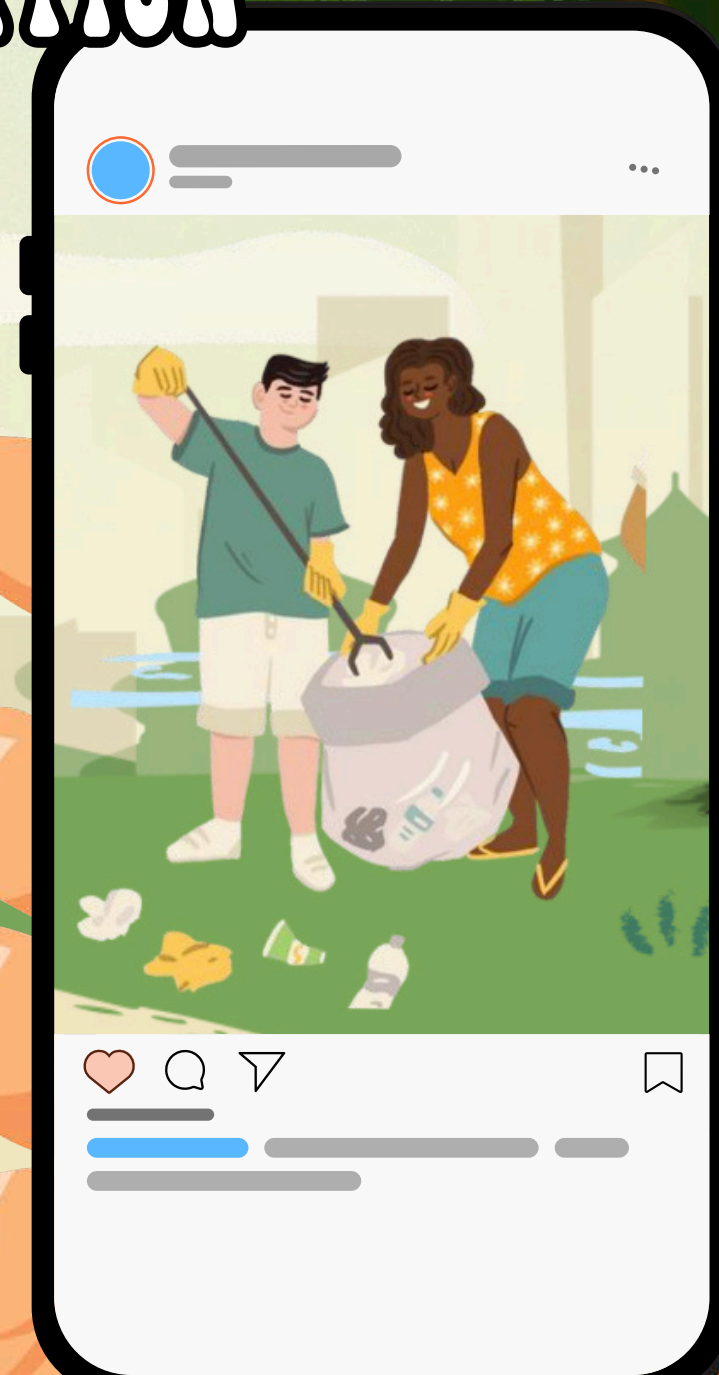


HARNESSING SOCIAL MEDIA TO INSPIRE ACTION: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION

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Northern Illinois University



Northern Illinois
University



A Survey to Start



<https://tinyurl.com/ilcma25>

AGENDA

1. Warm-Up Survey
2. Data on Social Media
3. How to be more effective
4. Discussion and Practice



WHY ARE WE HERE?

BEFORE WE BEGIN... A FEW CAVEATS

- A Political Scientist and an Environmental Studies undergraduate walk into ILCMA
- Focus on Environmental sustainability, but lessons are transferable
- The social media environment is complex and rapidly changing
- We welcome questions and clarifications



**Social Media is an
opportunity for local
governments to
promote sustainable
outcomes.**



PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

PERILS

Government's role is not advocacy, but just provide services

Social media can be image with no substance

No funding for communication/outreach

No training on social media

Effectiveness is questionable and hard to measure

POSSIBILITIES

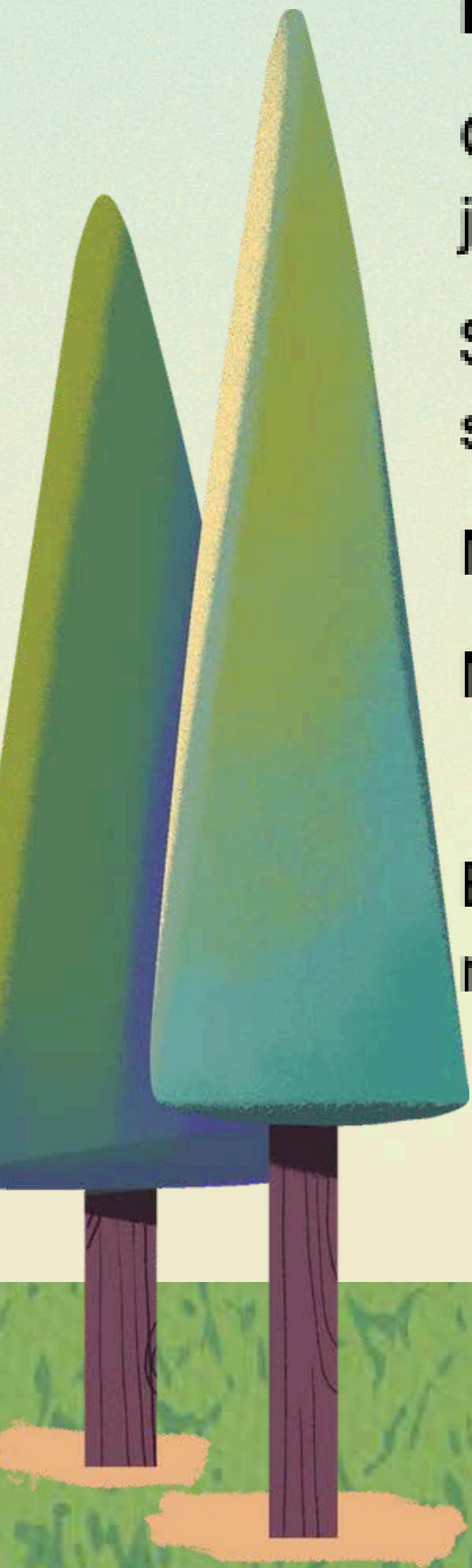
Cheap, easy, and widely accessible

Can bring problems to the attention of citizens and policymakers

Public validation

Unique avenue for engagement and reach new audiences

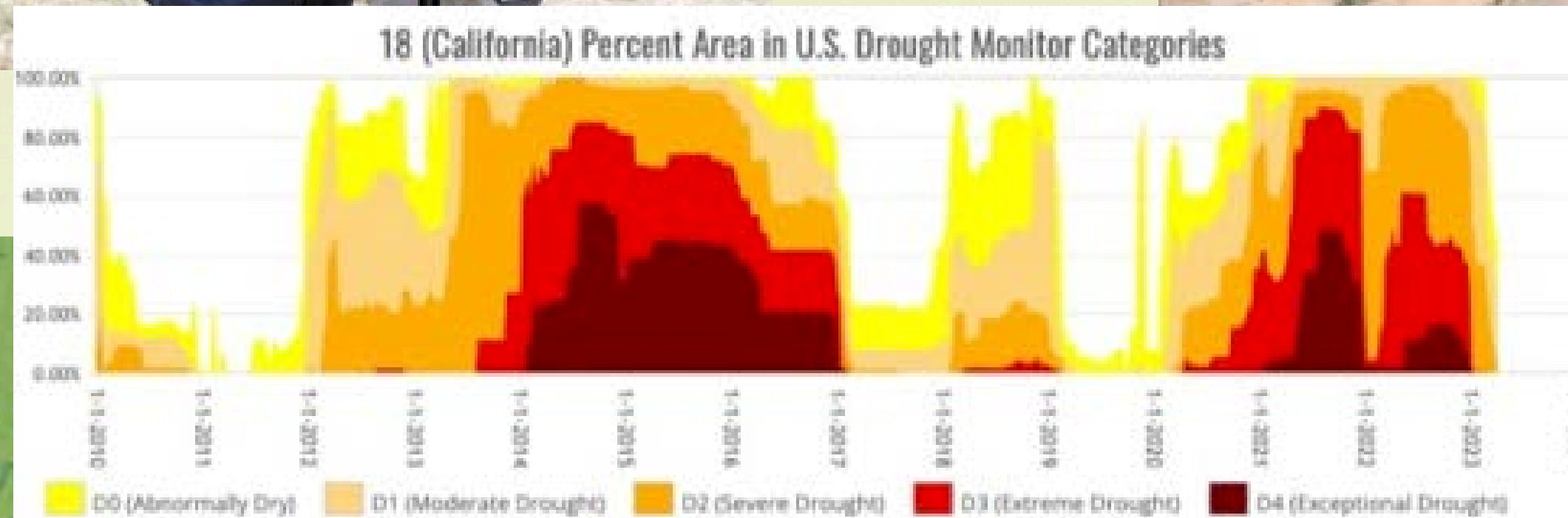
Creation of new policy





What messaging strategies do government agencies use to encourage resource conservation?

What strategies did water districts in California use to try to convince their users to conserve water?



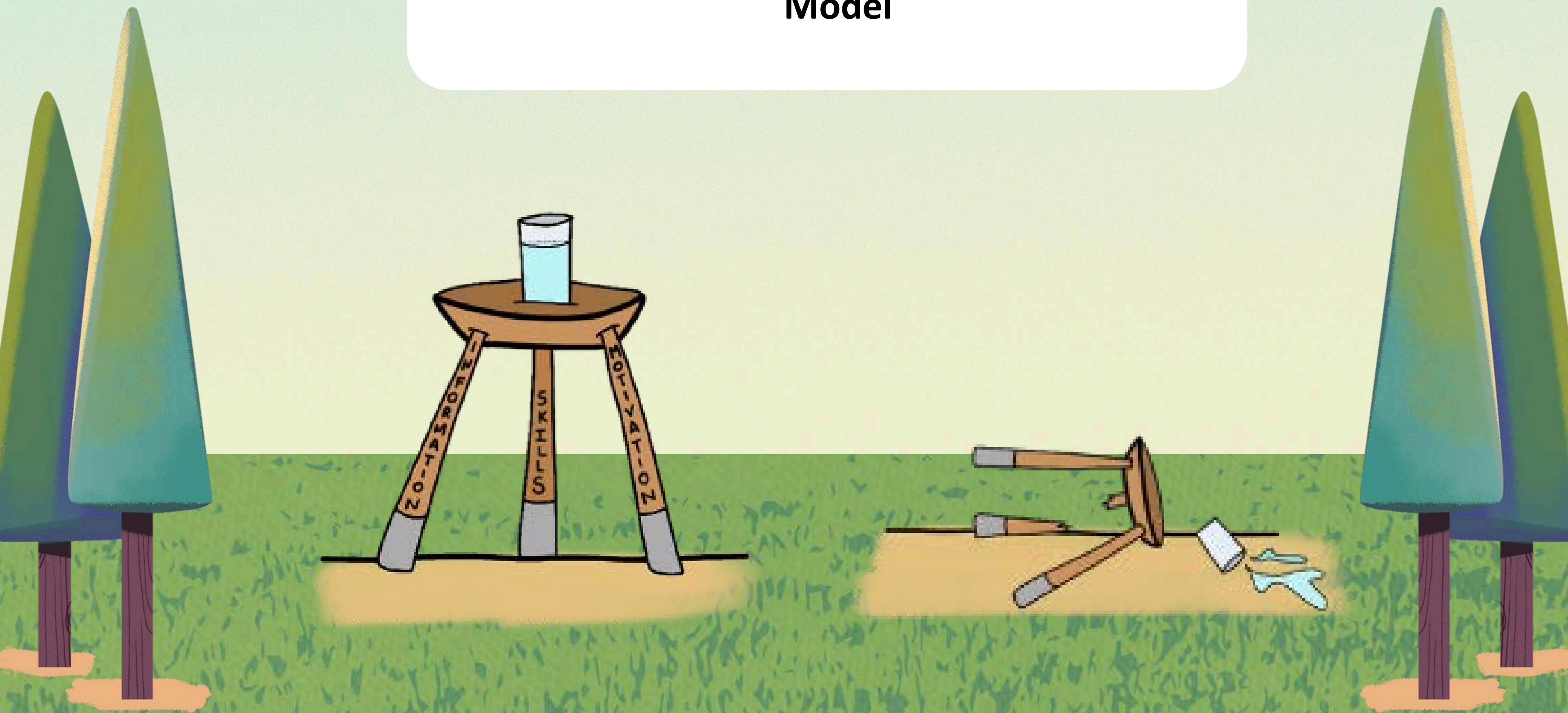
Policy Options

Regulations

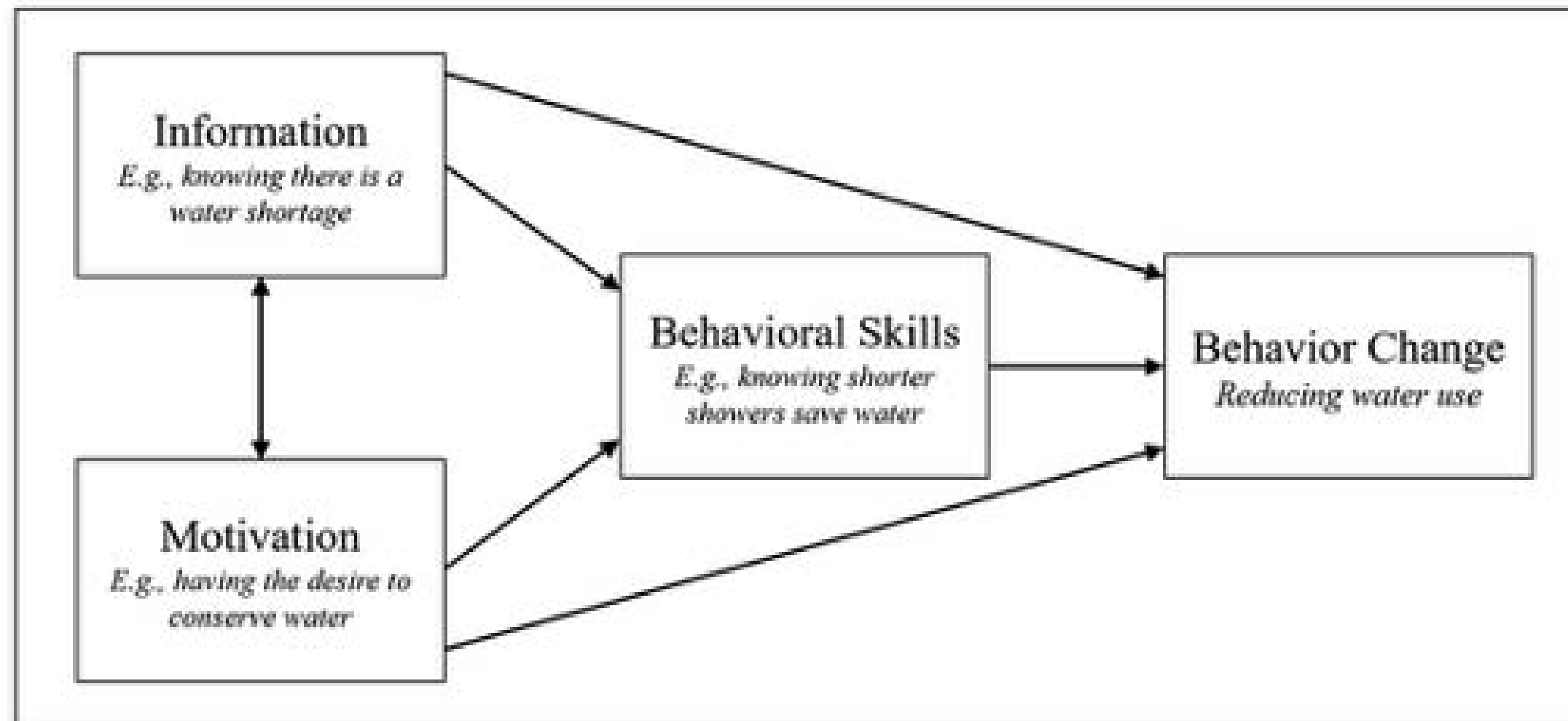
Incentives

Voluntary Behavior
Change

The Information-Motivation Behavioral Skills Model



The Information-Motivation Behavioral Skills Model



Systematic Review of Household Water Conservation Interventions Using the Information-Motivation- Behavioral Skills Model

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SAGE

Phillip J. Ehret¹, Heather E. Hodges¹,
Colin Kuehl², Cameron Brick^{3,4}, Sean Mueller¹,
and Sarah E. Anderson¹

How Managers Can Reduce Household Water Use Through Communication: A Field Experiment

Heather Hodges
Colin Kuehl
Sarah E. Anderson
Phillip J. Ehret
Cameron Brick

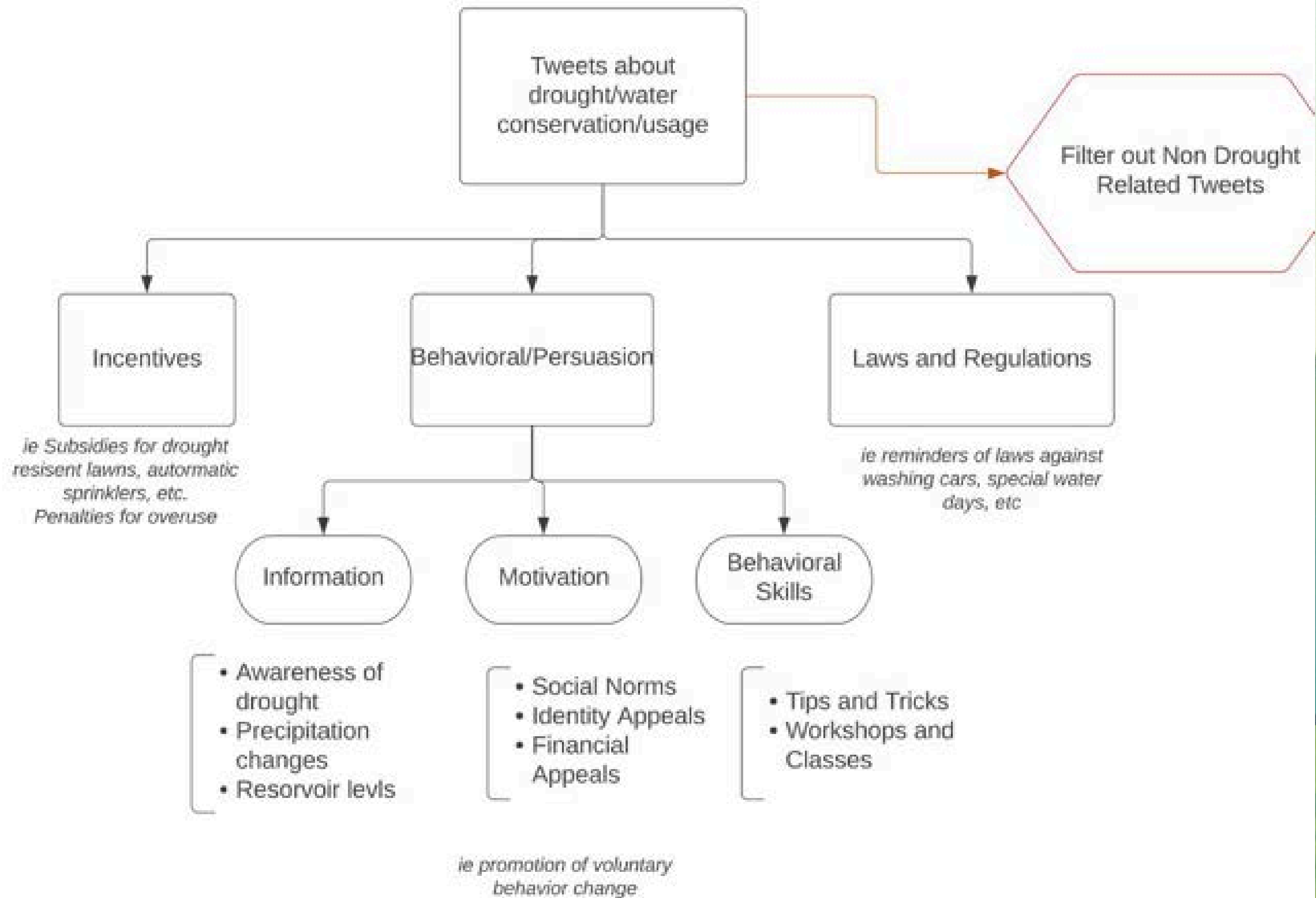
CA Water Districs

Water conservation focused tweets from California water providers

- 205 of 348 public water providers(Water District, City Utility, and For-profit) have twitter accounts
- We focus on special districts
- Academic Twitter API (Pre-Elon) was used to collect all water district tweets from January 2010 to October 2022 (54,000)

Drought focused tweets

- Focus on the drought, water supply, or efforts to conserve
- 30% of all tweets are drought focused (16,300)



 **Alameda County WD**
@AlamedaCountyWD

Happy #EarthDay2021! 🌍❤️ All it takes is one action to make a world of difference. Celebrate Earth Day every day by conserving water. Start today with these three simple water saving tips! #ACWDcares 📺
@Fremont_CA @UnionCityCA_Gov @WaterEdFdn @EPAwatersense @saveourwater

WHAT CAN I DO TO SAVE WATER?

Here are three simple tips:

- 1 Turn off the water when brushing teeth.
- 2 Fix leaks around the house.
- 3 Always run a full load of laundry.

 0:07 77 views

12:35 PM · Apr 22, 2021

 **San Jose Water** @sjwaterco · Jul 9, 2021

It's all hands on deck in #California. We need to consider every step we can take to conserve our precious water supply in a severe drought. Try this easy tip from our friends at @valleywater to recycle water at home. 🌱♻️

 valleywater @valleywater · Jul 6, 2021
#DroughtReady

USE ANY SMALL BUCKET TO COLLECT WATER

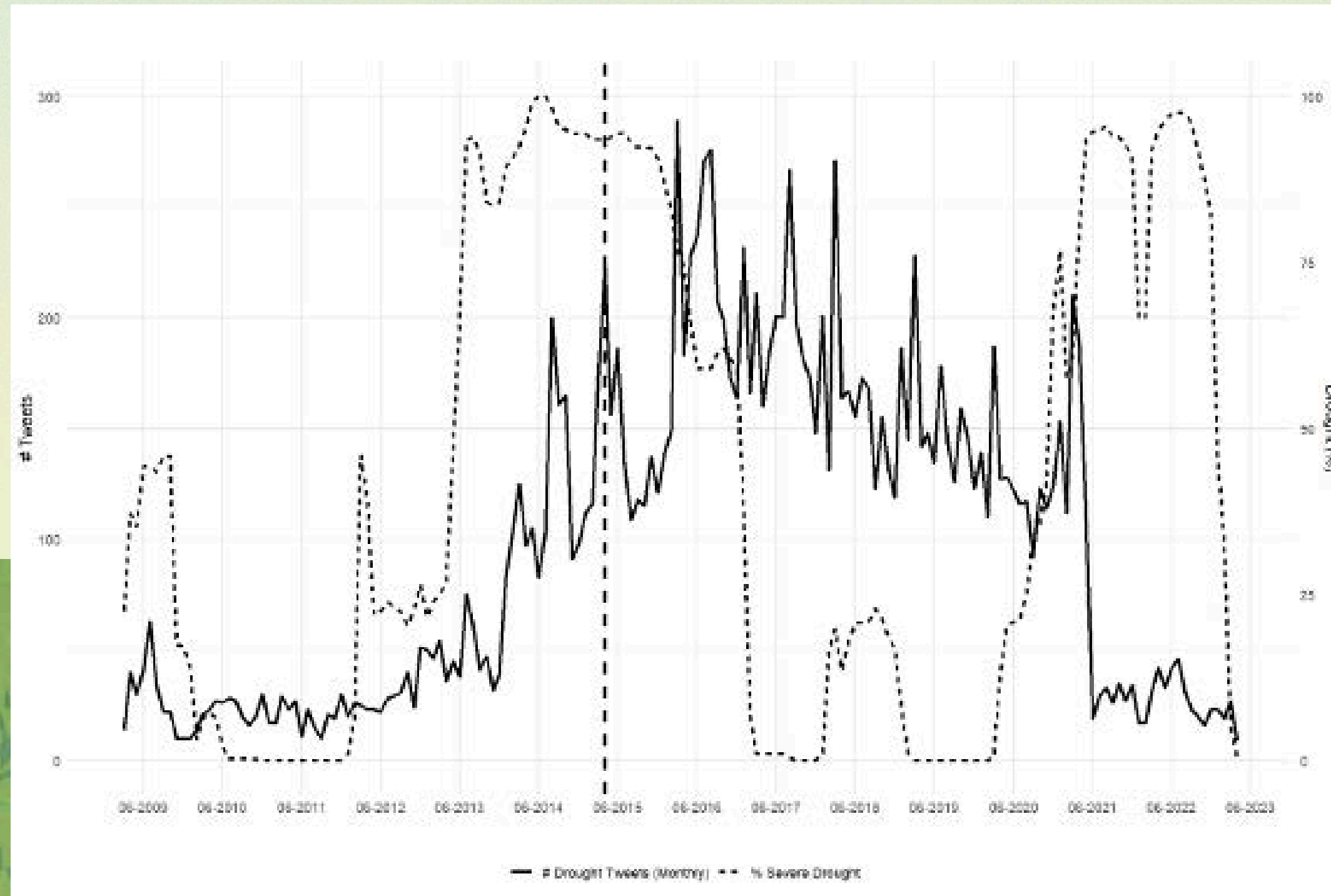
REMEMBER TO LIFT WITH YOUR LEGS! WATER IS HEAVY



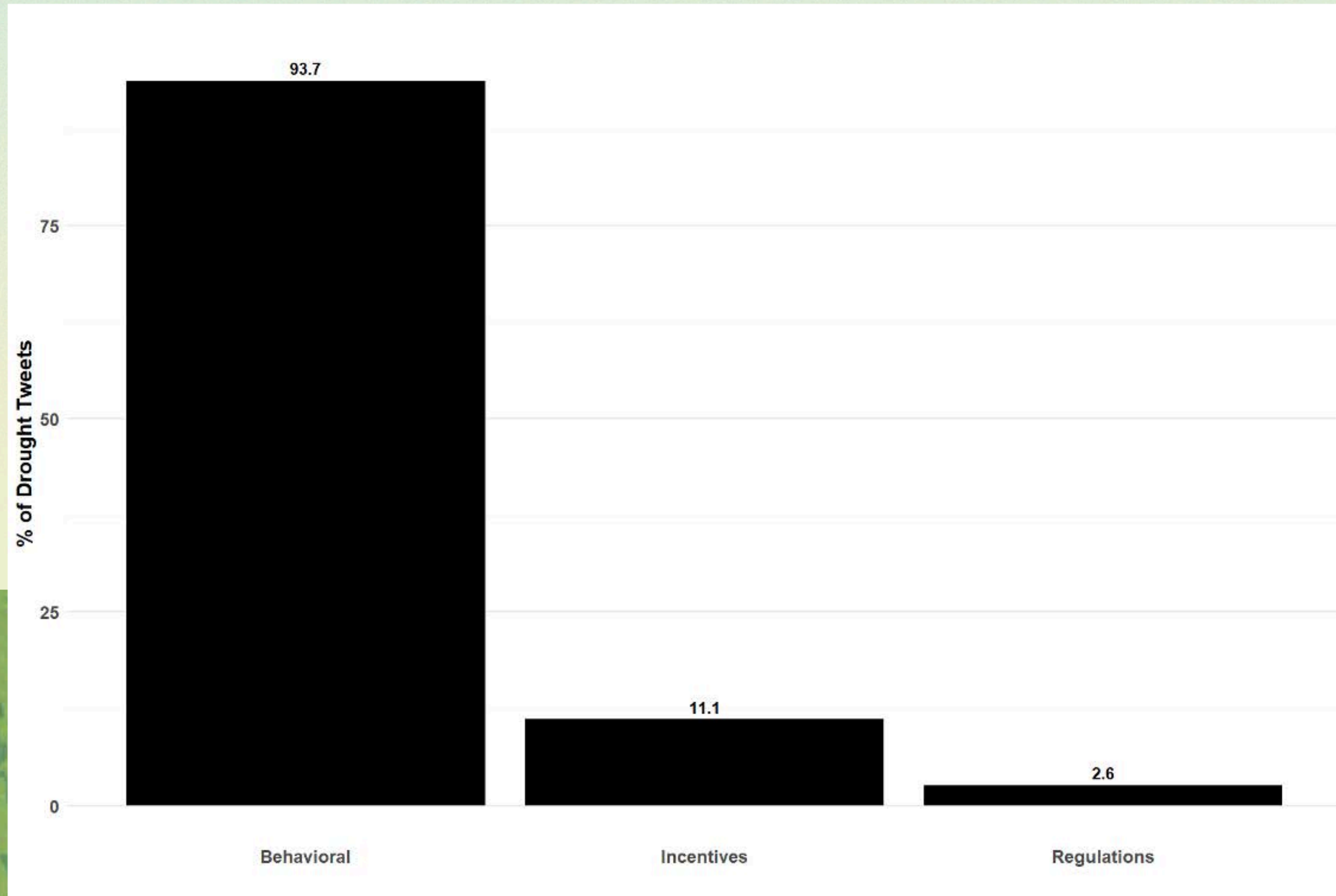
0:17 127 views

👁️ 2 ❤️ 2 🗣️ 📌

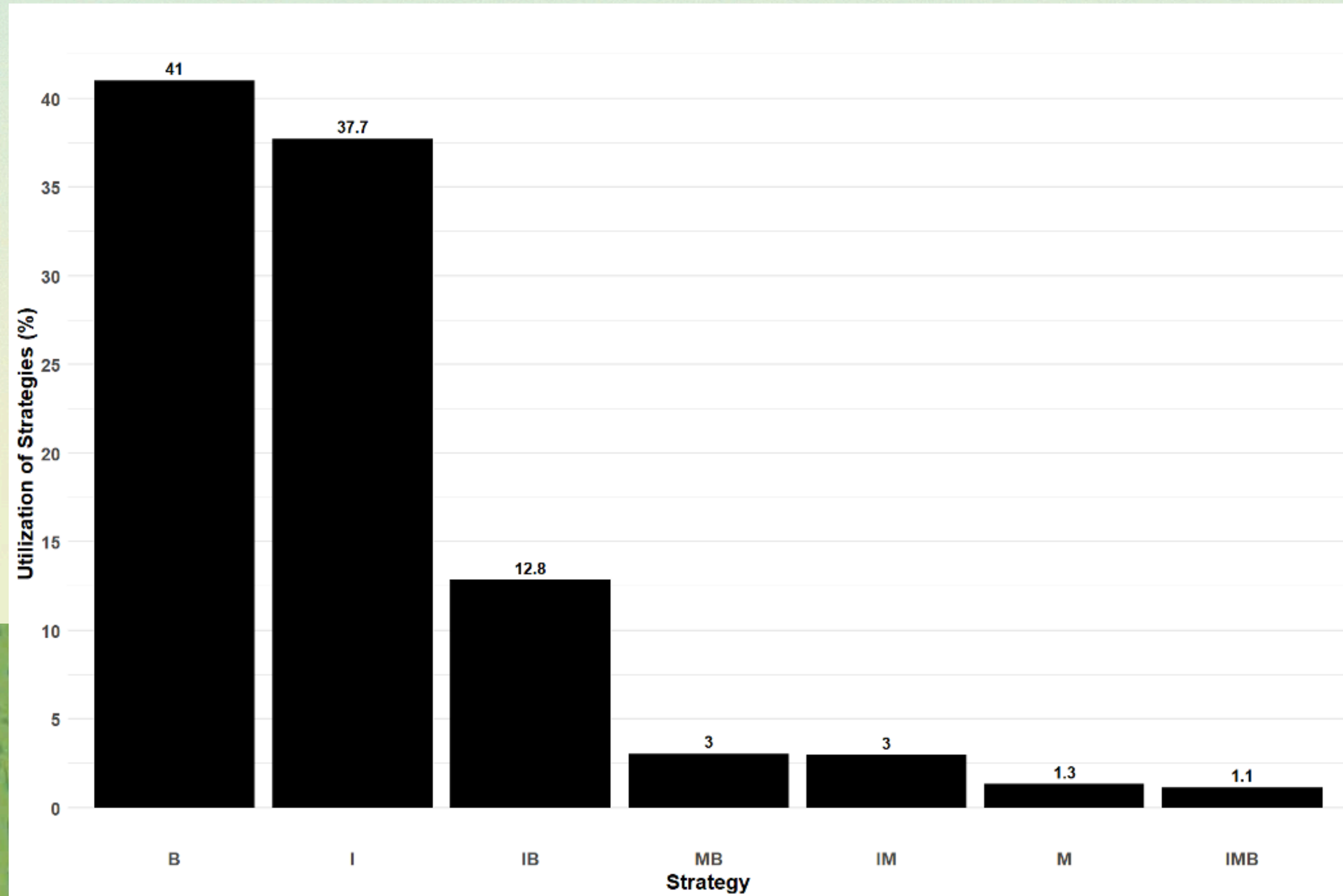
Droughts and Tweets over Time

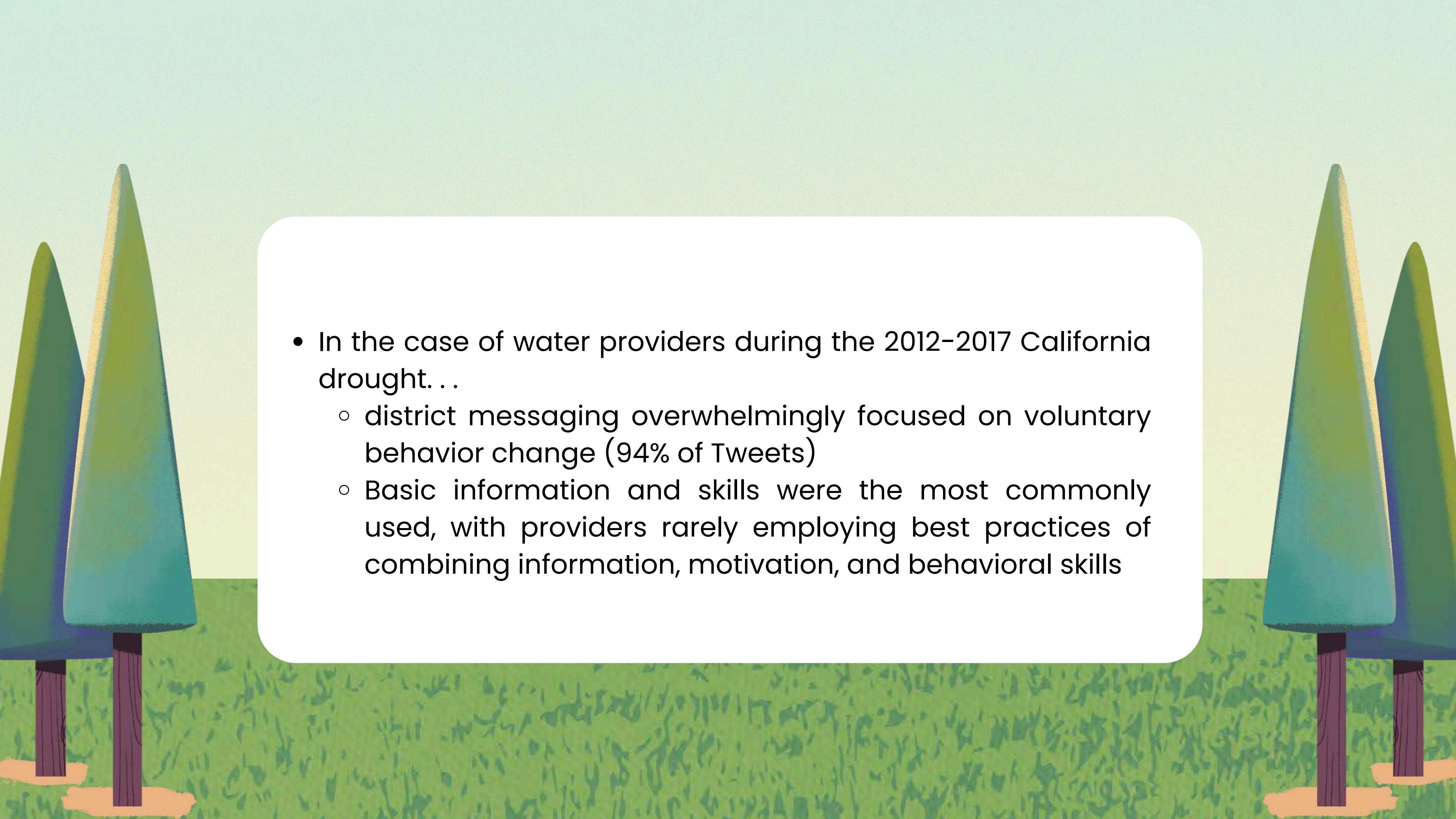


Policy Options in Tweets

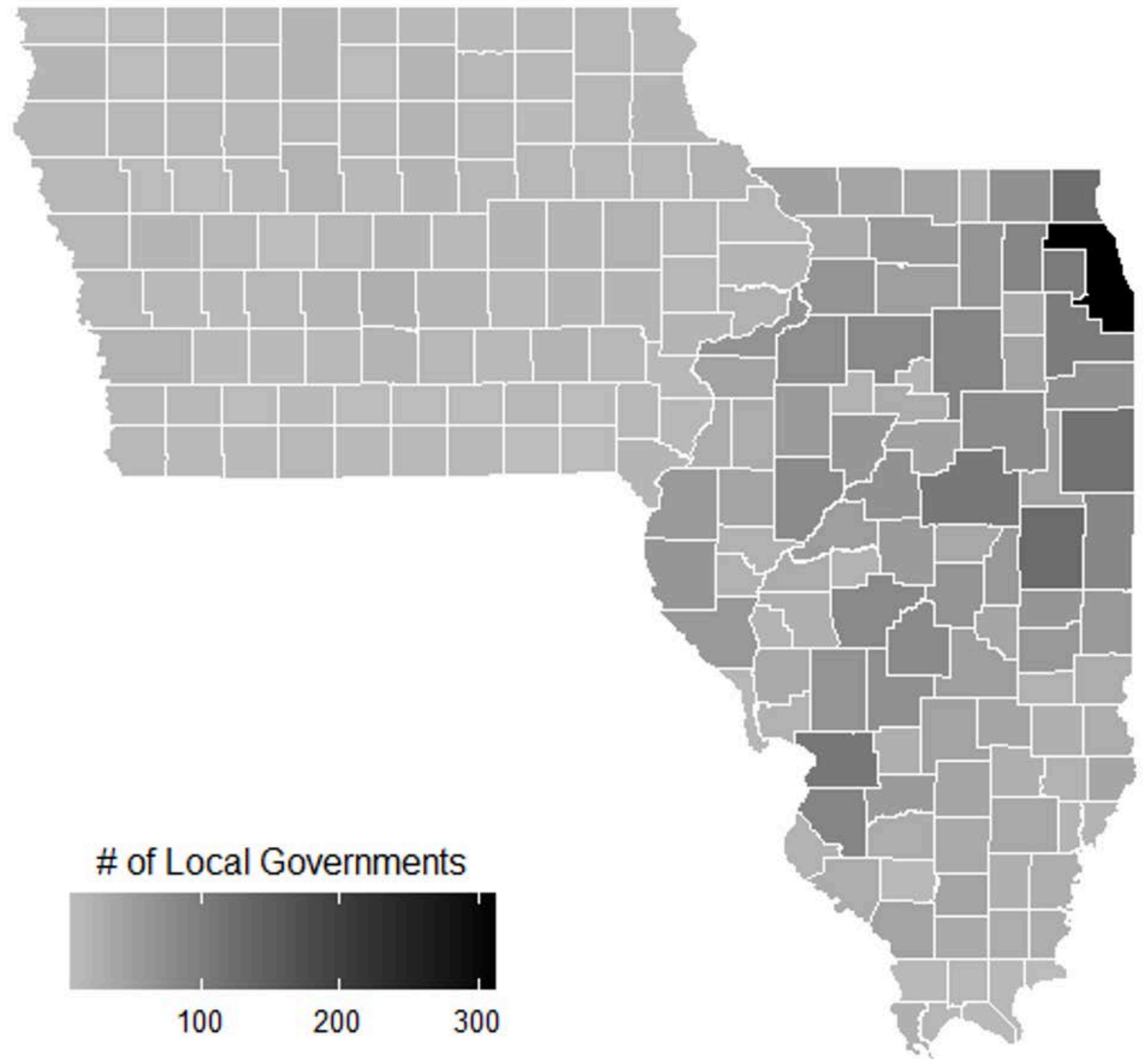


IMB in Drought Tweets

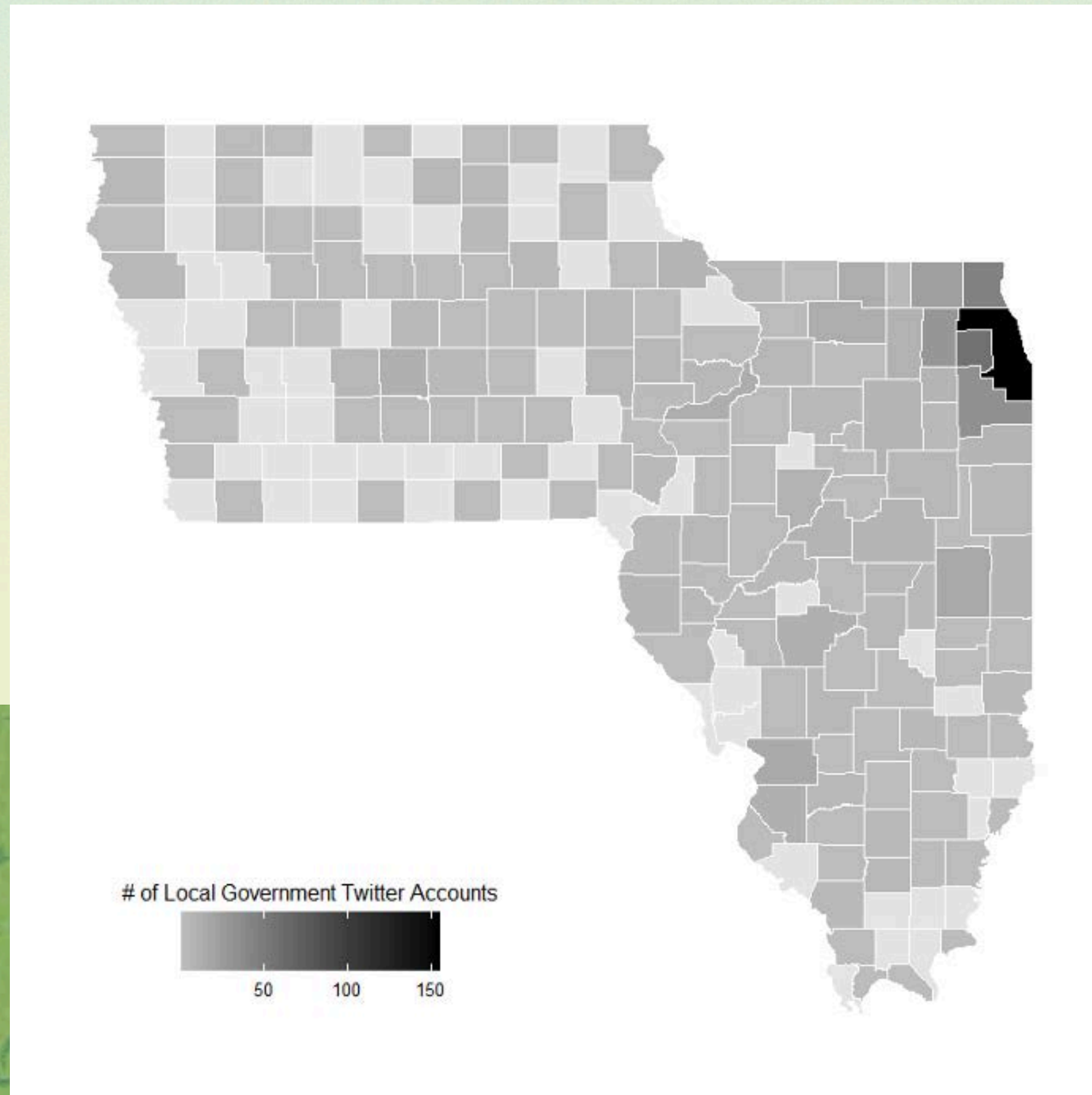


- 
- In the case of water providers during the 2012–2017 California drought...
 - district messaging overwhelmingly focused on voluntary behavior change (94% of Tweets)
 - Basic information and skills were the most commonly used, with providers rarely employing best practices of combining information, motivation, and behavioral skills

**Iowa and Illinois
Local
Governments**



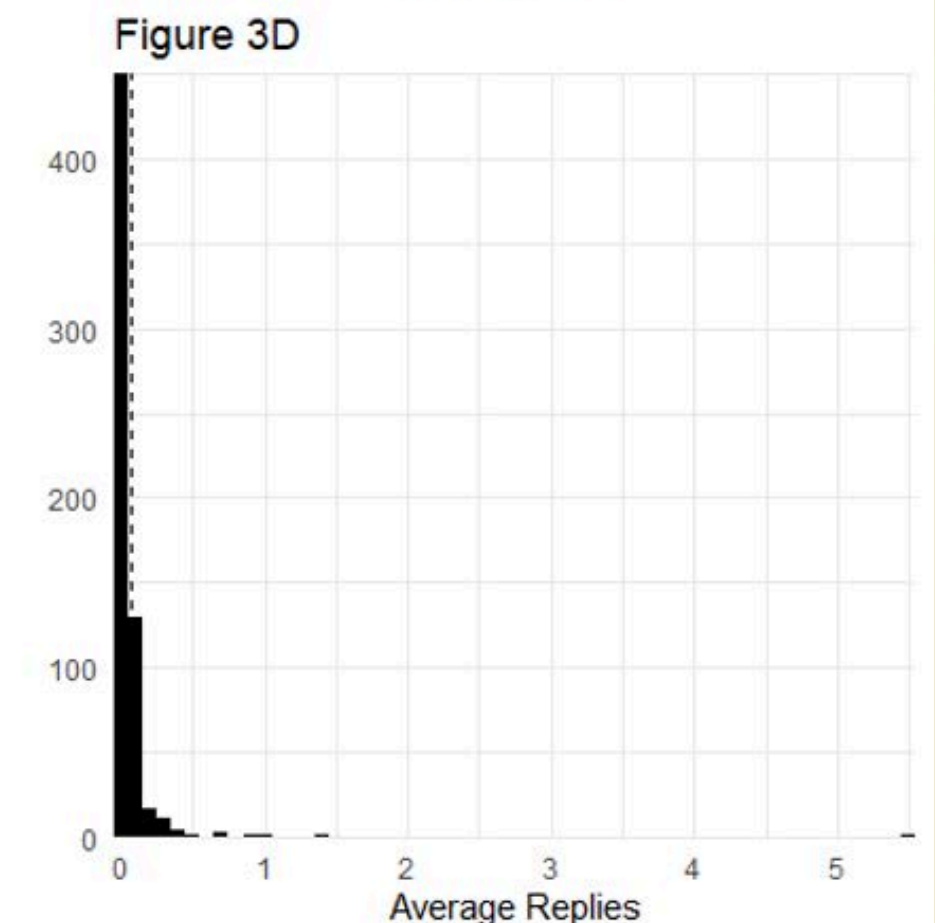
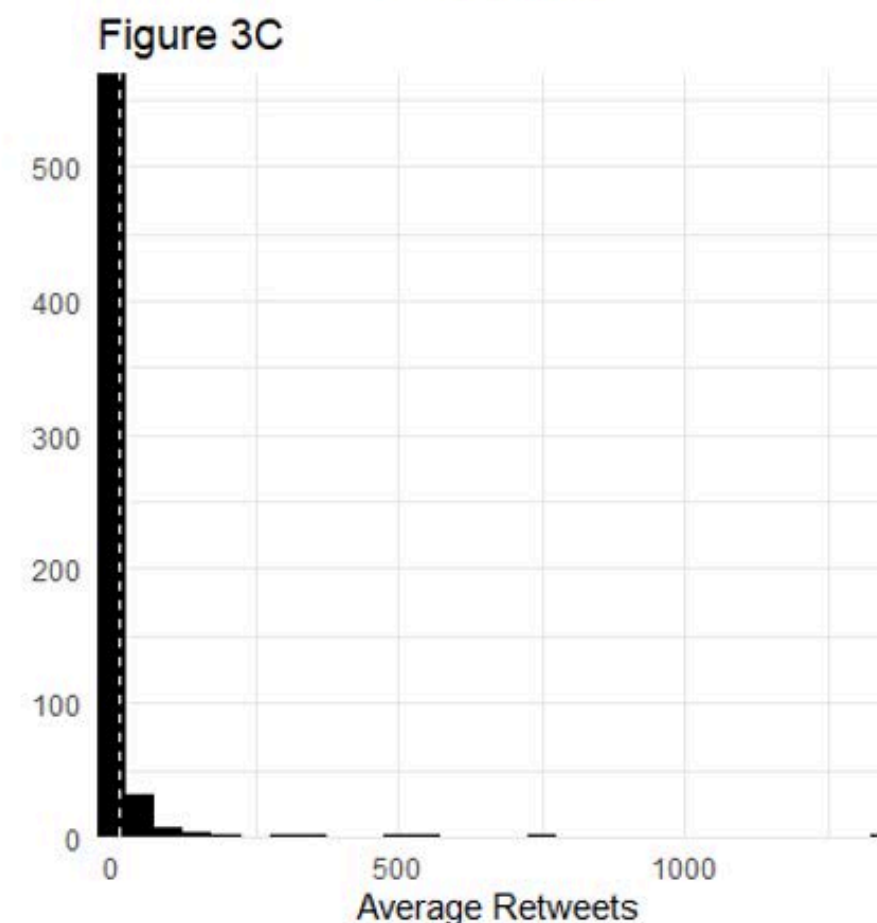
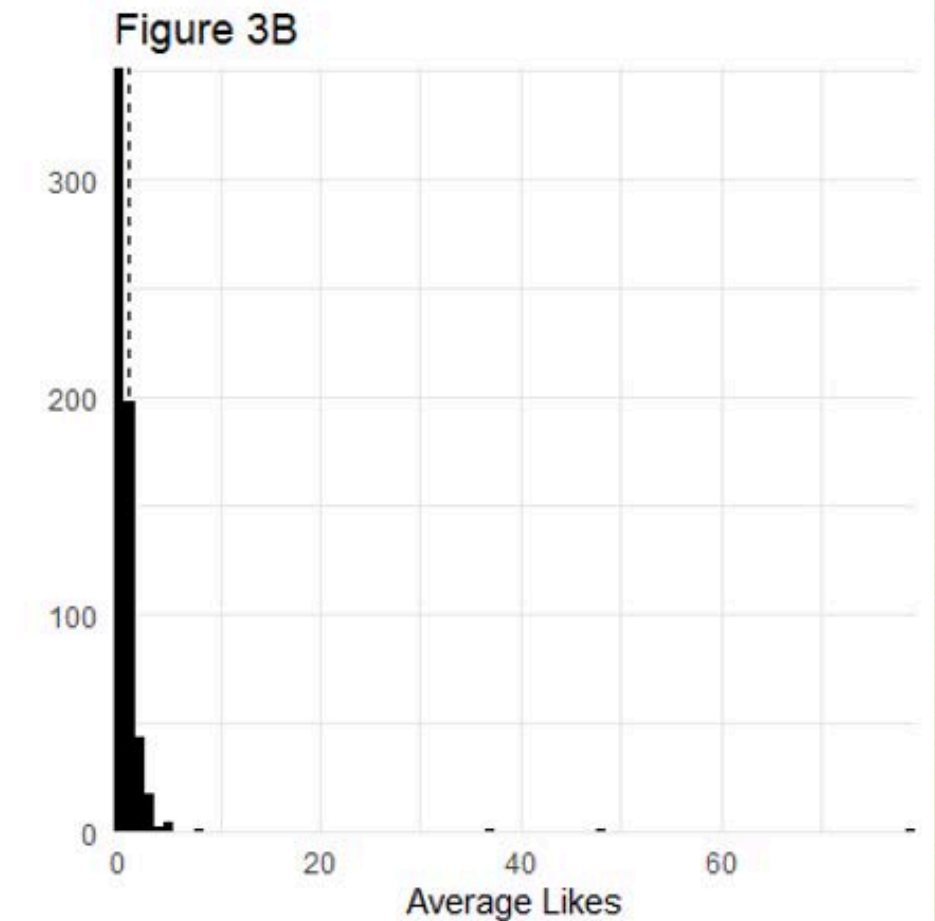
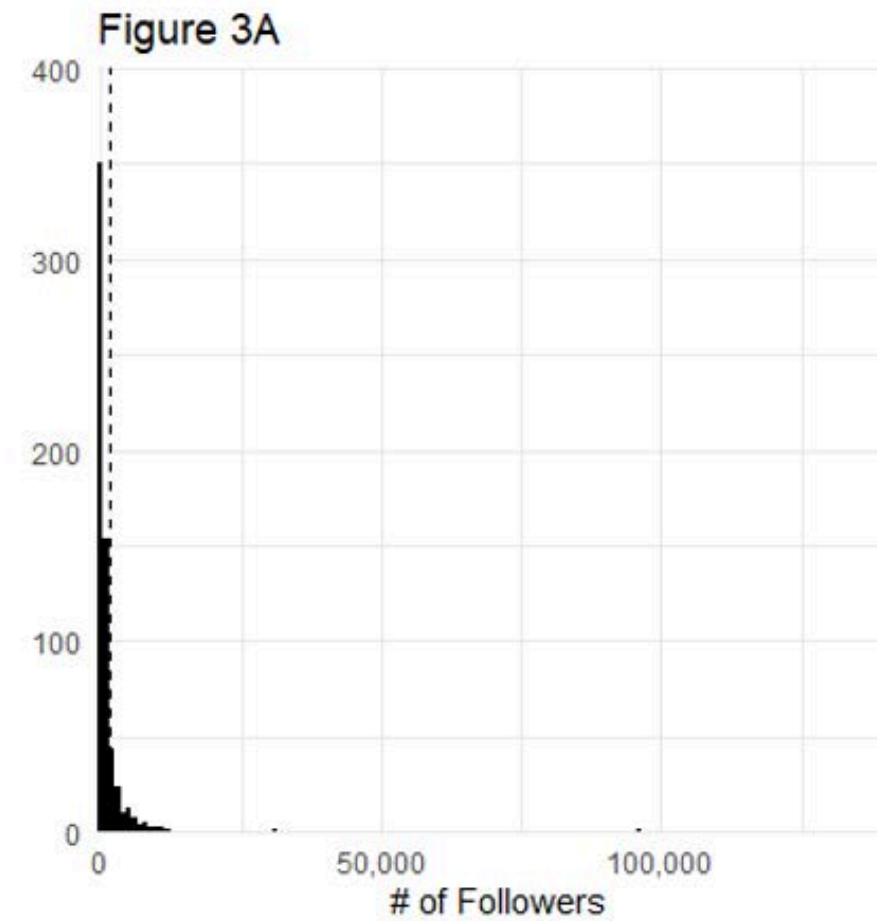
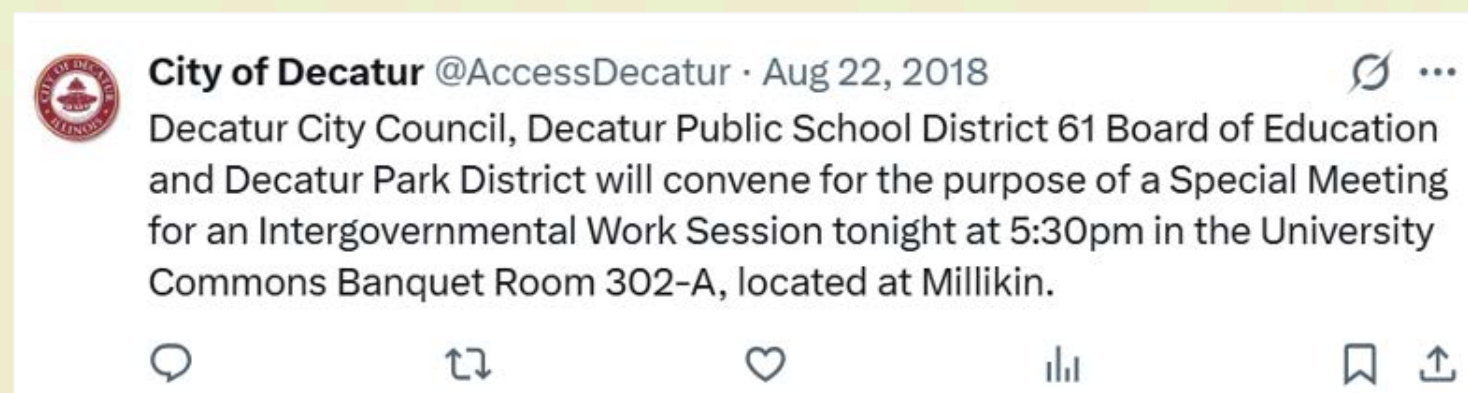
Illinois and Iowa Local Governments with Twitter Handles



Illinois and Iowa Data

- **2015 to 2025 Tweets**
- **All handles pulled using US Census**
 - **735 handles (619 active)**
- **840k total tweets**
 - **Mean per account: 1,353**
 - **Median per account: 592**
- **Larger municipality more likely to be on Twitter and more likely to be active**

Engagement ... it is lacking



Environmental or Not: Tweets focused on human impacts and interactions with the natural world

Only around 15% of tweets in our training dataset are categorized as environmental



Illinois and Iowa Tweet Categorization

- **Issue Area**
- **Intent***
- **Intensity**



EDUCATION



INFORMATION

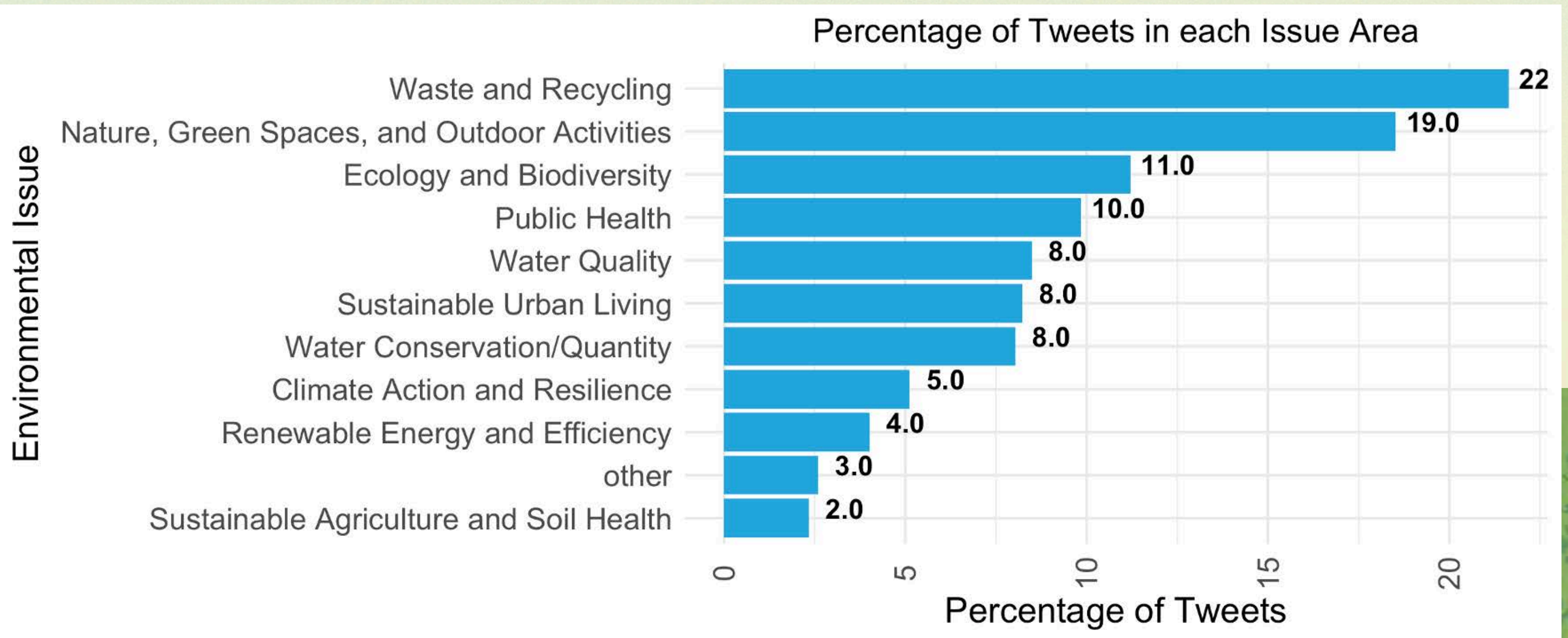


SELF-
PROMOTION

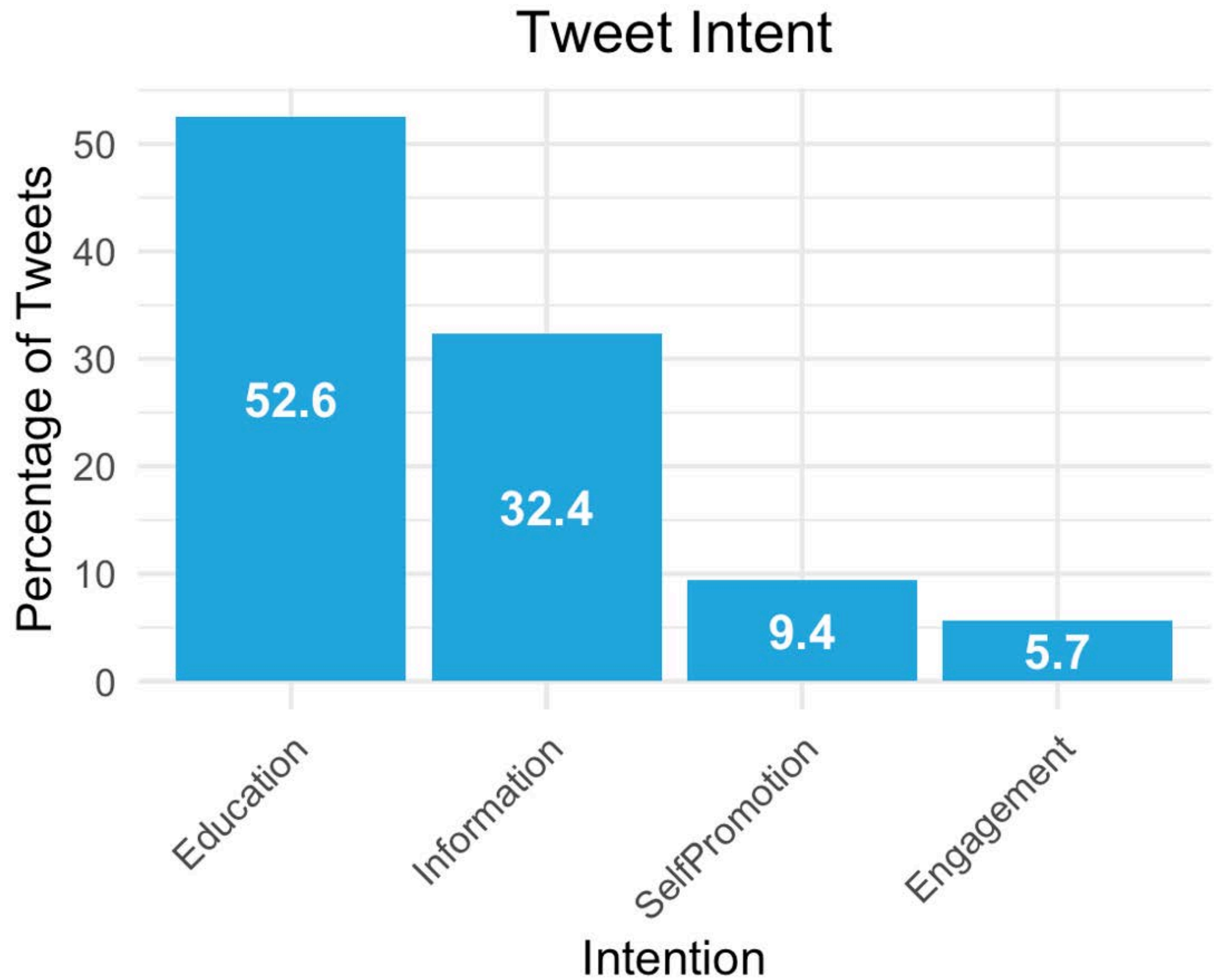


ENGAGEMENT

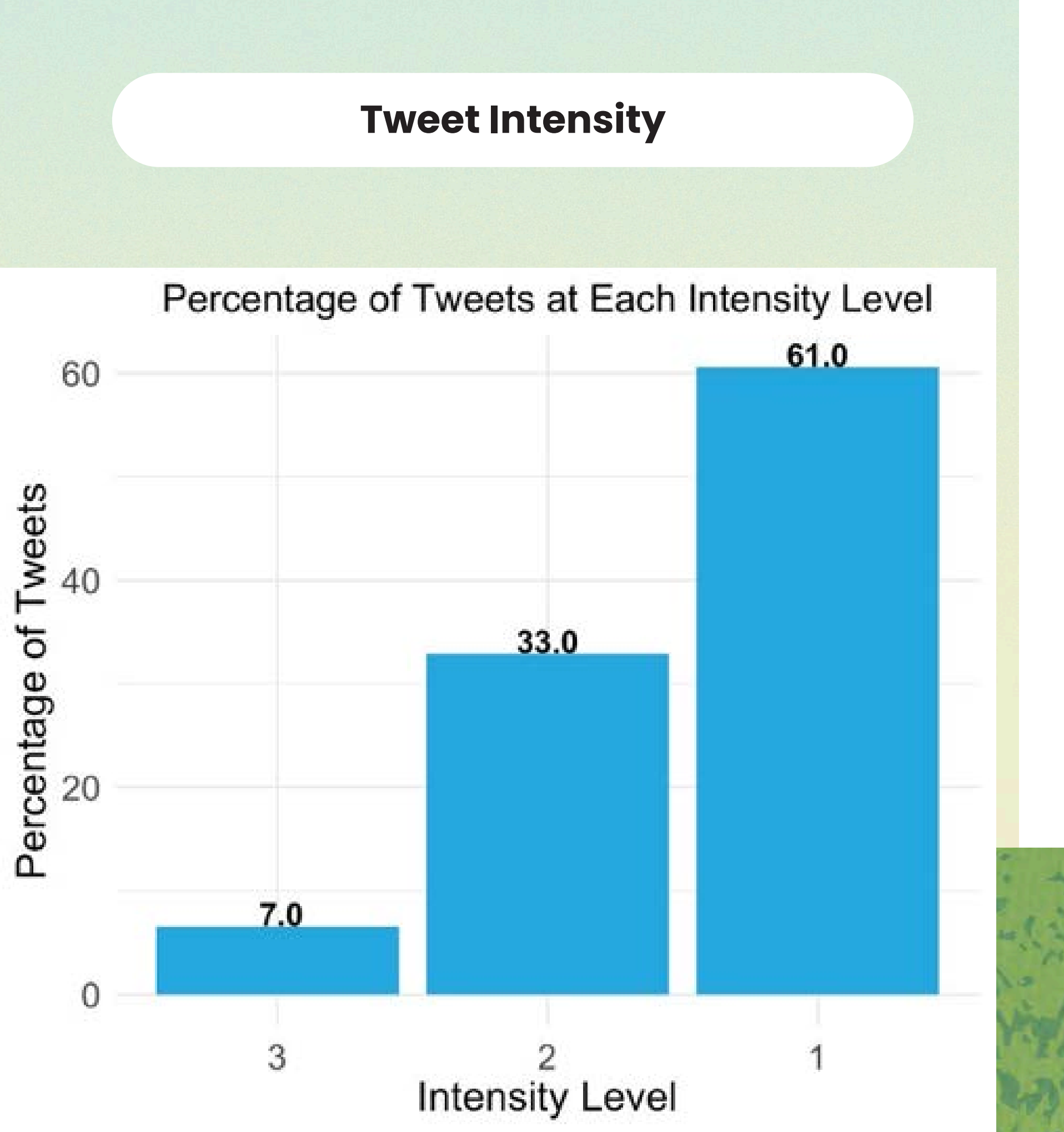
Environmental Issue Area



Tweet Intent

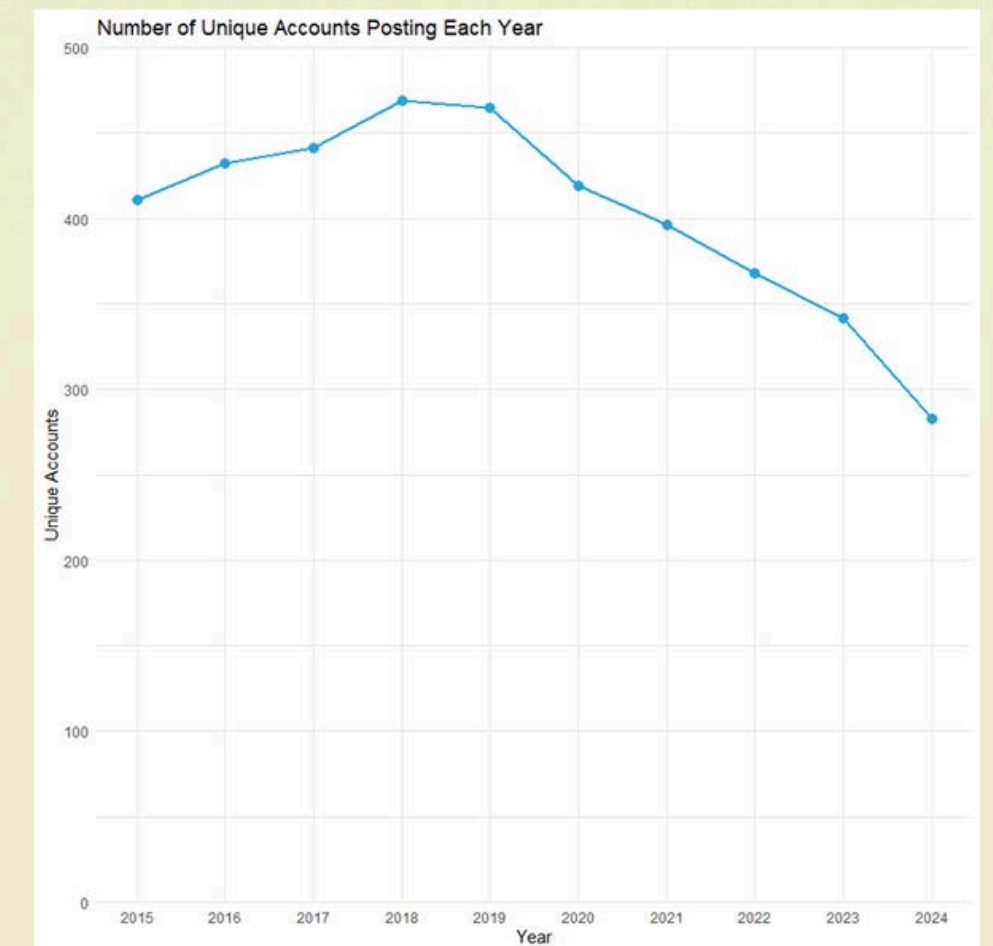
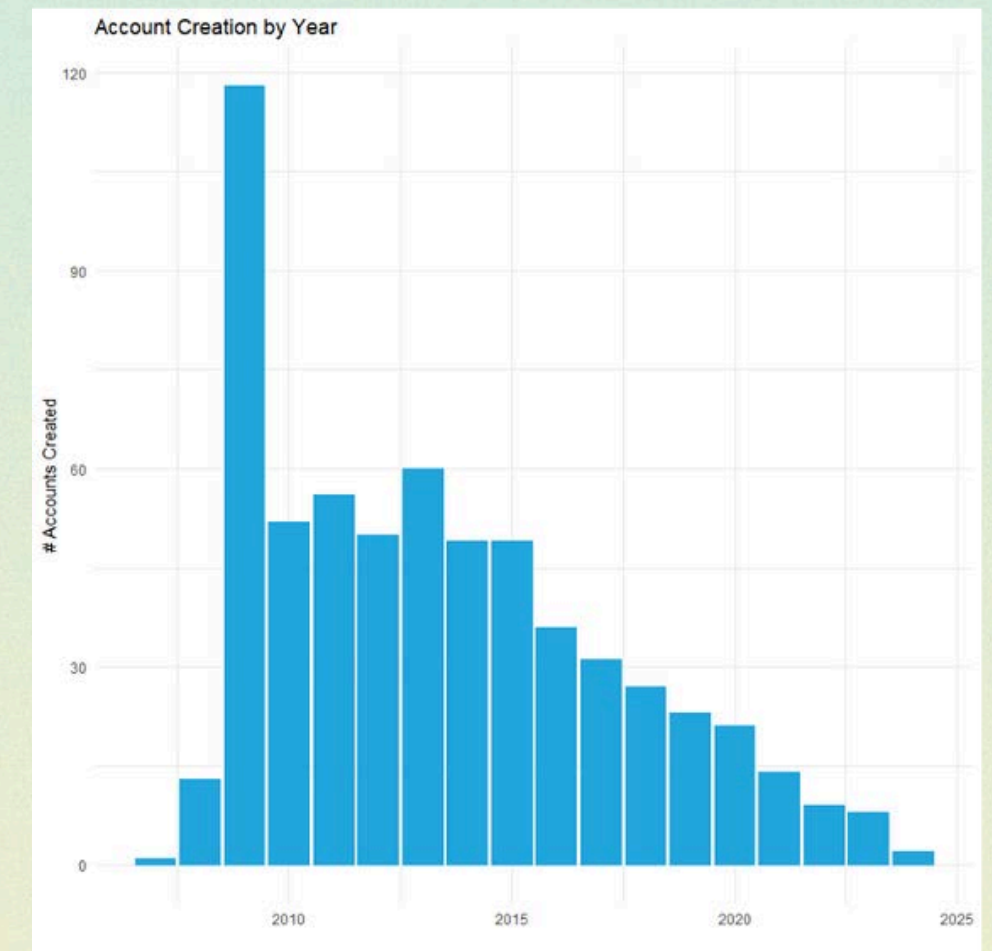


Intensity Level	Sample Tweet
1: Neutral: Factual updates, no emotional tone.	“Garbage collection delayed one day.”
2: Mild Encouragement: Positive framing, awareness.	“Here are some great tips for saving water in winter.”
3: Strong Advocacy: Emotional, urgent, persuasive.	“Say NO to single-use plastics! Sign the petition today!”



Limitations and Future Research

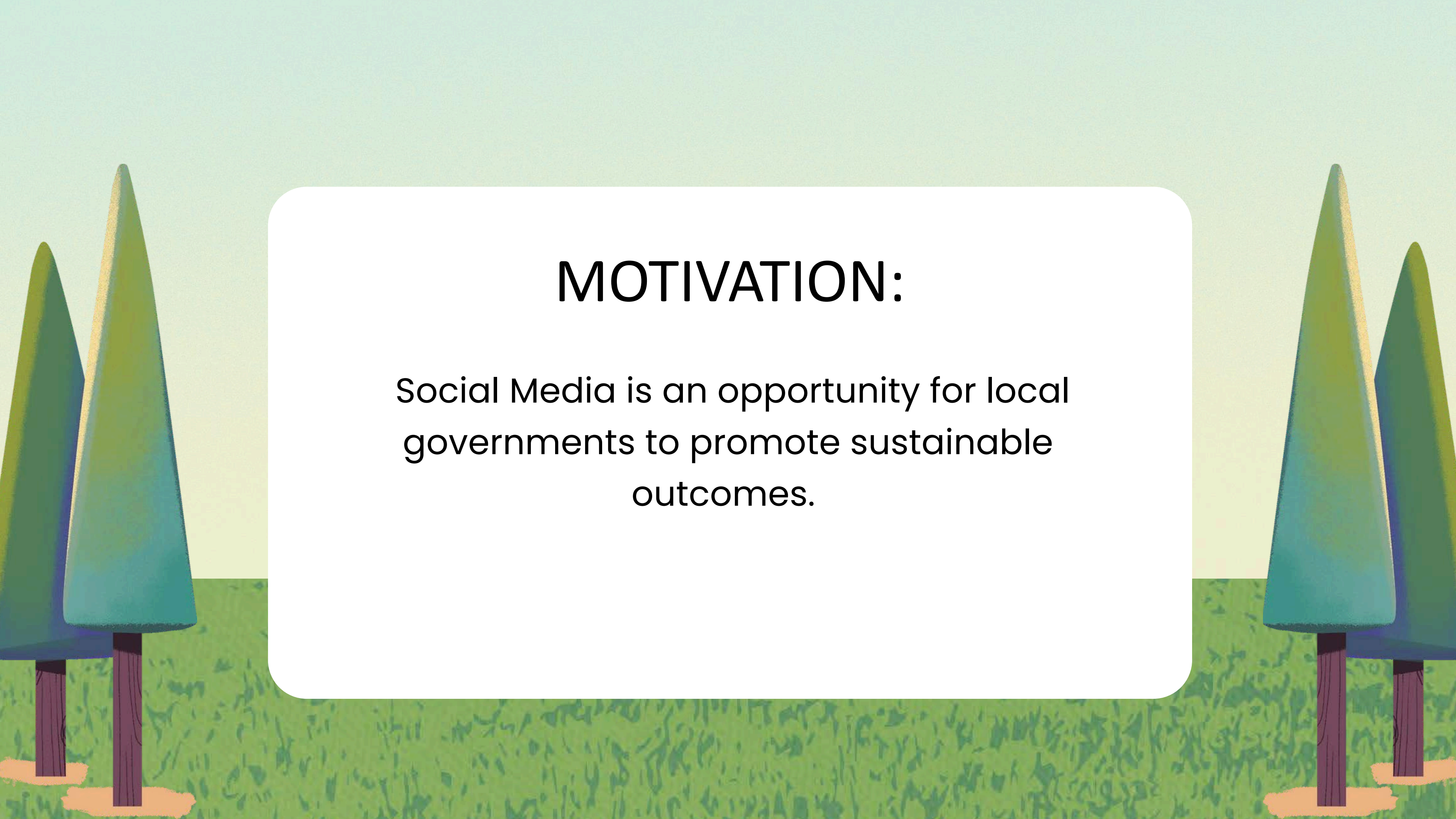
- **Twitter (X) is not representative of SM and usage is declining**
- **Analysis based only on text**
- **Comparison to national sample**
- **More work needed to understand what predicts effective messaging**
- **Alternative Machine Learning Models**



Conclusions from Data

- **Government tweets mostly inform or remind, rarely advocating for action or engagement**
- **Use of social media is inconsistent**
- **Motivational messaging is not consistent with best practices from behavioral science**
- **Social media is often a missed opportunity for local governments to help accomplish broader goals**





MOTIVATION:

Social Media is an opportunity for local governments to promote sustainable outcomes.

PEOPLE ACT WHEN THEY:



Feel connected to the issue



See their peers doing it



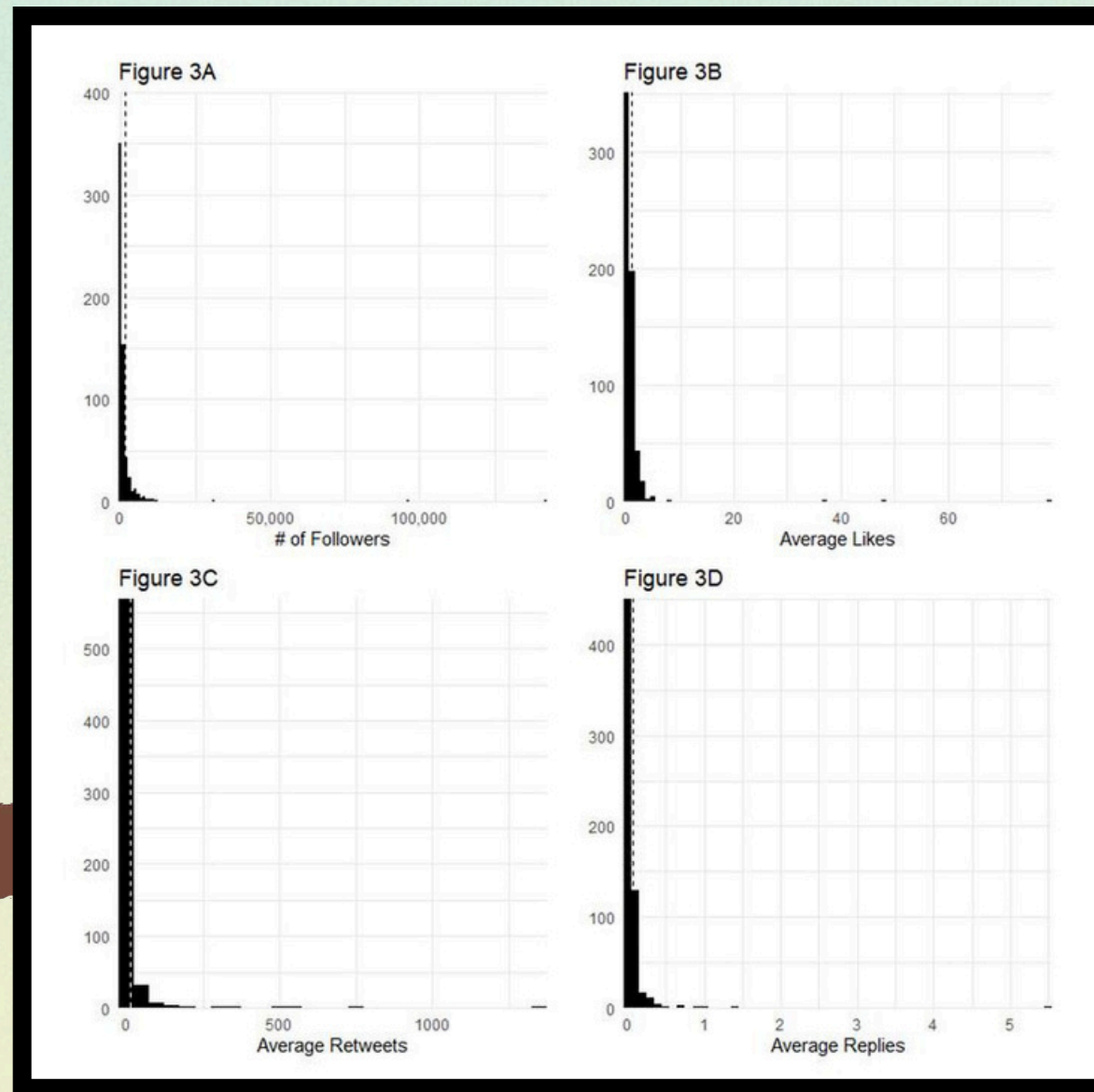
Believe the action is easy and worth doing

Great sustainability communication doesn't just instruct, it inspires!

THE PROBLEM:

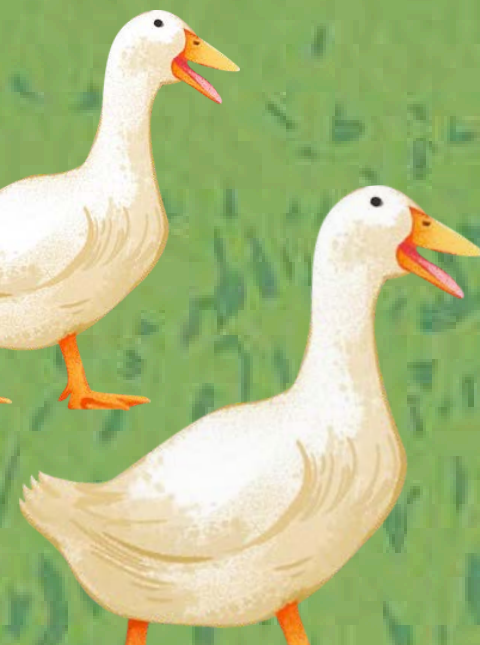
- **Local governments are underusing SM for community connection and behavior change.**

- Many LG accounts use social media like a bulletin board
- They rarely use platform-specific strengths or engaging and resonant content.
- They miss opportunities to build community, foster trust, highlight local features and **promote sustainability!**



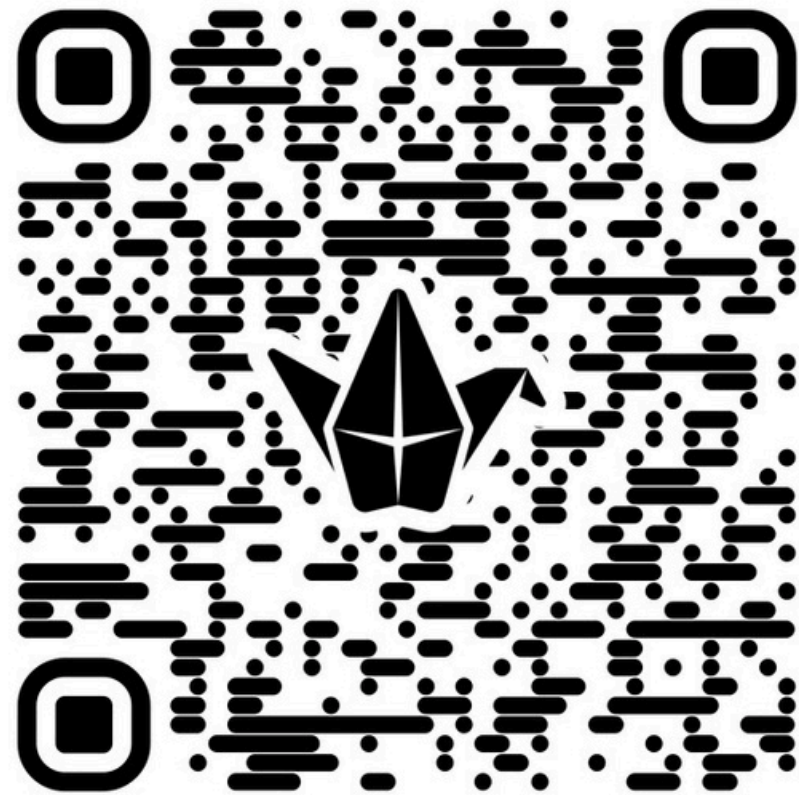
City of Decatur @AccessDecatur · Aug 22, 2018

Decatur City Council, Decatur Public School District 61 Board of Education and Decatur Park District will convene for the purpose of a Special Meeting for an Intergovernmental Work Session tonight at 5:30pm in the University Commons Banquet Room 302-A, located at Millikin.



ACTIVITY!

What is a social media post that has made you feel motivated to act 'sustainably'? Why did it make you feel this way?



Add a sticky note to this padlet!



WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

- **LGs have the ability to shape how people see and act on sustainability, both online and offline.**
 - Sustainability is local: different communities face different challenges and have unique capacities.
 - Social Media makes sustainability visible and accessible.
 - Behavior change often happens at the community level
 - Especially through shared identity, and social norms.





WHAT DOESN'T WORK?

- **Information dumps, generic content, and guilt are generally ineffective.**

- Instruction alone doesn't always inspire action.
 - People don't act merely because of facts. They act when they feel, relate, and when it makes them feel like they belong.
- Emotional fatigue + apathy are real barriers.
 - Hope framing vs Fear framing

WHAT *DOES* WORK?

- **Engaging locally-based and community orientated content**

- I know it's a hard ask
- Show, don't just tell
- Use hope, identity, community pride, humor, trends
 - Storytelling
 - Make people feel like they are part of the story
- Trust building
 - "We're in this together"
- Aesthetic cohesion and consistency
- Use platform specific strengths —>



Platform	Primary age group Demographic	Strengths	Best Practices
Facebook	30-65+	Community engagement, event promotion, information dissemination	Use Facebook's reach to promote community events and initiatives. Engage with residents through interactive content and timely responses.
Instagram	18-34	Visual storytelling, 'brand' identity building, community building	Use Instagram's visual nature to showcase local sustainability efforts. Maintain consistent branding and engage with followers through interactive features like polls and live video sessions.
Twitter (X)	25-49	Real-time updates, public discourse, policy announcements	Use Twitter for timely announcements and to participate in broader civic conversations. Engage with the community through replies and retweets.
TikTok	16-24	Trend engagement, peer influence, short educational content	Use TikTok to create engaging and relatable content while aligning with current trends or using popular audios, video formats.. influence local sustainability efforts through storytelling, peer influence and community participation.
YouTube	Broad (25-55 core)	In-depth storytelling and educational content, archival	Use YouTube for comprehensive storytelling and educational content. that highlights local sustainability initiatives and provides resources for community involvement.

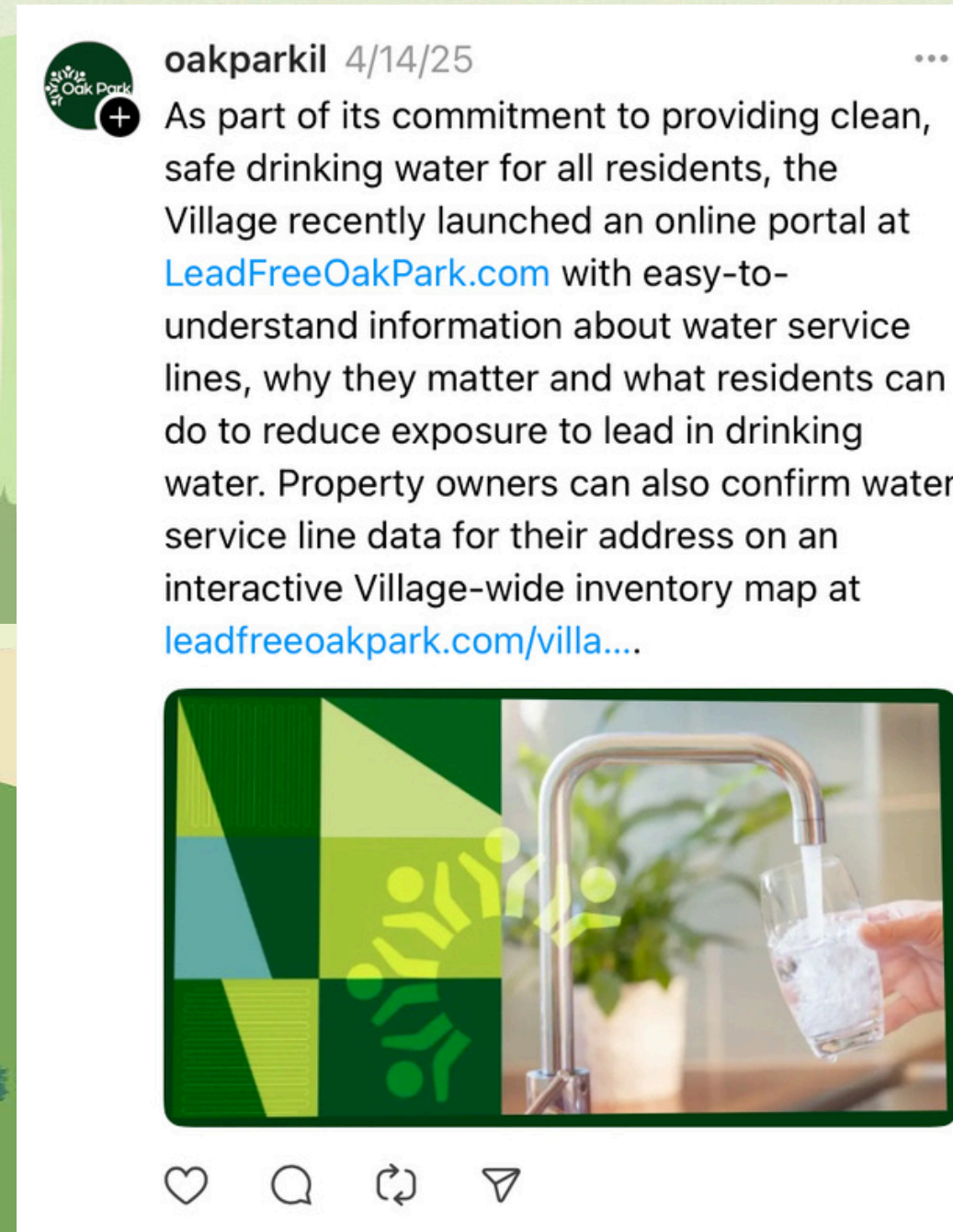


LOCALIZE IT!

- **Content should feel like *this place*.**
 - Use local landmarks, highlight local environmental features and community members.
 - Collaborate with residents
 - Representation matters!
 - Inspire action offline and in the community, through individual AND collective efforts.
 - What makes your town special? What sort of content would you engage with as a resident? What does sustainability look like to your town?

REAL EXAMPLES

Let's analyze what works... and what doesn't through real local examples.



WHAT LGs COULD BE DOING

- Strategic SM means using platforms to build connection, action, and trust.
 - Modeling sustainable norms
 - Fostering place-based environmental identity
 - Telling community stories
 - Posting consistently with warmth, relevance, and good design
 - Create space for resident voice and participation
 - Note feedback + adapt over time



A colorful illustration of a farm scene. In the background, there is a yellow barn with a brown roof and a brown picket fence. A large green tree stands on the right side. In the foreground, three white geese are walking on the left, and a man in a red shirt and blue pants is milking a brown cow on the right. A white dove is flying in the sky.

Thank you!

Please stay in touch.

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Hallela - z2004513@student.niu.edu

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