Elite connections: Political-economic elite networks in Germany

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Motivation

- Elite connections have political and economic implications. For example,
  - Firm executives with government experiences can access and influence the policy-making process.
  - Government officials with business exposure can respond to market changes through policy adjustments.
- The project seeks to answer three questions:
  - How can we measure political-economic elite networks?
  - What shape the formation of political-economic elite networks?
  - How do political-economic elite networks influence vertical linkage and horizontal contestation in societies?
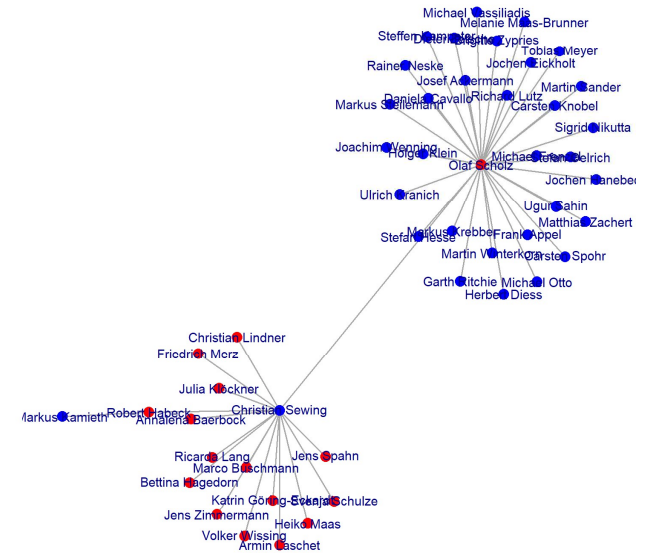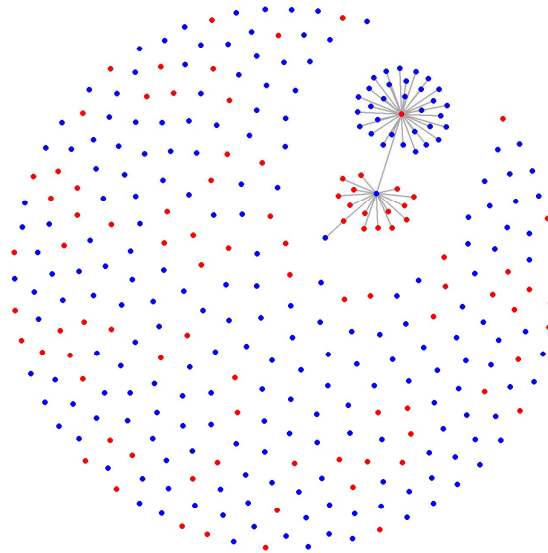
Challenges

- Collecting network data on elites in a scalable way
- Interpreting network data on elites in a meaningful way

Design

- Collecting network data on elites in a scalable way
  - Search co-appearance of elite names across a large set of news media
- Interpreting network data on elites in a meaningful way
  - Use large language models (LLMs) to assess the co-appearance according to a set of questions regarding to what extend the two elites engaged
  - Use human coders to validate the LLM results
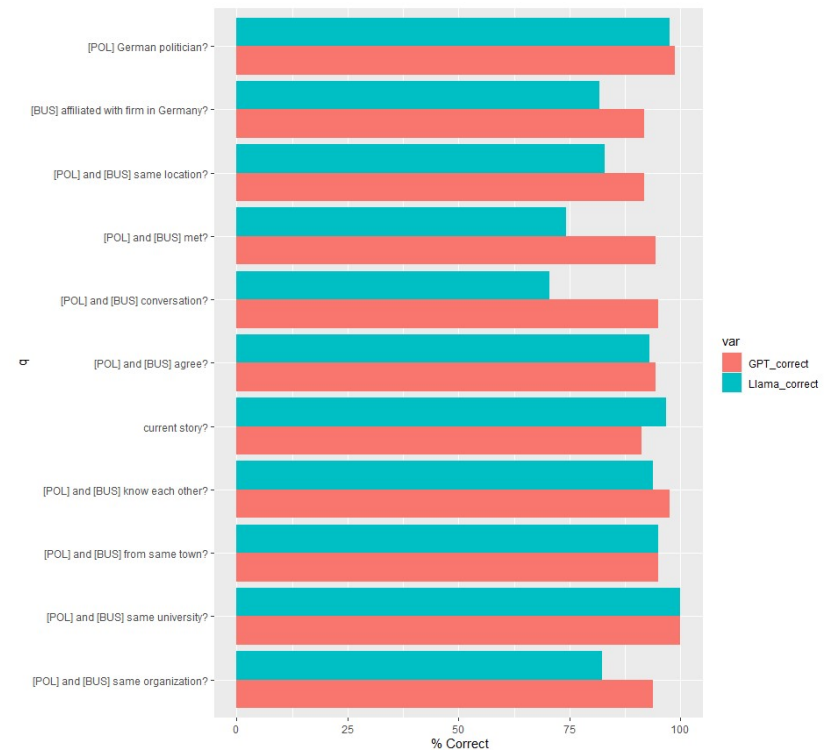 - Use human investigators to validate the news itself

Pilot results: elite connections per LLM coding

- search 5204 pairs of political-economic elites
  - incl. Olaf Scholz, Markus Kamieth, or Christian Sewing
- download 4002 articles over the past decade from 30+ German news media
- code the articles via OpenAI gpt-4o API
  - >90% consistent with human codes for all 11 questions
- identify a link if
  - both names refer to the right elites AND
  - the two elites have met OR knew each other historically

Pilot results: validating LLM coding

- A research assistant read a random sample of the articles coded by LLMs and answered the same set of questions (y-axis)

- Compare the coding from two LLMs with the human coding (x-axis)
    - OpenAI gpt-4o (closed model and difficult to replicate in the long run)
    - Meta Llama3.2 (open source and replicable)

What have we learned?

- It is possible to develop a spatiotemporally scalable method of measuring political-economic elite networks
- Next steps:
  - apply the method to German federal MPs and top-100 firms' management board members
  - explore the nature of the connection reported in the news qualitatively
  - consider possible media reporting bias
  - study the political-economic elite connections as dependent or independent variables