



Loaded Language: Tracking Firearms Discourse in American Christian Print

Jake Klasky

Quantitative Analysis Center, Global Center for Guns and Society
Prof. Maryam Gooyabadi and Prof. Joseph Slaughter

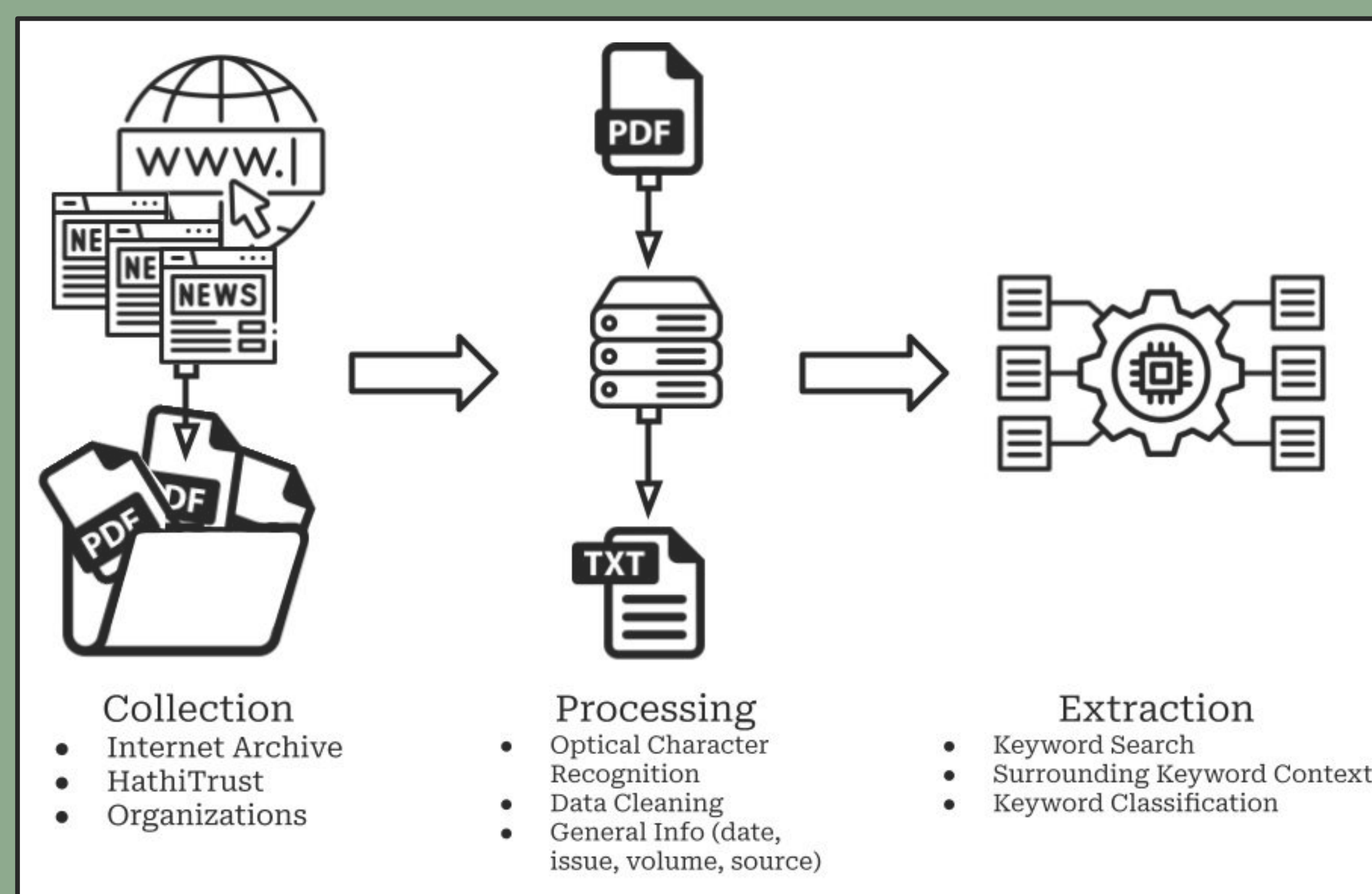


Introduction

Periodicals offer a rich and continuous record of the last two centuries. By collecting ten American Christian publications (plus one control) we can create a sample of what these groups thought about guns over time. Using natural language processing (NLP and large language model (LLM)-based interpretation we can trace the discourse across approximately 99,315 keywords from 8,444 issues.

Methods

Traditional physical reading can't scale to this volume of text. After scraping thousands of PDFs, we used optical character recognition (OCR) to convert them to clean text and extracted key metadata (source, date, issue, volume). An LLM then classified each keyword by its context. It filtered out false positives (e.g. proper nouns, verbs) from genuine firearm references, then coded the true references for connotation and narrative type (e.g. missionary, military, metaphor, cultural decline, advertisement). *The Atlantic*, spanning the full era, served as a secular control, letting us assess whether shifts in firearms sentiment are distinctly religious or track broader discourse. Finally, we analyzed word salience, frequency, sentiment, and semantic drift, using dimensionality reduction to plot the corpus over time.

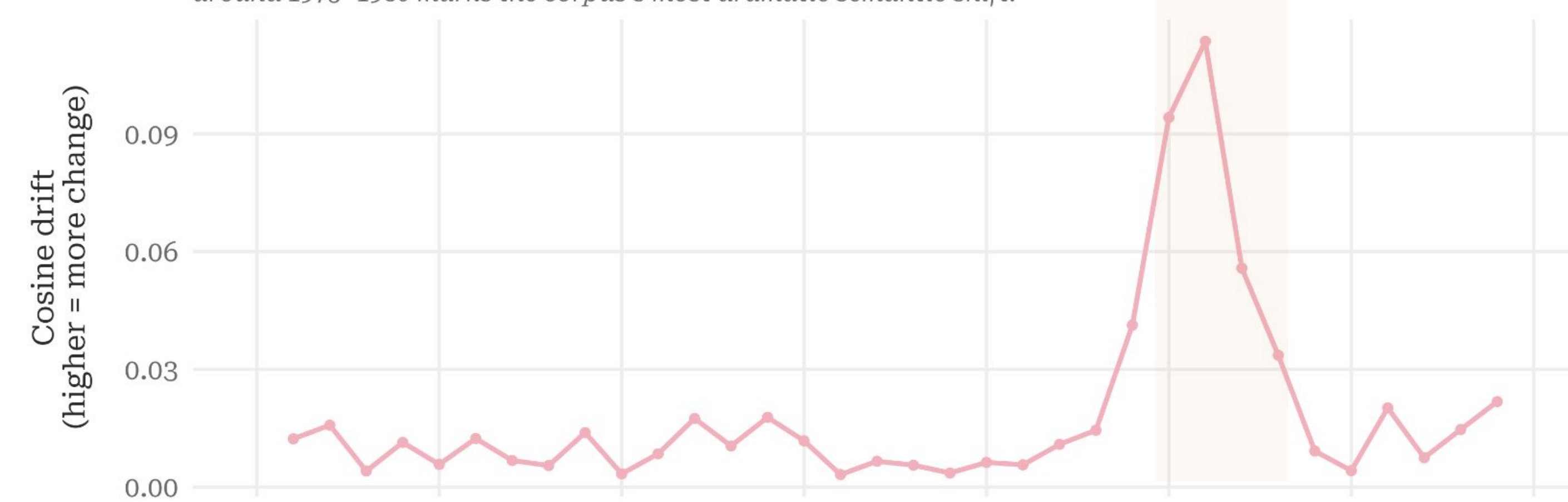


Results

Around 1975–1980, three independent signals converge on the same inflection point: editorial salience for firearm-related content in conservative Christian outlets collapses after a century of prominence, semantic drift for the term “firearm” spikes sharply as its usage rapidly shifts, and mentions of gun violence in our secular control (*The Atlantic*) peak simultaneously. Together, these suggest that as gun violence entered mainstream secular political discourse. This is consistent with Christian conservative media coverage also prioritizing discussion on firearms. This project remains ongoing and the corpus is still incomplete, but the pattern is striking enough to warrant closer historical investigation.

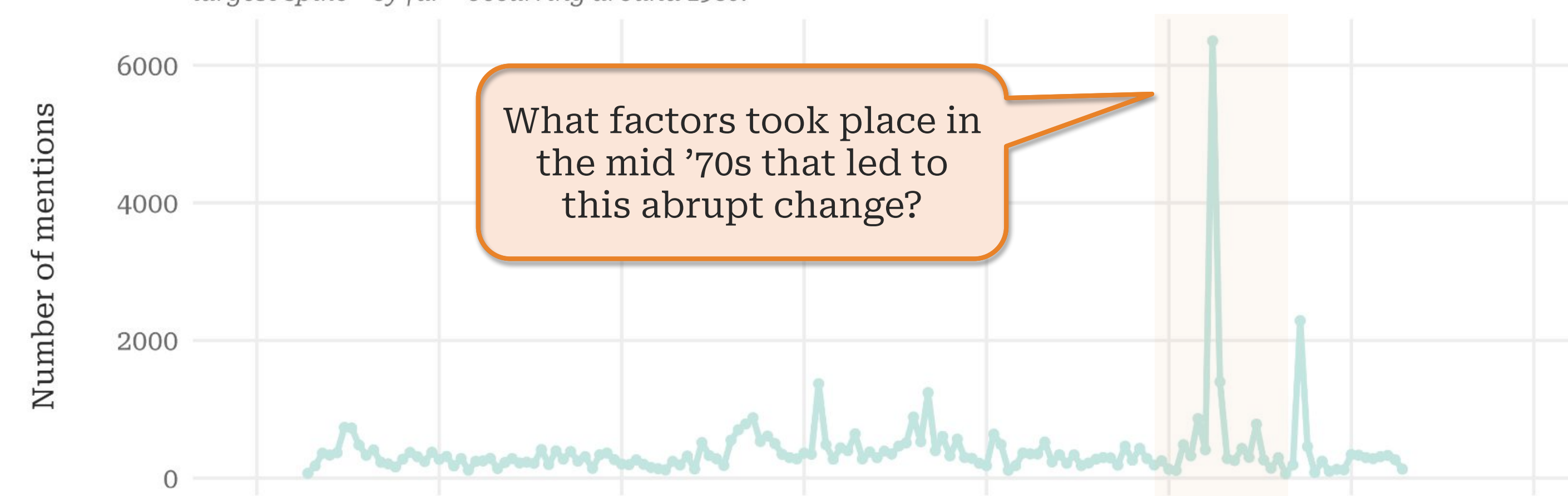
Semantic Drift Over Time — Firearm

Fig. 1. Cosine drift measures how much the meaning of the word “firearm” changed year to year; a sharp spike around 1975–1980 marks the corpus’s most dramatic semantic shift.



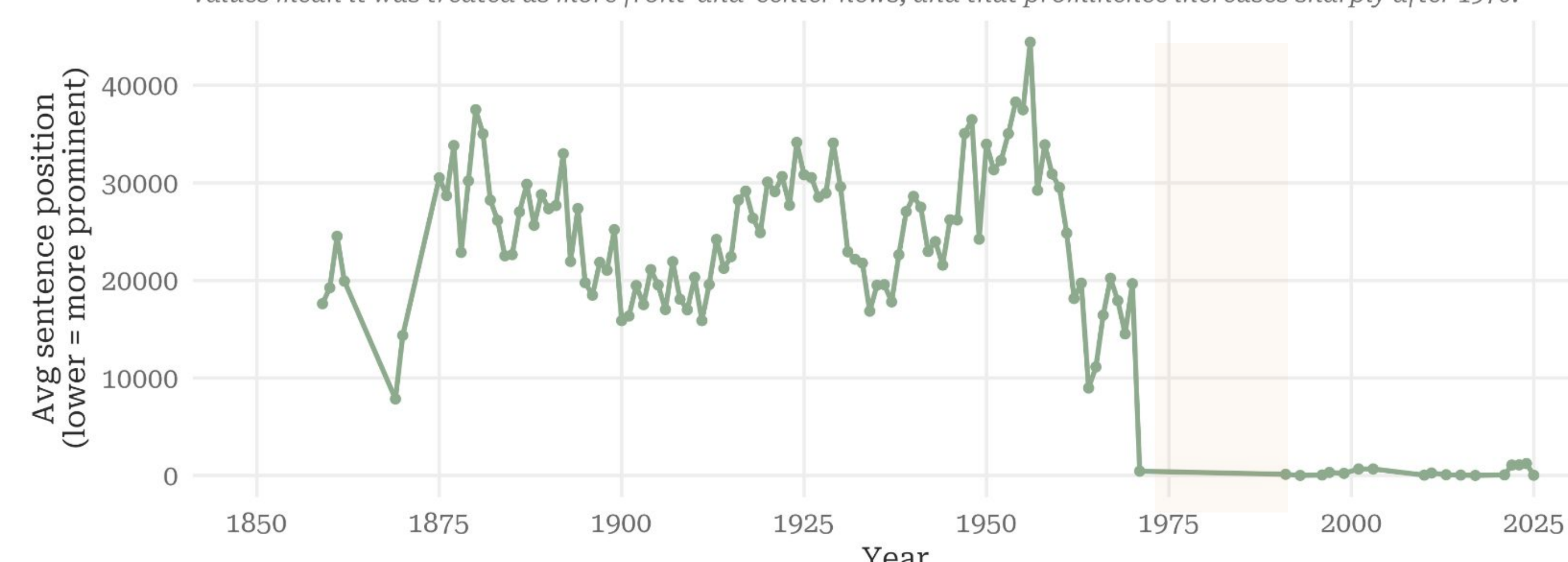
Mention Frequency Over Time — Control

Fig. 2. Mentions of gun violence in our secular control corpus stayed level for over a century, with the largest spike—by far—occurring around 1980.



Editorial Salience Over Time — Conservative

Fig. 3. Editorial salience measures how early in an issue firearm-related content typically appeared; lower values mean it was treated as more front-and-center news, and that prominence increases sharply after 1970.



Corpus Overview

Publication	First Collected Date	Last Collected Date	Count	Political Leaning	Denomination
The Atlantic	1857-11-01	2026-05-01	49,984	Centrist	N/A (Control)
The Sunday School Times	1859-01-01	1961-12-30	4,840	Conservative	Fundamentalist
Christian Century	1900-01-04	2026-07-01	26,183	Liberal	Protestant
The King's Business	1910-01-01	1970-12-01	730	Conservative	Fundamentalist
Moody Monthly	1911-12-01	1961-12-01	554	Conservative	Fundamentalist
Commonweal	1924-11-12	2026-06-01	3,428	Liberal	Catholic
Christian Herald	1938-01-01	1961-12-01	287	Conservative	Evangelical
Christianity Today	1956-10-15	2026-01-01	23,795	Centrist	Evangelical
Chick Tracts	1961	2025	280	Conservative	Fundamentalist
WORLD	1992-07-04	2025-12-24	32,822	Centrist	Evangelical
Charisma	2022-04-18	2026-01-01	454	Conservative	Pentecostal

Future Work

Looking ahead, we plan to expand our sample of Christian denominations and fill existing gaps. Most current denominational data begins only in the early twentieth century, and we hope to extend coverage back another half-century. We also intend on converting our OCR output from issue-level to article-level format, enabling more exhaustive analysis. Finally, we intend to extend this methodology beyond firearms to other pressing social and religious topics (e.g. LGBTQ, right-wing politics, and immigrant and person-of-color viewpoints).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to William Allen, Ethan Chu, and Parker McCoog for their work the past year(s) with this ongoing project as well as Maryam Gooyabadi and Joseph Slaughter for their continuing help.