What Happens when the President Calls You an Enemy of the People?
Election Officials and Public Sentiment

Joelle Gross, Samuel Baltz, and Charles Stewart III
MIT Election Data & Science Lab

Overview

- ❑ The people who run American elections have been singled out for abuse on a national scale.[1]

- ❑ Negative messages on social media have played an outsized role in creating a poisonous environment for election officials.

- ❑ We collect all the tweets and replies to statewide election officials to document this trend; we ask when they are receiving negativity, which officials receive the most, and who is responsible for generating it.

Method

- ❑ We collect the entire universe of tweets and replies from accounts associated with current American secretaries of state or election board accounts from 2012-2022.

- ❑ We analyze the trend in negativity from nearly a decade of data by documenting the incidence of these keywords in the replies.

- ❑ We examine patterns in the sentiment of replies using the VADER sentiment package in python.[2]

- ❑ We estimate the ideologies of the users who respond to these accounts via Pablo Barberá's ideology estimation method. [3]

- ❑ We compare the rhetoric towards American election administrators to non-American and non-election officials.
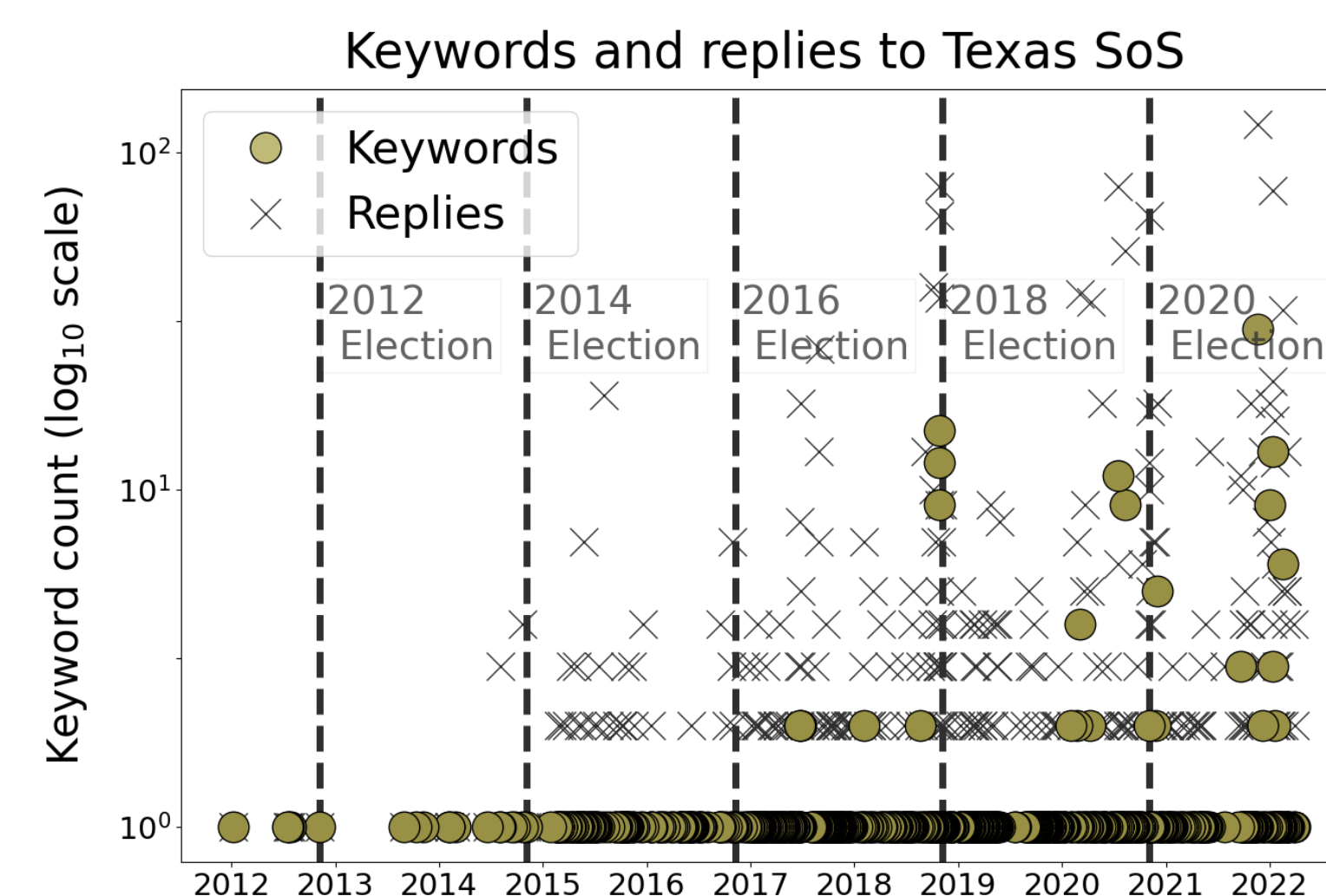
Keywords & Replies

Keywords and replies to Oklahoma Board of Elections
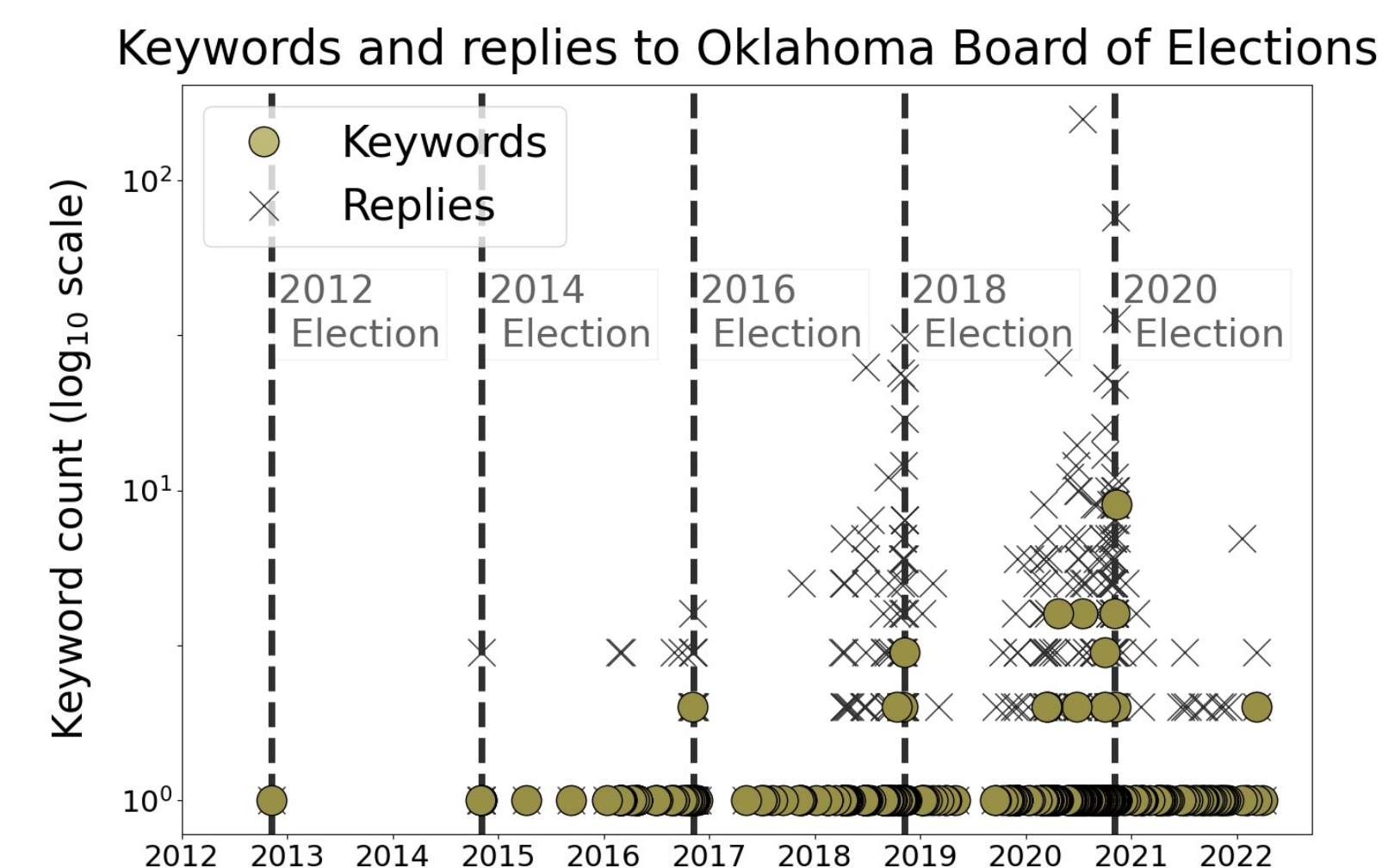
- ❑ The number of replies and keywords directed at the Oklahoma Board of Elections account are tightly tethered to the election cycle.


Keywords and replies to Pennsylvania SoS

- ❑ In PA, a sudden spike in the immediate period of the 2020 election includes several tweets that received hundreds of replies and dozens of keywords.


Keywords and replies to Texas SoS
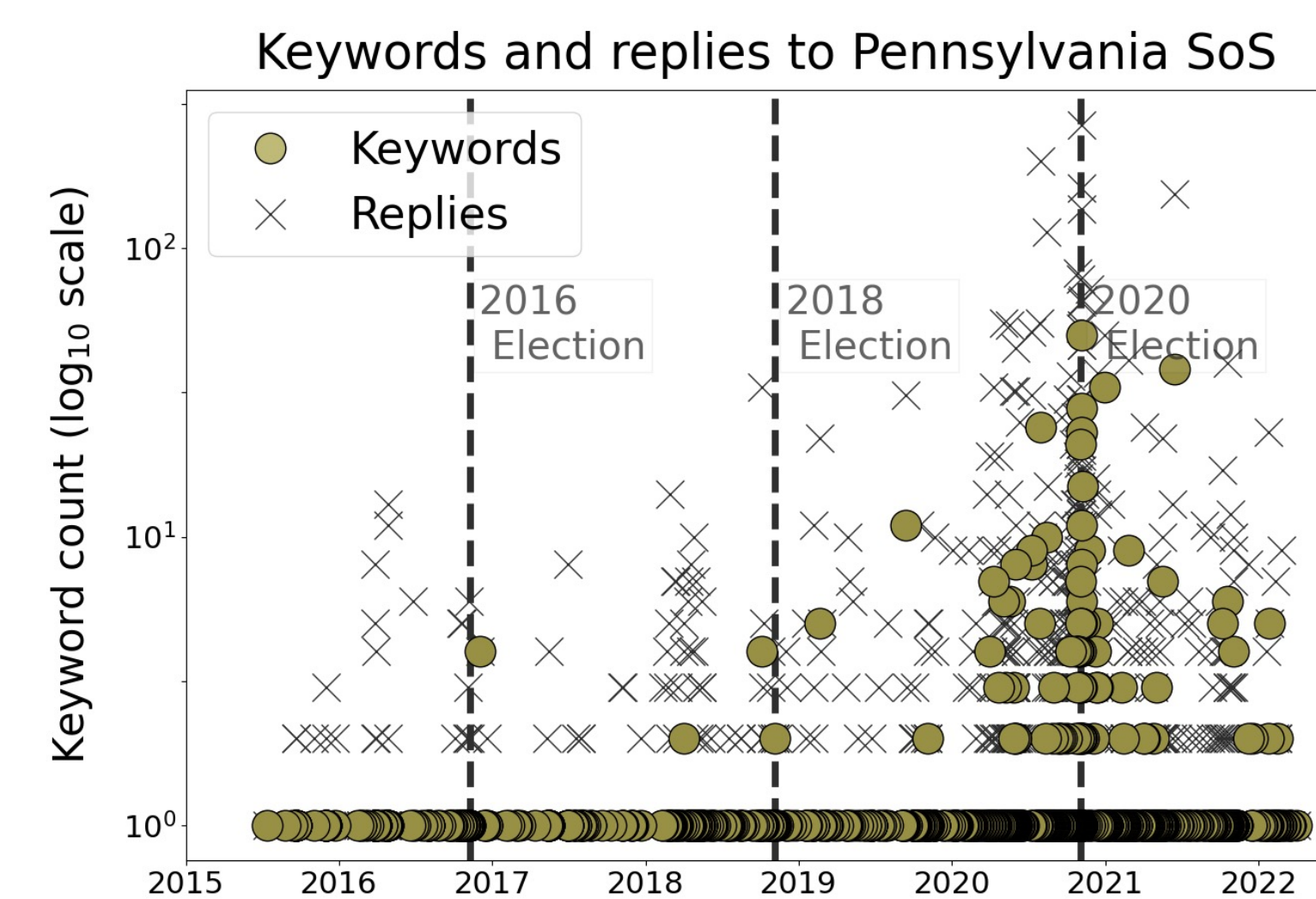
- ❑ Texas SOS account tweets more often in between election periods; it receives more replies and fraud-related keywords at moments that are distant from elections.

Keywords and replies to Brad Raffensperger

- ❑ Brad Raffensperger, Sec. of State of Georgia, received a surge of replies and keywords after the 2020 election.

Sentiment & Ideology

Average sentiment in replies to Brad Raffensperger
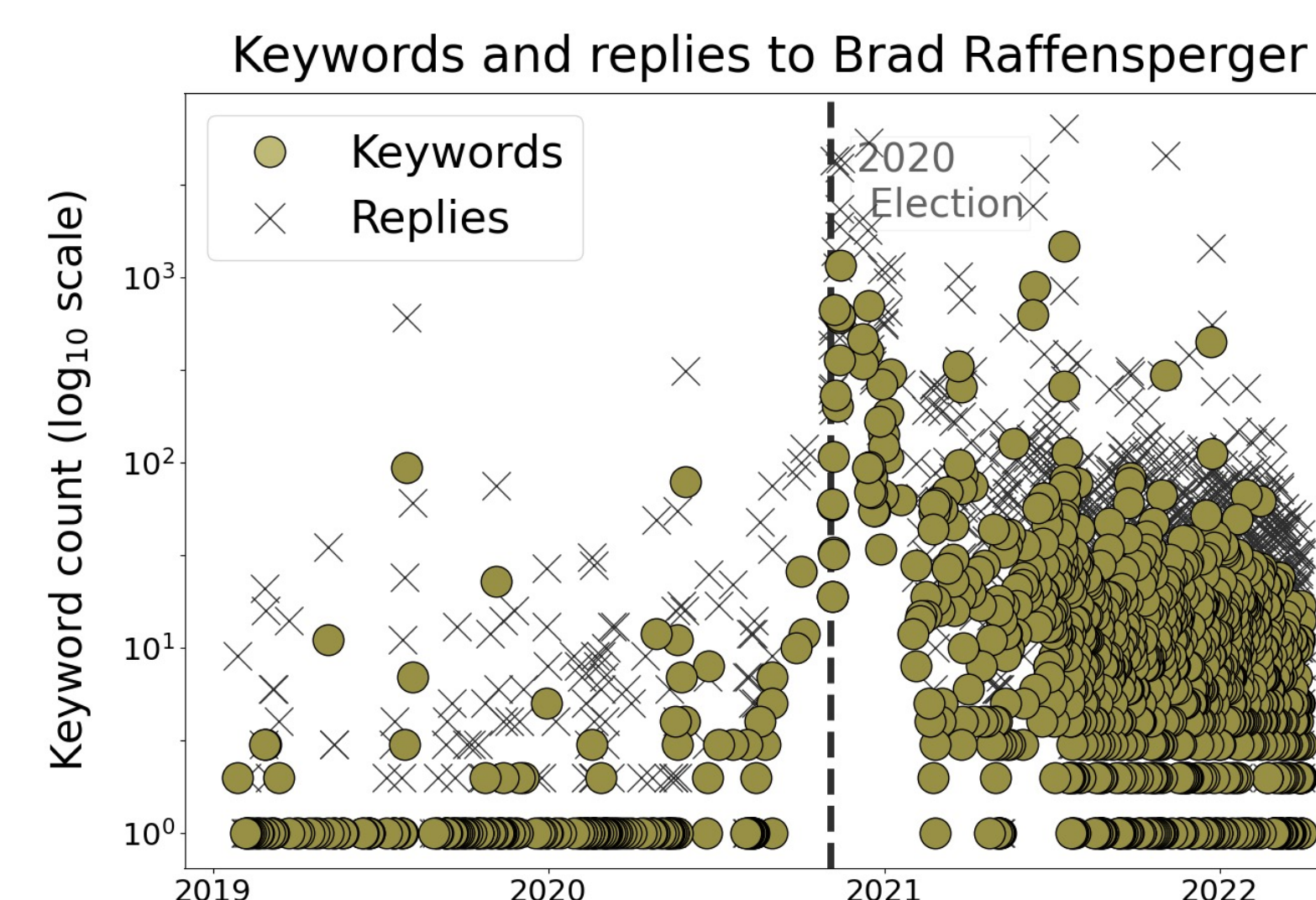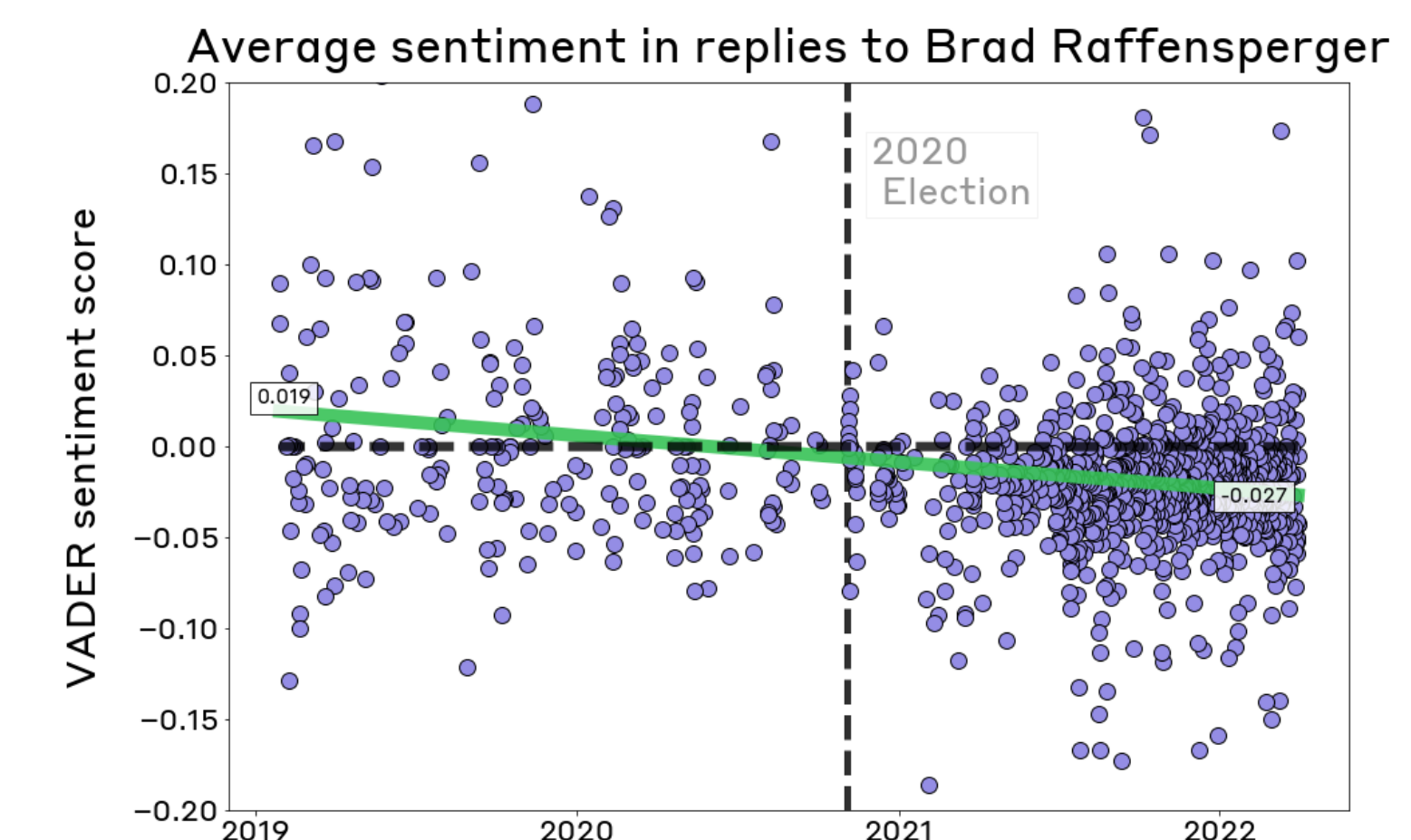
- ❑ A pronounced trend towards negativity following the 2020 election; since the sentiment of the replies have grown far worse, turning into a consistent barrage of negativity.

- ❑ For most officials, negative responses are driven by repliers of the opposite ideology of the official. Yet, Raffensperger's tweets derive negativity from his fellow conservatives.
- ❑ At the same time, he receives negativity from both liberals and conservatives.

Reply Sentiment to Brad Raffensperger by Ideology
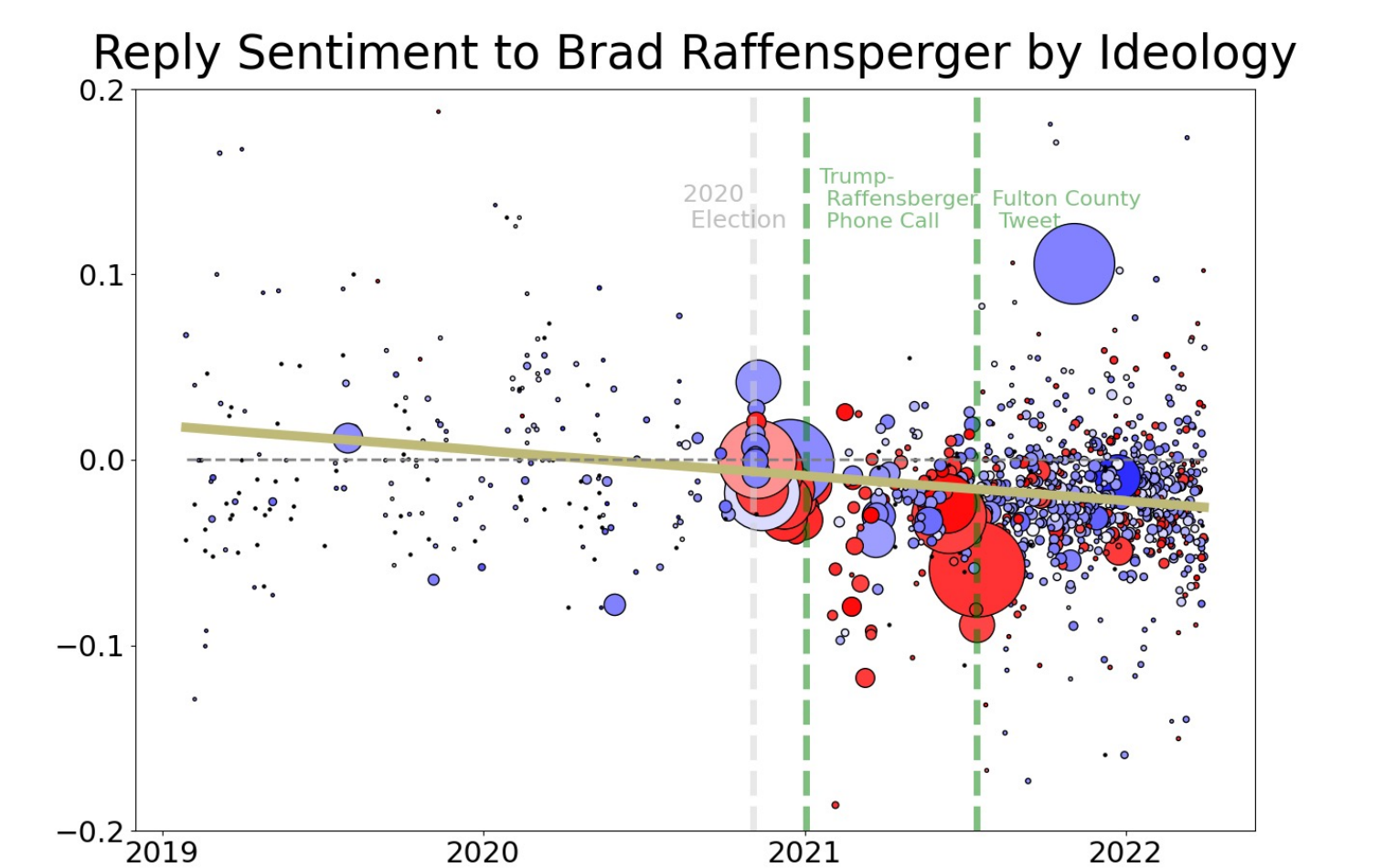
Conclusion

- ❑ The level of public salience of an official is a major determinant of the quantity of negative replies they might receive.

- ❑ Negativity is widely increasing, spilling across state borders and perhaps even to other countries.

- ❑ We find the ideological lean of the replier is often the opposite of the official; some are the targets of sustained negativity from users whose ideological positions are like their own.

Work Cited

[1] Eisler, Peter, Jason Szep, Linda So, and Sam Hart. Anatomy of a death threat. 2021.

[2] Barberá, Pablo. "Birds of the Same Feather Tweet Together: Bayesian Ideal Point Estimation Using Twitter Data". Political Analysis, vol. 23, no. 1, 2017, pp. 76–91.

[3] Hutto, C.J. and Eric Gilbert. "VADER: A Parsimonious Rule-based Model for Sentiment Analysis of Social Media Text". The International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, 2014.