Abstract:
We demonstrate a new strategy for scaling legislative speeches on heterogenous topics. Existing approaches to scaling political disagreement from texts perform poorly except when applied to narrowly selected texts discussing the same issue and written in the same style. Our approach exploits the fact that legislative speech is usually organized into a set of statements or speeches by legislators, sometimes preceding a vote or set of votes, i.e. a debate. We use this debate-level structure by scaling preferences from within-debate variation in word usage, thus holding constant the topic and other features of the debate. Then we combine these debate-specific scales into a general scale, recovering measures of spoken disagreement in legislatures, using an unsupervised model. We demonstrate this approach with applications to the Irish Dáil and the US Senate. In Ireland, we show that the dominant dimension of speech variation is government-opposition, that ministers are more extreme on this dimension than backbenchers, and that speeches are less polarized along these lines in later readings of bills. In the US, we show that partisan polarization in speeches varies in response to major political events and across the electoral cycle, as well as demonstrating strong gender differences in speech positioning that are not evident in roll-call voting.

Bio:
Dr. Alexander Herzog is a postdoctoral fellow in the Big Data Systems Lab (School of Computing) and the Social Analytics Institute (College of Business and Behavioral Science) at Clemson University. His research is in computational social science, with a focus on developing methods to extract quantitative information and meaning from large amounts of textual data, such as political documents, speeches, and social media. Before coming to Clemson, he received his Ph.D. in Political Science from New York University and taught at the London School of Economics.