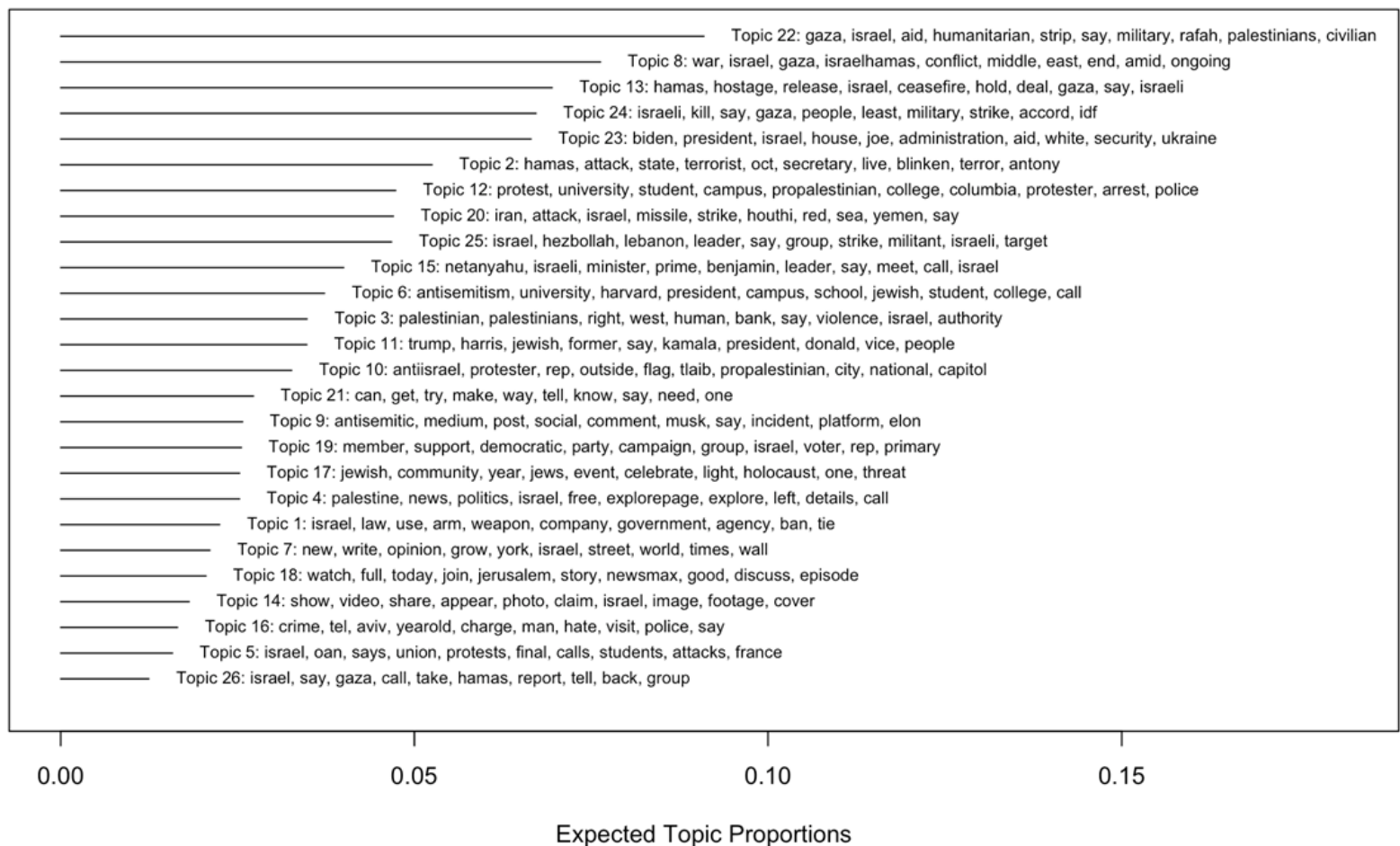


Figure 10 shows the major topics of coverage ranked by prevalence. The leading theme (Topic 22) centered on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, detailing restricted aid access, rising malnutrition, and severe shortages of water, medicine, and fuel associated with Israeli blockades and military operations. The second most prevalent theme (Topic 8) addressed the war's broader implications for regional stability and international politics, underscoring challenges to U.S. influence in the Middle East and wider geopolitical and economic spillovers. The third (Topic 13) centered on hostage releases during cease-fires and negotiations—often involving Israelis, Americans, and other nationalities—arranged through third-party-mediated exchange deals. Topic 24 focused on Israeli airstrikes in Gaza that produced civilian casualties, including women and children, in refugee camps and shelters for the displaced.

Figure 10

Topics in Gaza War Coverage on Facebook



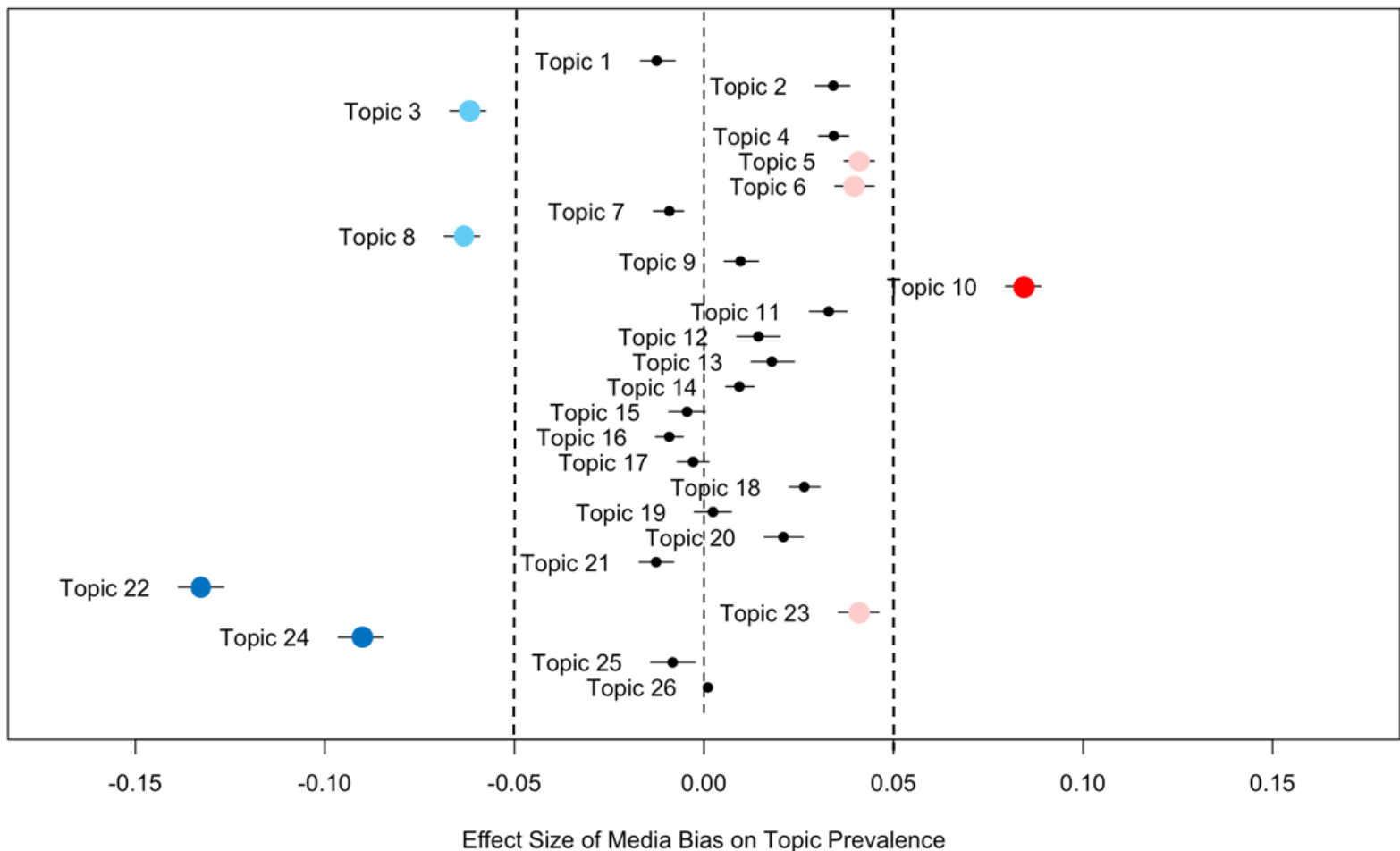
Media bias and topic representation in Gaza war coverage on Facebook

STM indicates clear partisan differentiation in topical emphasis (Figure 11). Liberal-leaning outlets disproportionately covered Topics 22 and 24, with Topics 3 and 8 also appearing more

frequently in their output. By contrast, conservative-leaning outlets emphasized Topic 10, with Topics 5, 6, and 23, likewise more common in their coverage. The remaining topics show no systematic association with outlet ideology.

Figure 11

Media Ideological Bias and Topic Representation in Gaza War Coverage on Facebook

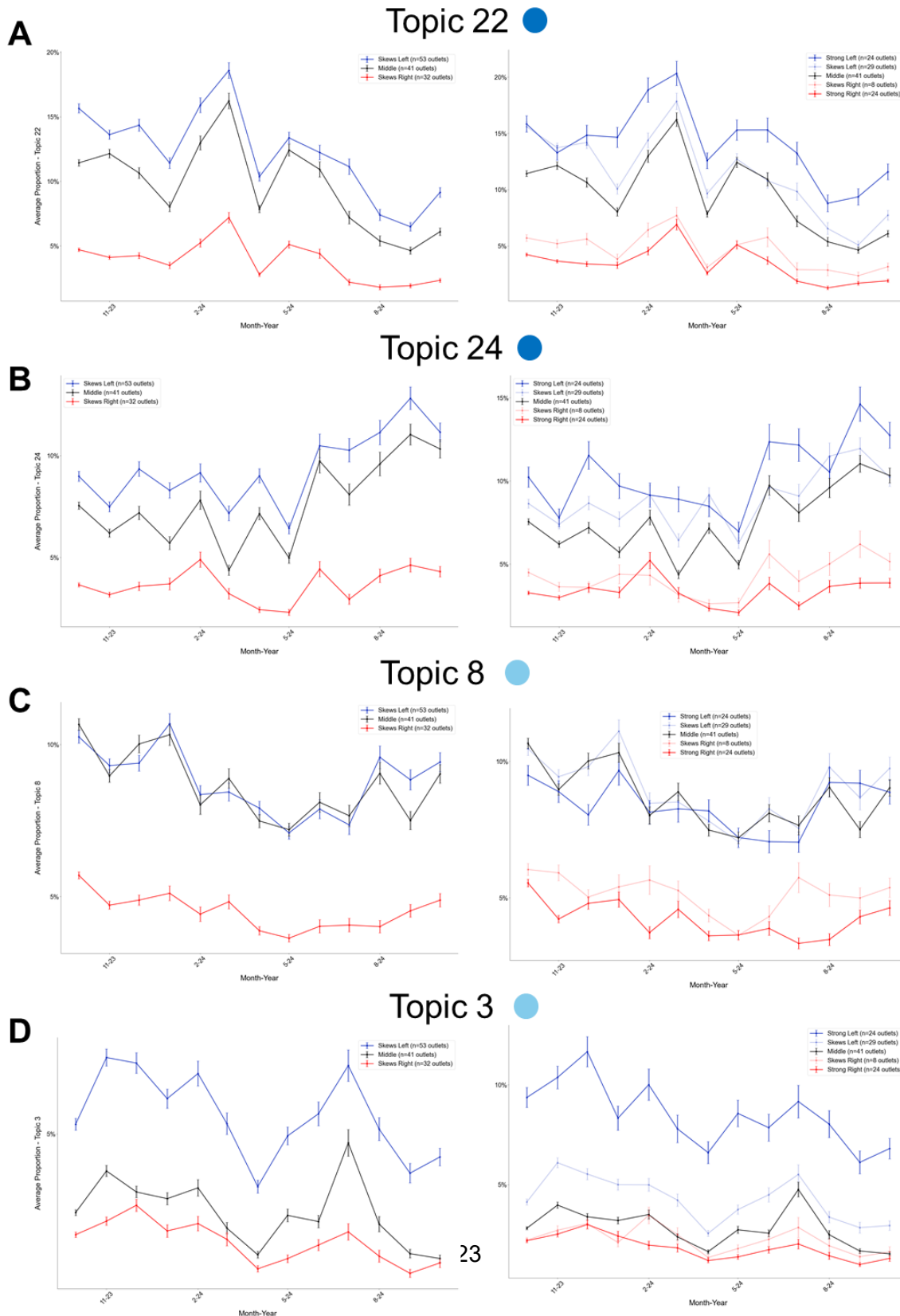


Topics emphasized in Gaza war coverage by liberal media on Facebook

Because Topics 22, 24, 8, and 3 were disproportionately emphasized by liberal outlets (Figure S6), these themes were analyzed in greater depth. Using STM-derived topic assignments, their relative prevalence was estimated for the liberal, centrist, and conservative sectors and visualized to compare cross-sector differences (Figure 12).

Figure 12

Topics Preferentially Covered in Gaza War Facebook posts of Liberal Media



Topic 22 received sustained attention from liberal and nonpartisan outlets, with coverage peaking between February and May 2024 (Figure 12A). This theme centered on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, including restricted aid access, rising malnutrition, and severe shortages of water, medicine, and fuel associated with Israeli blockades and military operations. Although liberal and nonpartisan outlets addressed this crisis more frequently than conservative outlets, their framing of the issue did not differ in statistically significant ways.

Topic 24 showed a similar pattern, with liberal and nonpartisan outlets discussing it more often than conservative outlets (Figure 12B). This theme focused on civilian casualties from Israeli military operations and on the attribution of responsibility, including the identification of sources for casualty figures. As with Topic 22, no significant partisan differences were detected in the framing of civilian harm under Topic 24.

Topic 8, which examined the implications of the Israel– Hamas war for regional stability and international relations, was also emphasized by liberal and nonpartisan outlets (Figure 12C). Across outlets with different ideological orientations, coverage placed the conflict within broader geopolitical tensions and often used historical context related to regional stability and U.S.– Israel relations. Liberal and nonpartisan outlets were more likely to foreground historical context. Some strongly liberal coverage also criticized the U.S. response, noting the Biden administration’s reluctance to press for a ceasefire and warning that this stance could contribute to further escalation. By contrast, strongly conservative outlets often situated the October 7 attack within a longer history of Arab and Iranian conflicts against Israel and the United States.

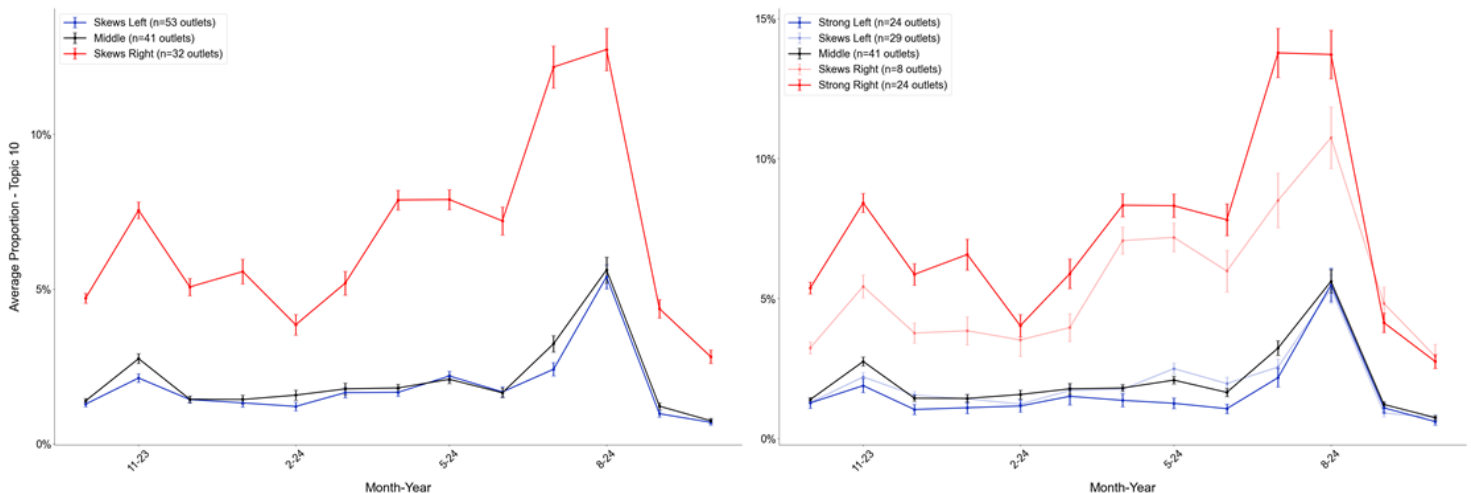
Topics emphasized in Gaza war coverage by conservative media on Facebook

Topic 10 appeared most frequently in conservative outlets (Figure 13) and focused on U.S. protests related to the Gaza war. Framing varied by ideology. Liberal and nonpartisan outlets typically described participants as “protesters,” “pro-Palestinian protesters,” or “antiwar protesters,” whereas conservative outlets more often labeled them “anti-Israel protesters.”

Figure 13

Topic 10 Was Preferentially Covered by Conservative Media on Facebook

Topic 10 ●



The construal level of Gaza war news

On news websites, partisan media on both the left and the right used more abstract language than centrist outlets (Figure 14A; Left vs. Middle, $P = e-4$; Right vs. Middle, $P = 0.006$). As shown in Figure S7A, this pattern was driven by the most ideologically extreme outlets: Strong Left vs. Middle, $P = 3e-5$; Strong Right vs. Middle, $P = 0.001$. Moderately conservative outlets exhibited lower construal than Strong Right overall ($P = 0.15$), although post hoc tests indicate significant differences in 7 of 13 months.

In headlines specifically, liberal outlets displayed higher construal than nonpartisan outlets, with the largest gap for Strong Left (Figure S8A, All Liberal vs. Middle, $P = e-5$; Figure S8B, Strongly Liberal vs. Middle, $P = 6e-6$). Strongly conservative outlets also tended to exceed nonpartisan outlets, but the overall difference was smaller (Figure S8B, Strongly Conservative vs. Middle, $P = 0.33$), despite month-level significance in 7 of 13 months.

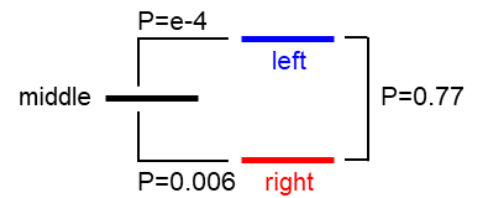
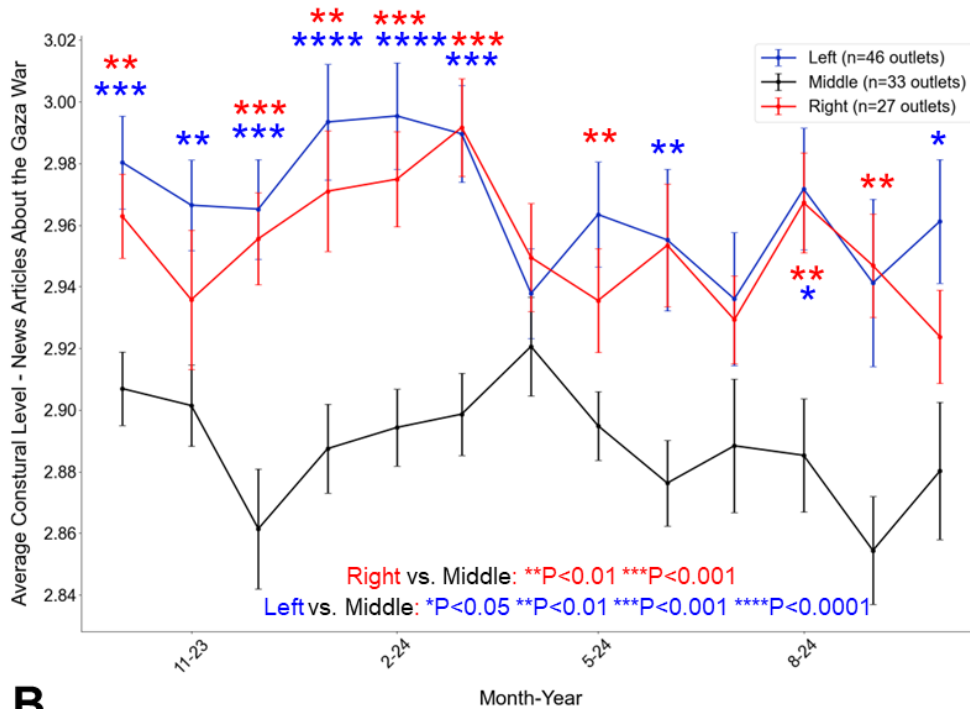
On Facebook, construal levels did not differ significantly across the three sectors (Figure 14B). No significant differences were detected between strongly partisan and moderately partisan outlets on that platform (Figure S7B).

In sum, coverage on outlet websites showed more abstract framing among the most strongly liberal and conservative outlets relative to the middle, whereas Facebook postings displayed no sectoral differences in construal.

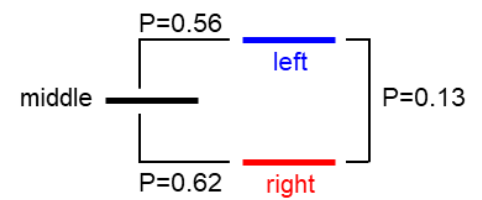
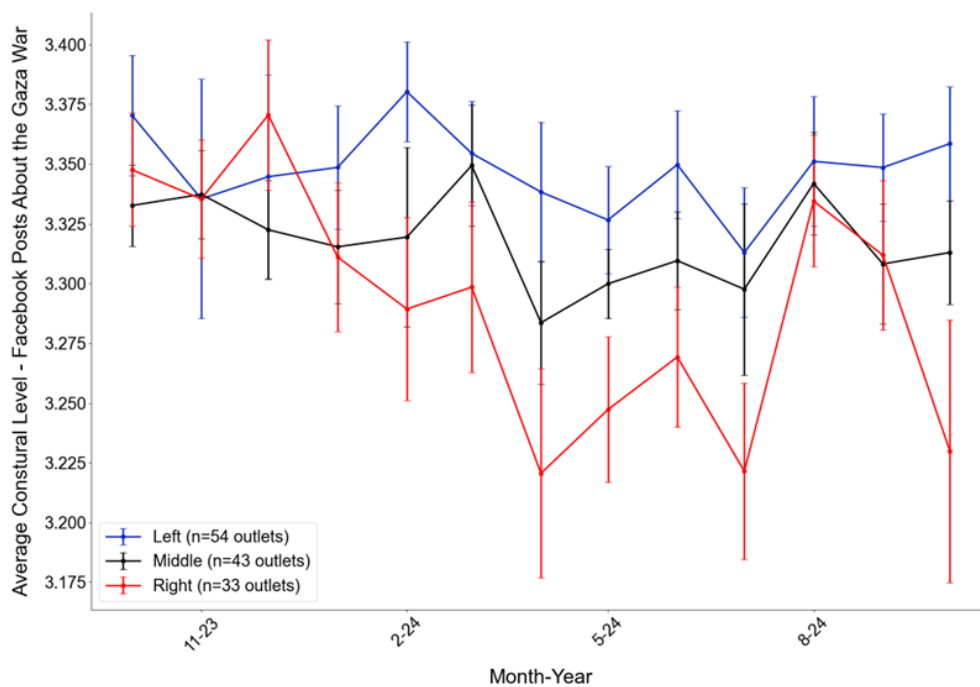
Figure 14

Construal of the Gaza War News on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)

A



B



Left vs. Middle: * $P < 0.05$
 Right vs. Middle: * $P < 0.05$

The prevalence of partisan cues in Gaza war news

In-group partisan cues in Gaza war news

In-group cue utilization in Gaza war news on media websites. On outlet websites, liberal media employed in-group cues more frequently than conservative media in Gaza coverage (Figure 15A; overall difference, $P = 3e-7$; month-level comparisons indicated by stars). This pattern was driven by strongly liberal outlets, which exceeded both strongly conservative outlets ($P = 4e-6$) and moderately conservative outlets ($P = 2e-4$) in in-group cue usage (Figure S10A). The gap between strongly and moderately liberal outlets was positive but not statistically significant ($P = 0.12$).

Comparisons with nonpartisan outlets showed the same direction of effects. Liberal outlets mentioned Democratic in-group actors more often than nonpartisan outlets (Figure S9A, left panel, $P = 0.007$). The difference was larger among the most liberal outlets, which referenced Democrats significantly more than nonpartisan outlets (Figure S11A, left panel; dark blue vs. green, $P = 0.003$).

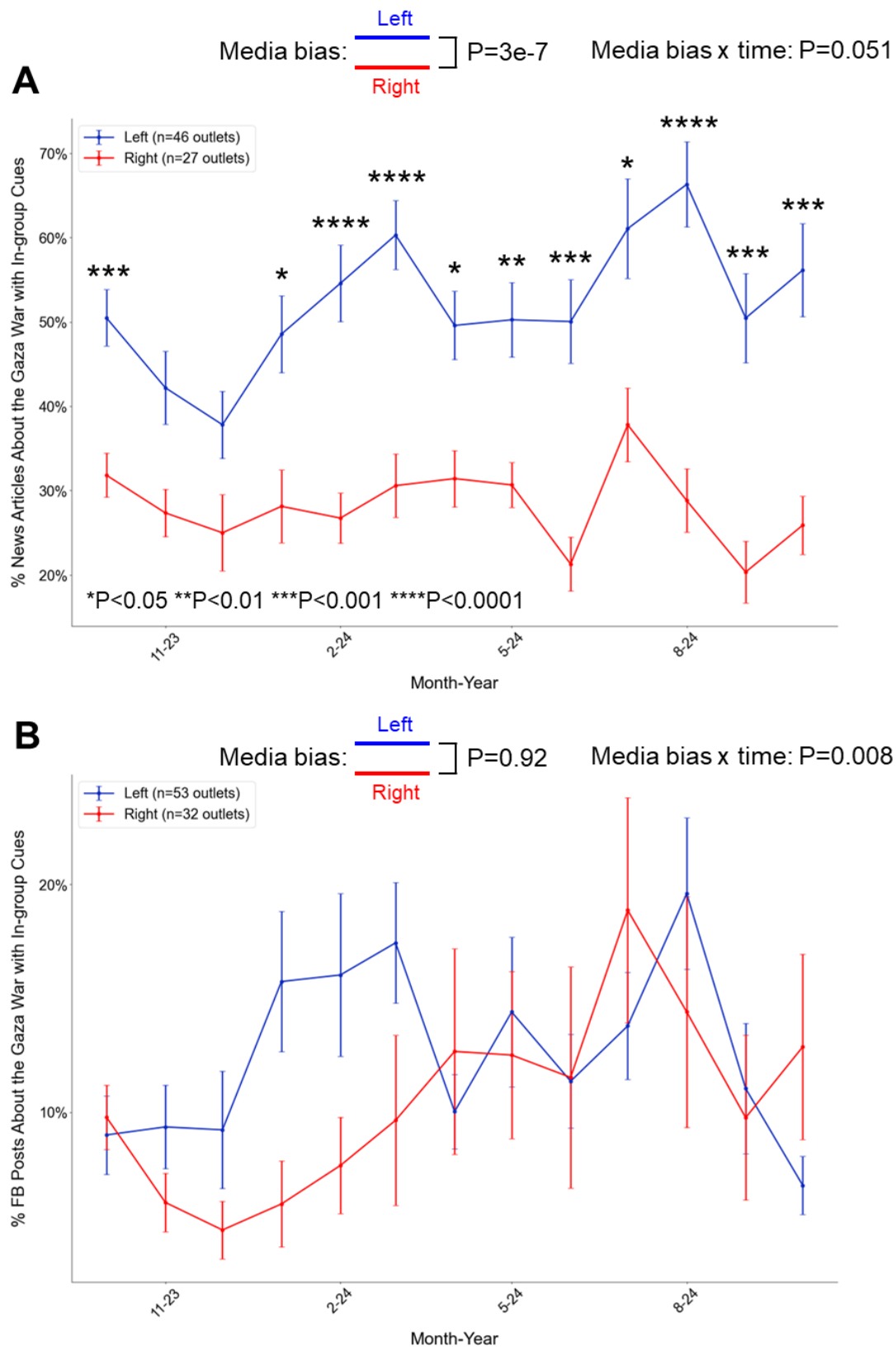
In contrast, conservative outlets' in-group references to Republicans did not differ from nonpartisan outlets (Figure S9A, right panel, $P = 0.28$). This null pattern held for both strongly conservative versus nonpartisan outlets (Figure S11A, right panel, $P = 0.41$) and moderately conservative versus nonpartisan outlets ($P = 0.99$). Thus, on outlet websites, elevated in-group cue usage was concentrated among liberal outlets; conservative outlets did not exhibit a comparable in-group premium.

In-group cue utilization in Gaza war news on Facebook. On Facebook, in-group cue usage did not differ between liberal and conservative outlets (Figure 15B, $P = 0.92$). No differences were detected between strongly partisan and moderately partisan outlets either (Figure S10B). Mentions of Democrats by liberal outlets and Republicans by conservative outlets were statistically indistinguishable from nonpartisan outlets (Figure S9B, left and right panels; Figure S11B, left and right panels).

Overall, preferential in-group cueing was confined to outlet websites, where strongly liberal outlets employed more in-group references than conservative outlets. On Facebook, in-group cue usage showed no systematic variation by outlet ideology.

Figure 15

In-Group Partisan Cues in Gaza War Coverage on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)



Out-group partisan cues in Gaza war news

Out-group cue utilization in Gaza war news on media websites. On news websites, conservative media employed out-group cues more often than liberal media in Gaza coverage (Figure 16A, $P = 0.019$). Within blocs, strongly liberal outlets used more out-group cues than moderately liberal outlets (Figure S13A, $P = 0.005$). Strongly liberal and strongly conservative outlets did not differ from one another ($P = 0.82$). Strongly conservative outlets exceeded moderately liberal outlets ($P = 2e-4$).

Comparisons to nonpartisan outlets point in the same direction. Liberal outlets mentioned out-group partisans more frequently than nonpartisan outlets (Figure S12A, left panel, $P = 7e-4$), and conservative outlets did so as well (Figure S12A, right panel, $P = 0.019$). This preference was concentrated among the most ideologically extreme outlets on both sides (Figure S14A, left and right panels). Moderately liberal and moderately conservative outlets did not exceed nonpartisan outlets in out-group cue usage (Figure S14A).

In sum, partisan outlets favored out-group cueing relative to nonpartisan outlets, and the conservative sector exhibited higher out-group usage than the liberal sector, even as the most partisan outlets on the two sides showed comparable rates.

Out-group cue utilization in Gaza war news on Facebook. On Facebook, conservative outlets displayed a stronger preference for out-group cues than liberal outlets (Figure 16B, $P = 7e-4$). This tendency was comparable in magnitude for both moderately and strongly partisan outlets (Figure S13B).

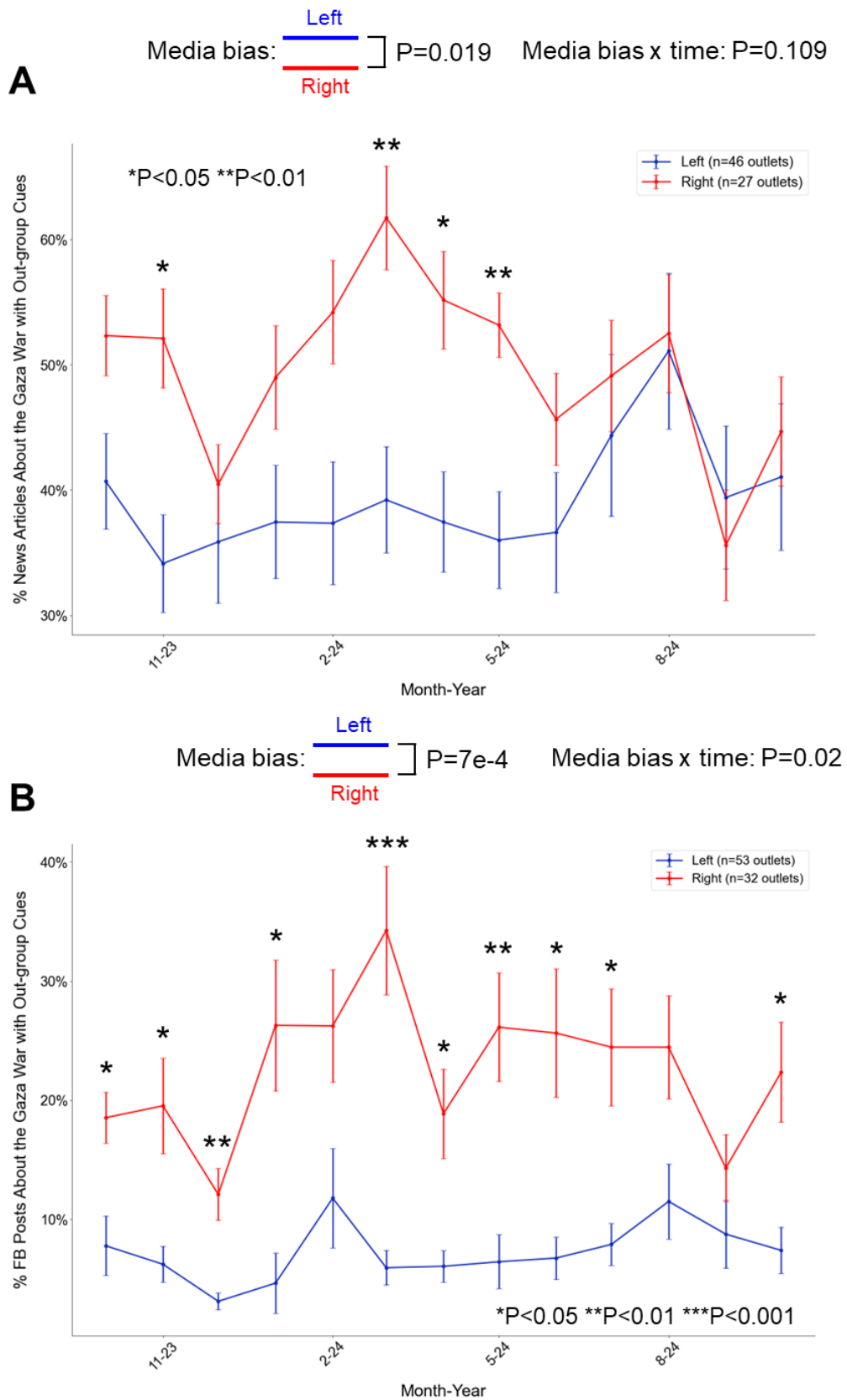
Relative to nonpartisan outlets, only conservative outlets exhibited elevated use of out-group cues on Facebook (Figure S12B, right panel, $P = 8e-4$). Within the conservative sector, the most ideologically conservative outlets mentioned Democratic out-group actors significantly more often than nonpartisan outlets (Figure S14B, right panel, $P = 4e-4$). In contrast, moderately conservative outlets did not differ from nonpartisan outlets ($P = 0.72$).

Liberal outlets showed no preferential use of out-group cues on Facebook. Their mentions of Republican out-group actors were statistically indistinguishable from nonpartisan outlets (Figure S12B, left panel, $P = 0.49$). The most liberal outlets did not exceed nonpartisan outlets in out-group mentions (Figure S14B, left panel, $P = 0.11$), nor did moderately liberal outlets ($P = 0.81$).

In summary, the conservative sector exhibited higher out-group cue usage on Facebook, led by the most conservative outlets. The most liberal outlets showed a similar preference on outlet websites, but not on Facebook.

Figure 16

Out-Group Partisan Cues in Gaza War Coverage on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)



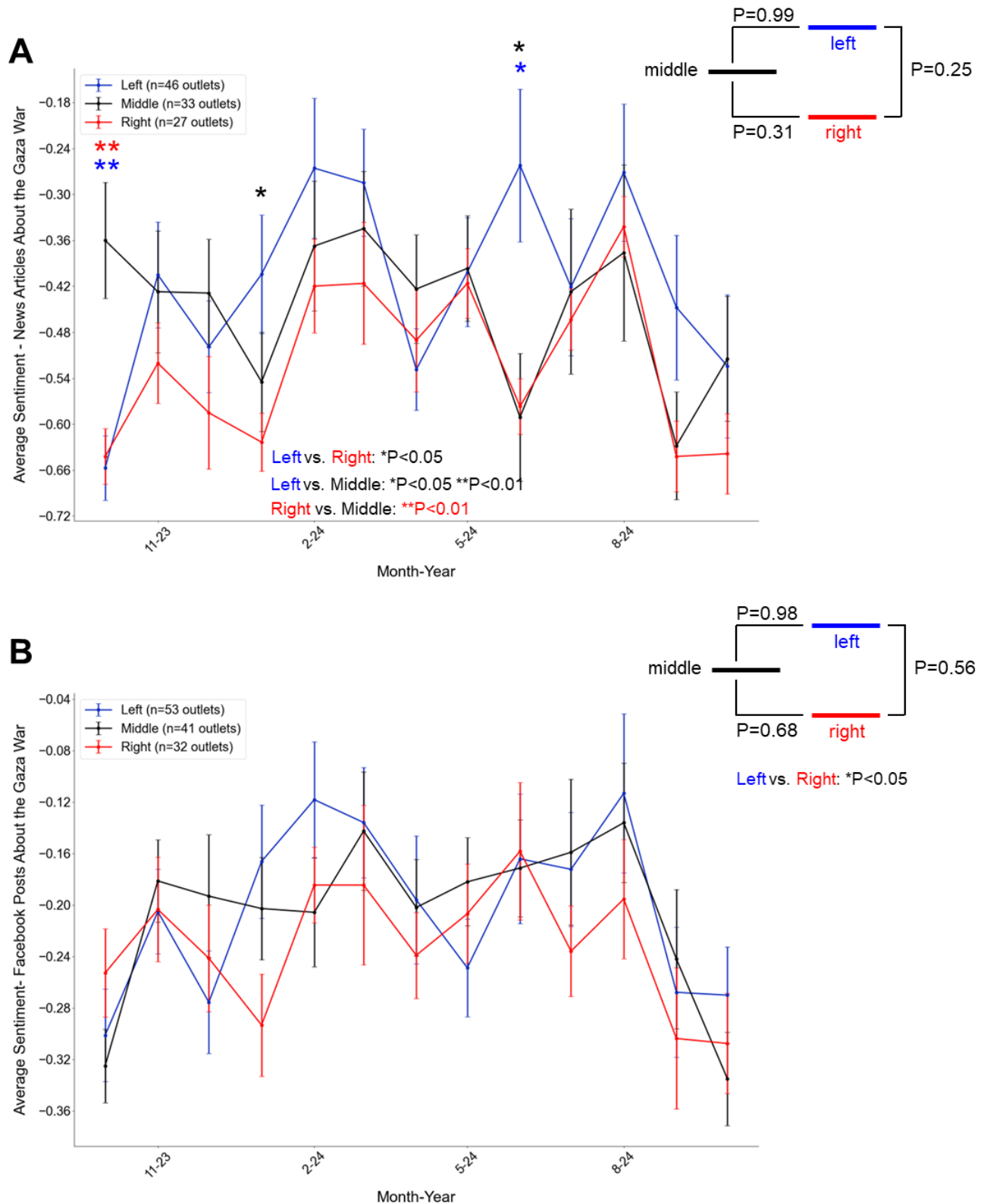
The sentiment of the Gaza war news

Across outlet websites, sentiment toward the Gaza war was predominantly negative in every sector, with average scores at or below -0.35 (Figure 17A). Sectoral means did not differ overall, but month-level deviations emerged. In October 2023, both liberal and conservative outlets adopted a more negative tone than nonpartisan outlets. By January 2024, conservative outlets were more negative than liberal outlets, whereas in June 2024, liberal outlets were less negative than both conservative and nonpartisan outlets (Figure 17A). A comparison of strongly versus moderately partisan outlets indicates that, in October 2023, strongly conservative, moderately conservative, and moderately liberal outlets were more negative than nonpartisan outlets, while strongly liberal outlets did not differ from the nonpartisan group (Figure S15A). The most liberal outlets displayed a tendency toward slightly less negative coverage overall, but this difference was not statistically significant after adjustment for multiple comparisons.

On Facebook, sentiment remained uniformly negative across ideological sectors, and no statistically significant differences were detected (Figure 17B; Figure S15B). Taken together, coverage on both websites and Facebook was consistently negative; occasional website-specific spikes suggest more negative tone among conservative outlets and a weak tendency toward less negative tone among the most liberal outlets, neither yielding a sustained or statistically robust sectoral gap.

Figure 17

Sentiment of Gaza War News on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)



Preferential engagement with Gaza war news on Facebook

Figure 18 summarizes the time series of Facebook engagement with Gaza war news. Audiences of conservative outlets showed a lower preference for sharing Gaza-related posts than audiences of liberal and nonpartisan outlets. Liberal and nonpartisan audiences exhibited preferential sharing above one, meaning they shared Gaza posts more than their baseline sharing of other news, while conservative audiences remained below that level (Figure 18A). Liberal audiences also trended higher than nonpartisan audiences in preferential sharing.

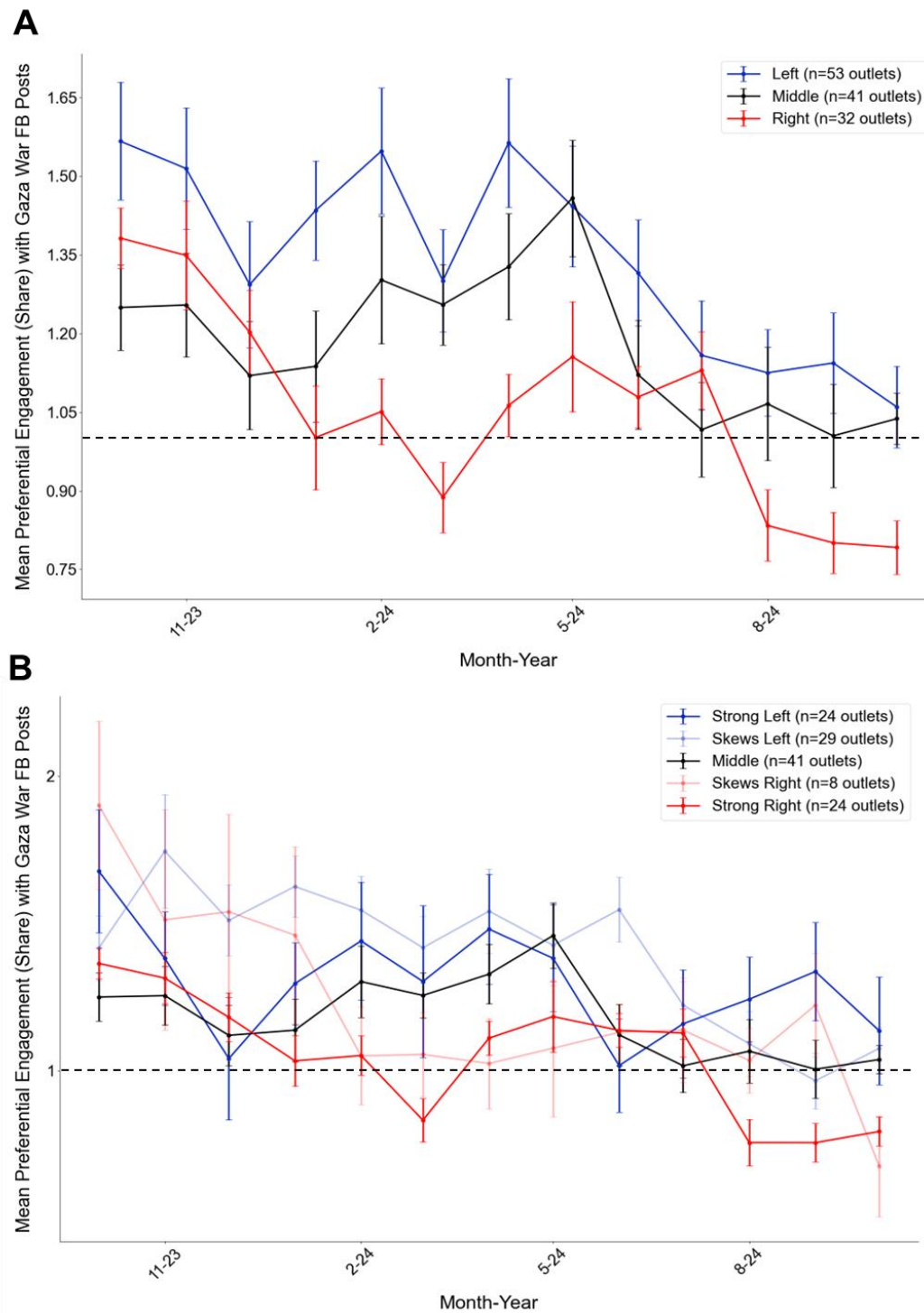
Figure 18B shows no substantive difference between audiences of highly partisan and moderately partisan outlets in Gaza-related sharing. If anything, audiences of moderately partisan outlets displayed a slight tendency toward higher preferential sharing.

Other engagement behaviors revealed a similar pattern. Compared with liberal and nonpartisan audiences, conservative audiences showed a lower preference for liking, commenting on, and reacting with “haha” to Gaza posts (Figure S16B, S16C, S16E). By contrast, there were no meaningful differences in “anger, love, sad, or wow” reactions across audience types, indicating no systematic disengagement on those affective dimensions (Figure S16D, S16F, S16G, S16H).

Overall, conservative audiences exhibited a lower preference for several forms of engagement with Gaza war content, especially sharing and commenting. In contrast, liberal and nonpartisan audiences displayed broadly similar and higher engagement profiles.

Figure 18

Preferential Engagement with Gaza War News on Facebook for Media Audiences

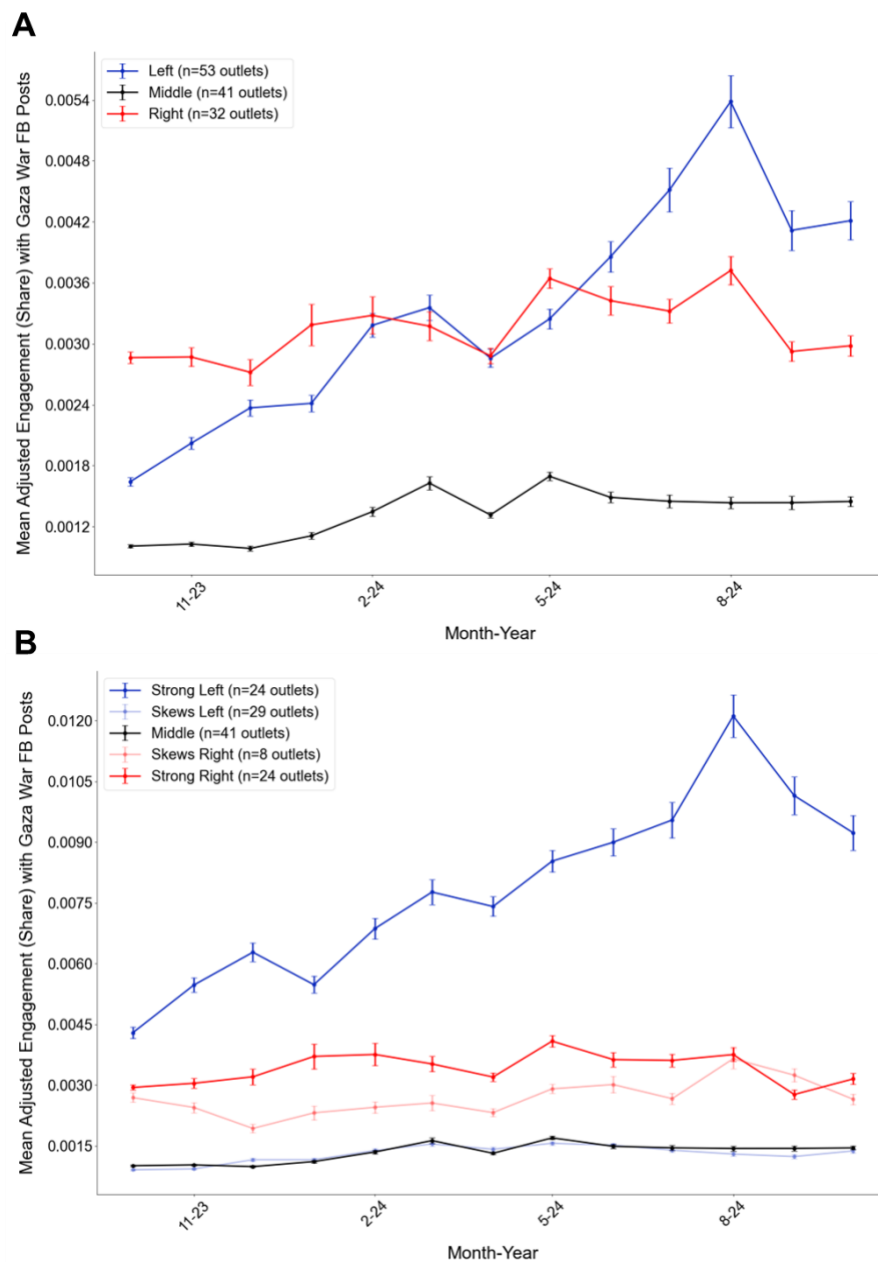


Patterns of audience engagement with Gaza war news on Facebook

Figure 19A shows that audiences of partisan outlets, liberal and conservative combined, shared Gaza war news significantly more than audiences of nonpartisan outlets. Figure 19B indicates that audiences of strongly liberal outlets shared the most, exceeding all other groups, including moderately liberal audiences. Strongly liberal audiences also outpaced both strongly conservative and moderately conservative audiences. Even so, audiences of the most partisan outlets on both sides and audiences of moderately conservative outlets shared more than nonpartisan and moderately liberal audiences. Overall, strongly liberal audiences exhibited the highest sharing, while moderately liberal audiences showed the lowest.

Figure 19

Sharing of Gaza War News by Media Audiences on Facebook



Effects of partisan and visual framing of the Gaza war on audience engagement

Figure 20A shows that liberal audiences shared more Gaza posts when they contained videos (blue line) but shared less when posts contained outgroup cues (red line). Ingroup cues (green line) were also associated with reduced preferential sharing. Photos (purple line) were linked to higher sharing early in the conflict, followed by lower sharing in later months.

Figure 20B shows that conservative audiences shared more when posts contained photos during the first nine months, with no effect thereafter. They also showed a higher preference for sharing posts that included outgroup cues over the same period. Ingroup cues and videos did not significantly affect sharing among conservative audiences.

In sum, outgroup cues were moderately associated with higher preferential sharing among conservative audiences but not among liberal audiences. Videos increased sharing among liberal audiences, while conservative audiences were more responsive to images of the conflict. Ingroup cues did not meaningfully influence preferential sharing for either partisan audience.

The most engaging elements of the Gaza war news on Facebook

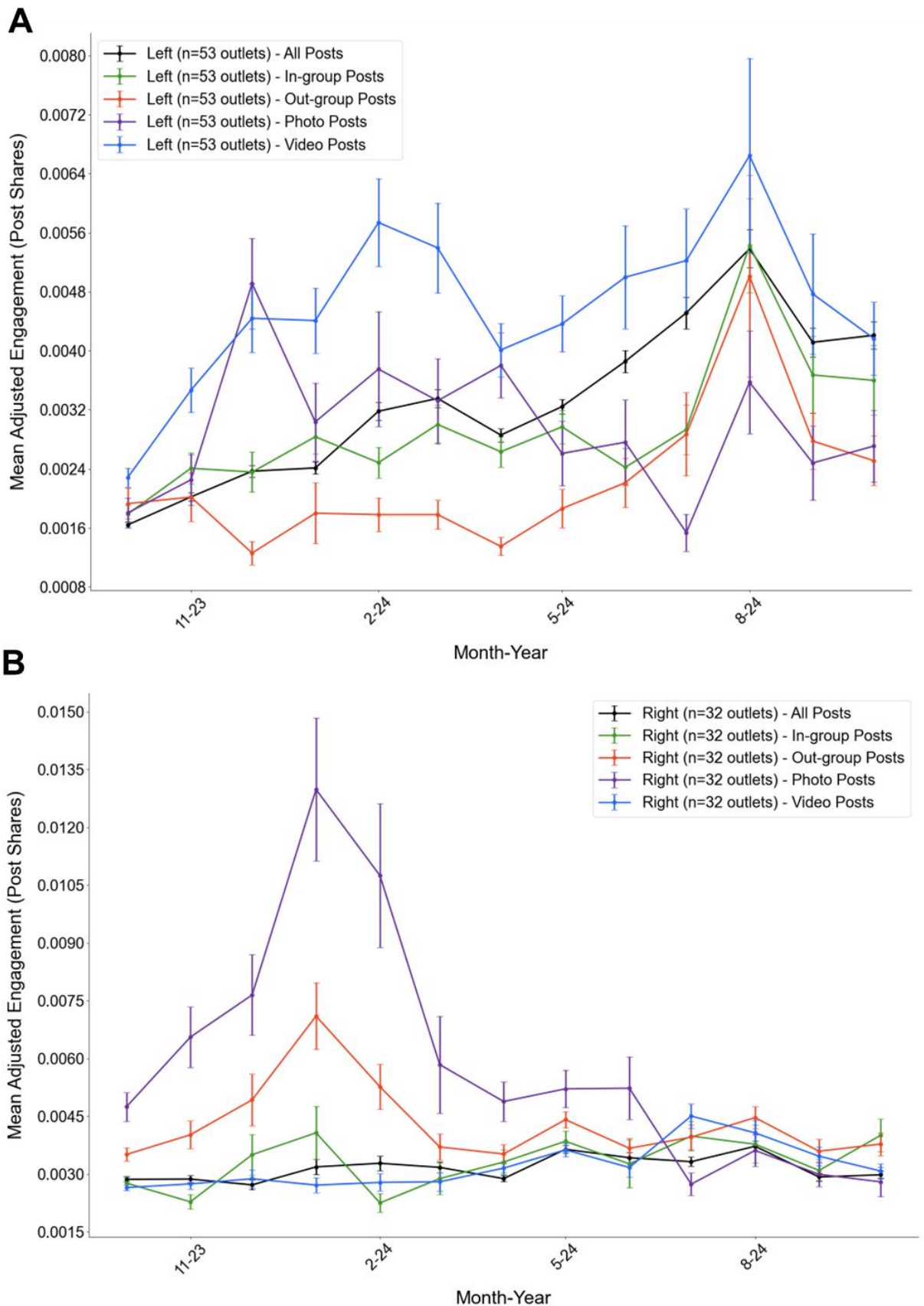
To identify which features of Gaza war coverage predicted audience engagement, regression models were estimated with adjusted Facebook sharing as the dependent variable. Explanatory variables included STM topic proportions, partisan cues for in-group and out-group references, visual cues for photos and videos, construal level measured via concreteness, sentiment, and text length. Separate models were fit for audiences of liberal, conservative, and nonpartisan outlets, aggregating posts within each sector.

Figure 21 indicates distinct audience responses by sector. Nonpartisan audiences shared posts associated with many topics, whereas liberal audiences were highly responsive to a small set of themes and less responsive to several others. Among conservative audiences, only a few topics displayed moderate predictive power, with several additional topics showing weak associations.

For nonpartisan audiences, topics 3, 4, and 5 were strong positive predictors of sharing. Topic 3 covered European recognition efforts for Palestinian statehood, Palestinian cultural symbols such as the keffiyeh and tatreez, reports of abuses in detention, and settler violence in the West Bank. Topic 4 captured reactions from public figures and celebrities, including calls for a ceasefire and notable contentious incidents. Topic 5 emphasized politics and activism around the conflict, including controversies in events such as Eurovision and the Olympics, as well as university protests. Nonpartisan audiences also responded positively to topics 11 and 12 on the Trump and Harris campaigns and campus protests, topic 15 on Prime Minister Netanyahu, topic 17 on the Jewish community, topic 23 on Biden administration policy, and topic 24 on Israeli military operations. No topic predicted lower sharing for this audience.

Figure 20

Partisan and Visual Cues and Sharing of Gaza War News on Facebook



Liberal audiences showed the strongest engagement with topic 5 on politics and activism, more than nonpartisan audiences. Topic 1 on U.S. military aid to Israel was also engaging among liberals and, separately, among nonpartisan and conservative audiences. Topic 3 produced additional engagement for liberals beyond its nonpartisan effect, while it was only weakly positive among conservatives. Liberals were moderately engaged by topics 24, 4, and 19, the last of which tracked positions of Democratic politicians during the 2024 campaign. By contrast, liberals were strongly less likely to share posts associated with topics 13 on Israeli hostages and Hamas actions and 14 on war footage, images, and reports of synthetic media, and they were mildly less likely to share posts associated with topics 6–9, 11–12, 15–18, and 20.

Conservative audiences were most responsive to topic 1 on U.S. military aid to Israel. Topics 3–5 generated only mild increases in sharing, as did topic 10 on anti-Israel protests, topics 11 and 12 on the Trump and Harris campaigns and campus protests, and topic 14 on war images and manipulated media.

Across sectors, videos were mildly associated with higher sharing among liberal and nonpartisan audiences and showed no effect among conservative audiences. Partisan mentions, construal level, and sentiment were weak predictors of sharing.

Figure 21

Predictors of Gaza War News Sharing on Media Facebook Accounts

	Nonpartisan media			Liberal media			Conservative media		
	β	S.E.	P-val	β	S.E.	P-val	β	S.E.	P-val
(Intercept)	-7.35	0.09	<2e-16	-5.89	0.10	<2e-16	-5.69	0.09	<2e-16
Topic 1	0.74	0.10	7E-14	2.32	0.13	<2e-16	1.01	0.13	1E-14
Topic 2	0.51	0.10	2E-07	-0.47	0.11	3E-05	0.29	0.10	0.005
Topic 3	1.07	0.10	<2e-16	2.20	0.10	<2e-16	0.31	0.12	0.013
Topic 4	1.32	0.15	<2e-16	1.13	0.13	<2e-16	0.26	0.10	0.008
Topic 5	1.25	0.20	5E-10	3.54	0.15	<2e-16	0.54	0.11	5E-07
Topic 6	0.51	0.09	3E-09	-0.62	0.10	1E-09	0.06	0.09	0.535
Topic 7	0.62	0.10	1E-09	-0.72	0.12	8E-09	0.02	0.15	0.911
Topic 8	0.42	0.09	1E-06	-0.17	0.10	0.084	-1.28	0.11	<2e-16
Topic 9	0.52	0.10	1E-07	-0.49	0.11	7E-06	-0.26	0.11	0.018
Topic 10	0.94	0.10	<2e-16	0.38	0.13	0.002	0.55	0.09	2E-09
Topic 11	1.17	0.11	<2e-16	0.13	0.11	0.253	0.36	0.10	4E-04
Topic 12	1.21	0.08	<2e-16	0.05	0.09	0.616	0.33	0.09	2E-04
Topic 13	0.65	0.08	1E-15	-1.19	0.09	<2e-16	0.09	0.09	0.305
Topic 14	0.65	0.12	2E-08	-1.32	0.15	<2e-16	0.37	0.12	0.003
Topic 15	1.14	0.08	<2e-16	-0.06	0.10	0.533	-0.27	0.10	0.005
Topic 16	0.51	0.11	2E-06	-0.20	0.13	0.133	-0.12	0.13	0.371
Topic 17	1.06	0.10	<2e-16	-0.20	0.11	0.064	0.20	0.11	0.077
Topic 18	0.51	0.16	0.001	-0.98	0.13	8E-14	-0.42	0.12	4E-04
Topic 19	0.78	0.10	6E-16	0.85	0.12	2E-13	0.08	0.11	0.480
Topic 20	0.79	0.08	<2e-16	-0.90	0.09	<2e-16	0.03	0.09	0.733
Topic 22	0.96	0.08	<2e-16	0.85	0.09	<2e-16	-0.08	0.10	0.457
Topic 23	1.02	0.09	<2e-16	-0.20	0.11	0.052	-0.28	0.09	0.003
Topic 24	1.04	0.08	<2e-16	1.20	0.09	<2e-16	-0.21	0.11	0.044
Topic 25	0.83	0.08	<2e-16	-0.46	0.09	1E-06	-0.13	0.09	0.166
Text length	0.00	0.00	2E-04	0.00	0.00	<2e-16	0.01	0.00	<2e-16
Has photo	-0.24	0.02	<2e-16	0.25	0.03	<2e-16	0.29	0.02	<2e-16
Has video	0.47	0.01	<2e-16	0.48	0.02	<2e-16	0.06	0.01	1E-05
Mentions Republicans	0.03	0.02	0.249	-0.09	0.03	0.003	-0.10	0.02	4E-08
Mentions Democrats	0.08	0.01	1E-07	0.11	0.02	1E-08	0.24	0.01	<2e-16
Concreteness score	-0.04	0.02	0.084	-0.05	0.02	0.046	-0.15	0.02	<2e-16
Sentiment	-0.03	0.01	0.006	-0.02	0.01	0.121	-0.04	0.01	5E-04
Pseudo R-square	0.13			0.22			0.20		
Number of posts	23,277			21,860			20,621		

Engagement of audiences of strongly partisan vs. moderately partisan media with Gaza war news

To assess whether audience engagement differed by the intensity of outlet partisanship, separate models were estimated for posts shared by audiences of strongly partisan and moderately partisan outlets. Figure 22 indicates broadly similar engagement profiles across these two audience groups.

Among liberal outlets, audiences of strongly liberal outlets showed greater responsiveness across most topics, especially Topic 1 on U.S. military aid to Israel, Topic 24 on Israeli military operations, Topic 5 on politics and activism including backlash at international events and student protests, Topic 3 on recognition of Palestine, Palestinian culture, and human rights abuses, Topic 10 on anti Israel protests, and Topic 12 on campus protests. No topic was a strong negative predictor of sharing for this audience; only Topic 13 on Israeli hostages and Hamas actions showed a very weak association with lower sharing.

Among conservative outlets, audiences of strongly conservative and moderately conservative outlets were engaged by a similar set of themes. The strongest positive associations appeared for Topic 1 on U.S. military aid, Topic 4 on reactions from public figures and calls for a ceasefire, Topic 5 on politics and activism, and Topic 10 on anti-Israel protests, with several additional topics serving as weak positive predictors. Both conservative audiences were less likely to share posts associated with Topic 18, which concerns media promotion of their own programming. A notable divergence arises for Topic 8 on the war's geopolitical implications in the Middle East, which was strongly disengaging for audiences of strongly conservative outlets but not for audiences of moderately conservative outlets.

Multimedia cues had limited effects. Photos and videos were mildly associated with higher sharing among audiences of moderately liberal outlets but did not affect engagement among audiences of strongly liberal outlets. Mentions of Democrats functioned as a mild out-group cue for audiences of strongly conservative outlets, increasing sharing, but had no measurable effect among audiences of moderately conservative outlets.

Taken together, nonpartisan, liberal, and conservative audiences exhibited distinct topic-linked sharing patterns for Gaza coverage. These sector differences persisted when comparing audiences of strongly partisan and moderately partisan outlets. The results indicate stable, audience-specific engagement signatures tied to topical content rather than to the intensity of outlet partisanship alone.

Figure 22
Predictors of Gaza War News Sharing on Media Facebook Accounts

	Skews left media			Strong left media			Skews right media			Strong right media		
	β	S.E.	P-val	β	S.E.	P-val	β	S.E.	P-val	β	S.E.	P-val
(Intercept)	-6.99	0.10	<2e-16	-5.20	0.16	<2e-16	-6.25	0.15	<2e-16	-5.51	0.11	<2e-16
Topic 1	1.01	0.13	3E-14	1.92	0.18	<2e-16	1.03	0.21	1E-06	1.01	0.16	4E-10
Topic 2	0.27	0.11	0.013	0.55	0.20	0.005	0.12	0.17	0.492	0.25	0.13	0.050
Topic 3	0.69	0.10	1E-11	1.34	0.15	<2e-16	0.14	0.18	0.445	0.46	0.16	0.004
Topic 4	0.35	0.14	0.012	0.51	0.18	0.005	0.50	0.15	0.001	0.40	0.13	0.003
Topic 5	0.31	0.19	0.107	1.42	0.17	<2e-16	1.02	0.30	0.001	0.36	0.13	0.004
Topic 6	0.15	0.10	0.134	0.21	0.20	0.302	0.36	0.14	0.012	-0.09	0.12	0.442
Topic 7	0.48	0.12	7E-05	-0.07	0.25	0.768	-0.19	0.25	0.437	0.12	0.18	0.513
Topic 8	0.42	0.10	2E-05	0.51	0.18	0.005	-0.23	0.17	0.171	-1.72	0.15	<2e-16
Topic 9	0.16	0.11	0.130	0.10	0.20	0.602	-0.19	0.18	0.267	-0.37	0.13	0.006
Topic 10	0.83	0.12	4E-12	1.16	0.21	3E-08	0.65	0.15	1E-05	0.41	0.11	3E-04
Topic 11	0.52	0.11	2E-06	0.45	0.19	0.020	0.28	0.16	0.090	0.32	0.12	0.010
Topic 12	0.61	0.09	1E-11	1.05	0.16	8E-11	0.48	0.14	0.001	0.26	0.11	0.024
Topic 13	-0.25	0.09	0.007	-0.27	0.18	0.126	-0.05	0.14	0.749	0.09	0.11	0.452
Topic 14	-0.01	0.14	0.961	0.88	0.37	0.018	-0.32	0.22	0.135	0.40	0.15	0.007
Topic 15	0.59	0.10	7E-10	0.70	0.18	8E-05	0.37	0.15	0.013	-0.60	0.12	6E-07
Topic 16	0.17	0.13	0.174	0.82	0.25	0.001	0.22	0.23	0.330	-0.27	0.16	0.090
Topic 17	0.05	0.11	0.625	0.72	0.20	4E-04	0.59	0.18	0.001	0.07	0.14	0.632
Topic 18	-0.29	0.12	0.020	0.41	0.33	0.217	-0.94	0.23	5E-05	-0.66	0.14	1E-06
Topic 19	0.10	0.12	0.431	0.56	0.17	0.001	0.04	0.17	0.835	0.11	0.14	0.435
Topic 20	0.02	0.09	0.817	-0.41	0.18	0.021	0.41	0.15	0.005	-0.22	0.11	0.053
Topic 22	0.49	0.09	2E-08	1.38	0.15	<2e-16	0.29	0.15	0.064	-0.25	0.13	0.063
Topic 23	0.36	0.10	4E-04	0.48	0.18	0.008	0.14	0.15	0.356	-0.52	0.12	9E-06
Topic 24	0.68	0.09	5E-14	1.62	0.15	<2e-16	0.18	0.16	0.266	-0.43	0.14	0.002
Topic 25	-0.06	0.09	0.514	0.69	0.17	5E-05	0.32	0.15	0.028	-0.33	0.11	0.005
Text length	0.00	0.00	0.356	0.00	0.00	5E-13	0.00	0.00	6E-11	0.01	0.00	<2e-16
Has photo	0.56	0.03	<2e-16	-0.19	0.05	8E-05	0.31	0.03	<2e-16	0.31	0.03	<2e-16
Has video	0.68	0.02	<2e-16	0.04	0.03	0.185	-0.10	0.02	2E-05	0.13	0.02	6E-16
Mentions Republicans	0.07	0.03	0.012	-0.20	0.05	1E-04	0.03	0.03	0.224	-0.14	0.02	9E-09
Mentions Democrats	0.00	0.02	0.965	0.02	0.03	0.516	0.12	0.02	1E-07	0.29	0.02	<2e-16
Concreteness score	-0.03	0.02	0.301	-0.15	0.03	3E-06	0.01	0.03	0.826	-0.18	0.02	<2e-16
Sentiment	-0.03	0.01	0.010	-0.08	0.02	4E-05	-0.05	0.02	0.005	-0.05	0.01	0.001
Pseudo R-square	0.19			0.26			0.20			0.24		
Number of posts	15,795			6,065			6,963			13,658		

DISCUSSION

The media's role in partisan division and mass polarization remains insufficiently understood. This study developed a novel and comprehensive framework to examine U.S. coverage of the war in Gaza and its impact on audiences at national scale. The framework integrates a broad analysis of the U.S. media at the institutional level – 131 media outlets were surveyed – with a longitudinal design – news coverage was surveyed during the first year of the war – and complements a deep analysis of the coverage – conducted at multiple analytical levels: clustering of sources, coverage volume, topical emphasis, embedding of sociopsychological and emotional cues – with the analysis of audience engagement with the news.

The findings reveal deep divisions within the U.S. institutional media in the coverage of the war. Every aspect of coverage – from source selection, volume, topic framing, sentiment, construal level, and partisan referencing – was deeply impacted by media's ideological bias, suggesting that ideology is a central component of the journalistic and editorial processes in the contemporary U.S. media ecosystem.

Network analysis of news sourcing during the Gaza war yielded the first “connectomes” of Gaza coverage, which revealing sharp ideological cleavages in news sourcing and sharing of sources. We demonstrate that partisan outlets dominated source selection and emphasis, while nonpartisan outlets played a minor role in shaping the war narrative.

Not only did the partisan outlets dominate the war narrative, but the degree of ideological bias was responsible for the most partisan narratives of the war. Highly partisan outlets produced extreme narratives that relied heavily on socio-psychological and abstract references to frame the conflict.

We further demonstrate that platform features also played an important role in the crafting of the stories. The significant differences between news disseminated on media websites and their Facebook pages suggest the existence of key interactions between platform architecture and editorial bias that condition what content is circulated and how. In this environment, the “medium” becomes politically biased through the joint influence of platform design and producer ideology, amplifying the polarizing potential of news.

The highly partisan and extreme war narratives disseminated by partisan media generated polarized patterns of audience engagement with the news. Liberal, conservative, and nonpartisan audiences exhibited sharply distinct preferences for sharing and reacting to Gaza content. Additional fractures were demonstrated between audiences of moderate and strongly partisan media, suggesting that extreme and partisan narratives can drive both inter-party and intra-party divisions and polarization.

We thus propose that the partisan media dominated the narrative of the Gaza war, using extreme narratives enriched in recurrent sociopsychological and emotional references to create cognitive distortion among national audiences which were responsible for the deepening of societal divisions in Gaza war attitudes throughout the war in Gaza.

Partisan media dominated the sourcing of the Gaza war

Network analysis of named individuals in Gaza war coverage revealed persistent partisan segmentation, polarized information flows, and structured interrelationships among outlets. The media landscape clustered into liberal, conservative, and nonpartisan hubs with distinct sourcing patterns. Partisan outlets reinforced ideological divides by privileging different sets of individuals and events, while nonpartisan outlets were largely absent from the sourcing of Gaza war stories—indicating that partisan outlets overwhelmingly dominated the news agenda for the American public.

A small set of partisan, and some nonpartisan, outlets consistently anchored the most influential hubs, exhibiting strong internal cohesion in their citations of people and events. Thus, sourcing was not only dominated by partisan outlets in general, but by a handful of highly influential ones. These outlets elevated different figures, thereby amplifying divergent narratives within their respective ecosystems.

Intermediate outlets linked to these hubs connected liberal, conservative, and nonpartisan clusters, recirculating names first elevated by the largest players and enabling limited cross-pollination. Yet, overall, nonpartisan outlets remained underrepresented in Gaza coverage, suggesting their diminished role in narrative framing during high-intensity conflict and the growing agenda-setting dominance of partisan media.

At the institutional level, these patterns show that media bias extends beyond framing to the strategic selection of individuals and sources. Such sourcing choices sustain distinct informational ecosystems in which partisan outlets elevate some actors and stories while sidelining others. Although organizations such as the Associated Press continue to contribute to public discourse, partisan media increasingly drive the agenda in an already polarized political environment.

This “big picture” perspective aligns with prior research documenting granular sourcing biases in Gaza war coverage. U.S. outlets—liberal and conservative alike—cited Israeli sources and U.S. officials more frequently than Palestinian sources (De Morais, 2024; Hamas Elmasry, 2024; Johnson, 2023; Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024; Youmans, 2025). Comparative studies of war reporting have also highlighted imbalances in empathic emphasis: for example, CNN and MSNBC devoted more sympathetic coverage to victims in Ukraine than to victims in Gaza, despite the higher death toll in Gaza (Johnson & Ali, 2024). The present analysis extends this literature by mapping all individual citations across partisan sectors, revealing systematic differences in source usage and narrative anchoring. Taken together, these findings suggest that ideological biases within institutional media produce systemic distortions at multiple levels of the journalistic process, contributing to widening partisan divisions and mass polarization.

Divergence in topic focus: Topic polarization

Message factors—selective topic emphasis and framing—shape how segmented, partisan audiences interpret conflict (Jost et al., 2022). Prior research on the early stages of the Gaza war found a cross-ideological tilt toward Israeli frames (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023; Gilboa & Sigan,

2024; Hamas Elmasry, 2024; Jackson, 2024; A. Johnson & Ali, 2024; Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024; Kozman & Cozma, 2024). Two analytic traditions dominate the field: *war/peace journalism*, which documents an initial reliance on elite-driven, binary war frames with only partial movement toward peace frames after the first truce (Kozman & Cozma, 2024); and *topic framing*, which highlights asymmetries such as pro-Israel language around “ceasefire” and “right to defend” (De Morais, 2024), the use of “massacre” mainly for Israeli deaths with more passive wording for Palestinian casualties (Johnson, 2023), and Sunday-show agendas privileging hostages over occupation while reserving “genocide/massacre” largely for Hamas (Youmans, 2025).

The present study extends this literature by examining topical framing across the duration of the war and across platforms. We find large and systematic differences in coverage that plausibly conditioned audience perceptions and distorted understanding among partisan publics. Liberal outlets devoted significantly more space to Palestinian deaths and the humanitarian crisis, while conservative outlets—especially in web coverage—stressed Israeli military advances and downplayed civilian harm. Conservatives also blurred distinctions between Hamas militants and Palestinian civilians, sometimes conflating Palestinians with terrorism. Identity framing diverged as well: conservative outlets frequently equated pro-Palestinian positions with antisemitism and shamed Jewish voices on the left, whereas liberal outlets situated Jewish identity in broader historical and religious contexts. Protest coverage mirrored this split—“anti-Israel protesters” versus “pro-Palestine protesters”—and regional framing diverged too, with liberals providing more historical and geopolitical context and conservatives portraying instability as a collective Arab challenge to Israel and the United States.

Beyond these major differences between topical framing of the war by liberal and conservative outlets, another major finding in this study is significant and *systematic divergences within the same ideological camp*. These differences were particularly striking among the liberal media outlets. Thus, strongly liberal outlets emphasized vivid, empathetic accounts of Palestinian suffering, national identity, and claims to self-determination, often questioning continued U.S. support for Israel. By contrast, moderately liberal outlets placed greater emphasis on Israeli hostages and sustained U.S. backing for Israel, with substantially less attention paid to Palestinian narratives. Observed across dozens of outlets, these consistent within-camp differences indicate measurable intra-sector fragmentation that can plausibly fuel intra-party polarization. By exposing ideologically aligned audiences to distinct agendas and emphases, such fragmentation challenges a purely inter-partisan conception of media polarization and highlights the need to analyze within-camp dynamics as drivers of broader sociopolitical conflict. Finally, these observations showcase the power of our analytical framework: by analyzing the entire institutional media with saturation in terms of the number of media outlets that were surveyed, our analysis can uncover differences between ideologically aligned media that were overlooked in previous studies due to limitations in the coverage and systematic surveillance of the media at the institutional level.

The institutional polarization of the media

This study demonstrates, arguably for the first time at the institutional level, that partisan biases of the media are deeply embedded in core routines of institutional news production. These

partisan biases permeate source selection, the portrayal of individuals, topic emphasis, tone, levels of abstraction, and the depiction of political actors. Polarization is therefore not an occasional editorial choice but a recurring and deeply entrenched structural feature of how news is made and circulated.

Network analysis indicates that polarization stems not only from outlet ideology but also from inter-outlet relationships, sourcing hierarchies, and amplification chains. Stable clusters link moderate and more partisan sectors, raising the possibility that polarization is an institutional artifact as much as a market response. We thus propose that media outlets do not merely mirror public opinion; rather, they directly shape it through selective emphasis, narrative reinforcement, and ideological filtering.

Our results also uncover substantial within-camp variations. Differences between strongly and moderately conservative outlets, and parallel, though distinct, patterns on the left, reveal intra-partisan fragmentation within the media ecosystem that may have potential implications for party system dynamics. Divergent choices in topics, emotional tone, abstraction, and partisan cue usage create ideologically conditioned filters on global events, producing narrative and cognitive distortions that can be asymmetric across partisan audiences. In turn, these ideological filters can alter audience perceptions, leading to a deepening of partisan divisions and accelerating mass polarization.

Our analytical framework further demonstrates a critical link between media polarization and audience polarization at a national scale. By tracing decisions from newsroom inputs to engagement outputs, we demonstrate how emotional, abstract, and partisan signals travel through platforms and help organize mass responses, providing a plausible pathway from institutional practices to ideological division among the public.

Given the observed alignment of many outlets across geography and ownership on similar dimensions of tone, sourcing, framing, and cue usage, we propose that ideology shapes organizational behavior beyond competitive and technological pressures. For example, during periods of socioeconomic stress, feedback loops between ideology, institutional identity, and production practices may tighten, leading to an increased supply of polarizing content. Our findings, therefore, depict media institutions not as neutral conduits but as politically shaped actors that have the power to structure how citizens understand salient issues in a democracy.

The architecture of cognitive distortion: Sociopsychological and emotional cues in polarized news coverage

Abstractness in coverage of polarizing issues

Our analysis uncovered a pattern of news abstractization by the media that may have contributed to the polarizing effects of the news about the Gaza war on audiences. Thus, across outlets' websites, we found that the coverage of the Gaza war was more abstract among strongly partisan outlets on both the left and the right than among nonpartisan outlets. Moreover, headlines were more abstract than full articles, with the strongest headline abstraction among strongly liberal outlets. On Facebook, all posts were more abstract than website articles, and partisan—

nonpartisan differences were no longer significant, consistent with shorter formats encouraging abstraction. These observations establish, at the level of institutional media, a major strategy of storytelling by the U.S. media: using abstractization to convey more symbolic meaning and depict a bloody war with concrete, visible, and devastating consequences for all parties involved.

Can this abstractization of a very real war with very real and concrete consequences contribute to audience polarization? Classic theory holds that abstract linguistic features promote thematic framing and ideological reasoning (Iyengar, 1994). Several studies linked higher-level construal to intensified polarization by activating core convictions (Alper, 2020; Soderberg et al., 2015; Trope & Liberman, 2010), including evidence that abstract wording heightens threat perceptions and leads to polarized judgments (Geschke et al., 2010) and that salient partisanship combined with abstract thinking increased issue polarization among both liberals and conservatives (Luguri & Napier, 2013). Based on these prior findings and our current observations, we propose that highly abstract coverage of the Gaza war, particularly from strongly partisan outlets, fosters polarization by jointly invoking higher-order reasoning and activating political identity among audiences. Moreover, the greater abstraction observed on social media platforms and in news headlines further implies that truncated formats may structurally favor mass polarization.

Emotional coverage of polarizing issues

Our analysis also showed that the sentiment of Gaza war coverage followed a consistent pattern, with both partisan and nonpartisan outlets crafting news with a strongly negative tone, which persisted throughout the first year of the coverage. These observations have implications for affective polarization—in which partisans exhibit a growing dislike and distrust of the opposing side. We suggest that persistently more negative sentiment, particularly among partisan outlets, likely reinforced hostile emotions toward out-groups, which were often mentioned in the news crafted by the most partisan outlets. Repeated mentions of out-group partisans in news crafted with a very negative tone may have had the consequence of eliciting a greater dislike for these out-group partisans. For example, members of the Biden administration were often quoted and outright criticized in news from conservative media about the suffering of Israeli hostages. Because partisan audiences were repeatedly exposed to emotionally charged, negative portrayals of the conflict — and implicitly of the groups associated with it — hostility and distrust could have become further entrenched. Equally important may have been the negative coverage of the Biden administration by very liberal outlets, which elevated Palestinian casualties and suffering. This may have had the effect of further exacerbating intra-party polarization by potentially polarizing liberal audiences and driving a wedge between moderate and progressive liberals. In sum, we argue that global sentiment trends in Gaza coverage by the U.S. media were not merely reflections of public mood but may have been active contributors to affective inter- and intra-party polarization.

Partisan cues in Gaza war news: Drivers of ideological polarization?

Our analysis of partisan references in Gaza war coverage revealed distinct patterns of alignment and fractures. Focusing on the mentions of in-group partisans, we found that conservative outlets in aggregate referenced Republicans far more often than nonpartisan outlets, yielding a preferential in-group effect driven chiefly by the most strongly conservative outlets; moderately

conservative outlets contributed far less. By contrast, liberal outlets, in aggregate, showed no consistent preference for in-group cues. Similarly, focusing on out-group mentions, we also found that conservative outlets in aggregate referenced Democrats more frequently than nonpartisan outlets, with the effect concentrated among the most strongly conservative outlets. Interestingly, strongly liberal outlets also favored out-group cues (Republicans), but the pattern was less pronounced. Overall, conservatives used more out-group cues than liberals, largely because strongly conservative outlets employed them at much higher rates. These results support our hypothesis that media outlets with stronger partisan bias were more likely to employ out-group cues when reporting on the Gaza war. This was especially true for the most ideologically extreme outlets — especially on the far right — which were the most likely to deploy partisan references, particularly out-group signals, across platforms.

The patterns uncovered by our analysis align with prior observations in previous research conducted on selected news media outlets. Prior content analyses found that partisan television devoted more attention to attacking partisans of opposing ideology than promoting partisans of the same ideology, often in language that was meant to provoke outrage (Chalif, 2011). Experimental work has also found that exposure to out-group politicians via like-minded media reduces affect toward those politicians (Levendusky, 2013). Our studies at the level of institutional media provide systematic evidence at a larger scale that media embedded partisan cues in Gaza war stories. Importantly, our studies of audience engagement directly linked these partisan references to increased engagement with partisan news. Thus, on Facebook, out-group cues increased dissemination of Gaza war posts, whereas in-group cues were less effective. Our findings are consistent with prior evidence that out-group language predicts sharing more strongly than negative sentiment or moral-emotional language (Rathje et al., 2021). Taken together, the findings underscore the central role of partisan references, especially out-group signaling, in how partisan media communicate the Gaza war and drive its wider circulation.

How may the greater embedding of partisan cues in the news crafted by partisan media contribute to exacerbating partisan divisions and mass polarization? One possible mechanism is by eliciting persuasion among audiences, because most of these partisans were prominent political figures (political elites), and elite signaling is a major mechanism of persuasion (Jost et al., 2022). As shown in the qualitative analysis of Gaza war coverage (Appendix 2), partisan outlets frequently invoked in-group and out-group political elites—presidents, governors, and members of Congress—valorizing allies while castigating opponents. References to elites shape how audiences construe the conflict by steering attention to select considerations and altering persuasion dynamics, with downstream effects on polarization (Jost et al., 2022). Elite signaling through partisan cues interacts with citizens' psychological needs, motivations, and information-processing capacities to structure interpretation and engagement (Jost, 2021). Building on Social Identity Theory and findings on affective polarization, such cues reinforce partisan identity, heighten in-group favoritism, and intensify out-group animus (Iyengar, 2013). Elite mentions also operate as social proof, a persuasive heuristic that—when partisan—nudges audiences toward stronger alignment or hardens existing attachments; repetition further amplifies these effects. Therefore, the routine use and reiteration of partisan elite cues in the Gaza war news provide a potential mechanism linking war coverage to the escalation of attitudinal divisions among citizens regarding the war in Gaza.

A second, parallel mechanism linking partisan cue embedding in the Gaza war news and attitudinal divisions and polarization among citizens is the ability of partisan cues to elicit ideological thinking, leading to ideological alignment or shifts in ideology (ideological polarization). To better understand this mechanism, we first review our current understanding of ideology. Ideology is commonly conceived as a system of beliefs, values, and ideas that organizes social interpretation, legitimizes political and economic arrangements, and guides identity and governance choices, with classic accounts emphasizing its ties to power and legitimacy (Kumar, 2006) and its expression across religious, fascist, or capitalist systems (Hall, 1989). Critics describe ideological thinking as rigid, doctrine-bound, and resistant to disconfirming evidence, yielding simplified and distorted social reality (Vincent, 2010; Zmigrod, 2025). Relationally, ideological cognition privileges perceived in-groups and disfavors out-groups, a dynamic illuminated by Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory (Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner, 1988; Turner & Reynolds, 2012). Recent work integrating psychological and neuroscientific evidence proposes two core components of ideology: a doctrinal component that enforces adherence to rigid dogma and prescriptive beliefs, and a relational component that demarcates adherents from nonadherents, strengthening identification with the in-group and distrust or hostility toward the out-group (Zmigrod, 2022, 2025).

Based on these insights into the underpinnings of ideology, we propose that greater use of partisan representations in news by partisan media elicits ideological thinking and engages the relational component of individuals' ideology. References to both in-group and out-group partisan cues function as potent triggers of identity-based processing. The result is a strengthening of ideological thinking following repeated consumption of news featuring partisan references, and/or a shift in ideology facilitated by lasting and plastic changes in the neural circuits that process partisan cues and elicit ideological thinking.

We also note that modern mass society may be unusually receptive to partisan cues. Classic mass communication theories highlight the erosion of communal ties and the rise of social isolation in large-scale societies compared with smaller, organic communities (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Contemporary shifts toward online interaction further reduce face-to-face contact and are associated with greater perceived isolation (Primack et al., 2017). In this context, partisan cues in news can simulate social connection for in-group members — potentially providing a much-needed sense of social connection and belonging — which could result in the sharpening of mental boundaries against out-groups. When political, these cues may promote ideological alignment and, if repeated and persuasive, contribute to partisan polarization. Future work can experimentally test how specific news-embedded partisan cues related to polarizing issues map onto the doctrinal and relational components of ideology, isolating their effects on identity reinforcement, belief updating, and downstream polarization.

How media polarization may lead to audience polarization

The analysis of audience engagement with Gaza war news on Facebook revealed that audiences engaged more with Gaza war content from strongly partisan outlets than nonpartisan outlets, as reflected in higher adjusted sharing and broader dissemination. Moreover, strongly liberal outlets generated the widest sharing, followed by strongly conservative and moderately conservative outlets; all three exceeded nonpartisan and moderately liberal outlets (Figure 19). Notably,

moderately liberal outlets saw the narrowest reach, indicating distinct engagement profiles for partisan versus nonpartisan audiences.

We also found that out-group partisan references in conservative content were associated with higher dissemination of Gaza war posts during key periods. In-group references, by contrast, rarely increased engagement, with only occasional month-specific exceptions. Regression models that pooled the full period corroborated these patterns: out-group cues predicted higher sharing, whereas in-group cues did not.

Visual framing also mattered. Liberal audiences preferentially shared posts with videos, while conservative audiences responded more to posts with photos over much of the period. Pooled regressions generally support these effects, even if month-to-month variation can be muted in aggregate estimates.

How can engagement of partisan audiences with partisan news lead to audience polarization? Because of the fragmentation of audiences, both liberal and conservative audiences are exposed to their preferred partisan outlets. News disseminated by these partisan outlets reaches the partisan audiences, and the polarizing content embedded in the news (especially partisan references, abstractness, and negative tone) elicits socio-psychological (partisan and abstract cues), emotional (negative tone), and ideological thinking (both abstract and partisan cues) among audiences. Repeated exposure to partisan news featuring these potent psychological cues can thus lead to persistent patterns of audience engagement, which may alter individuals' perceptions of the Gaza war. We call this lasting alteration of perceptions **cognitive distortion**. We propose that partisan media drive persistent patterns of cognitive distortion—through repeated activation of socio-psychological, emotional, and ideological thinking—which in turn is responsible for alignment of audiences with party elites and their policies and proposals (leading to greater partisan sorting) or shifts in affective (leading to affective polarization) or ideological (leading to ideological polarization) thinking at a national scale.

In addition to fostering greater inter-party divisions, partisan media may also foster greater divisions between partisans that are ideologically aligned—which may exacerbate intra-party divisions and polarization. The audience engagement patterns observed on Facebook revealed a stark intra-liberal divide that was not observed on the right (Figure 22). Thus, strongly liberal audiences were highly responsive to coverage of U.S. military aid to Israel, Israeli military operations, student protests, pro-Palestinian demonstrations, recognition of Palestinian statehood, and reports of human rights abuses against Palestinians, whereas moderately liberal audiences showed markedly lower engagement. This split mirrors editorial differences: strongly liberal outlets were more critical of Israeli actions and more attentive to Palestinian rights, while moderately liberal outlets were more supportive of Israel.

Taken together, these observations suggest that coverage choices shape inter- and intra-party divisions and mass polarization. Differences in engagement map onto topic selection and framing, as well as the use of abstract, emotional, and partisan cues, providing a mechanism for how the crafting of Gaza war news by the partisan media led to divergent patterns of audience engagement at a national scale—which may have contributed to the observed differences in attitudes toward the Gaza war among partisans in the United States.

Limitations and perspectives

Despite its broad scope and systematic design, this study has several limitations. First, outlet ideology is treated as stable over the observation window, although bias can vary with events and topics. Classifying outlets in a low-dimensional ideological space is itself contested: it may falsely imply symmetry across sides or equate low bias with objectivity, concepts that are normatively and cross-nationally variable (Benjes-Small, 2012; Lichter, 2014). To mitigate this, outlets were grouped into broad ideological sectors using established charts, and their clustering was cross-validated with network analysis of sourcing and content. We argue that aggregating media outlets at the sector level reduces sensitivity to outlet-specific drift and can uncover robust differences between the different ideological sectors of the media. Second, beyond a qualitative review of more than 1,000 items, the study does not implement a formal framing analysis. As a result, systematic identification of frame types and their distribution across outlets remains for future work; the assembled corpora can support such extensions. Third, audience engagement is proxied by Facebook reaction and sharing metrics. Engagement is multidimensional—cognitive, affective, and behavioral—and platform metrics capture only a subset. Moreover, the analysis does not code visual content at scale; photos and videos can independently drive emotion and attention, and their omission narrows inference. Despite these limitations, the paper provides arguably the first inkling into the complex ecology of the U.S. media, at institutional scale, and uncovers deep divisions between and within its ideological sectors, providing a map as well as a useful and varied resource for future studies of institutional media polarization, audience polarization, and the relationships between them that are highly relevant to the process of mass partisan divisions and polarization.

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Supplementary Table 1

The News Media Outlets Surveyed by this Paper

News outlet	Ad Fontes bias	Ad Fontes reliability	Ad Fontes category	All Sides bias	Facebook ID
ABC News	-3	44.8	Middle	-1.42	ABCNews
AlterNet	-13.59	36.15	Strong Left	-4.5	Alternet
American Greatness	22.45	18.93	Hyper-Partisan Right	4.4	Theamericangreatness
American Spectator	22.97	17.46	Hyper-Partisan Right	4	americanspectator
American Thinker	24.8	13.64	Hyper-Partisan Right	4	AmericanThinker
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette	0.18	45.14	Middle	-4	arkansasonline
Associated Press	-2.22	45.07	Middle	-3.1	APNews
Atlanta Journal-Constitution	-3.84	44.83	Middle	-2	ajc
Axios	-3.22	43.33	Middle	-1.7	axiosnews
AZ Central	-7.06	42.17	Skews Left	0	azcentral
Bloomberg	-3.16	42.11	Middle	-2.4	bloombergbusiness
Boing Boing	-14.43	19.23	Strong Left	-4	boingboing
Boston Herald	9.68	36.31	Skews Right	2	bostonherald
Breitbart News	13.54	31.23	Strong Right	5	Breitbart
Business Insider	-4.09	40.58	Middle	-2.6	businessinsider
BuzzFeed News	-5.98	39.98	Middle	-4	BuzzFeedNews
CBN	15.17	34.2	Strong Right	4	cbnonline
CBS News	-2.74	41.97	Middle	-1.5	CBSNews
Chicago Sun-Times	-4.35	45.44	Middle	-2	thechicagosuntimes

Chicago Tribune	-4.24	44.67	Middle	0	chicagotribune
Christian Science Monitor	-2.53	44.3	Middle	-0.3	ChristianScienceMonitor
CNBC	-1.81	43.8	Middle	-0.9	cnbc
CNET	-1.39	40.02	Middle	0	cnet
CNN (Web News)	-6.2	42.1	Skews Left	-1.3	cnn
Columbia Journalism Review	-6.39	43.22	Skews Left	0	columbiajournalismreview
Current Affairs	-18.26	33.09	Hyper-Partisan Left	-4	curaffairs
Daily Beast	-10.5	32.53	Skews Left	-4.1	thedailybeast
Daily Kos	-17.45	28.51	Strong Left	-4	dailykos
Daily Mail	4.38	31.05	Middle	4	DailyMail
Democracy Now	-16.15	31.68	Strong Left	-4	democracynow
Deseret News	2.11	42.29	Middle	0.9	deseretnews
Esquire	-18.14	27.41	Hyper-Partisan Left	-4	Esquire
FactCheck.org	-1.76	46.2	Middle	-1.6	factcheck.org
Fiscal Times	-4.18	43.33	Middle	2	TheFiscalTimes
FiveThirtyEight	-6.11	42.85	Skews Left	-0.4	fivethirtyeight
Forbes	-3.02	40.58	Middle	-0.5	forbes
Foreign Affairs	-6.55	44.56	Skews Left	0	ForeignAffairs
Fox Online News	11.07	35.37	Skews Right	3.88	FoxNews
HotAir	12.78	24.77	Strong Right	2	hotaircom
HuffPost	-10.57	38.03	Skews Left	-4.3	HuffPost
Independent Journal Review	12.82	25.81	Strong Right	4.1	theijr

InfoWars	23.46	15.9	Hyper-Partisan Right	5	
International Business Times	-2.74	42.28	Middle	0	IBTimes
Jacobin	-21.47	31.69	Hyper-Partisan Left	-4	jacobinmag
Jezebel	-18.18	29.2	Hyper-Partisan Left	-4	Jezebel
Judicial Watch	23.27	23.64	Hyper-Partisan Right	2	JudicialWatch
Los Angeles Times	-6.35	42.78	Skews Left	-2	latimes
MarketWatch	-3.88	40.93	Middle	-0.3	marketwatch
Mashable	-8.63	40.37	Skews Left	-4	mashable
Media Matters	-15.06	26.45	Strong Left	-4.5	Mediamatters
MEDIAite	-8.64	37.25	Skews Left	-2	mediaite
Miami Herald	-8.24	38.74	Skews Left	-2	miamiherald
Mother Jones	-15.11	37.02	Strong Left	-4	motherjones
MSNBC	-13.98	34.55	Strong Left	-3.71	msnbc
National Review	12.92	31.12	Strong Right	2.5	nationalreview
NBCNews.com	-5.68	42.77	Middle	-1.8	NBCNews
New Republic	-17.07	29.66	Strong Left	-4	newrepublic
New York Daily News	-8.12	40.47	Skews Left	-4	NYDailyNews
New York Magazine	-9.89	39.72	Skews Left	-4	NewYorkMag
New York Post	9.35	31.82	Skews Right	2.93	NYPost
New York Times - News	-8.08	41.04	Skews Left	-2.2	nytimes
Newsday	-3.51	46.71	Middle	0	newsday
Newsmax	13.46	29.05	Strong Right	3.05	NEWSMAX

Newsweek	-2.3	38.99	Middle	-0.45	Newsweek
NPR	-4.21	43.08	Middle	-2	NPR
One America News Network	14.02	28.48	Strong Right	3.1	OneAmericaNewsNetwork
Orange County Register	5.57	40.54	Middle	2	ocregister
PBS NewsHour	-9.2	43.11	Skews Left	-1.1	newshour
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	-0.45	47.59	Middle	0.2	pittsburghpostgazette
PJ Media	21.63	18.77	Hyper-Partisan Right	4	PJMedia
Politico	-5.49	42.37	Middle	-1.2	politico
PoliticusUSA	-16.24	30.82	Strong Left	-4	PoliticusUSA
PolitiFact	-3.51	44.67	Middle	-2	politifact
ProPublica	-6.78	47.27	Skews Left	-2	propublica
Quartz	-4.77	43.87	Middle	0	quartznews
Quillette	9.33	37.67	Skews Right	2	freethoughtlives
Rasmussen Reports	13.94	33.72	Strong Right	2	RasmussenPoll
Raw Story	-14.11	34.68	Strong Left	-4	TheRawStory
RealClearPolitics	14.45	26.9	Strong Right	0.16	realclearpolitics
Reason	4.74	36.43	Middle	0.28	Reason.Magazine
Red State	21.64	21.12	Hyper-Partisan Right	4	RedStateBlog
Roll Call	-3.31	46.27	Middle	0	RollCall
Salon	-13.59	32.73	Strong Left	-4	salon
San Francisco Chronicle	-6.06	44.98	Skews Left	-4	SFChronicle
Scientific American	-11.13	33.38	Skews Left	-2	ScientificAmerican

Slate	-12.72	35.37	Strong Left	-4.5	Slate
Star Tribune	-3.02	46.13	Middle	-2	startribune
Tampa Bay Times	-3.28	45.56	Middle	0	tampabaycom
TechCrunch	-0.39	45.4	Middle	0	techcrunch
Teen Vogue	-15.5	37.79	Strong Left	-4.6	teenvogue
The American Conservative	14.44	31.63	Strong Right	4	The.American.Conservative
The Atlantic	-9.19	38	Skews Left	-4	TheAtlantic
The Boston Globe	-7.85	41.94	Skews Left	-4	globe
The College Fix	10.33	34.31	Skews Right	4	TheCollegeFix
The Daily Caller	12.94	34.48	Strong Right	3.8	DailyCaller
The Daily Signal	17.13	19.98	Strong Right	4	TheDailySignalNews
The Daily Wire	13.18	30.92	Strong Right	5	DailyWire
The Dallas Morning News	-1.91	43.56	Middle	0	dallasmorningnews
The Economist	-1.43	42.4	Middle	-1.4	TheEconomist
The Epoch Times	16.2	24.67	Strong Right	2.5	epochtimes
The Federalist	18.58	21.8	Hyper-Partisan Right	4	fdrlst
The Gateway Pundit	23.64	14.91	Hyper-Partisan Right	4	gatewaypundit
The Hill	-1.4	41.97	Middle	-0.8	TheHill
The Independent	-6.9	38.46	Skews Left	-2	TheIndependentOnline
The Intercept	-14.1	37.46	Strong Left	-3.6	theinterceptflm
The Libertarian Republic	11.25	33.06	Skews Right	2	libertarianrepublic
The Nation	-19.21	31.34	Hyper-Partisan Left	-5	thenationdaily

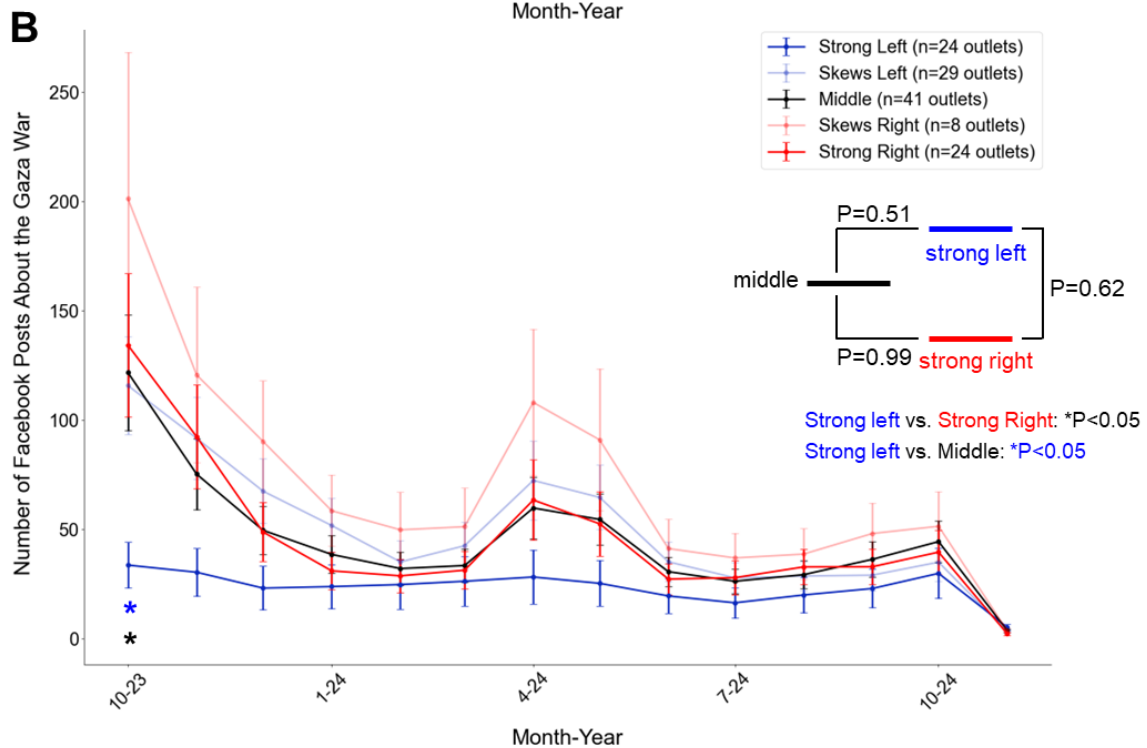
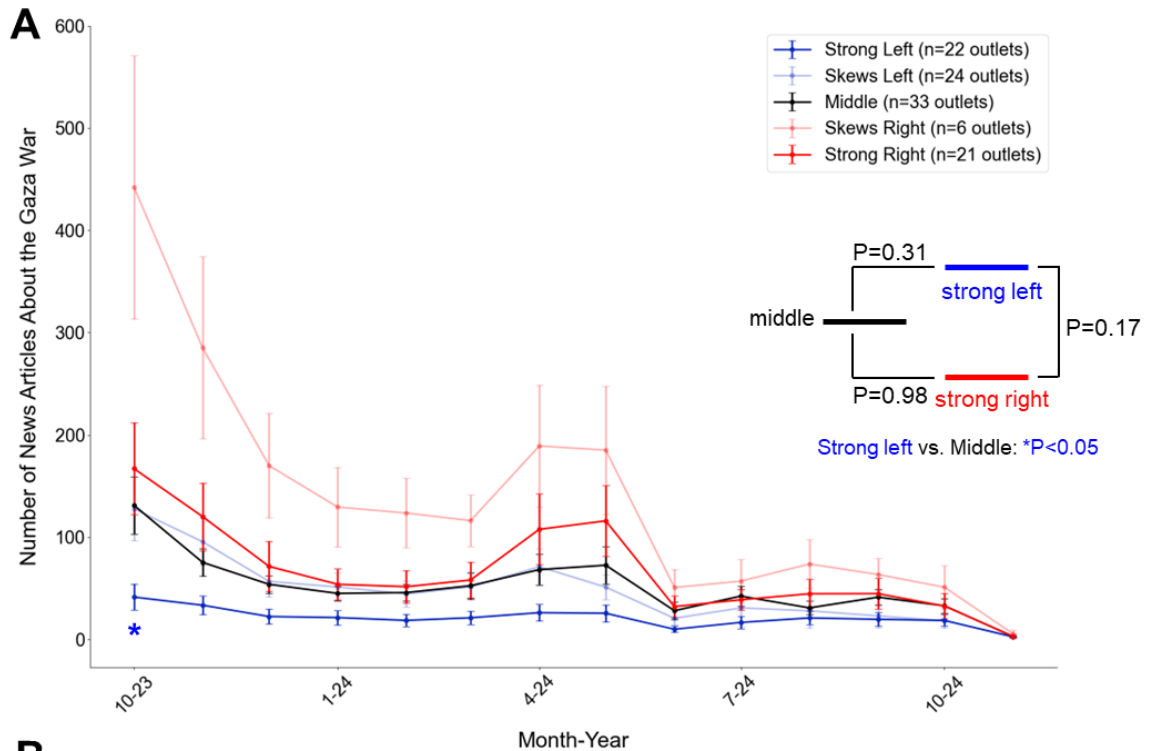
The New Yorker	-12.25	40.91	Strong Left	-4.2	newyorker
The Observer (New York)	-5.41	44.78	Middle	0.7	observer
The Philadelphia Inquirer	-11.28	37.67	Skews Left	-2	philadelphiainquirer
The Root	-18.47	26.47	Hyper-Partisan Left	-2	theRoot
The Sacramento Bee	-8.2	44.52	Skews Left	-2	sacramentobee
The Verge	-6.3	38.26	Skews Left	-2	verge
The Week - News	-10.75	38.32	Skews Left	-2	theweek
TheBlaze.com	13.14	31.5	Strong Right	4	TheBlaze
Time Magazine	-7.44	41.09	Skews Left	-2.3	time
Townhall	19.69	24.95	Hyper-Partisan Right	4	townhallcom
TruthOut	-16.97	33.38	Strong Left	-2	truthout
U.S. News & World Report	-2.82	43.77	Middle	-1.5	usnewsandworldreport
Upworthy	-5.57	39.86	Middle	-4	Upworthy
USA TODAY	-4.05	40.84	Middle	-2	usatoday
Vanity Fair	-13.88	33.17	Strong Left	-2	vanityfairmagazine
Vice	-9.39	38.96	Skews Left	-4	vicenews
Vox	-10.03	39.72	Skews Left	-3.5	Vox
Wall Street Journal - News	4.55	43.27	Middle	-0.2	WSJ
Washington Examiner	11.3	34.05	Skews Right	2.3	WashingtonExaminer
Washington Free Beacon	14.31	23.71	Strong Right	4	FreeBeacon
Washington Monthly	-12.08	35.78	Strong Left	-2	WashingtonMonthly
Washington Post	-6.82	38.85	Skews Left	-2.2	washingtonpost

Washington Times	11.34	34.49	Skews Right	2	TheWashingtonTimes
Yes! Magazine	-14.64	39.57	Strong Left	-4	yesmagazine.ph

Supplementary Figures

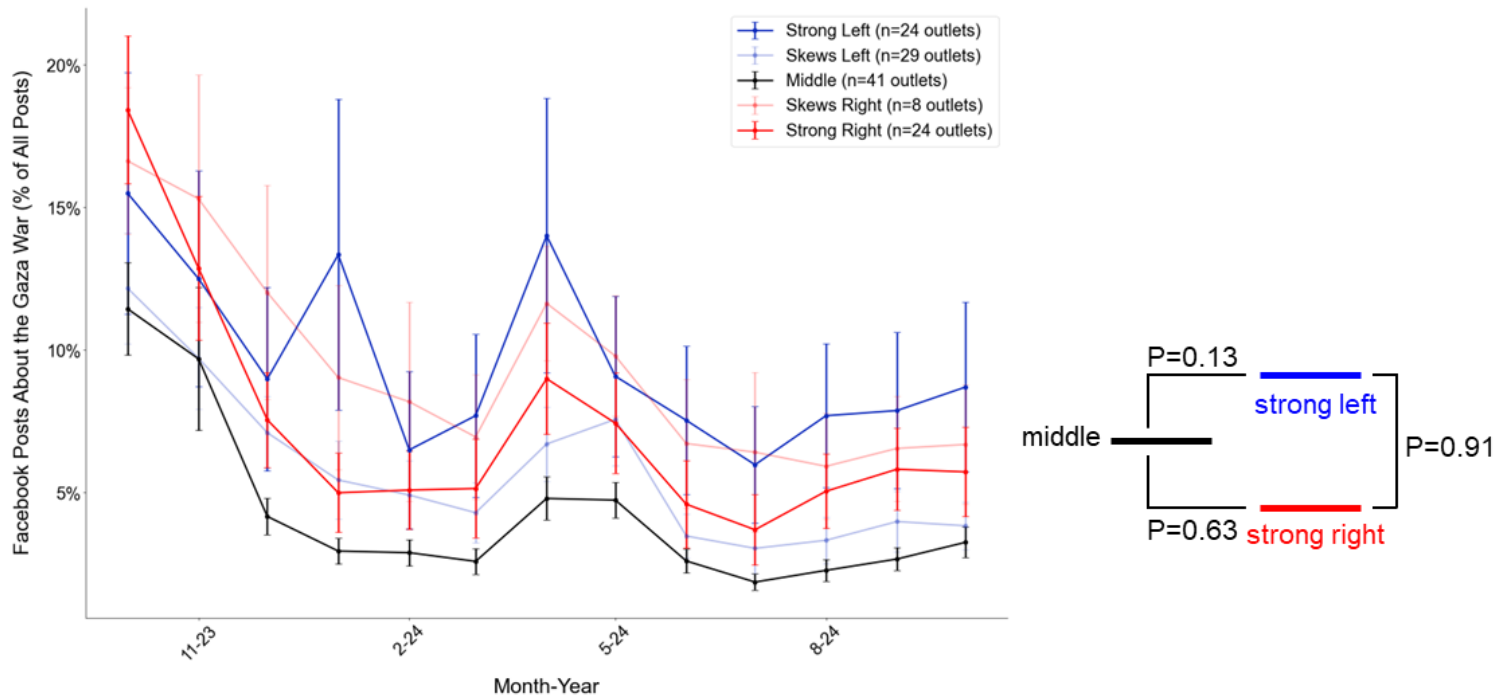
Supplementary Figure S1

Coverage of the Gaza War on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)



Supplementary Figure S2

Relative Coverage of the Gaza War on Facebook

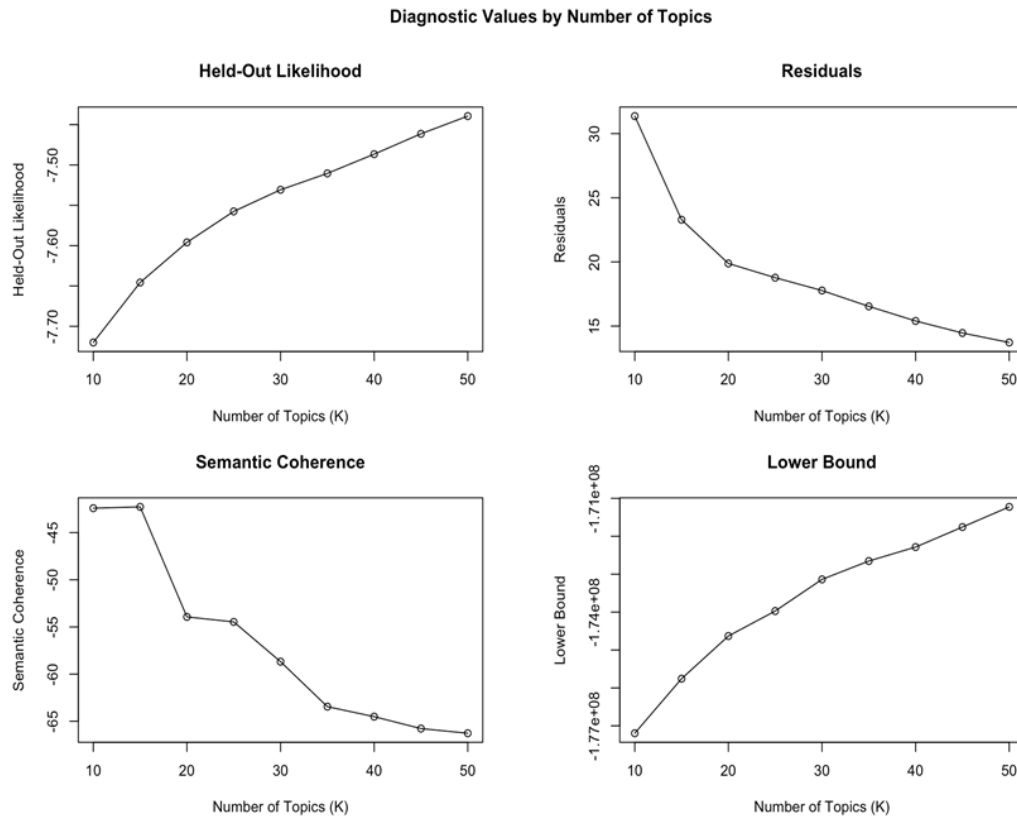


Supplementary Figure S3

Coverage

of the Gaza War: Determining the Optimal Number of Topics

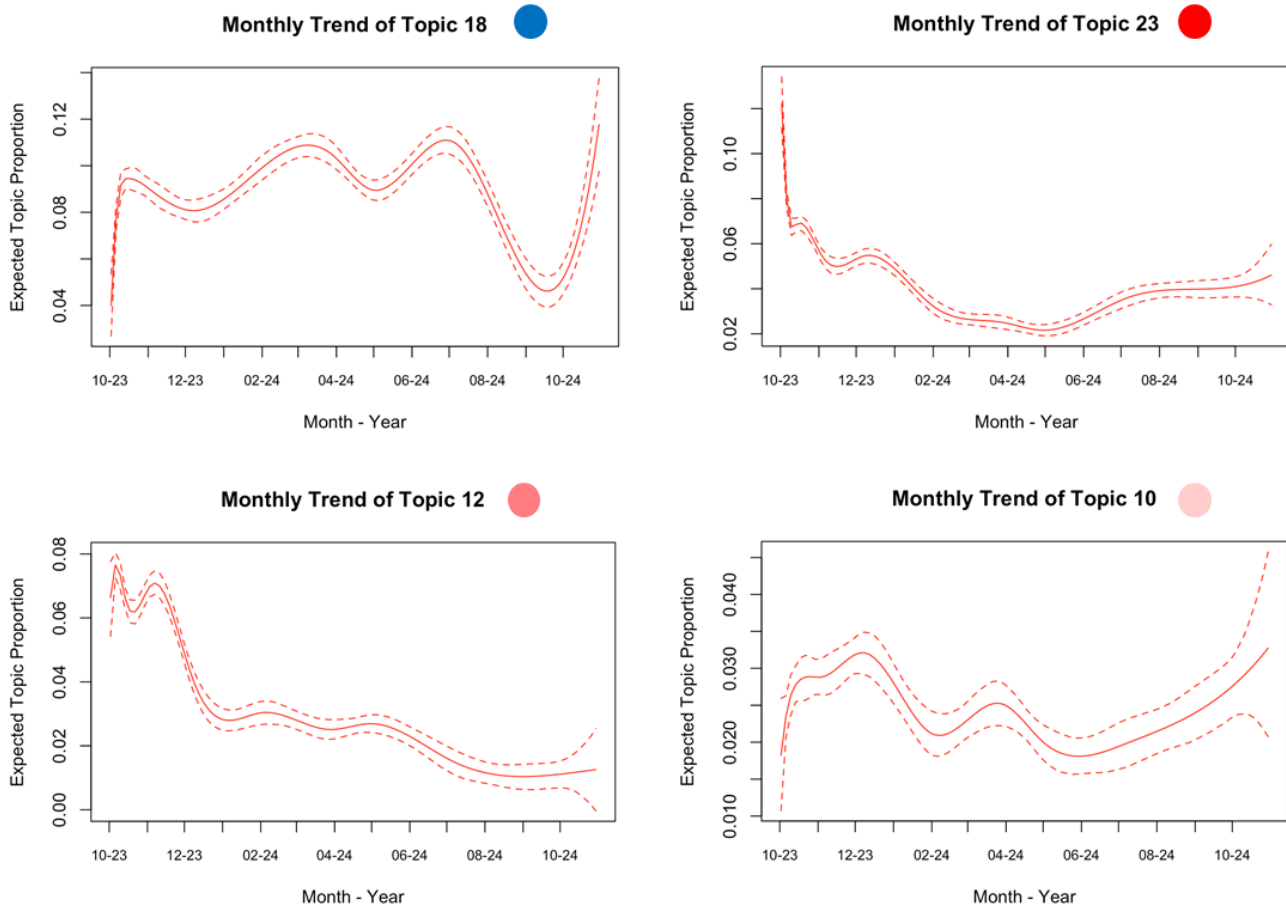
A

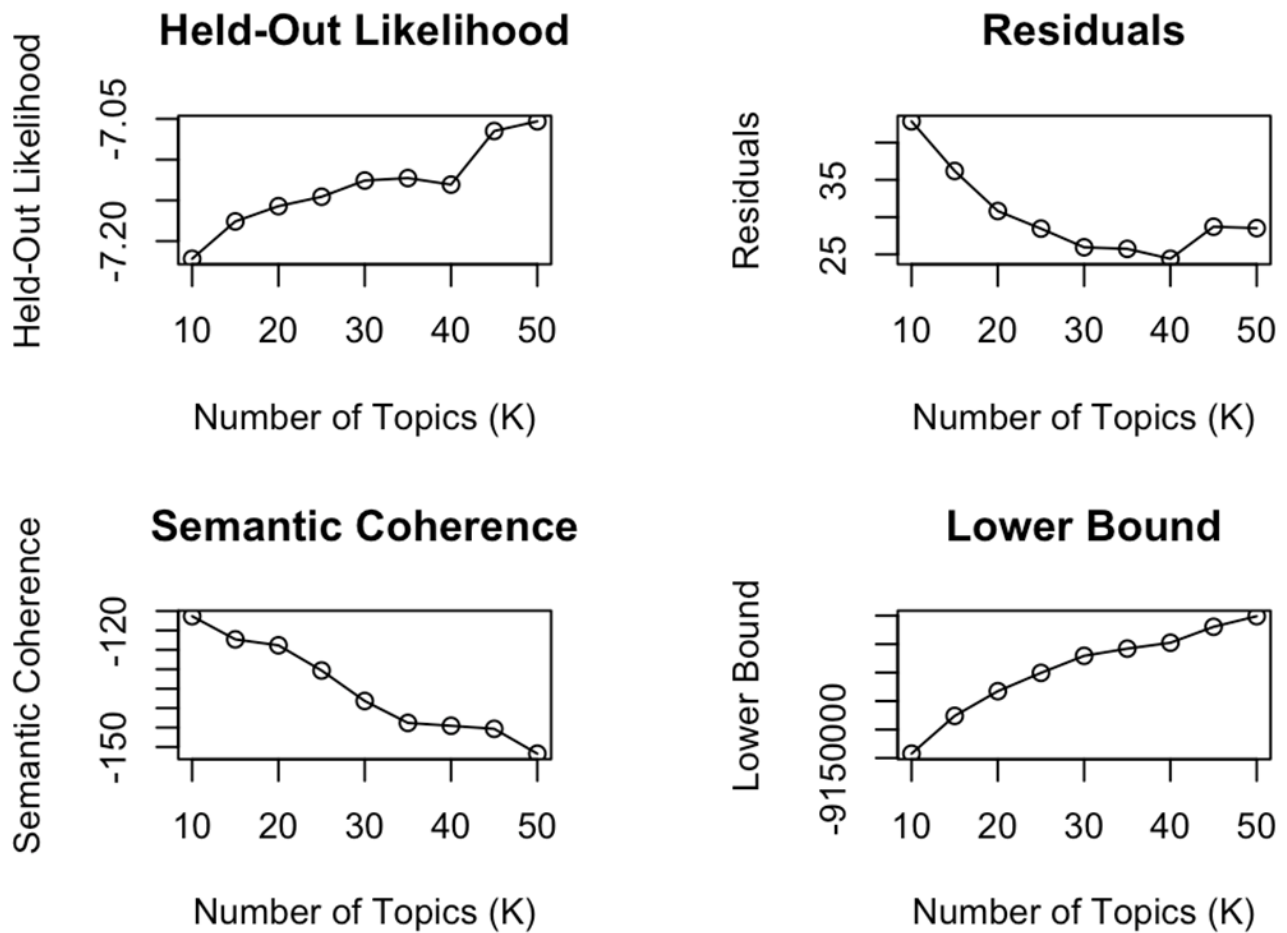


Supplementary Figure S4

The

War in Gaza: Topics Differently Covered on Liberal and Conservative Media Websites

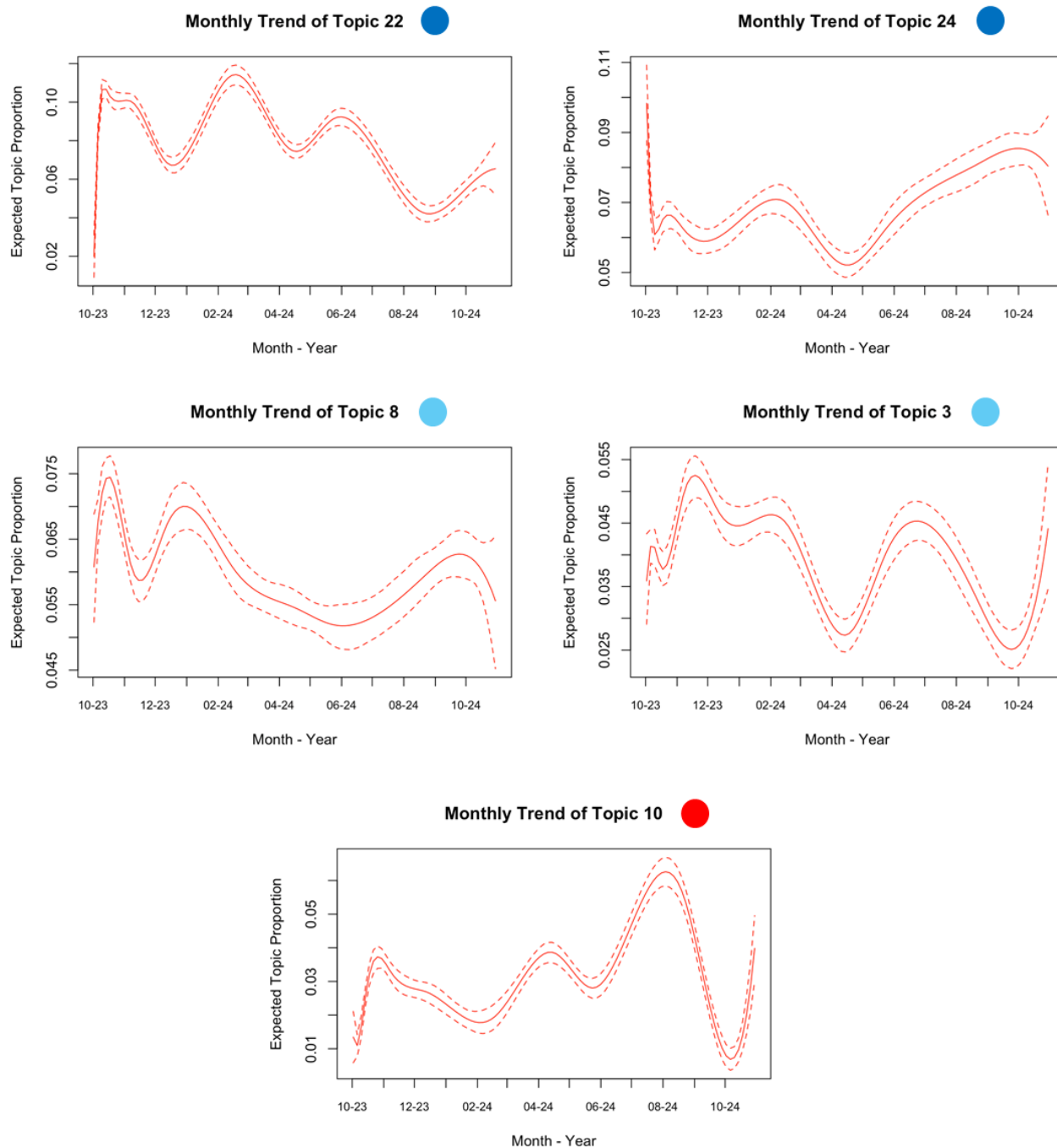


Diagnostic Values by Number of Topics

Supplementary Figure S6

The

Gaza War: Topics Differently Covered on Liberal and Conservative Media Facebook Pages

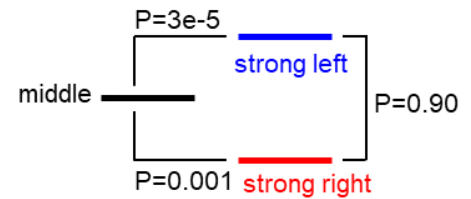
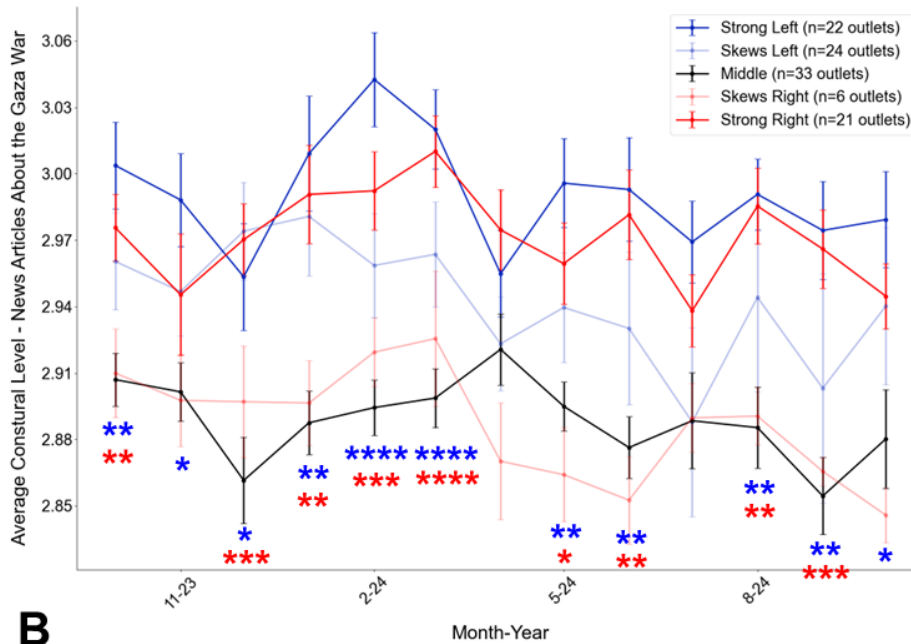


Supplementary Figure S7

Construal

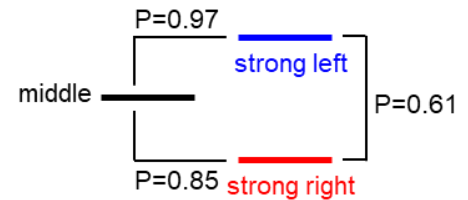
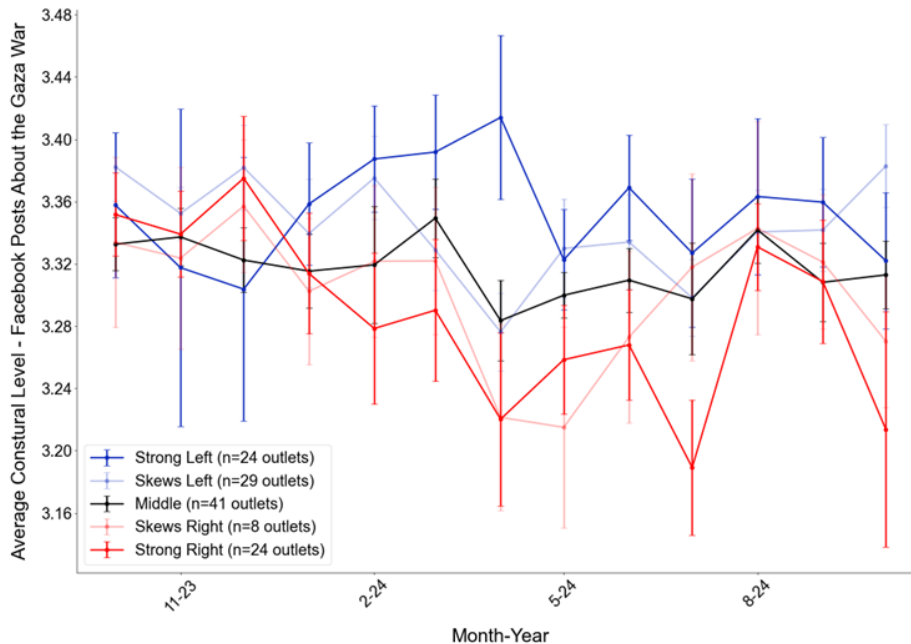
of Gaza War News on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)

A



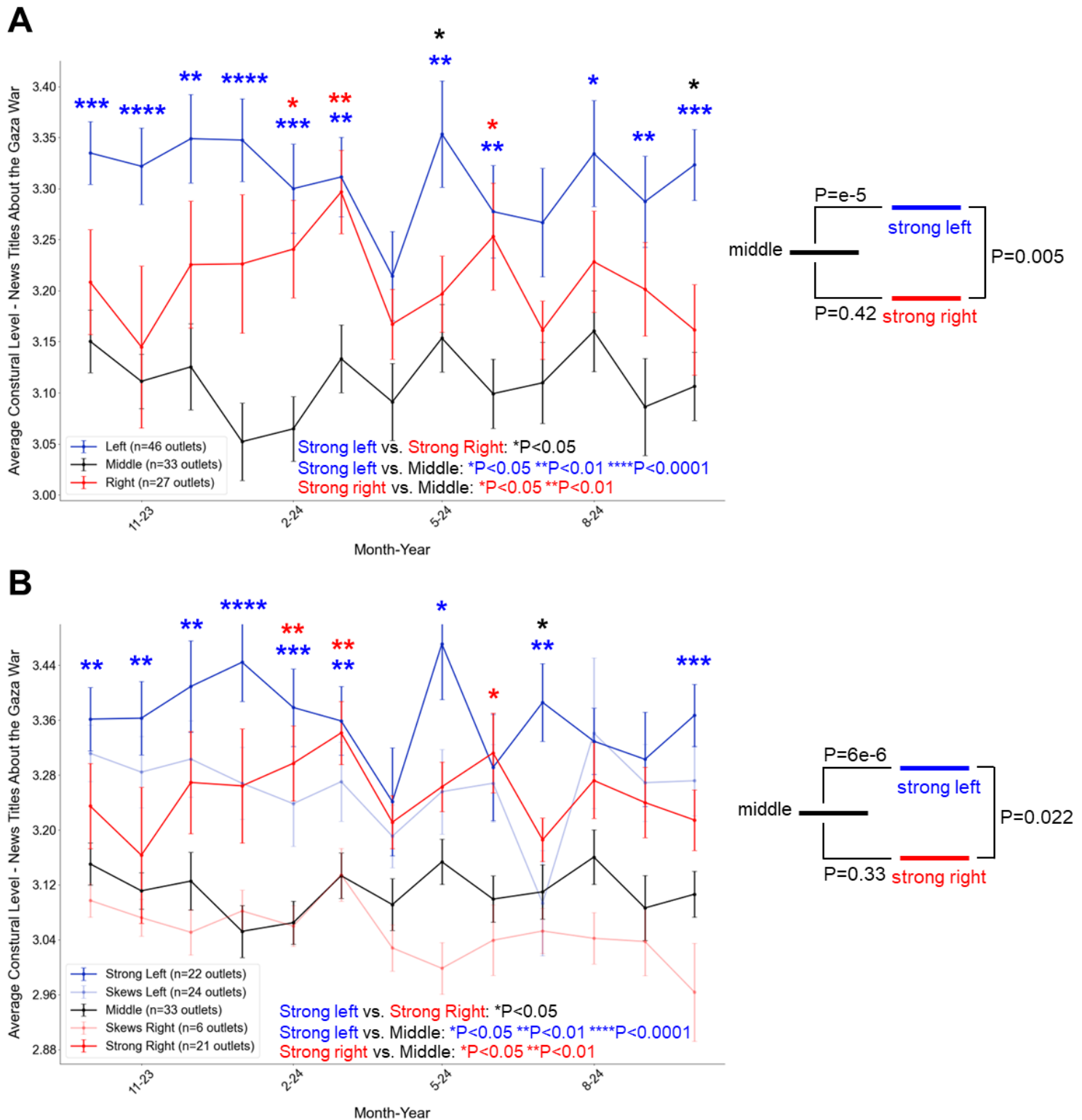
Strong left vs. Middle: * $P < 0.05$ ** $P < 0.01$ **** $P < 0.0001$
Strong right vs. Middle: * $P < 0.05$ ** $P < 0.01$ *** $P < 0.001$

B



Supplementary Figure S8

Construal of Gaza War Article Titles on News Media Websites

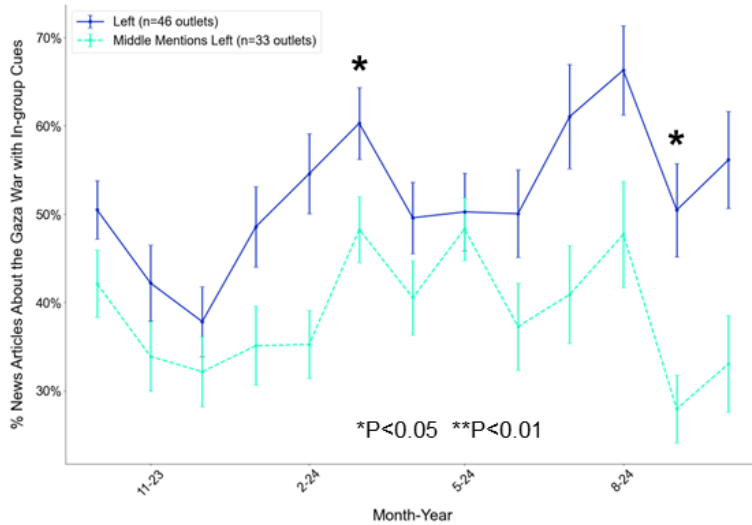


Supplementary Figure S9

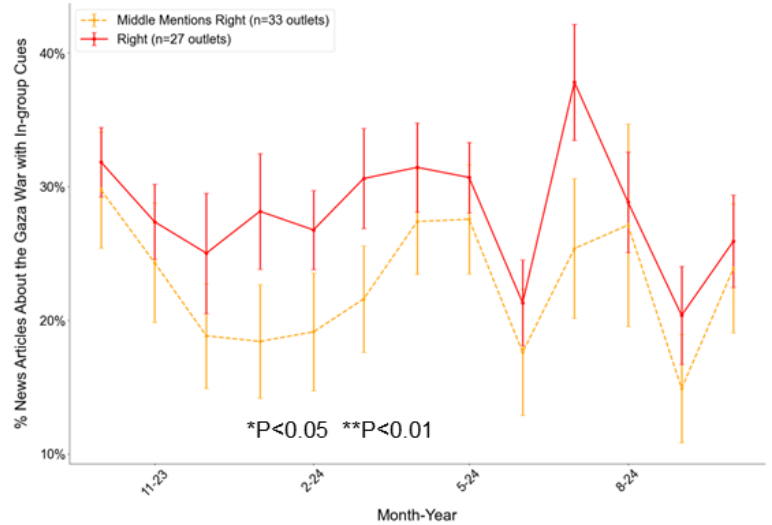
In-Group Partisan Cues in Gaza War Coverage on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)

A

Media bias $P=0.007$
Media bias x time $P=0.10$

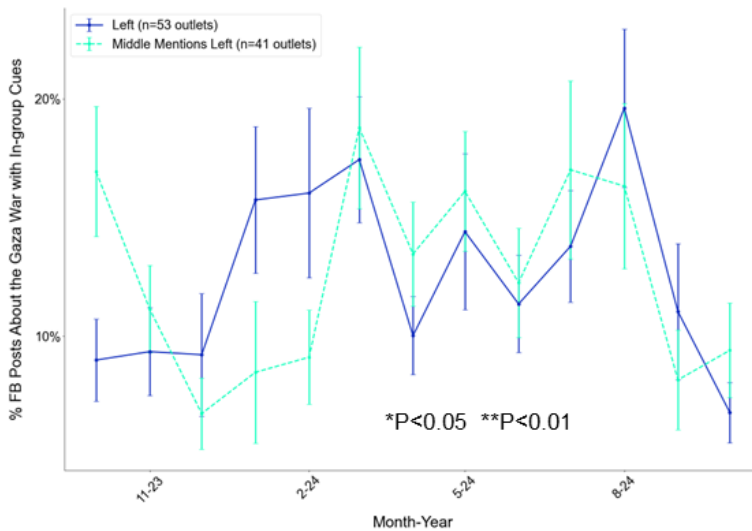


Media bias $P=0.28$
Media bias x time $P=0.83$

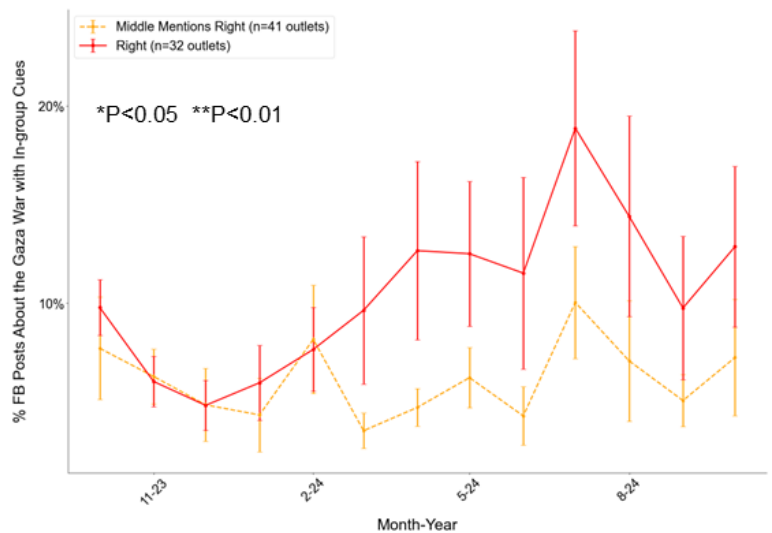


B

Media bias $P=0.88$
Media bias x time $P=0.008$



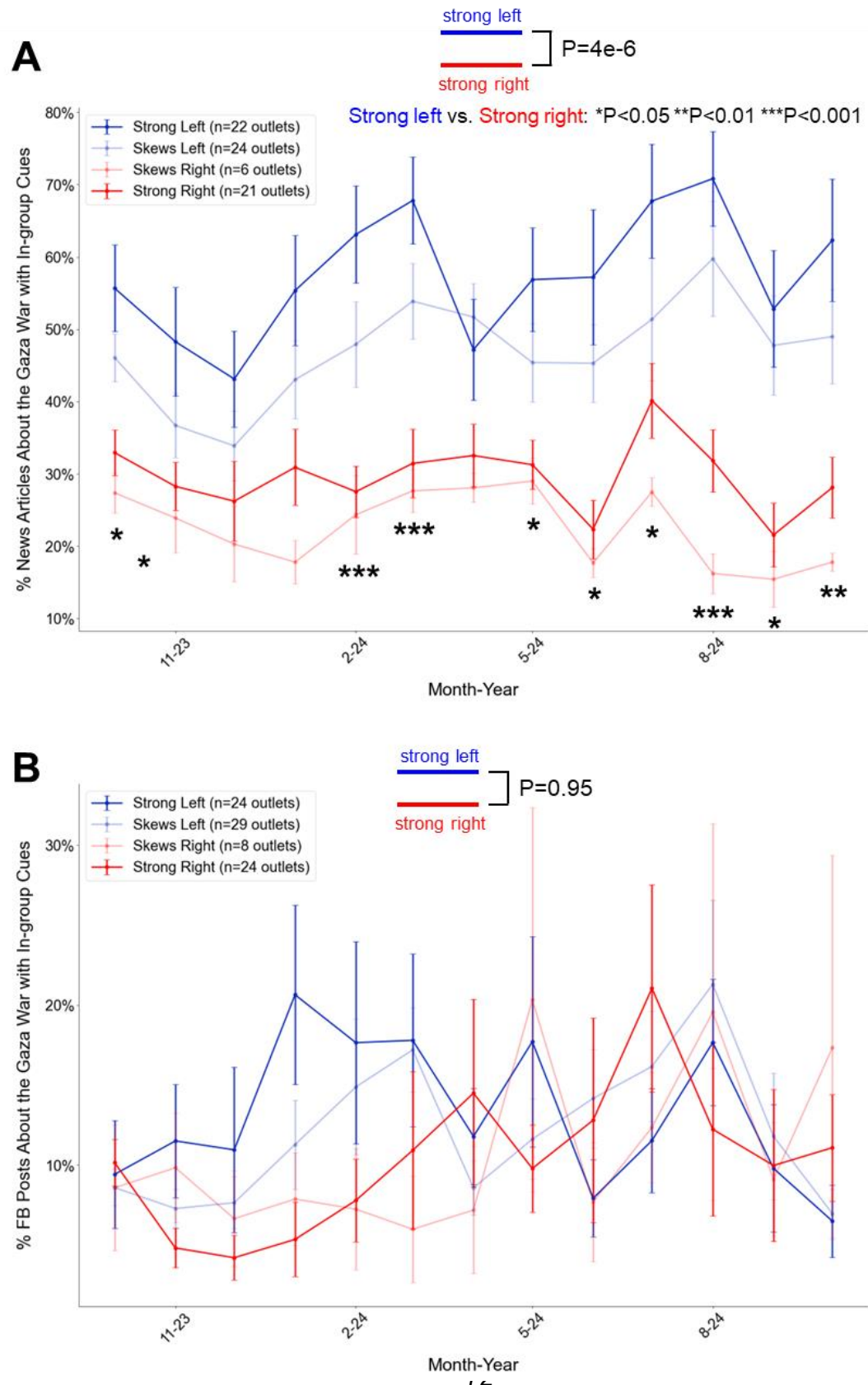
Media bias $P=0.075$
Media bias x time $P=0.59$



Supplementary Figure S10

In-

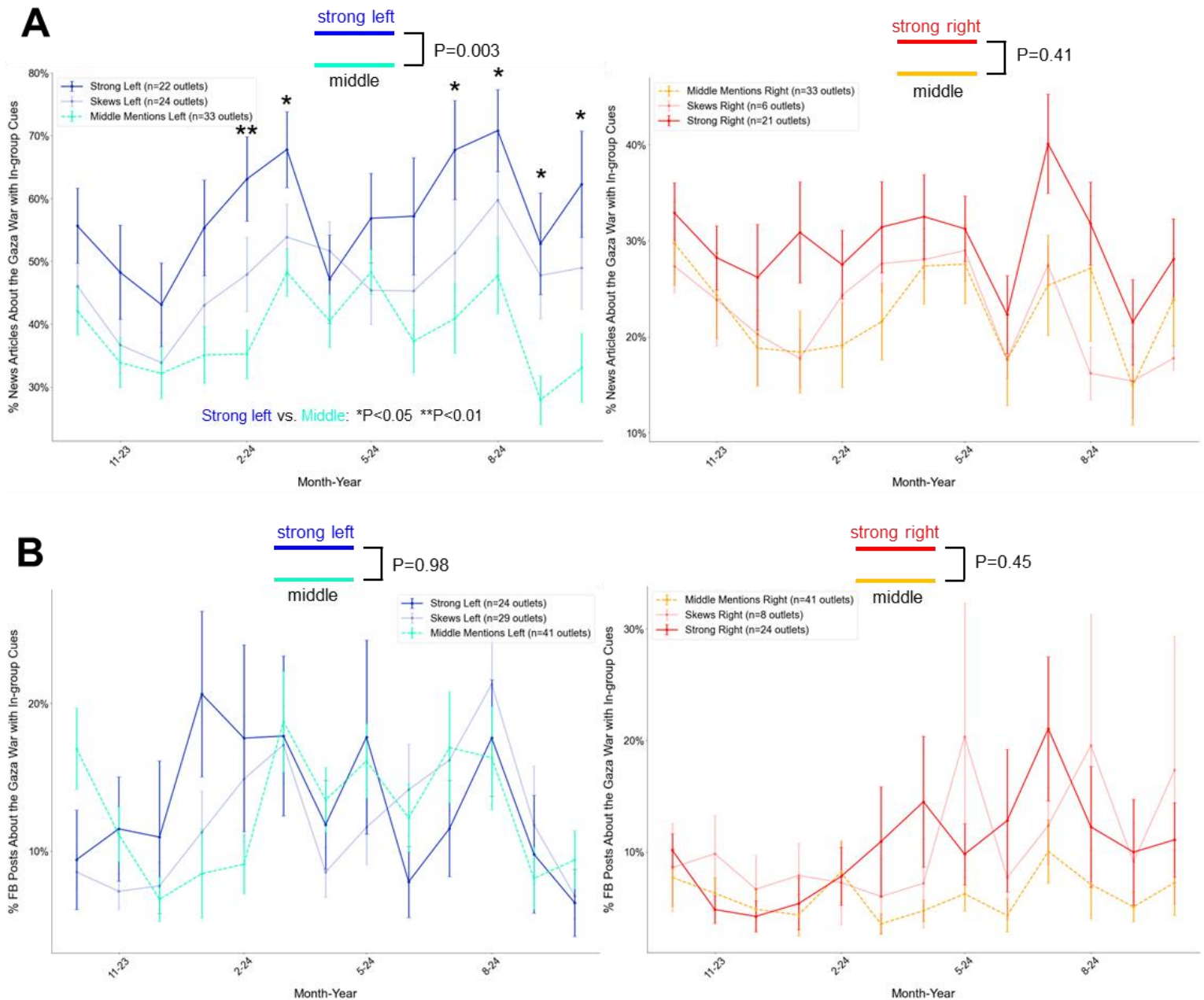
Group Partisan Cues in Gaza War Coverage on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)



Supplementary Figure S11

In-

Group Partisan Cues in Gaza War Coverage on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)

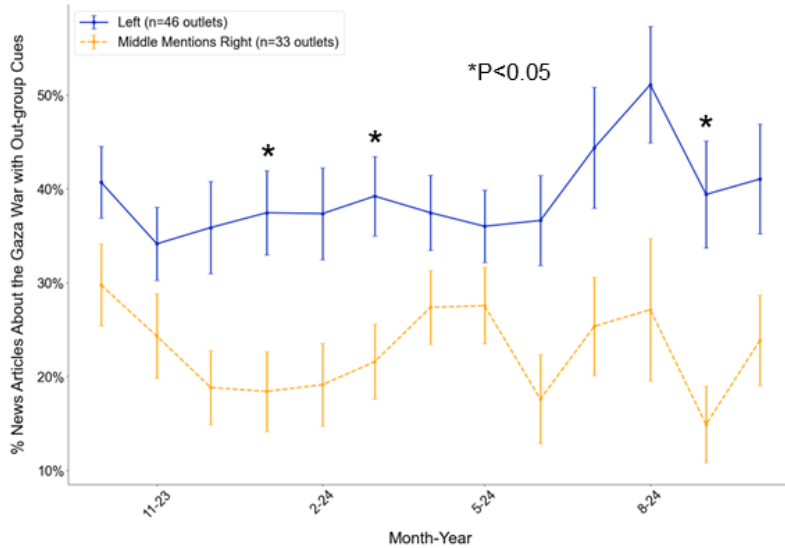


Supplementary Figure S12

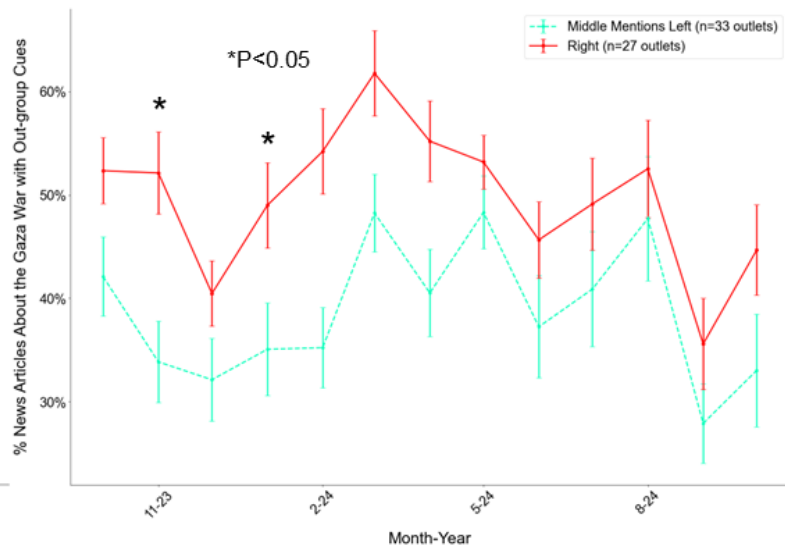
Out-Group Partisan Cues in Gaza War Coverage on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)

A

Media bias $P=7e-4$
Media bias x time $P=0.66$

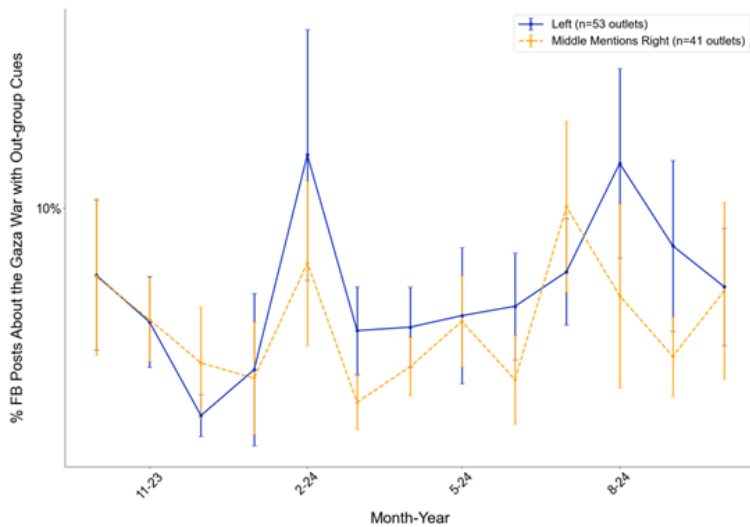


Media bias $P=0.019$
Media bias x time $P=0.51$

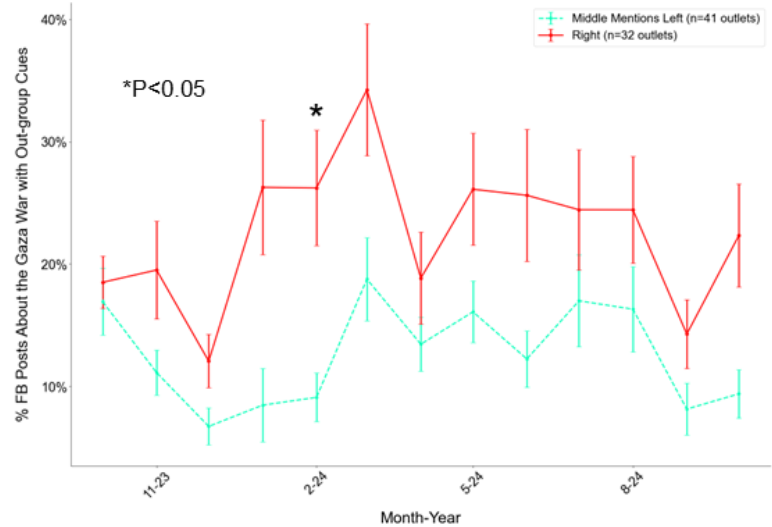


B

Media bias $P=0.49$
Media bias x time $P=0.63$

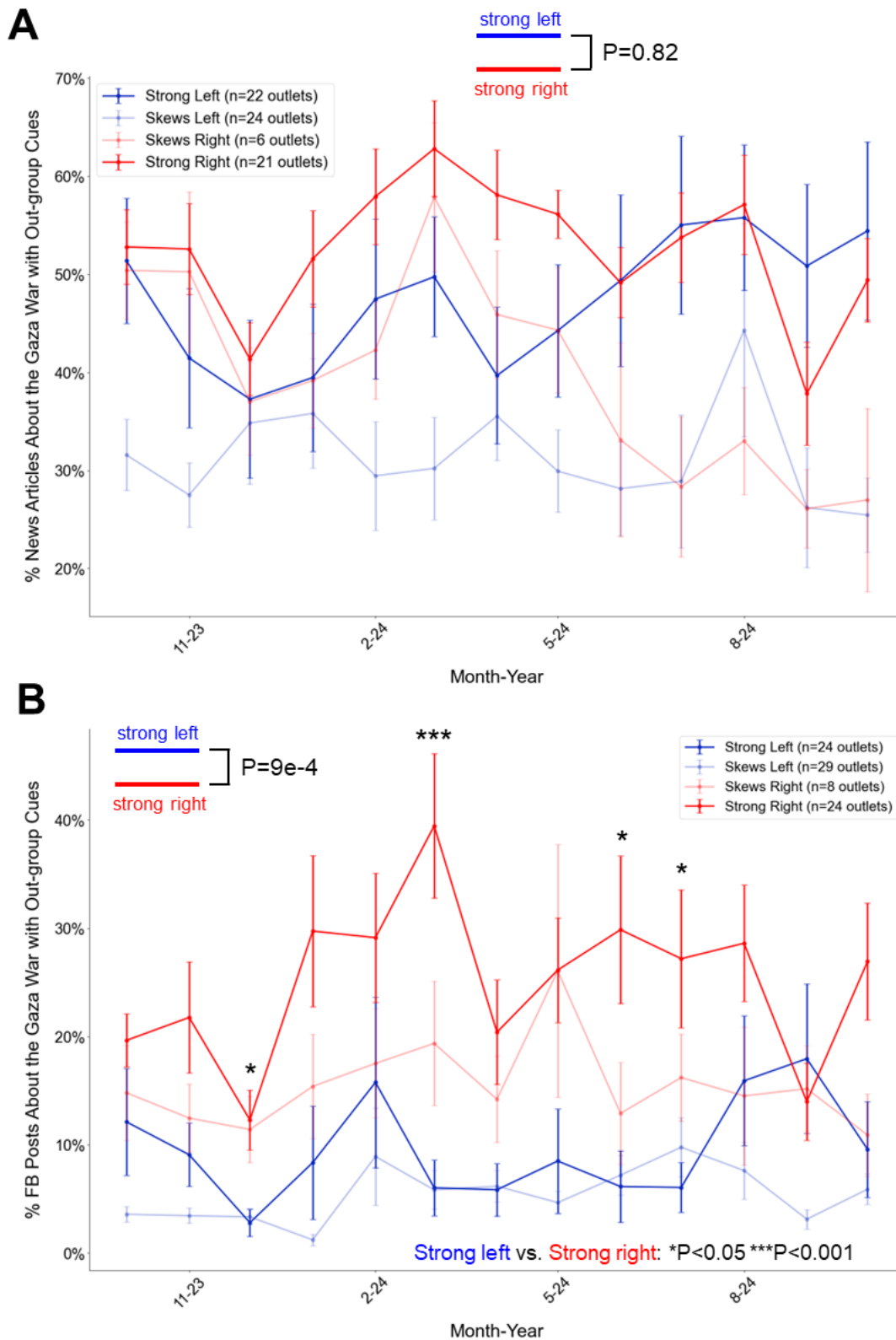


Media bias $P=8e-4$
Media bias x time $P=0.11$



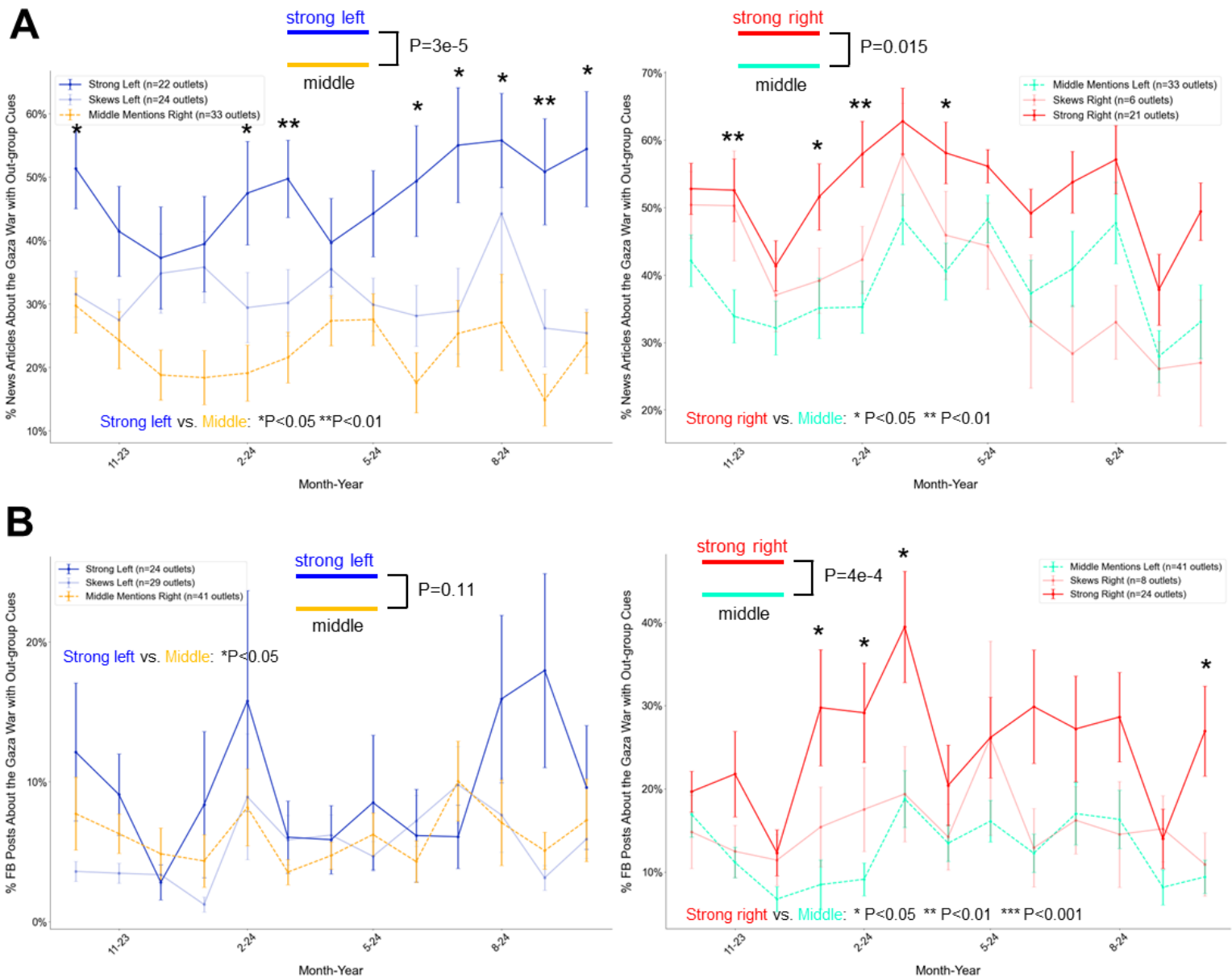
Supplementary Figure S13

Out-Group Partisan Cues in Gaza War Coverage on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)



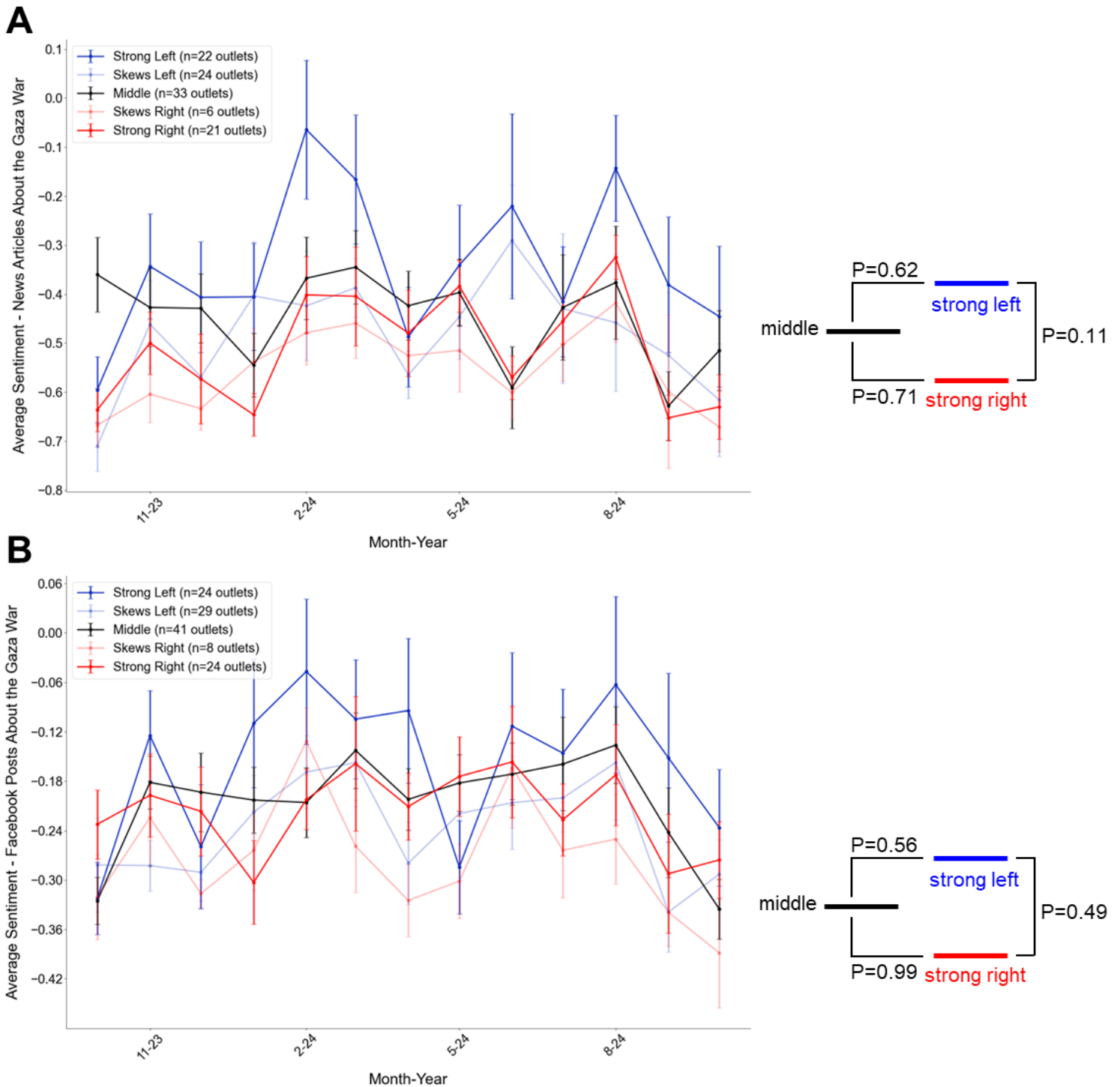
Supplementary Figure S14

Out-Group Partisan Cues in Gaza War Coverage on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)



Supplementary Figure S15

Sentiment of Gaza War News on Media Websites (A) and Facebook (B)

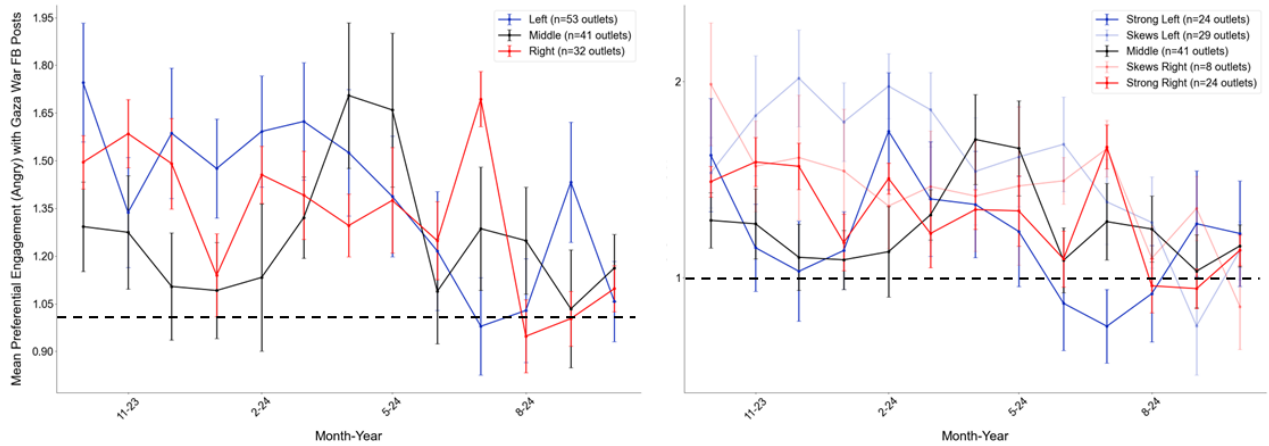


Supplementary Figure S16

Preferential Engagement with Gaza War News on Facebook

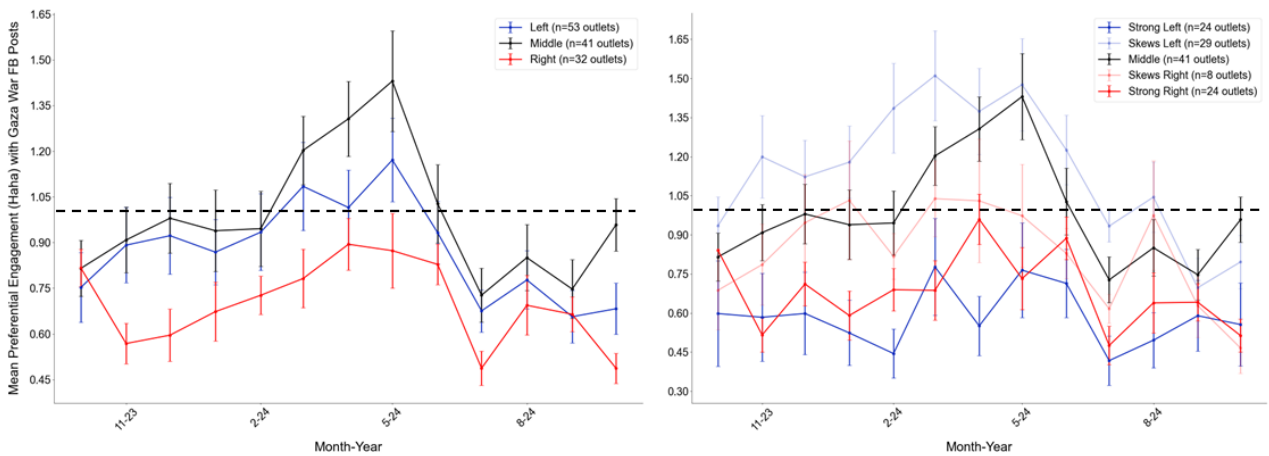
D

Angry



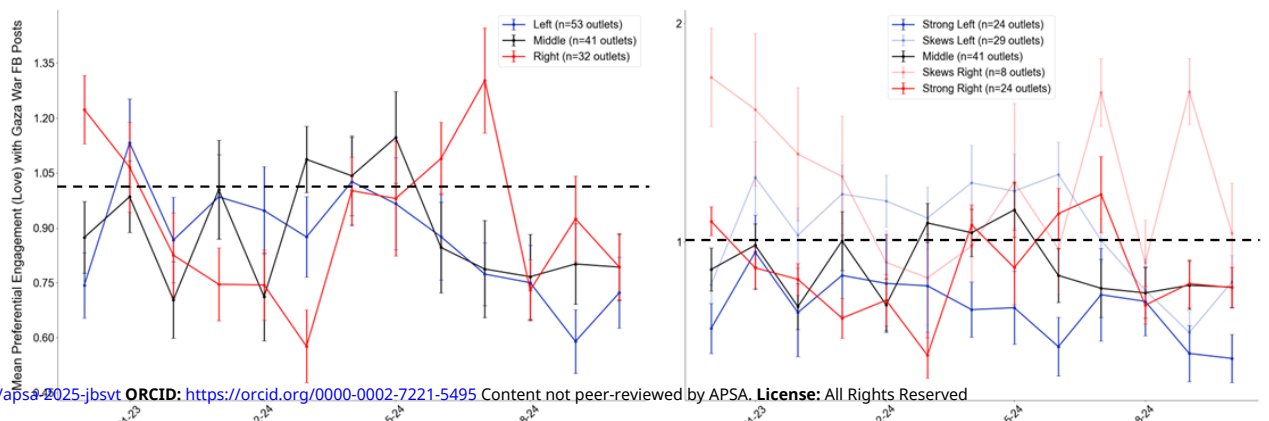
E

Haha



F

Love

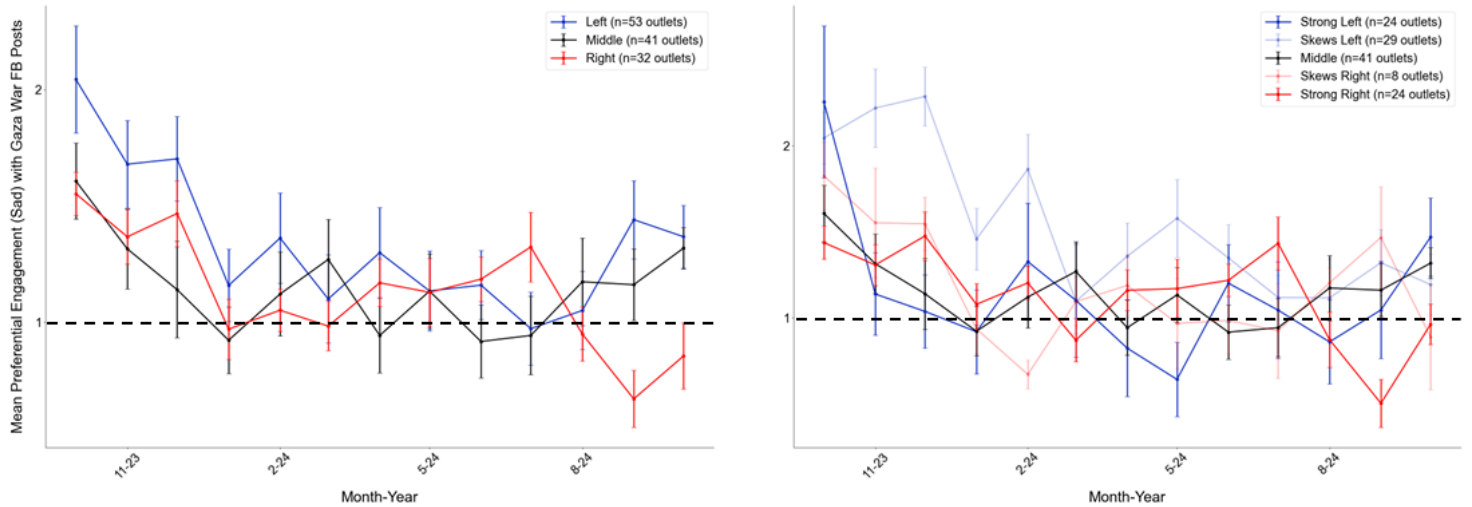


Supplementary Figure S16 (Continued)

Preferential Engagement with Gaza War News on Facebook

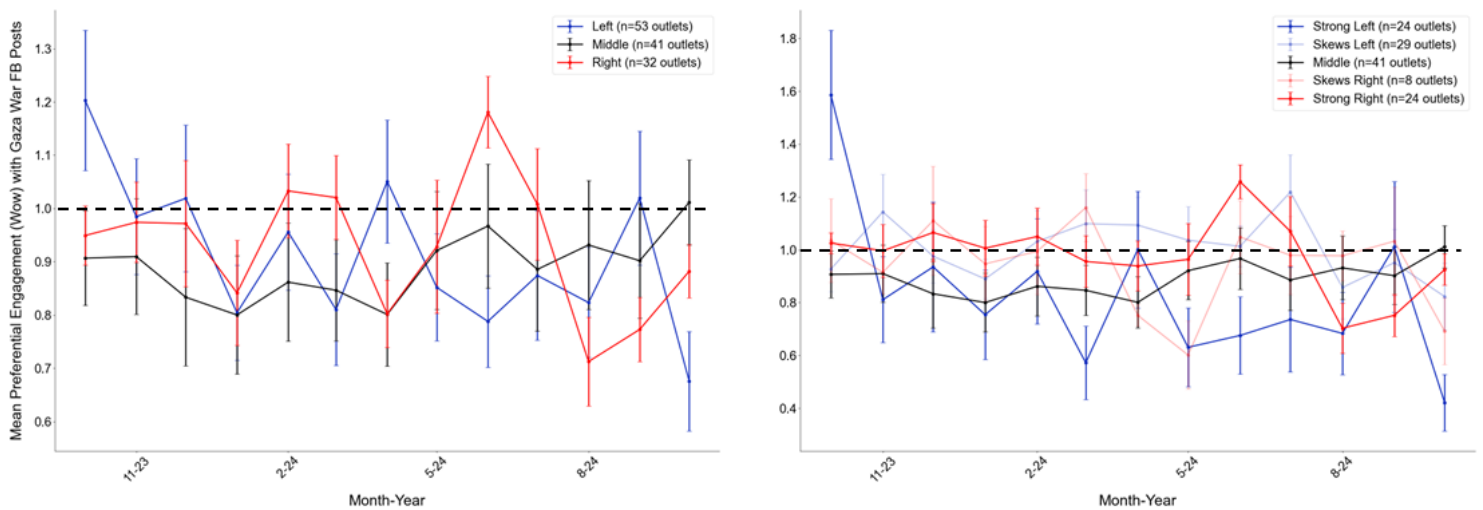
G

Sad 😞



H

Wow 😲



Appendix 1

Filter for News Articles and Facebook Posts on the War in Gaza

Hamas, Israel, Palestine, Gaza, Rafah, West Bank, Palestin, Fatah, Hezbollah, Intifada, kibbutz, Knesset, Mossad, IDF, Netanyahu, Houthi, two state solution, two-state solution, Golan, Arab-Israeli, Naftali Bennett, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, pro-palestinian protest, Jew, antisemit

Mentions of Republican Individuals and the Republican Party

Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis, Kevin McCarthy, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Ted Cruz, Lindsey Graham, Mitch McConnell, Josh Hawley, Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, Matt Gaetz, Jim Jordan, Mike Pence, Rudy Giuliani, Sarah Palin, John McCain, Chris Christie, Larry Hogan, Brian Kemp, Greg Abbott, Tom Cotton, Rob Portman, James Comer, Steve Daines, Tim Walberg, Michael McCaul, James Risch, Lee Zeldin, Liz Cheney, Adam Kinzinger, Victoria Spartz, Andy Biggs, Mark Meadows, maga, trump, gop, republican, conservative, conservatism, RNC, GOPLeader, America first, Make America Great, makeamaricagreatagain, Keep America Great, stop the steal, stopthesteal, go brandon, lets gobrandon, wwgowga, wwglwga, QAnon, proud boys, oath keepers, oathkeepers, alt-right, far right, far-right, extreme right, extreme-right, maga republican, radical republican, election denier, repmtg, tedcruz, sarahpalinusa, gregabbott_tx, senjohnmccain, lindseygraham, repandybiggsaz

Mentions of Democratic Individuals and the Democratic Party

Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, Cory Booker, Gavin Newsom, Gretchen Whitmer, Kathy Hochul, Stacey Abrams, Eric Adams, Lori Lightfoot, Cori Bush, Pramila Jayapal, Steny Hoyer, Hakeem Jeffries, Tim Kaine, Bob Menendez, Ben Cardin, Gregory Meeks, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, Antony Blinken, Adam Schiff, Mike Quigley, Chris Murphy, Andrew Cuomo, Bill De Blasio, Jen Psaki, democrat, democratic party hoax, dems, DNC, demconvention, liberal, neo-liberal, neoliberal, progressive, socialist, alt-left, far left, far-left, radical democrat, radical dem, radical left, nevertrumper, never trumper, trump hater, triumphater, antifa, sleepy joe, sleepyjoe, china joe, chinajoe, crooked biden, crooked joe, crooked hillary, green new deal, AOC, kamalaharris, joe Biden, nancypelosi, chuckschumer, senschumer, nygovcuomo, speaker nancy

Appendix 2

Qualitative Analysis of Structured Topic Modeling (STM) of Media Coverage on the War in Gaza Across Websites and Facebook Accounts, as Related to Ideological Bias

Gaza War News on Media Websites

Topic 18 was primarily covered by liberal and nonpartisan media, in contrast to conservative outlets, throughout the duration of the war (**Figure 7, Left panel**). Coverage was lowest among the most conservative media outlets, while conservative-leaning outlets provided more coverage than strongly conservative outlets (**Figure 7, Right panel**). The coverage of **Topic 18** saw a decline after July 2024.

Out of the 100 most relevant articles covering **Topic 18**, 33 were from left-leaning media, 54 from centrist media, and 13 from right-leaning media. **Topic 18** focused on the Palestinian death toll resulting from Israeli military actions and the challenges of delivering humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. While media outlets across the ideological spectrum framed this issue in a largely similar manner, the volume of coverage varied significantly along partisan lines (**Figure 7**). Examples of article news titles include “Israel Orders New Evacuations in Northern Gaza as U.N. Suspends Food Deliveries” (The New York Times³, Skews Left), “Israeli strikes across Gaza kill dozens of Palestinians, even in largely emptied north” (NPR⁴, Nonpartisan), and “Life and Death in Gaza's 'safe Zone' Where Food Is Scarce and Israel Strikes without Warning” (Newsmax⁵, Strong Right).

Topic 12 was predominantly covered by conservative media (**Figure 8A, Left panel**), with moderately conservative outlets providing more coverage than strongly conservative ones (**Figure 8A, Right panel**). Its usage peaked in the first months of the war, after which its coverage declined.

Topic 12 focused on prominent U.S. politicians or activists and their involvement in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Right-leaning media dominated the coverage, accounting for 89 of the top 100 most relevant articles, compared to 8 from left-leaning outlets and just 1 from centrist media. In right-leaning coverage, figures associated with the political left—such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, and groups like Black Lives Matter—were frequently mentioned, primarily in relation to their statements about the war in Gaza. These individuals

³ The New York Times, Israel Orders New Evacuations in Northern Gaza as U.N. Suspends Food Deliveries. February 20, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/20/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-city-un-food.html#:~:text=Gaza%20as%20U.N.,Suspends%20Food%20Deliveries,it%20to%20provide%20food%20supplies>.

⁴ NPR, Israeli strikes across Gaza kill dozens of Palestinians, even in largely emptied north. December 28, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/28/1221952425/israeli-strikes-gaza-palestinians-killed>.

⁵ Newsmax, Life and Death in Gaza's 'safe Zone' Where Food Is Scarce and Israel Strikes without Warning. July 3, 2024. <https://www.newsmax.com/amp/world/globaltalk/israel-hamas-war-gaza-evacuation-safe-zone/2024/07/03/id/1171198/>

were often portrayed in a negative light by conservative media. Examples include: “Rashida Tlaib is stoking the flames of antisemitism and hatred” (Fox Online News⁶, conservative-leaning outlet), “Tlaib Avoids Questions, Won’t Comment on Hamas Murdering Babies, Raping Women” (Breitbart News⁷, outlet with a strong conservative bias), “BLM chapter sparks outrage after posting pro-Palestinian cartoon referencing Hamas terrorists” (Fox Online News⁸, conservative-leaning outlet), and “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s ‘Squad’ Democrats are slammed for calling for ‘ceasefire’ after Hamas’ deadly terror attacks on Israel” (Info Wars⁹, outlet with a strong conservative bias).

In addition to criticizing Democratic politicians and organizations, right-leaning media frequently used terms like ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ not only to describe Hamas but also to refer to Palestinians more broadly. Some articles also attempted to equate Palestine, antisemitism, and Nazism.

Finally, liberal media criticized conservative outlets for equating Palestinians with antisemitism and Nazism; for example, “Right-wing media equate Palestinian flag with Nazism and support for Hamas” (Media Matters¹⁰, outlet with a strong liberal bias).

Topic 23 was predominantly covered by conservative media (**Figure 8B, Left panel**), with strongly conservative outlets providing more coverage than moderately conservative ones (**Figure 8B, Right panel**). Strongly liberal outlets showed the lowest coverage of Topic 23, while moderately liberal and nonpartisan outlets covered it somewhat more frequently (**Figure 8B, Right panel**). Its usage peaked across all media sectors in the first months of the war, after which it saw a decline, followed by a resurgence in mid-late 2024.

Of the 100 most relevant articles related to **Topic 23**, 76 were from right-leaning media, 23 from centrist media, and 1 from left-leaning media. **Topic 23** covered the advancements made by the Israeli military and the actions taken by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) against Hamas, including airstrikes and ground operations during the war in Gaza. A significant number of articles highlighted the number of Hamas fighters killed by the IDF. Articles by right-leaning

⁶ Fox Online News, Rashida Tlaib is stoking the flames of antisemitism and hatred, October 18, 2023. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/sean-hannity-rashida-tlaib-stoking-flames-antisemitism-hatred>

⁷ Breitbart News, Tlaib Avoids Questions, Won’t Comment on Hamas Murdering Babies, Raping Women, October 10, 2023. <https://www.breitbart.com/clips/2023/10/10/tlaib-avoids-questions-wont-comment-on-hamas-murdering-babies-aping-women/>

⁸ Fox Online News, BLM chapter sparks outrage after posting pro-Palestinian cartoon referencing Hamas terrorists, October 11, 2023. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/blm-chapter-sparks-outrage-posting-pro-palestinian-cartoon-referencing-hamas-terrorists>

⁹ Infowars, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s ‘Squad’ Democrats are slammed for calling for ‘ceasefire’ after Hamas’ deadly terror attacks on Israel, October 8, 2023. <https://www.infowars.com/posts/alexandria-ocasio-cortezs-squad-democrats-are-slammed-for-calling-for-ceasefire-after-hamas-deadly-terror-attacks-on-israel/>

¹⁰ Media Matters, Right-wing media equate Palestinian flag with Nazism and support for Hamas, December 14, 2023. <https://www.mediamatters.org/middle-east/right-wing-media-equate-palestinian-flag-nazism-and-support-hamas>

outlets such as the Washington Times¹¹, New York Post¹², Red State¹³, Daily Caller¹⁴, Breitbart News¹⁵, Newsmax¹⁶, and Epoch Times¹⁷ often referred to Palestinian officials as ‘ Hamas terrorists’ and ‘ Palestinian terror officials’. In contrast, centrist media outlets like the Wall Street Journal^{18, 19} and Business Insider²⁰ referred to Palestinians as ‘ Hamas targets’.

Topic 10 was primarily covered by the most partisan media, both conservative and liberal (**Figure 8C, Left and Right panels**). Moderately partisan liberal and conservative outlets gave this topic less coverage than strongly partisan outlets, but more than nonpartisan outlets. Additionally, strongly liberal outlets had the lowest coverage of **Topic 10**, while moderately liberal and nonpartisan outlets showed slightly higher coverage (**Figure 8C, right panel**). The usage of Topic 10 was particularly high during the first months of the war, peaking in October 2024, just before the November 5, 2024, elections.

Of the 100 most relevant articles covering **Topic 10**, 79 were from right-leaning media, 16 from left-leaning media, and 5 from centrist outlets. Topic 10 focused on Jewish identity, Zionism, and antisemitism. Conservative media primarily emphasized antisemitism, often implying an equivalence between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Examples include "Yes, Anti-Zionism Is Antisemitism" (Townhall²¹, strong conservative bias) and "The Woke Dehumanization of Jews" (HotAir²², strong conservative bias).

¹¹ Washington Times, Israel Defense Forces says it killed top Palestinian terror official in Gaza, January 4, 2024. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2024/jan/4/israel-defense-forces-says-it-killed-mamdouh-lolo/>

¹² The New York Post, New elite Israeli unit to hunt down every Hamas terrorist involved in sneak slaughter, October 22, 2023. <https://nypost.com/2023/10/22/new-elite-israeli-unit-to-hunt-down-every-hamas-terrorist-involved-in-sneak-slaughter/>

¹³ Red State, IDF's Flotilla 13 Elite Unit Rescues 250 Israeli Hostages, 'Neutralizes' 60 Hamas Terrorists, October 12, 2023. <https://redstate.com/wardclark/2023/10/12/idfs-flotilla-13-elite-unit-rescues-250-israeli-hostages-neutralizes-60-hamas-terrorists-n2165008>

¹⁴ Daily Caller, IDF Claims It Killed Mastermind Of Hamas Terrorist Attack In Airstrike, October 26, 2023. <https://dailycaller.com/2023/10/26/idf-claims-mastermind-shadi-barud-hamas-dead/>

¹⁵ Breitbart News, IDF Kills Terrorist Who Kidnapped Female Israeli Soldier, May 12, 2024. <https://www.breitbart.com/middle-east/2024/05/12/idf-kills-terrorist-who-kidnapped-female-israeli-soldier/>

¹⁶ Newsmax, IDF Dismantles Terror Infrastructure in Shejaiya and Rafah, Including Inside UN Schools, July 1, 2024. <https://www.newsmax.com/world/globaltalk/idf-israel-hamas/2024/07/01/id/1170872/>

¹⁷ Epoch Times, Terror Hive of Hamas Tunnels and Command Rooms Found Under Gaza Hospital: IDF, October 27, 2023. <https://www.theepochtimes.com/world/terror-hive-of-hamas-tunnels-and-command-rooms-found-under-gaza-hospital-idf-5518195>

¹⁸ The Wall Street Journal, Israel Says It Hit More Than 100 Hamas Targets Overnight, Killed Hamas Operative, October 20, 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/israel-hamas-war-gaza-strip-conflict/card/israel-hits-more-than-100-hamas-targets-overnight-kills-hamas-operative-nBBvDefJyd5uCihhJJ4>

¹⁹ The Wall Street Journal, Israeli Jets Hit 750 Military Targets in Gaza Overnight, October 13, 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/israel-hamas-war-gaza-strip/card/israeli-jets-hit-750-military-targets-in-gaza-overnight-QjkF2cFx5HWx6IArSX7z>

²⁰ Business Insider, 100 Israeli warplanes bomb 150 'underground targets' in the hunt for Hamas tunnels in Gaza dubbed the 'metro', October 28, 2023. <https://www.businessinsider.com/israel-hits-underground-targets-gaza-heaviest-bombing-hamas-conflict-2023-10>

²¹ Townhall, Yes, Anti-Zionism Is Antisemitism, December 12, 2023.

<https://townhall.com/columnists/dennisprager/2023/12/12/yes-anti-zionism-is-antisemitism-n2632292>

²² Hot Air, The Woke Dehumanization of Jews, October 8, 2024. <https://hotair.com/headlines/2024/10/08/the-woke-dehumanization-of-jews-n3795543>

Some right-leaning media articles covering **Topic 10** also linked Jewish identity to religious references, portraying the return of the Jews as part of God's plan. Examples include "Zionism explained from its biblical origins to the rebirth of the state of Israel" (Fox Online News²³, conservative-leaning outlet) and "End Times: Jewish and Gentile reunion is vital to God's plans" (Washington Times²⁴, conservative-leaning outlet).

In addition, right-leaning media framed Jewish identity through a U.S. political lens, criticizing members of the Jewish population whose political views aligned with the left: "The Sickness of Israel-Hating Jews" (HotAir, strong conservative bias), "15 Reasons Liberal US Jews Shouldn't Be Shocked by Fellow Leftists" (The Daily Signal²⁵, strong conservative bias), and "Sick Jews" (PJ Media²⁶, strong conservative bias), and framing Jews whose political stance sided with the left as hypocritical or naïve.

Left-leaning media's discussion of Jewish identity under **Topic 10** was more nuanced, often incorporating historical context, complex perspectives on antisemitism, and diverse viewpoints on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Examples of news titles include "Jewish Identity with and Without Zionism" (The New Yorker²⁷, strong liberal bias), "Is Israel Part of What It Means to Be Jewish?" (The New York Times²⁸, liberal-leaning outlet).

Gaza War News on Facebook

Topic 22 was consistently emphasized by liberal and nonpartisan media throughout the war, with a peak in coverage between February and May 2024 (**Figure 12A**). To gain deeper insight into the news posts featuring **Topic 22**, a qualitative analysis was conducted on the 100 most relevant news posts associated with this topic.

Out of the 100 retrieved Facebook posts, 56 came from left-leaning media, 41 from nonpartisan media, and 3 from right-leaning media. **Topic 22** focused on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, marked by restricted aid access, rising malnutrition, and severe shortages of water, medicine, and fuel due to Israeli blockades and military operations. While nonpartisan and liberal media covered this crisis more frequently than conservative outlets, there were no significant differences in how they framed the issue. For example, "A three-ship convoy left Cyprus on Saturday with 400 tons of food for Gaza as concerns about famine in the territory soar" (Bloomberg, nonpartisan, March 31, 2024); "Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza is running dangerously low on clean water, medicine, supplies, and fuel" (CNN, left-leaning, November 12,

²³ Fox Online News, Zionism explained from its biblical origins to the rebirth of the state of Israel, May 14, 2024. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/zionism-explained-from-biblical-origins-to-rebirth-state-of-israel>

²⁴ Washington Times, End Times: Jewish and Gentile reunion is vital to God's plans, April 4, 2024.

<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2024/apr/4/end-times-jewish-and-gentile-reunion-is-vital-to-g/>

²⁵ Daily Signal, 15 Reasons Liberal US Jews Shouldn't Be Shocked by Fellow Leftists, November 9, 2023.

<https://www.dailysignal.com/2023/11/09/american-jews-on-left-are-shocked-by-fellow-leftists-but-shouldnt-be/>

²⁶ PJ Media, Sick Jews, May 7, 2024. <https://pjmedia.com/dennis-prager/2024/05/07/sick-jews-n4928814>

²⁷ The New Yorker, Jewish Identity with and Without Zionism, February 15, 2024.

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/jewish-identity-with-and-without-zionism>

²⁸ The New York Times, Is Israel Part of What It Means to Be Jewish, January 16, 2024.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/14/us/israel-jewish-america-diasporism.html>

2023); and "An influx of aid appears to have eased a hunger crisis in northern Gaza for now..." (Washington Times, right-leaning, June 25, 2024).

Similar to Topic 22, **Topic 24** saw more frequent coverage by liberal and nonpartisan media (**Figure 12B**). Of the 100 most relevant Facebook news posts, 52 were from liberal media, 43 from nonpartisan media, and 5 from conservative media. **Topic 24** focused on civilian casualties resulting from Israeli military operations and the cause of Palestinian deaths, while identifying the sources of information. For example, "An apparent Israeli airstrike on a school where displaced people were sheltering in Gaza has killed at least 19 people, Palestinian health officials say" (Associated Press, nonpartisan, July 9, 2024); "Israeli strikes killed at least 23 people in Deir al-Balah's Bishara neighborhood in central Gaza on Friday, according to Ashraf al-Qudra, a spokesman for the Gaza Health Ministry" (Washington Post, left-leaning, February 23, 2024); and "An Israeli was shot dead in a Palestinian town in the northern West Bank Saturday morning, Israel's army said, while deadly strikes rocked northern Gaza" (Washington Times, right-leaning, June 22, 2024). No significant partisan differences were observed in coverage of civilian casualties under **Topic 24**.

Topic 8, which focused on the impact of the Israel-Hamas war on regional stability and international relations, was favored by liberal and nonpartisan media (**Figure 12C**). Of the 100 most relevant Facebook news posts, 52 were from nonpartisan media, 37 from liberal media, and 11 from conservative media. The media across different biases discussed broader geopolitical tensions, often contextualizing the Israel-Hamas conflict with historical perspectives on regional stability and U.S.-Israel relations. Nonpartisan and liberal media outlets tended to frame the issue with a historical context, such as "The Hamas terrorist attack on Israel comes amid the backdrop of a longstanding history of conflict over land..." (ABC News, nonpartisan, October 14, 2023) and "Israel and Iran have fought a shadow war across the Middle East for decades... Here's a recent history of the conflict" (The New York Times, liberal-leaning, April 20, 2024). Some strongly liberal media posts also criticized the U.S. government's response, especially the Biden administration's reluctance to press for a ceasefire, suggesting that this could lead to further escalation: "President Biden's reluctance to press Israel for a ceasefire in Gaza has the potential to escalate the war and drag the U.S. into the fighting" (Democracy Now, strong left, January 8, 2024).

In contrast, strongly conservative media outlets framed the October 7 attack as part of a broader history of Arab-Iranian conflicts against Israel and the U.S. For example, "October 7, 2023 was not the beginning of the war; it was the continuation of Arab-Iranian wars against Israel and the U.S. that began decades ago" (Independent Journal Review, strong conservative, October 5, 2024).

Topic 10 was primarily covered by conservative outlets. Of the 100 most relevant Facebook news posts for Topic 10, 85 were from conservative media, 10 from nonpartisan media, and 5 from liberal media. Topic 10 focused on protests in the U.S. related to the Gaza war. In addition to the differential coverage across media biases, the framing of the protesters varied significantly. While nonpartisan and liberal media typically referred to them as 'protesters,' 'pro-Palestinian protesters,' or 'anti-war protesters'—for example, "A group of protesters calling for a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas conflict..." (Forbes, nonpartisan, November 15, 2023) and "What happened when pro-Palestine and anti-war protesters calling for a

ceasefire..." (New York Magazine, left-leaning, May 7, 2024)—conservative media outlets often labeled them as 'anti-Israel protesters.' For example, "Anti-Israel riots erupted on the final night of the DNC as agitators clashed with police in Chicago" (Fox News, right-leaning, August 23, 2024) and "Masked anti-Israel protesters took over a New York City subway car on Monday..." (New York Post, right-leaning, June 12, 2024).