

A New Approach to Measuring the Political Bias of Websites

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Abstract

Since 2016, our research group has been developing ways of estimating the level of political bias in web pages. While we were experimenting with ways of using machine learning to rate web pages, we relied at first on ratings that had been published by Harvard's Berkman Klein Center (Center for Internet and Society, 2017). They had people rate the political bias of 976 online news sources, rating bias on a linear scale from liberal (-1.00) to conservative (+1.00). With the Harvard data becoming dated, we began to rely on data from three online websites – Ad Fontes Media, All Sides Technology, and Media Bias/Fact Check – each of which claims to be politically independent. They each use human raters to rate the political bias of news sources; between them, they cover more than 4,000 news sources, and they regularly update their ratings. We developed a way to standardize and average their ratings. Meanwhile, our goal remained to be able to rate the political bias of individual webpages, and we made steady progress, gradually increasing the level of agreement between our algorithmic ratings and human ratings. We could not, however, exceed an 80% level of agreement, mainly because a single web page might contain a combination of liberal, moderate, and conservative content. In 2025, we abandoned the liberal/conservative linear scale approach in favor of a methodology that rated liberal, moderate, and conservative content independently. This shift has proved to be highly successful, as measured both by agreement between our new ratings and the ratings of the three organizations mentioned above, and by the agreement between our ratings and human ratings. We now have a credible and relatively accurate method for rating the political bias of virtually any web page, allowing researchers to quickly measure the possible political bias in content being sent to voters and others by tech or media companies in the months leading up to elections worldwide. The new methodology can be tested at <https://aibrt.org/urw>.