



# Positive Psychology: Agency & the History of Human Progress

## COVID-19 | Women's Literature | African American Progress

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### Background

#### Defining Agency in the Context of Human Progress:

"Agency" is composed of the conceptual triad of efficacy, optimism, and imagination. All three of these concepts must be activated and visibly active for agency to occur. Based on how active these observed agentic tendencies are, we can then determine whether a studied subset experiences progress or stagnation.

#### Our Research into COVID-19:

I analyzed the pattern and trends of word usage within the categories of agency, efficacy, imagination, and optimism. More specifically, I compared the surrounding months (between January 2020 and April 2022) of March 2020 (peak of COVID-19 outbreak).

#### Our Research into Women's Literature:

I conducted an exploratory analysis into whether agency is expressed through female literature. Though our team does not have a definitive hypothesis established, some topics we are interested in exploring include: deciding factors on the popularity of books; how agentic/communal word usage changes over time; shifts in genres and contextual causes; the switch from male to female dominance in literature - both in sales and popularity.

#### Our Research into African American Progress:

I explored changes in significant markers for human progress including the following: education, income, population, healthcare, and voting.

### Methodology

#### COVID-19 Data:

This lexicon was created using words from all major US magazines published between January of 2020 and April of 2022. I then cross compared the list with our dictionary of each of the four categories to see the frequency of how many times each word came up. I deemed a "notable" increase percentage when the increase was > 0.001%

#### Women's Literature:

Because the data is entirely exploratory, there was no definitive methodology our team used to collect data. We are beginning this process by analyzing the first 20 pages (the exposition) for the top 10 novels by women and men from the years 1950-2022. Through this, we hope to create a large database of words to test our hypotheses. The list itself (1440 books) was created using the criterion below:

- US Authors (primary): top 200 books list from goodreads.com and NYT bestsellers list; wrote the book while living in the US or were born in the US; US citizenship was prioritized
- Non-US Authors (special case): book had a recognizable or significant impact on US culture; book was in a top 10 list
- Criterion for non-novel choices: diary/volume/feminist work that provides direct insight into US culture at the time

I am still compiling the list, but in total, I have scanned 654 documents, which gave us 3,849,249 words to analyze. For men this included 2,068,863 words and for women this included 1,780,386 words. In the results section, I will display some of the preliminary data that my data collection has revealed.

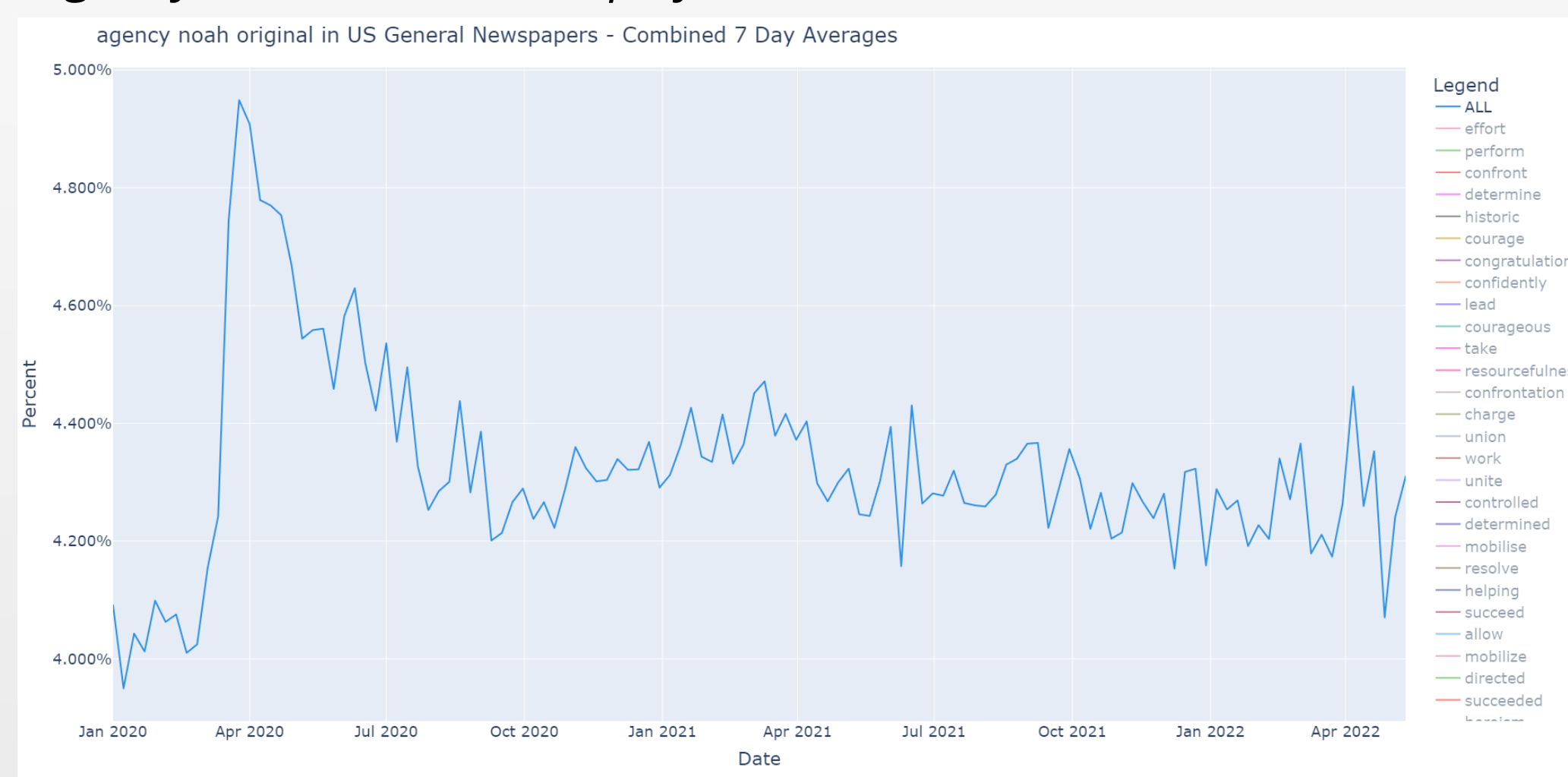
#### African American Progress:

Because this data is entirely exploratory, there was no definitive methodology we used to collect data. I began this process by analyzing census data collected from the year 1900-present. I was particularly looking at data from significant progress markers of agency including education, income, population, healthcare, and voting rights.

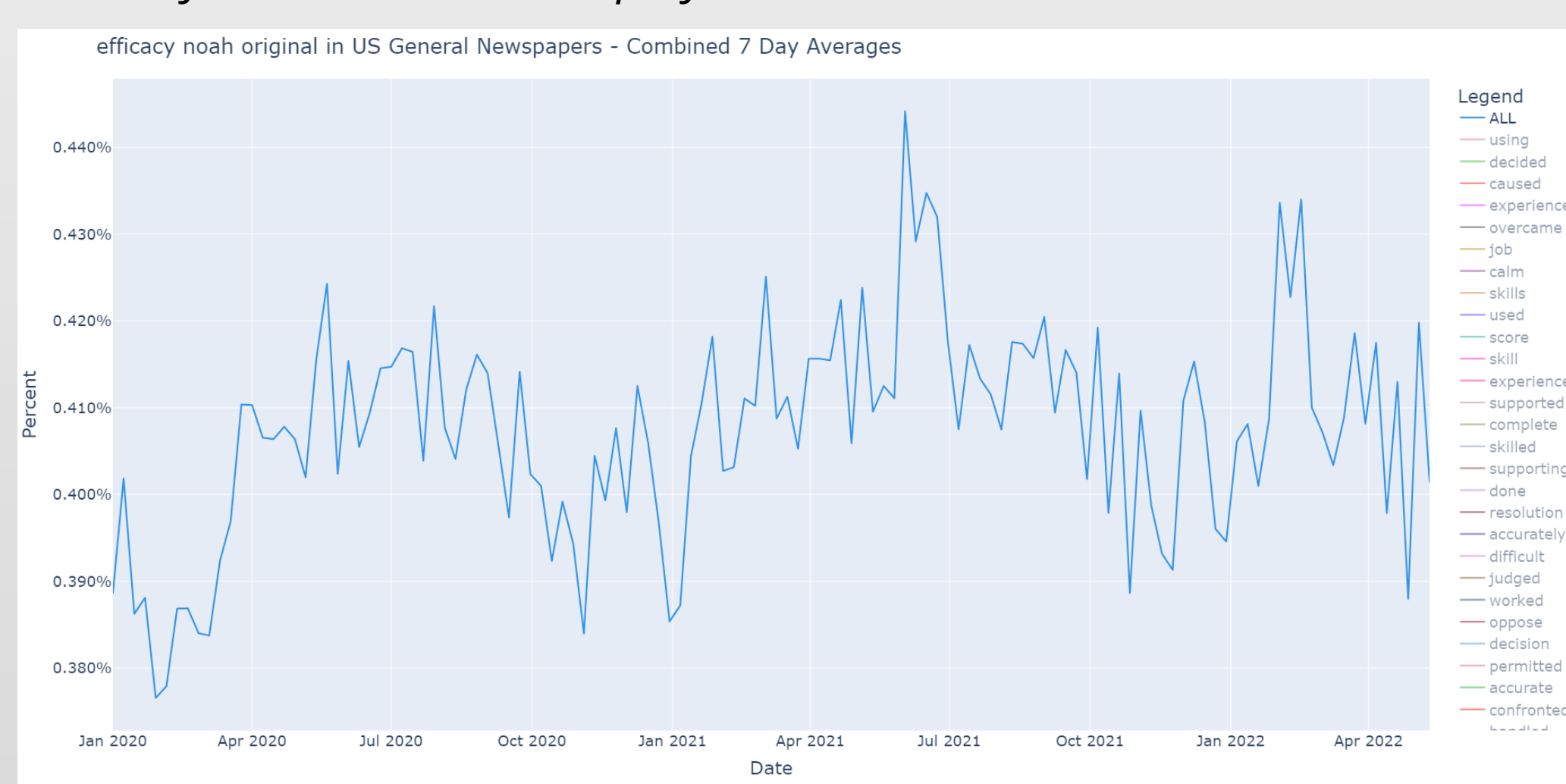
### COVID-19 Results

#### COVID-19 Data:

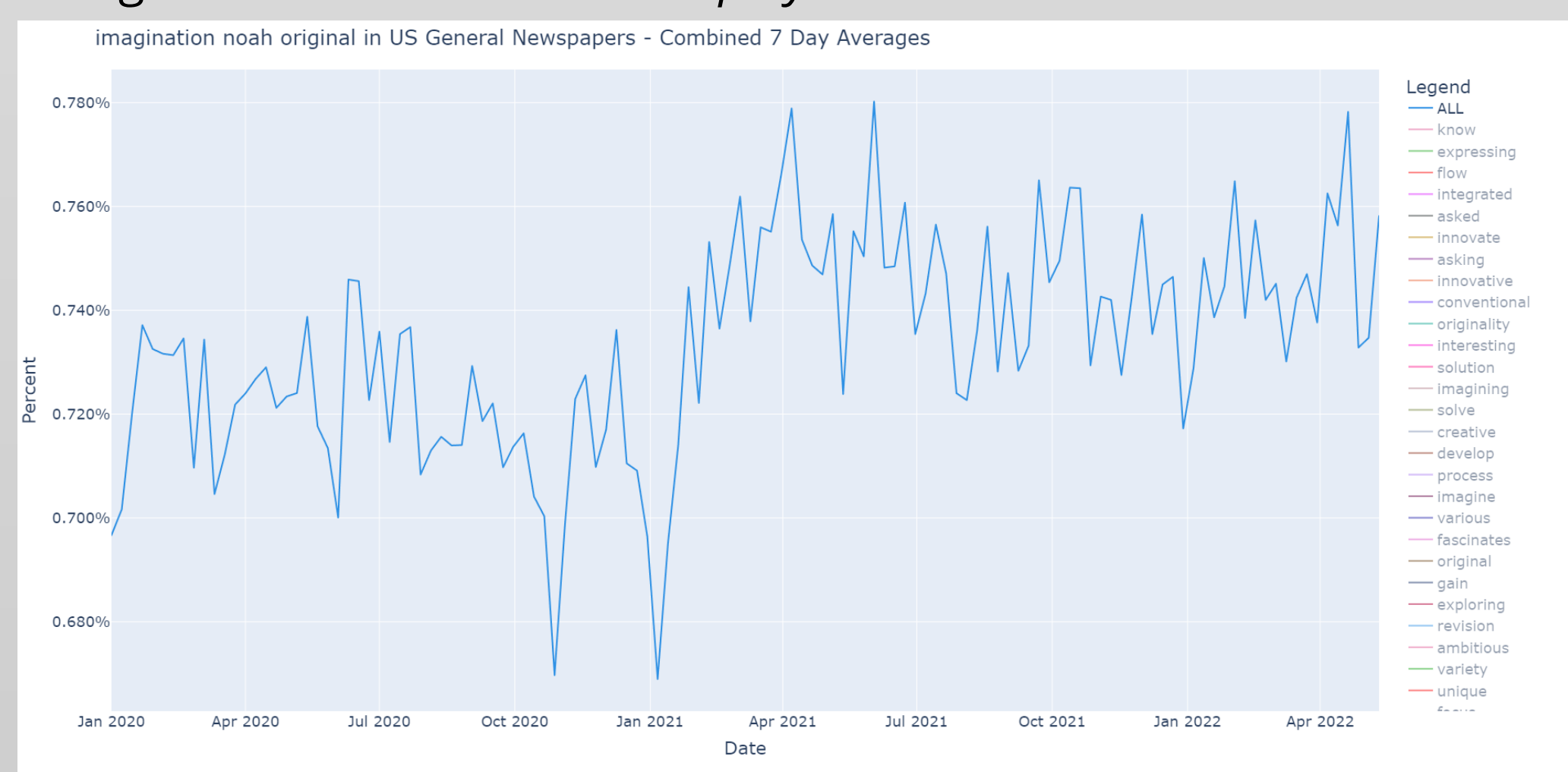
##### Agency Words: 35.92% displayed a notable increase



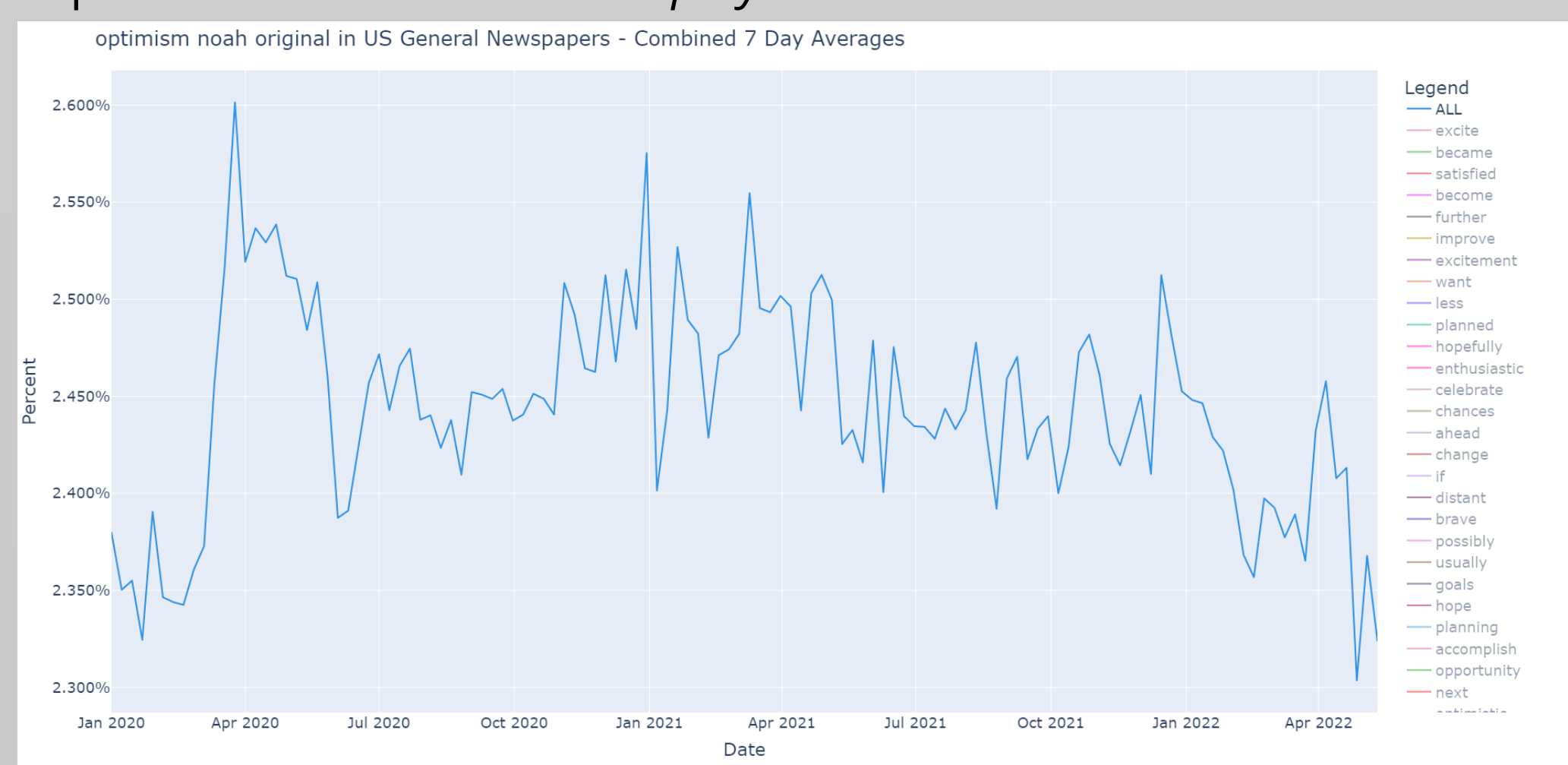
##### Efficacy Words: 34.21% displayed a notable increase



##### Imagination Words: 16.30% displayed a notable increase



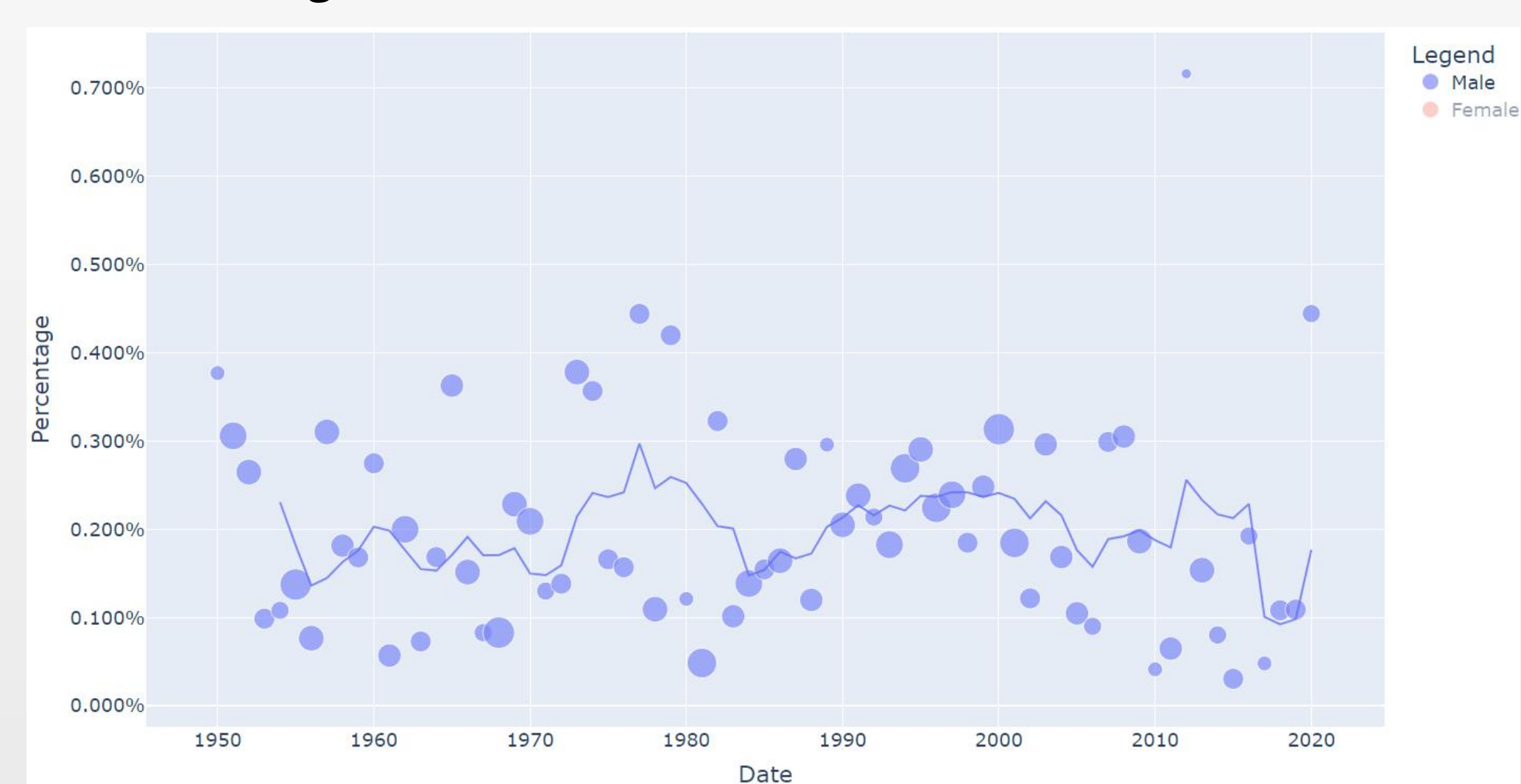
##### Optimism Words: 33.33% displayed a notable increase



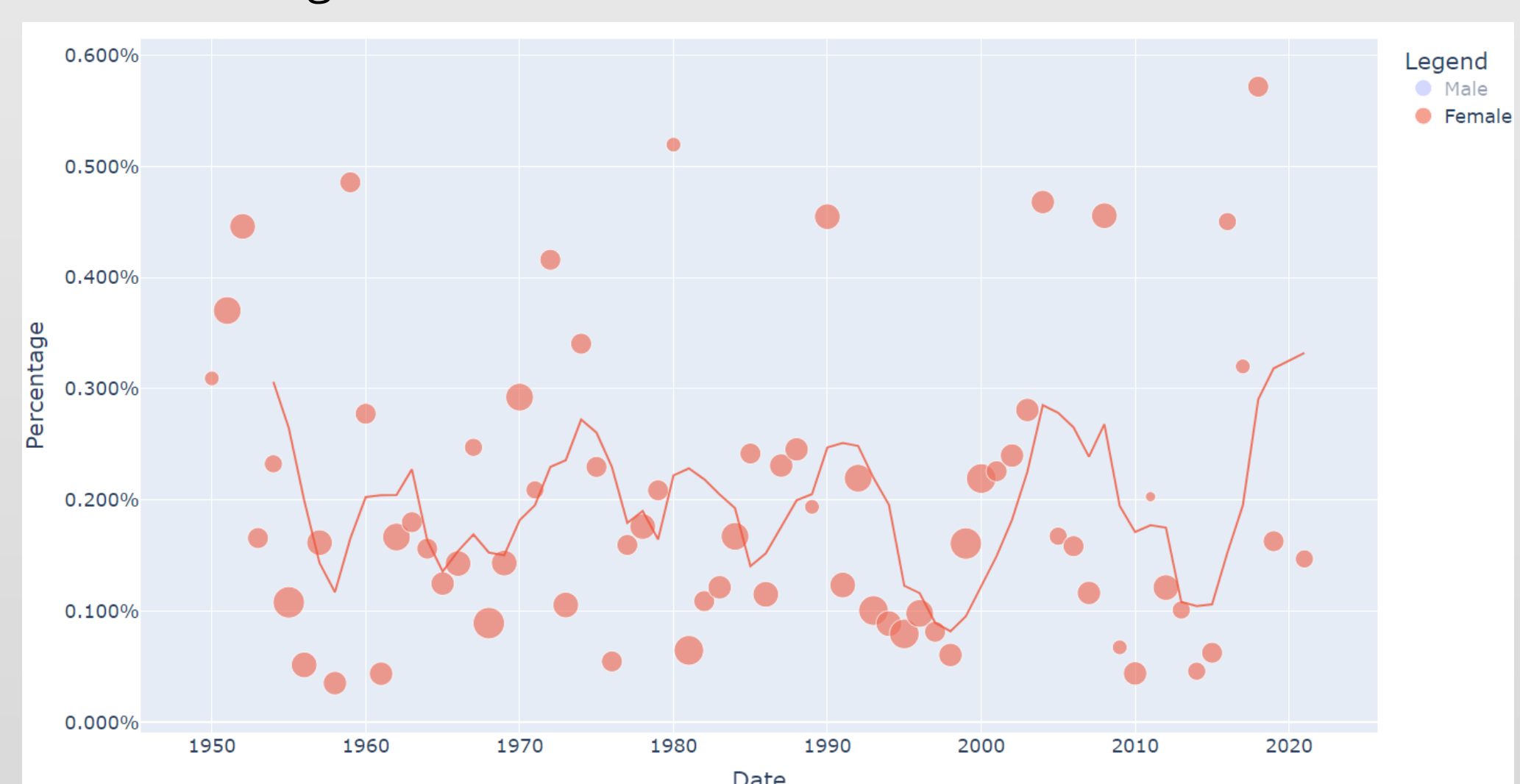
### Women's Literature Results

#### Women's Literature Data:

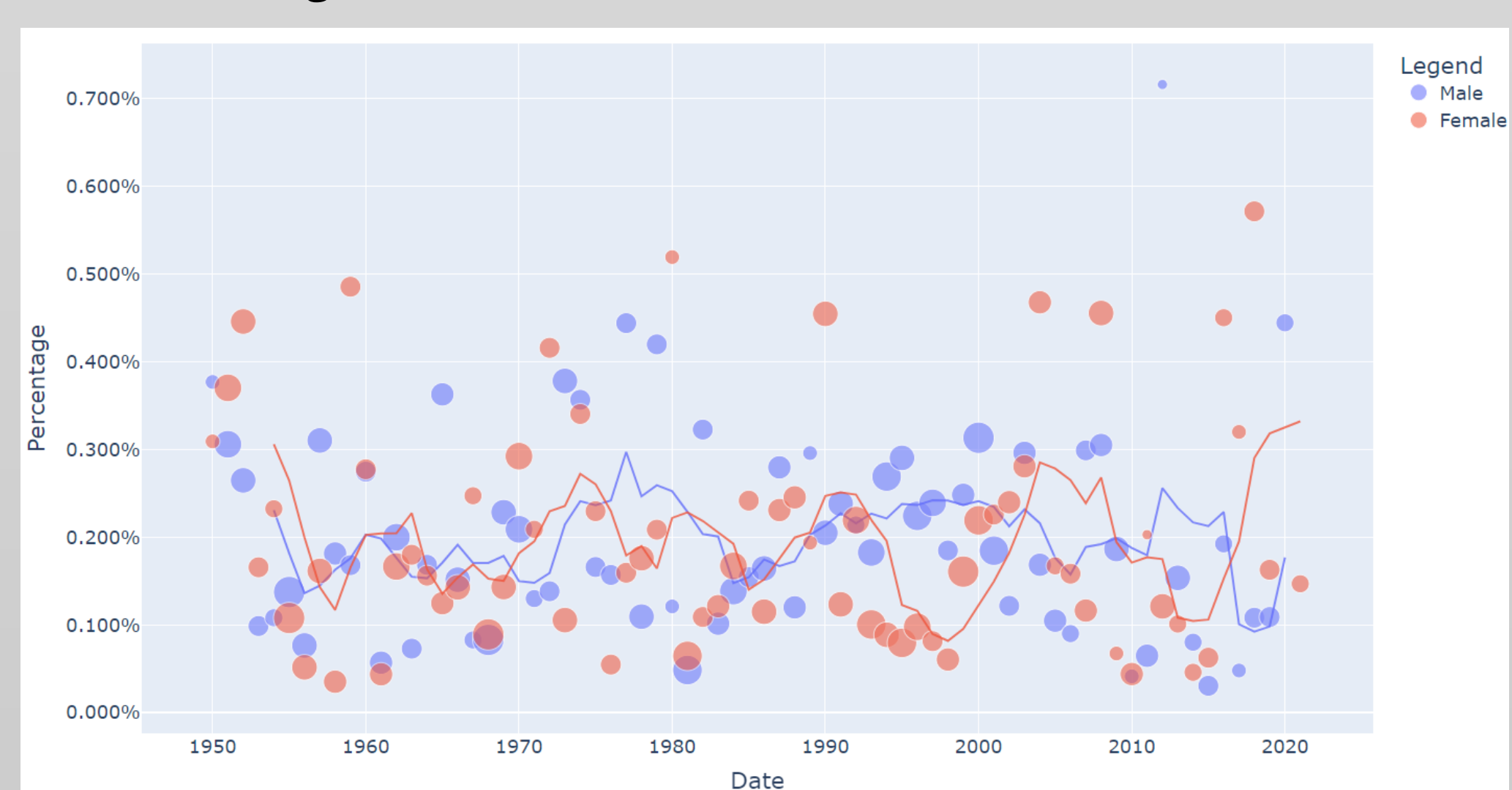
##### Percent of Agentic Words in Each Year for Men



##### Percent of Agentic Words in Each Year for Women



##### Percent of Agentic Words in Each Year for Men & Women



### COVID-19 Discussion

#### COVID-19 Data:

From my preliminary data collection, there seemed to be a significant increase in agentic, efficacy, and optimistic dictionary usage. All of which displayed that nearly 30% of their words displayed a notable increase. The exception was imaginative word usage in which only 16.30% of words showed a notable increase. Though there are 100+ words in each dictionary, I displayed the total variance per category.

### Women's Literature Discussion

#### Women's Literature Data:

This preliminary research is still in its infancy. However, I was able to find a few notable trends in the data. This has resulted in the following inferences:

- Female use of agentic words increased and decreased in an oscillating pattern around every 10 years
- Agentic word usage peaked for women in the early 2020s while for men they peaked in the late 1970s
- Through my construction of the book list, I noticed several patterns:
  - Women increased in popularity concurrently with the rise of sales in Young Adult (YA) and fantasy novels in the early 2000s - this remains in effect
  - The genre of domestic fiction rose dramatically after "Fascinating Womanhood" by Helen Andelin was published in 1963; however, the genre itself shifted dramatically depending on the time period in which it was written
  - Men dominated the market with science fiction during the early second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and then switched to horror in the later half of the century
  - Authors that remained on the charts for the longest time often had to define the genre itself (Isaac Asimov, Stephen King, Robert Jordan, Beverly Cleary, J.K. Rowling)

#### Caveats to Our Data:

Although lexicon analysis provides our team with meaningful exploratory insights, review of other data (i.e., news articles, data on women's organizations and leadership) might enrich our view and provide a more comprehensive view of women's agency over time.

#### Moving Forward:

This fall, I will work on completing our list of books so that we can have as much data as possible to run within our programs. Before all the data is acquired, we will finalize hypotheses to test and examine.

### African American Progress Discussion

#### Preliminary Data Findings:

Though I have yet to run formal tests on the collected data, I have already begun to make a few inferences:

- Significant increase in progress began in the 1960s, with the introduction of the Civil Rights Act of 1960 (in all the categories)
- Testing rates and graduation rates improved dramatically up until the early 2000s, when they suddenly began to decline
- COVID-19 pandemic affected African American males the most out of any other race/gender - both in terms of unemployment rates and decreasing life expectancy rates

### Acknowledgements

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