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De-Polarizing Politics: Faith Meets Science in the French Third Republic” (with Gianandrea Lanzara and Mara Squicciarini)

Abstract: We investigate whether individual politicians can help reduce emotionality and polarization in parliamentary debates. Focusing on the French Third Republic (1880–1914), we study Members of Parliament (MPs) educated in Jesuit schools (collèges) -- institutions combining religious formation with rigorous scientific, philosophical, and rhetorical training. Using newly digitized data on Jesuit school enrollments and over one million parliamentary speeches, we identify Jesuit-educated MPs (JeMPs) and analyze their linguistic and behavioral patterns through text embeddings and large language models. We find that JeMPs systematically employed less emotional and less polarized rhetoric, emphasizing reason and science in their arguments. They also engaged more directly with preceding speeches, as reflected in greater lexical overlap. We then examine the dynamics within parliamentary debates, where the order of speakers was by and large pre-assigned. Even after controlling for speaker-discussion fixed effects, we find that JeMP interventions reduced subsequent speakers' emotionality and polarization. These effects were particularly pronounced during the contentious 1905 Separation of Church and State Law.