The past and the future of the PostgreSQL community

Tomas Vondra, EDB, <tomas@vondra.me>

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Who here uses Postgres just because it's cheaper, and who actually cares about the "open source" idea?

What I'm going to talk about ...

- history
  - Where did the community come from?
  - How did that affect the structure of the community?
- current state
  - State of the community.
  - The ~~arcane~~ traditional development process.
- future
  - Where will we (maybe) go?
  - How will we adjust the development process?

history

the distant past

- 1986 - POSTGRES project starts at Berkeley
  - evolution of earlier research projects, various improvements over the years
- 1995 - released as Postgres95 as open source
  - a lot of improvements on top of POSTGRES, reworks, portability, stability, ...
- 1996 - maybe Postgres95 was not such a great idea?
  - rename to PostgreSQL, CVS history starts at 1996/07
  - this is where the core team comes from - the OGs of PostgreSQL
  - they did everything, they were the only people willing to do so
  - also beginning of the original development process

not so distant past

2004 - buildfarm started (https://buildfarm.postgresql.org)

2008 - maybe we should stop doing waterfall development

- very unpredictable releases (not even a waterfall, really)
- invention of commit fests (monthly cycles, wiki)

2009 - let's organize commitfests better (not just a wiki page)

- https://commitfest.postgresql.org/ [old]

2010 - let's switch from CVS to git

- https://lwn.net/Articles/409635/

1: emergent structure of the community

- things evolved a certain way, which determines the structure
    - a "green field" design might look differently, but well ...
- things are not set in stone
    - core team does not want to do everything - CoC, committers, ...
    - many independent bits of the community (PUGs, various related projects, ...)
- it's not about "just core"
    - relationship of multiple orgs, many other parts of the community
- people are aware of the challenges

2: emergent development process

- originally not "arcane", this is how distributed development worked
    - mailing lists were the common way to share patches (e.g. kernel)
- we did actually do various improvements over the years
    - commitfests were a huge step forward
    - regular release cycle was another major improvement
    - the commitfest app (CFA) helped a lot too
- mailing lists are not the norm anymore, so seems a bit arcane
    - people no longer know how to do this, may need some adjustments
    - do the proposed changes address the actual bottlenecks?

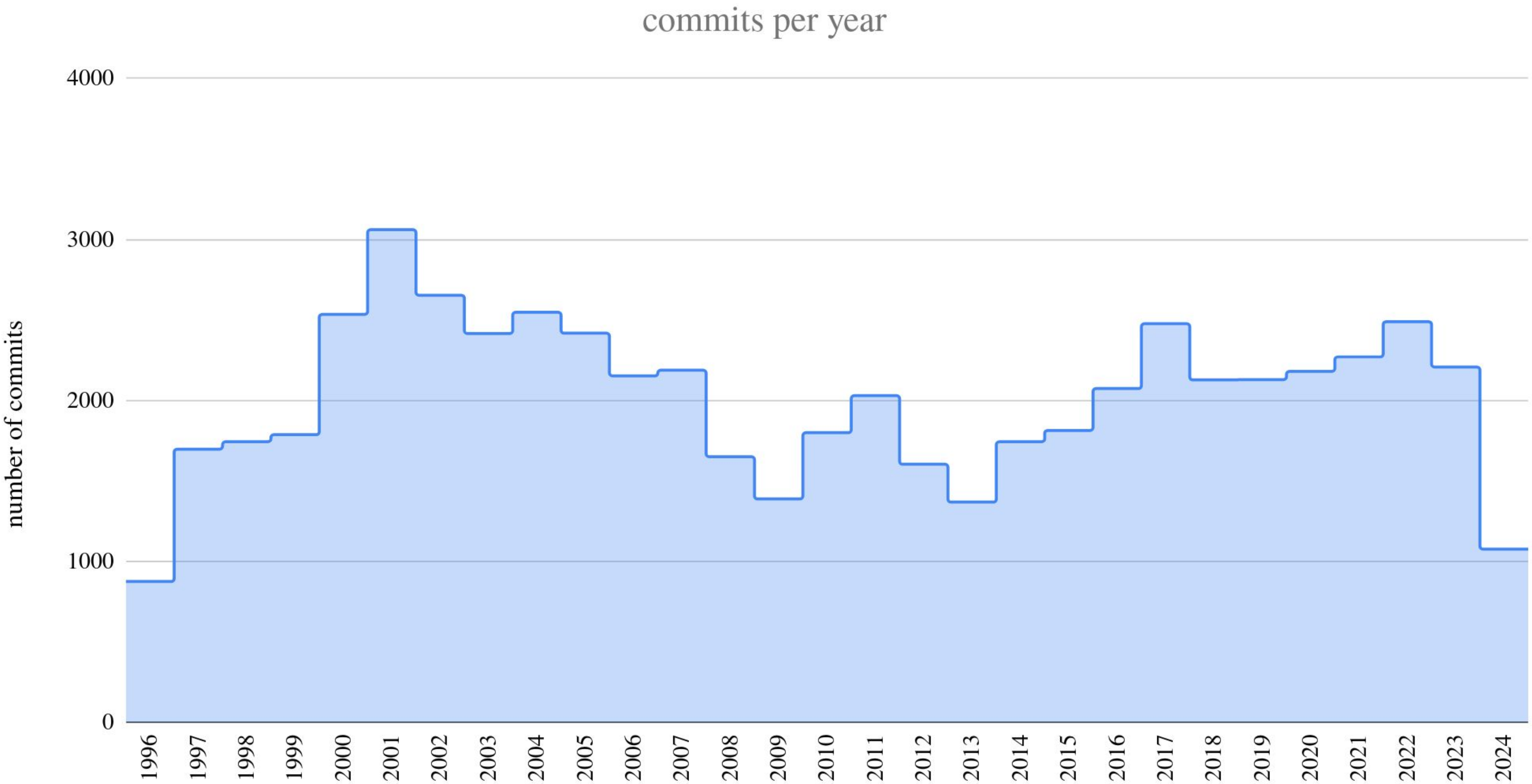
3: our tools precede a lot of modern stuff

- e.g. github started in 2010
- also a lot of stuff (mostly) died meanwhile
  - think about sourceforge, pgFoundry (GForge), ...
- there still is not a 100% replacement for some stuff
  - buildfarm (our custom CI) runs on many exotic platforms
  - still nothing comparable
- reasons to prefer running our stuff on our infrastructure
  - e.g. legal reasons, commercial interests, other risks, ...

4: what about companies?

- I didn't actually mention any companies backing this, right?
  - no company controls the project
  - many companies contribute
- There are other projects like this (kernel, Libre Office, ...) of course.
- But many projects are dominated by a single company.
  - That has risks, of course. Also, makes it harder to collaborate in open source manner.
- PostgreSQL is super-friendly to forks (and we have quite a few).
  - A bit ironic that we have very few issues with forks. It's a strength.

present


commits per year
number of commits
4000
3000
2000
1000
0
1996
1997
1998
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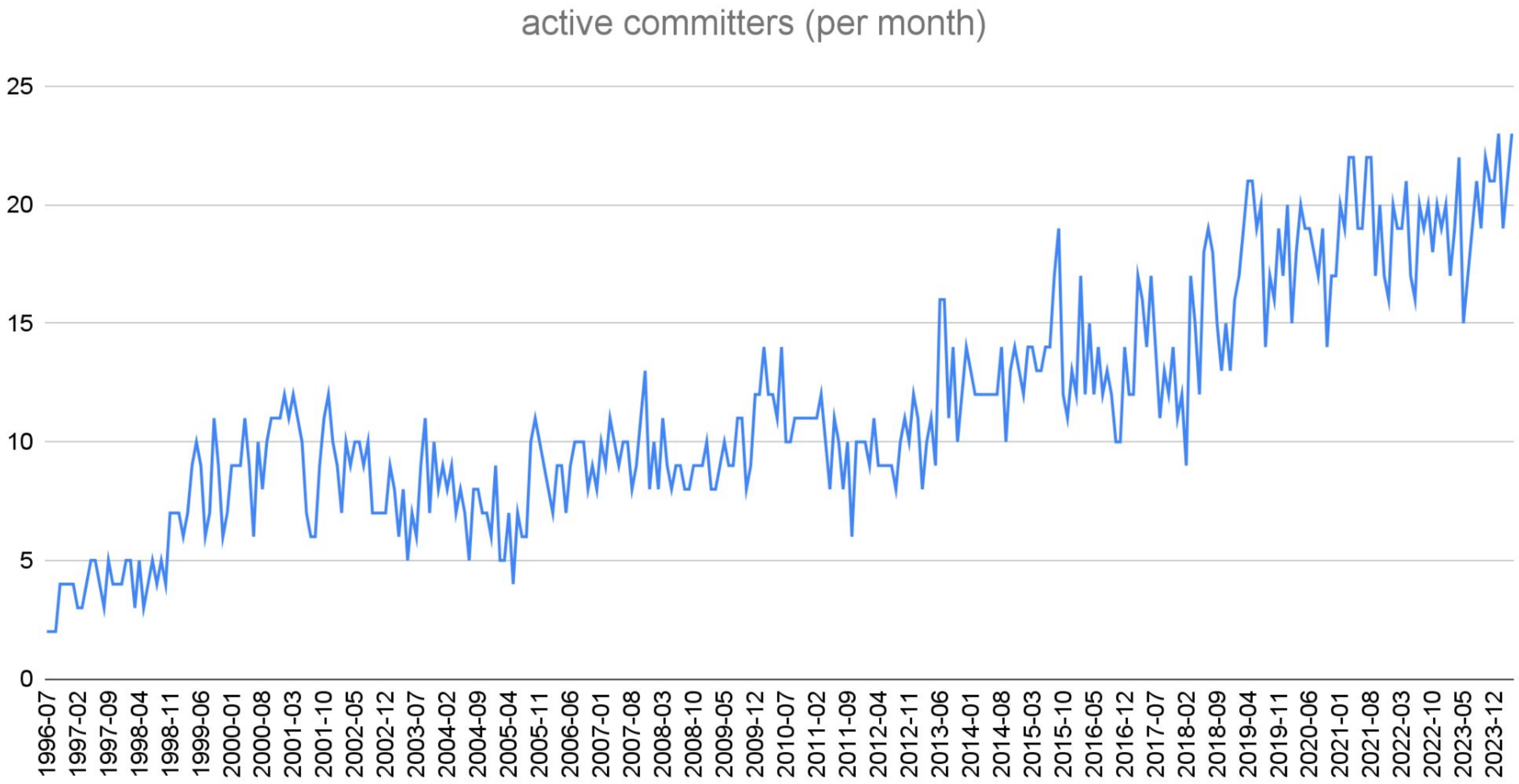
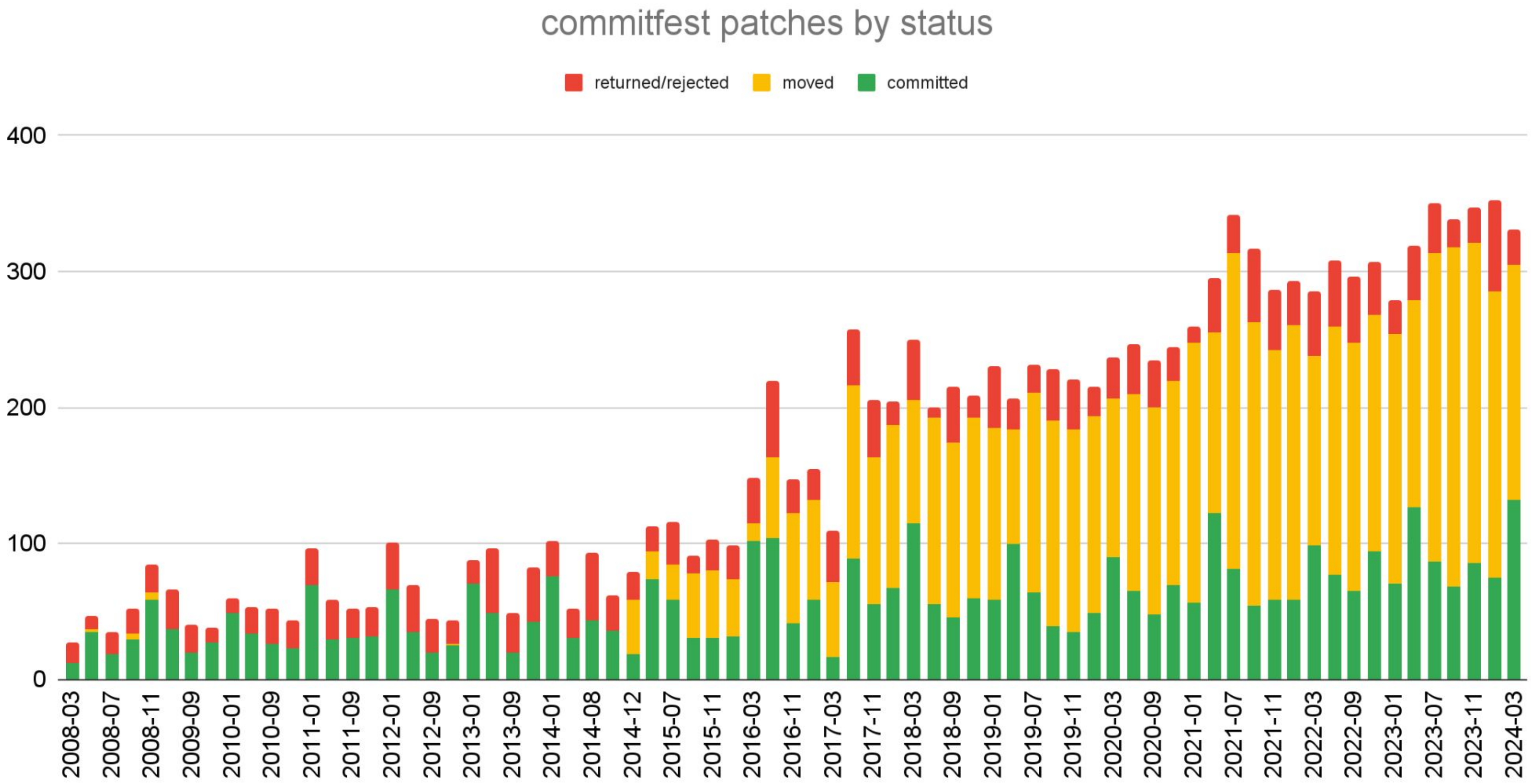

active committers (per month)


commitfest patches by status
returned/rejected
moved
committed
400
300
200
100
0
2008-03
2008-07
2008-11
2009-09
2010-01
2010-09
2011-01
2011-09
2012-01
2012-09
2013-01
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2020-09
2021-01
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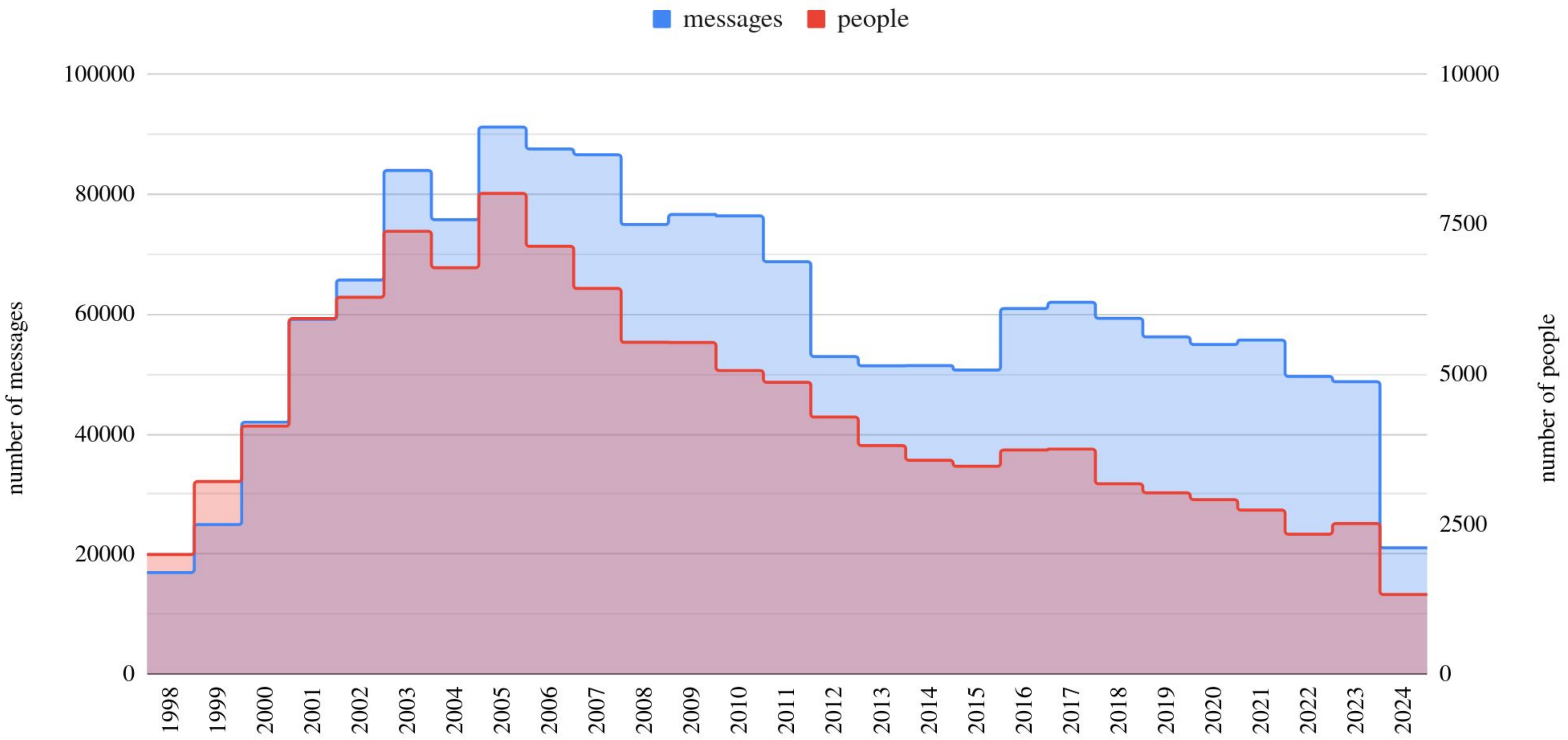
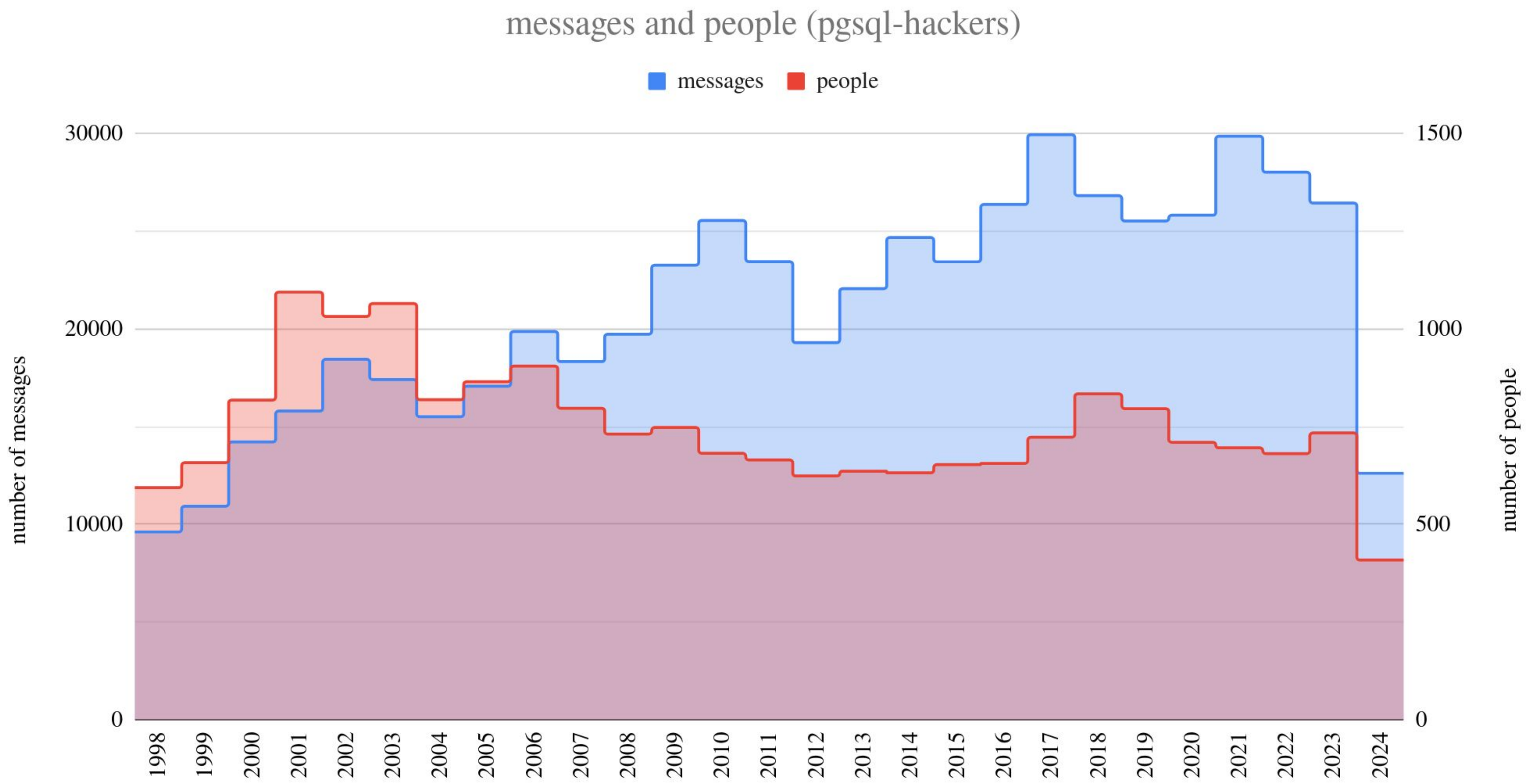
2023-11
2024-03

messages and people (all mailing lists)




messages and people (pgsql-hackers)
messages
people
number of messages
number of people
30000
20000
10000
0
1500
1000
500
0
1998
1999
2000
2001
2002
2003
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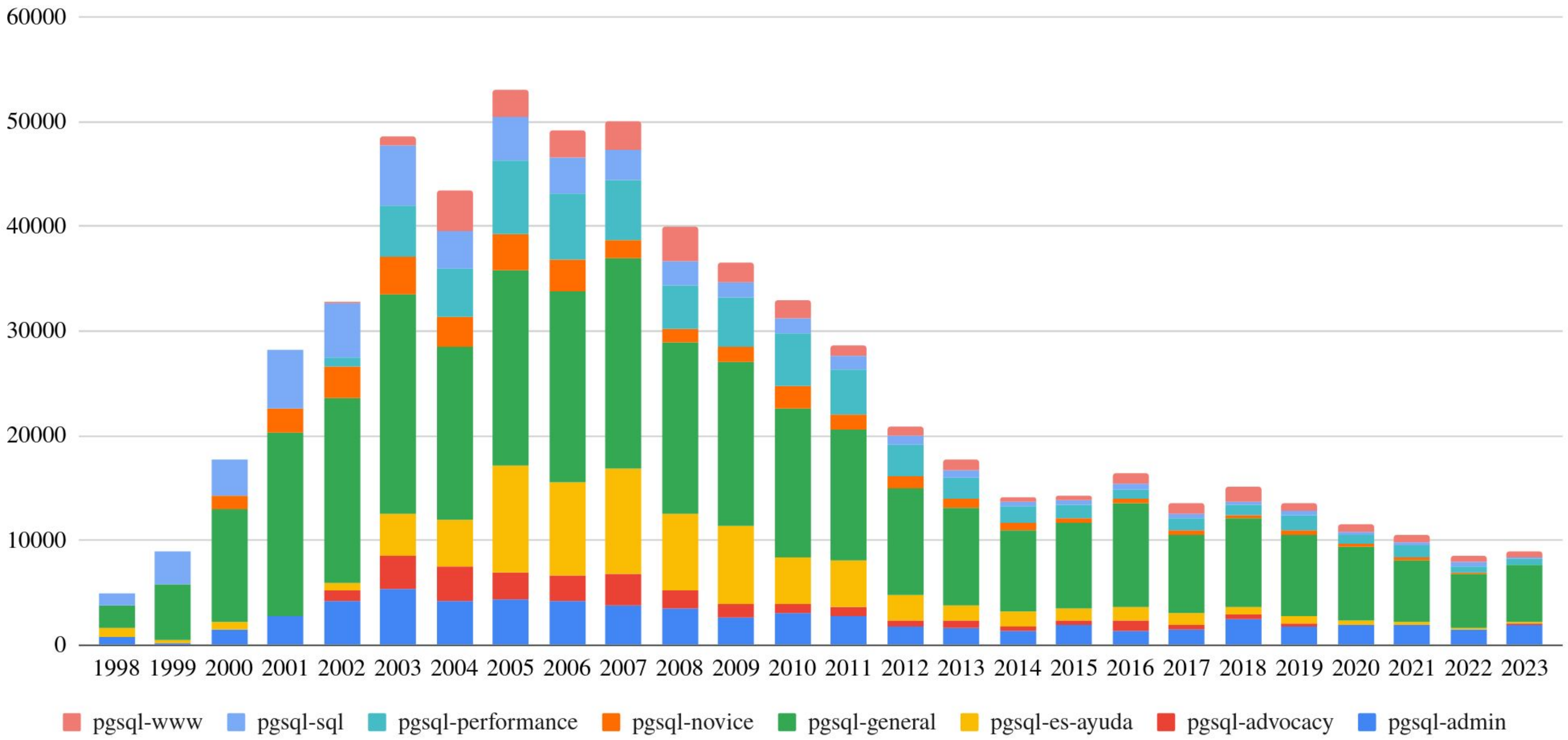
2024

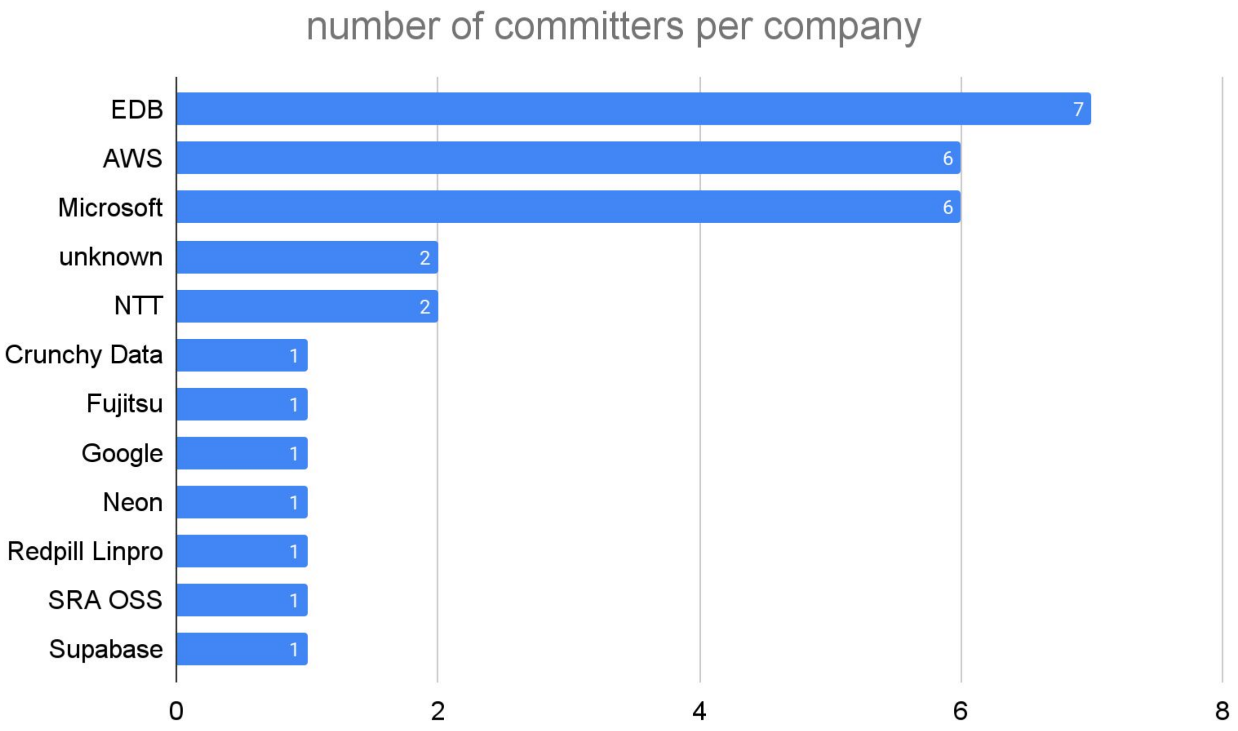
messages per year / less active mailing lists



Takeaways?

- development activity is growing
  - more committers, more messages on pgsql-hackers, ...
  - number of committed patches stagnates
  - review bottleneck? increased complexity? stricter reviews?
  - development process may need improvements
- the activity on "user" lists declined a lot
  - likely moved elsewhere (SO, slack, discord, ...)
  - we may be losing an important source of feedback

A bit about companies ...



future

community structure

- the community structure will continue to evolve
  - core will delegate more stuff to other people
  - likely in direction to less "self selection", also a matter of trust
- not everything has to be driven by core
  - community = gathering of individuals with agency
  - don't wait for core to do something, do it yourself + ask for help
- users clearly moved elsewhere
  - not a bad thing, but we need to adapt (not pretend nothing changed)

development process

- incremental changes / evolution [discussion]
  - foundation likely to remain the same (regular cycles, ...)
  - make it more accessible for "current generation" of devs
  - maybe some "federation" (accept PRs, curate/forward to hackers?)
- really need to address the bottleneck(s)
  - more committers? takes time, not sure if solution on it's own
  - "growing" contributors able to review complex stuff (mentoring)
  - make reviews easier (clear patch status)

growing contributors

- mentoring of future contributors
  - responsibility of current committers
  - requires effort and motivated developers
  - community-driven efforts [thread] (but you can reach out directly too)
- importance community-wide mentoring
  - companies usually have internal mentoring, mixed teams, ...
  - that doesn't help to grow committers in smaller companies
  - risk of domination, focus on helping people in smaller companies

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open source / free software

- unlikely to convince people to stop using managed services
  - convenience, cost, reduced expertise requirements, ...
  - but lets be very clear about the limitations and that "it's not Postgres"
- doesn't mean we can't educate people about the open source idea
  - developers often don't have experience with how our community works
  - users often just consume the product as is, don't realize it can be extended
  - ...

resources

Who are the contributors?

- no specific requirements for contributors (committers, ...)
- people take often very different paths
- maybe check https://postgresql.life/
  - interviews with community members
  - very different paths, very diverse areas of focus/interest

A bit about technology?

- didn't want to talk about individual features
- there's usually a talk about new stuff in each release
- but maybe look at the following two talks
- 2013 pgconf.eu keynote / Keith Alsheimer / EDB
    - https://momjian.us/main/writings/pgsql/other/KeynotePPEU_v9.pdf
    - 5-year prediction on slide 18, talk a bit about what we improved etc.
- 2023 pgconf.eu keynote by Simon Riggs
    - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8W-J36IxYv4
    - next 20 years, too early to review
    - definitely worth looking at

considering contributing?

Not sure how / where to start?

- Need an idea for your first patch?
- Already have an idea, but need advice / guidance / feedback?
- Not familiar with our development process?
- Something else?

Maybe talk to me ...

intro

- very different talk from what I usually do
  - usually - technical, this is much less so
  - also my first keynote, I hope not to ruin it
- a lot of this is an opinion / interpretation
  - my usual technical talks are backed by numbers/facts
  - I have many opinions, a lot of them are likely wrong
  - I'm speaking for myself, not for EDB or other PG contributors
- feel free to shout questions, I hate boring lectures
  - or approach me later and we can chat
  - I'm here to ask questions, not give answers.

agenda

- where does postgres come from
- how the community evolved
  - how the core team started, why it works the way it does
  - core team - committers - contributors - how will it evolve?
  - concerns about abrupt changes
  - if we started on a green field ... it'd look different
- some numbers on how the community evolved
  - number of committers, contributors, authors, commits, lines of code, ...
  - what about "users"?
  - maybe extract names from release notes?
  - statistics of pgsql-hackers

agenda II

- postgres vs. companies
  - no company "owns" postgres
  - a mix of companies, global/regional, small/large, ...
  - thankfully some of the large companies are joining and contributing
- postgres vs. forks
  - many forks, but vast majority being very friendly with the project
  - funny how well this works, compared to projects with licenses that make forking harder