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Consequential Consensus: A Decade of Online Discourse about Same-sex Marriage

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Abstract

Framing issues as matters of non-negotiable values can increase the perceived intractability of debates. Focusing on the concrete consequences of policies instead can facilitate conflict resolution. Using a topic model of Reddit comments from January 2006 to September 2017, we show that the contribution of certain topics concerned with protected values to the debate increased prior to the emergence of a public consensus in support of same-sex marriage and declined afterwards. These topics related to religious arguments and freedom of opinion. In contrast, discussion of certain concrete consequences (the impact of politicians stances and policy implications) showed the opposite pattern, their increased prominence coinciding with improved public support for same-sex marriage after 2012. Our results reinforce the meaningfulness of protected values and consequentialism as relevant dimensions for describing public discourse and highlight the usefulness of unsupervised machine learning methods in tackling questions about social attitude change.