

# Understanding the Complexity of Detecting Political Ads

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# Motivation

## The rise on online political advertising

- 2012 US election cycle, digital media accounted for **1.5%** of political ad spend
- 2016 US election cycle, digital media accounted for **3%** of political ad spend
- 2020 US election cycle, digital media accounted for **18%** of political ad spend

# Misuses of political ads

**Cambridge Analytica:** political ads targeted based on personality

**Agreeableness:** "A Safer World for Our Children"



**Extraversion:** "Leadership – Support Thom Tillis for US Senate"



John BOLTON  
Former U.N. Ambassador

**Russian Internet Research Agency:** foreign interference in elections

Suggested Page

**Secured Borders**  
Sponsored

Every man should stand for our borders! Join!



**Secured Borders**  
News & Media Website  
134,943 people like this.

Like Page

# Mitigating risks with political ads

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- **Facebook:** advertisers have to verify their account, have to self-label their political ads and advertisers can only send political ads in the country they reside
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Underlying assumption: we know which ads are political

# Key problem

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Political or not?

# This paper

## Can reliably distinguish political ads from non-political ads?

We take an [empirical approach](#) to test the assumption by:

- Analyzing if people agree on what ads are political
- Analyzing the characteristics of ads considered political by ordinary people
- Analyzing the characteristics of ads that lead to disagreement

**Do platforms agree what ads are political?**

# Definitions of political ads

## facebook

- Made by, on behalf of, or about a candidate for public office, a political figure, a political party or advocates for the outcome of an election to public office; or
- About any election, referendum, or ballot initiative, including "go out and vote" or election campaigns; or
- **About social issues** in any place where the ad is being placed; or
- Regulated as political advertising.

Social issues: civil and social rights, crime, economy, education, environmental politics, guns, health, immigration, political values and government, security and foreign policy

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## No consensus across platforms

- Facebook and TikTok are considering issue ads as political
- Twitter and Google do not consider issue ads as political

**Do users agree on what ads are political?**

# Data set: ProPublica

- ProPublica is an investigative journalism organization
- Dataset contains labels from volunteers and advertisers
- 55k ads with at least 3 volunteer votes



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# Do volunteers agree which ads are political?

Strong political ads ( $fr=1$ )	26k
Political ads ( $0.5 \leq fr < 1$ )	19.7k
Marginally political ads ( $0 < fr < 0.5$ )	7.6k
Non-political ads ( $fr=0$ )	1.3k

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**Answer: No! Volunteers disagree on more than 50% of ads**

# Do volunteers and advertisers agree?

	Official political	Official not political
Strong political ads	96 %	4 %
Political ads	93 %	7 %
Marginally political ads	74 %	26 %
Non-political ads	100 %	NA

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**Answer: No! Many ads considered political by advertisers are not regarded as political by volunteers**

**What are the characteristics of the ads  
labeled as political?**

# Analysis of advertisers' categories

- Advertisers have to select a page's category from a pre-defined list
- Extracted categories for 82% of advertisers

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WWF   
Non-profit organisation  **category**  
Building a future in which people  
live in harmony with nature.  
<http://wwf.panda.org>

 <http://wwf.panda.org/>

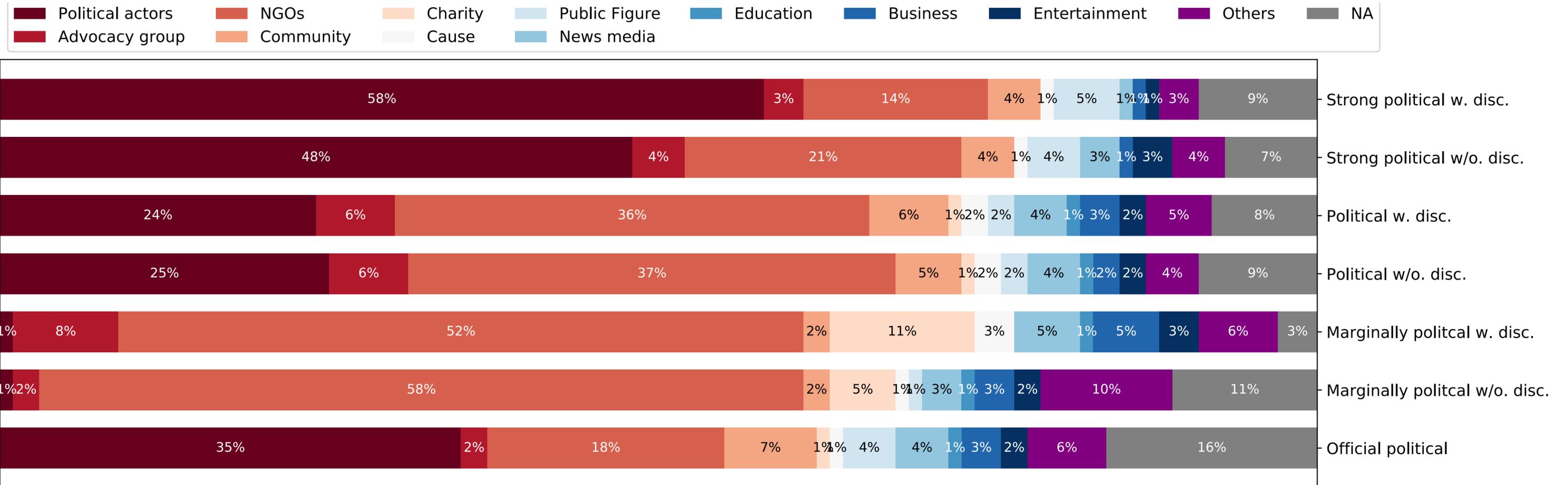
 (55) 5286-5631

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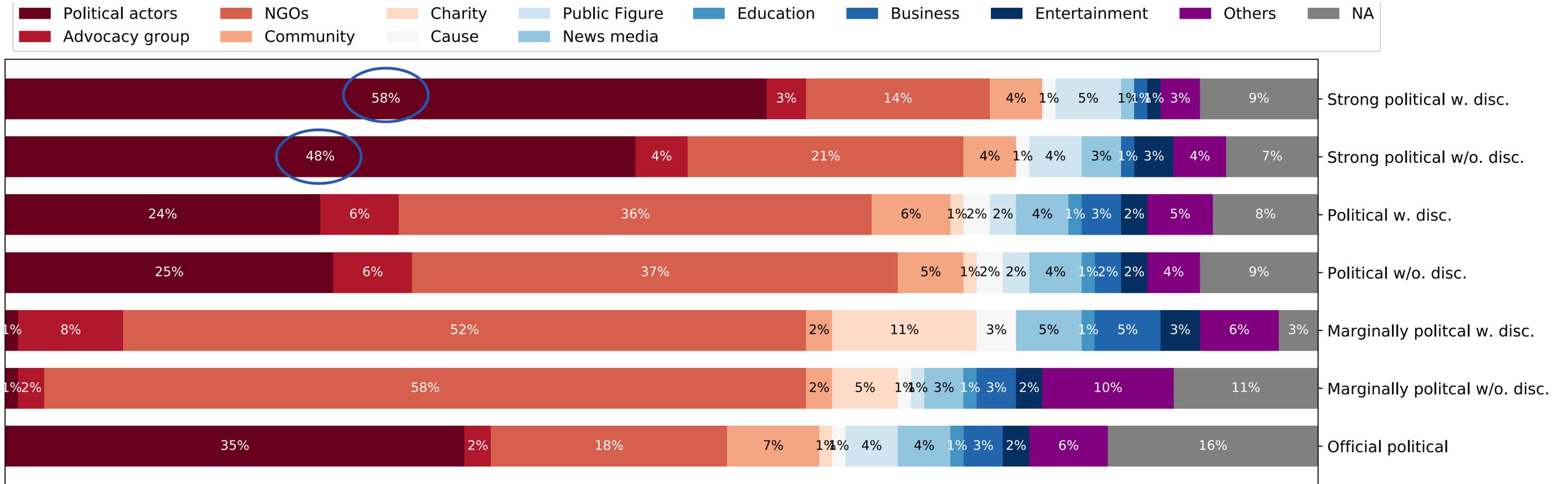
 Like  

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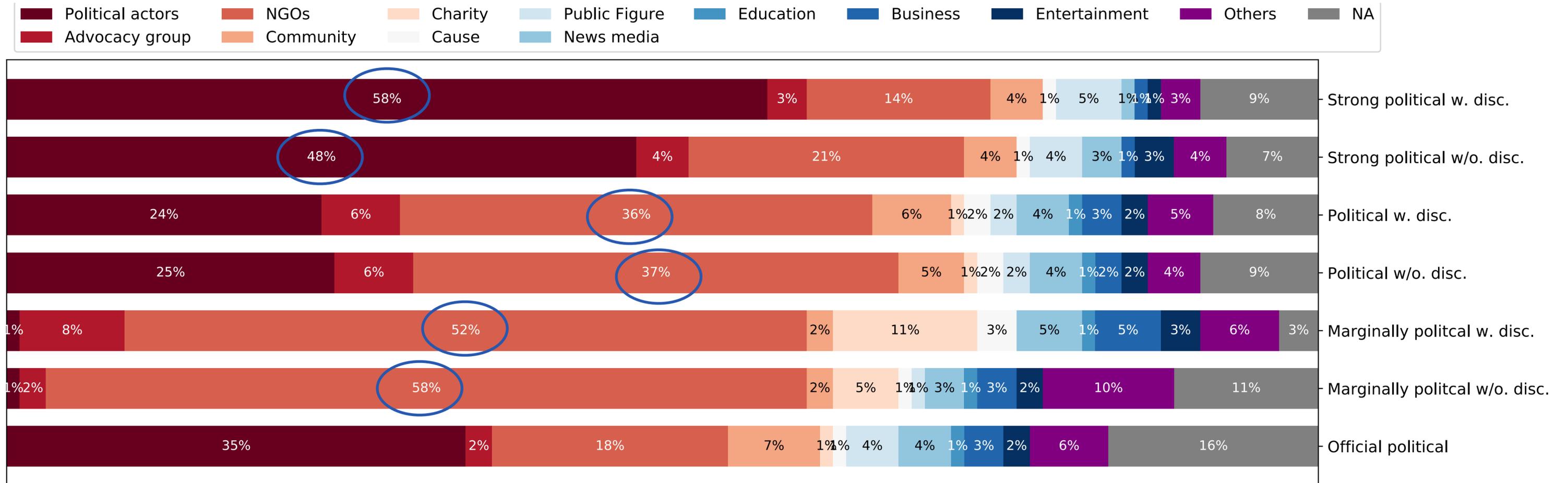


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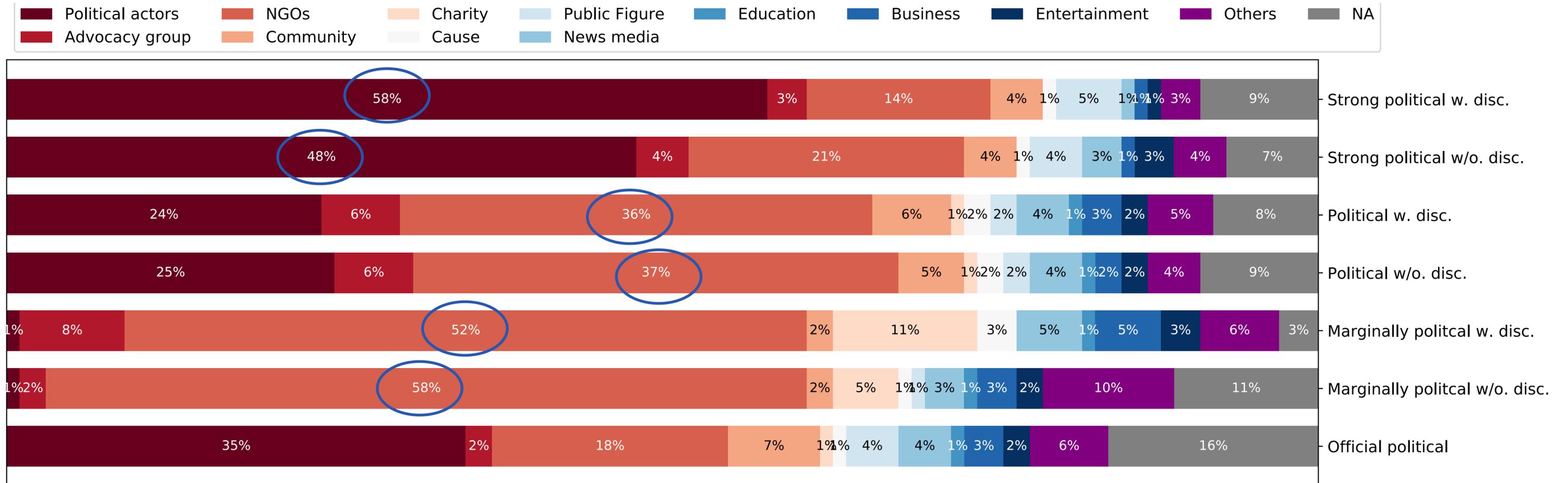
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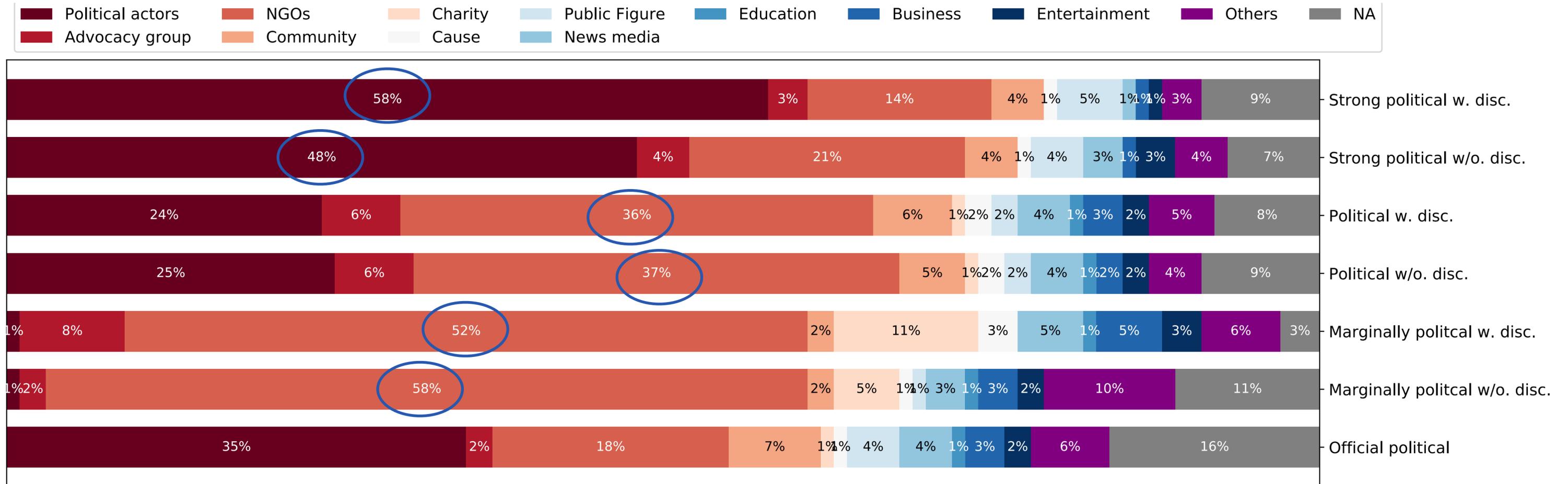
- Most strong political ads come from political actors
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- Most strong political ads come from political actors
- Most political ads and marginally political ads come from NGOs
- Official political ads has a wide variety of advertisers' categories

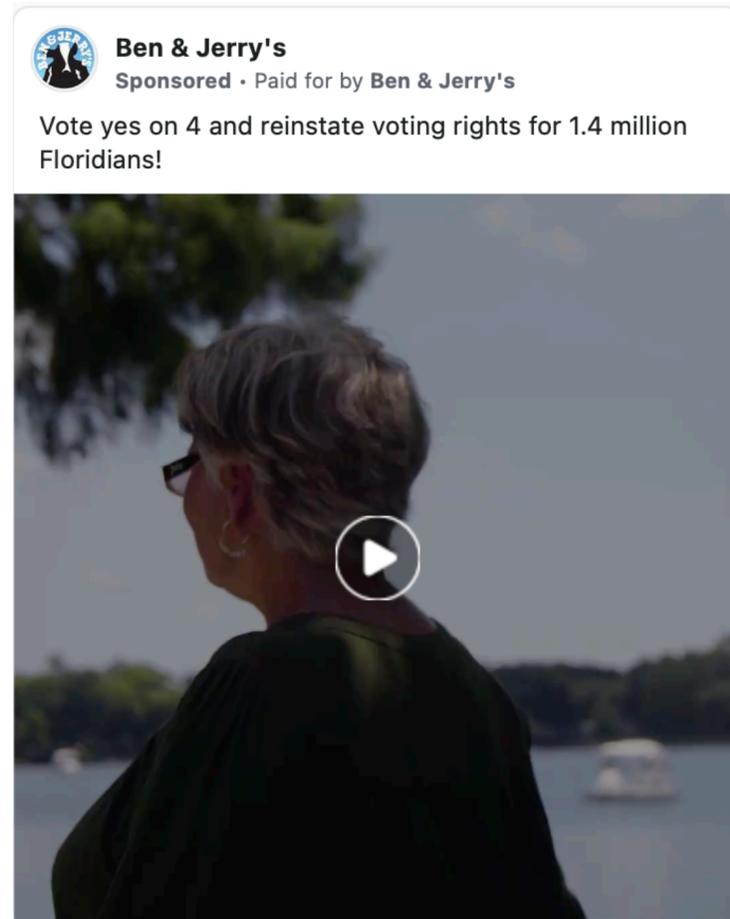
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- Implication: **specific electoral legislation should not regulate (and impose restrictions on) ads only from political actors (as some countries do)**

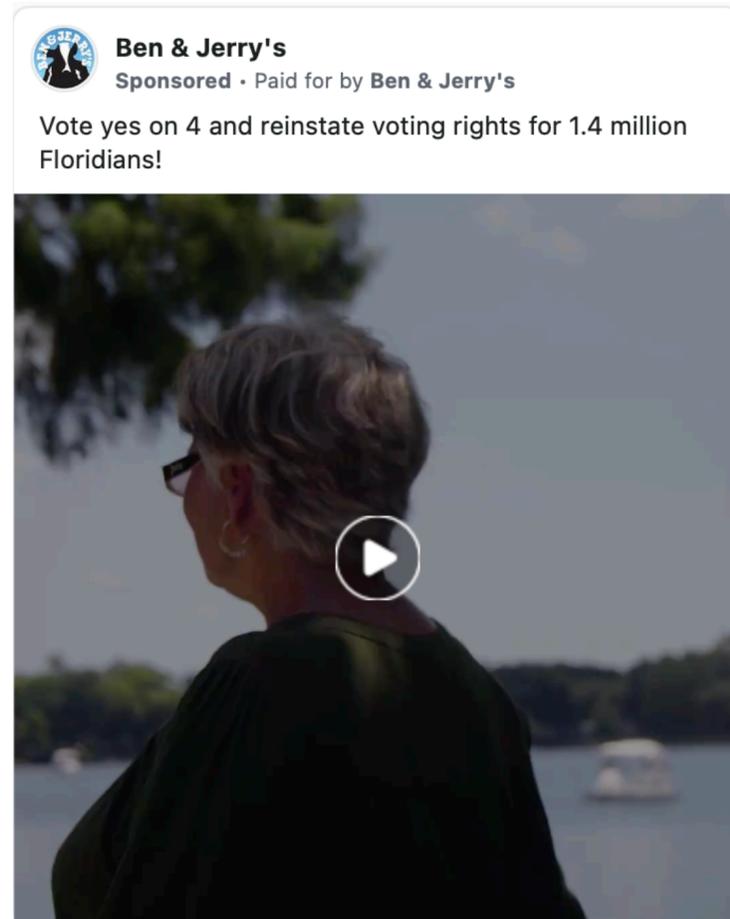
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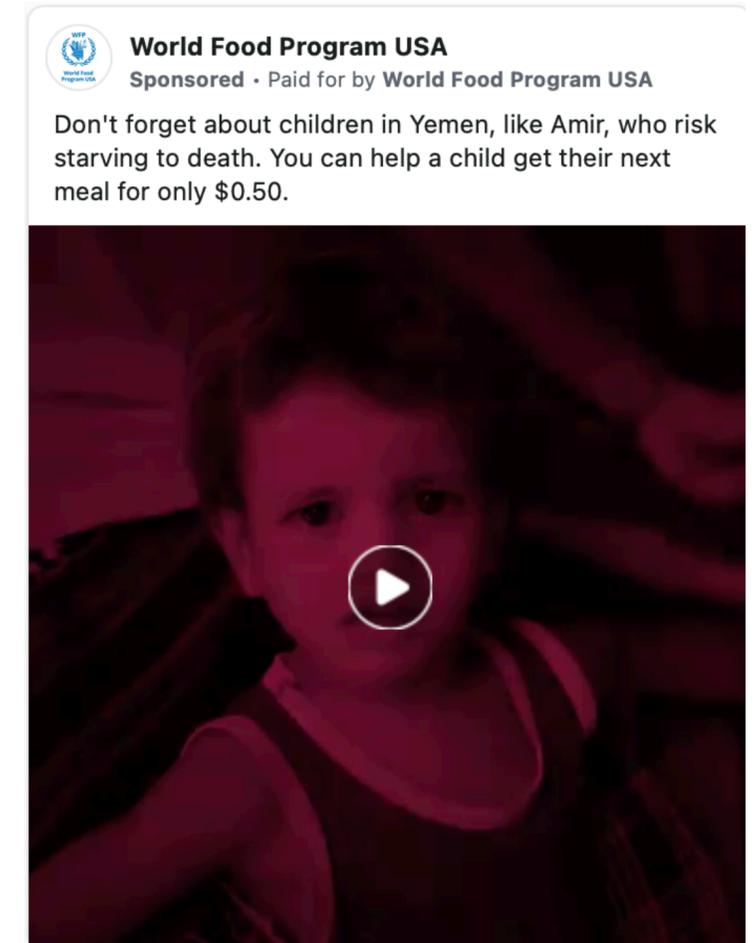
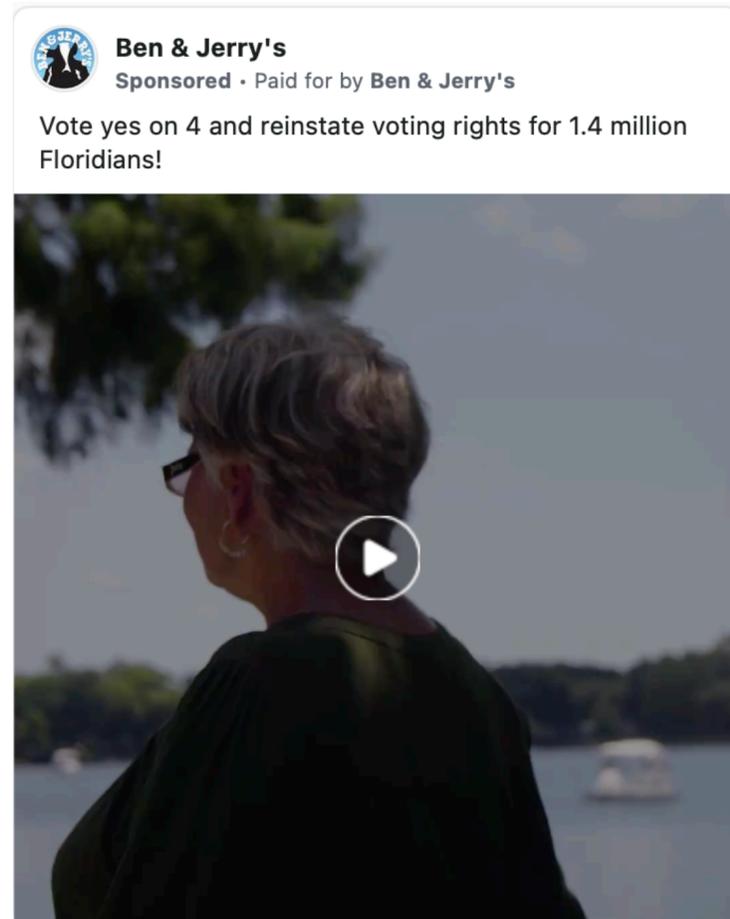
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- Center for Reproductive Rights (NGO) is addressing advocacy messages about abortion issues
- World Food Program (a charity) is addressing social issues (do not have association to legislation)

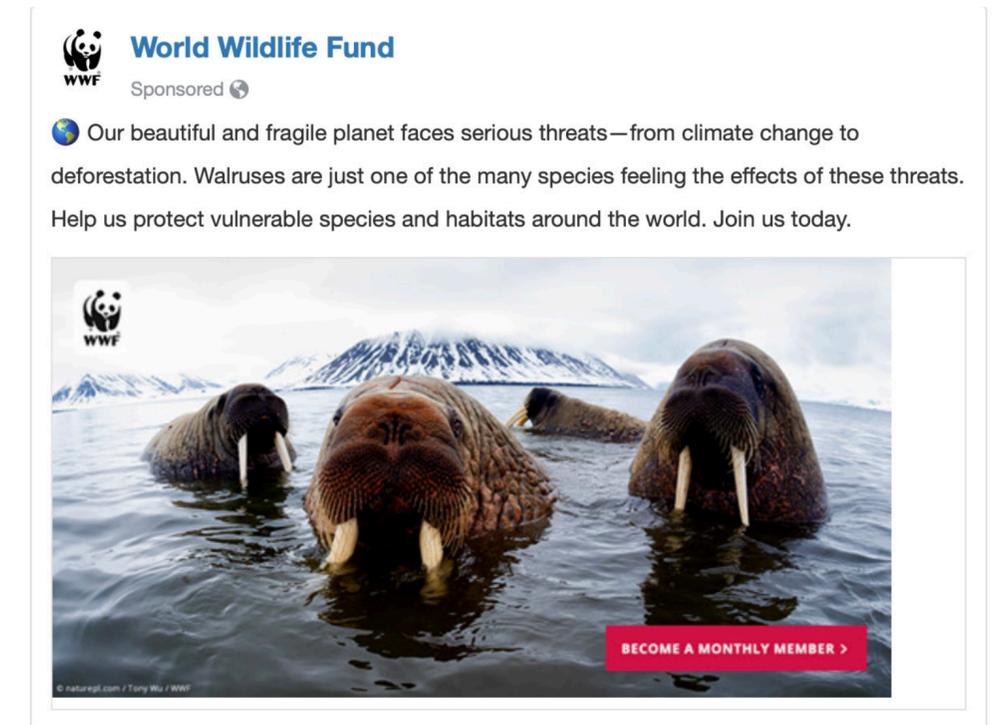
# Analysis of ads' messages

## Study ads' messages:

- 300 random ads with disclaimer and 300 random ads without disclaimer from each groups of ads.
- 200 ads without disclaimer from AdAnalyst dataset
- Each worker labeled 20 random ads from the pool of 2300 ads
- Each ad was labeled by 3 workers

## For each ad, we asked the following questions:

- Is this ad made by, on behalf of, or about a political actor?
- Is this ad about elections?
- Does this ad refer to a social issue?



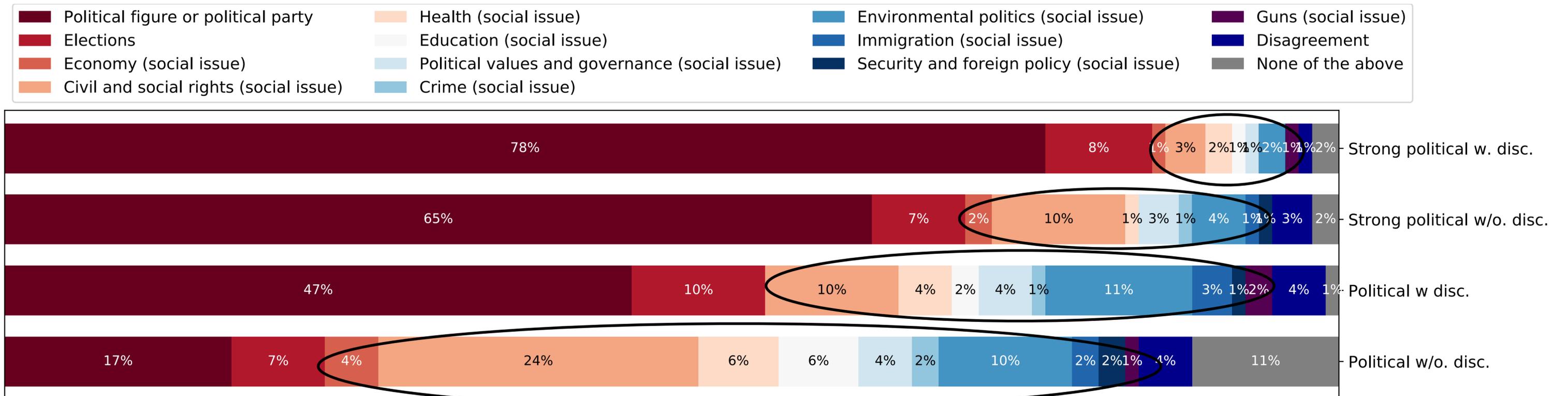
Does this ad refer to a social issue?

(such as civil and social rights, crime, economy, education, environmental politics, guns, health, immigration, political values and government, security and foreign policy)

Yes

No

# Analysis of ads' messages



- A large fraction of ads labeled as political are about social issues (social issues ads do not mention a political actor or elections!)
- Implication: **issue ads should be considered political!** (Google and Twitter do not consider them political)

# A wide range of ads are considered political



**AFSCME 3299**

Sponsored • Paid for by **AFSCME Local 3299**

Stand up for immigrant families. Tell UC to cancel its contracts with ICE collaborators now!



**Boston Rescue Mission**

Sponsored • Paid for by **Boston Rescue Mission**

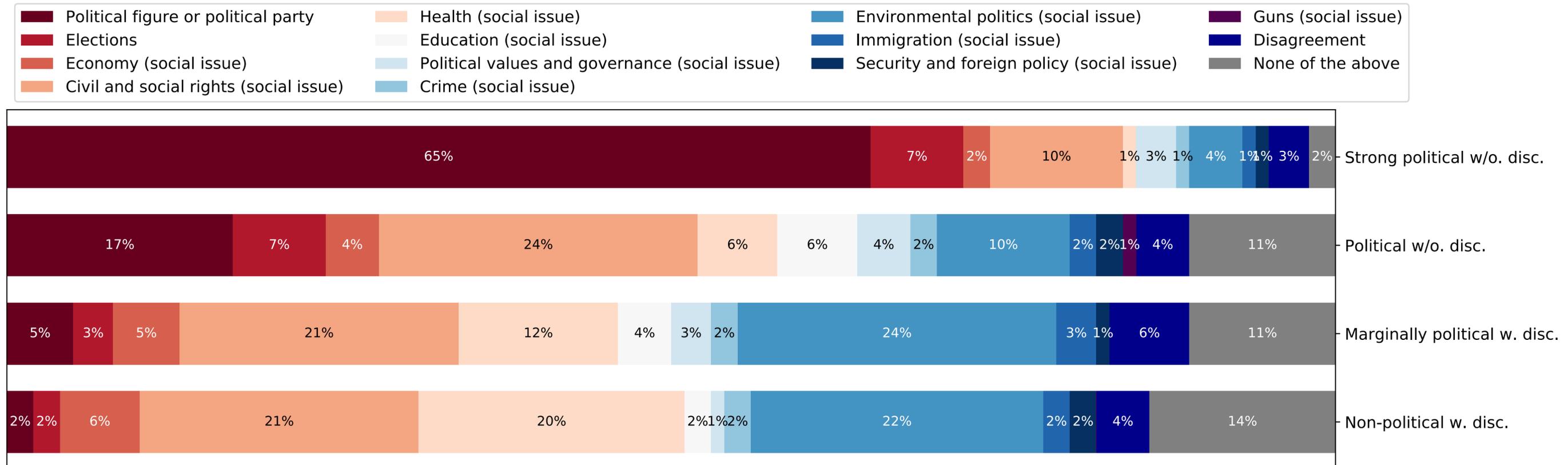
It's tragic to be all alone and hungry. Your gift can bring hearty, nutritious meals to men and women who struggle with homelessness.



Should all ads related to social issues be considered political and have the same restrictions?  
If not: where should we draw the line between political and humanitarian?

**What can we learn from disagreement?**

# Advertisers vs. volunteers



- Both advertisers and volunteers underreport ads about social issues

Reason: the definition of social issue ads are too broad which leads to different interpretations among people

- Advertisers mislabel ads as political or non-political

Reason: advertisers maybe want to avoid scrutiny; they are forced to label their ads as political by enforcement mechanisms

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  - we need to consider these ads as political
  - but ... social issue ads create confusion between volunteers and advertisers
- Should we treat ads about more politicized issues differently than ads about less politicized issues?
- Should we treat ads that call for precise actions differently than ads that just inform citizens?
- How much weight should be given to the advertiser's identity?

**The end**