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From Jokes to Votes: Memes as a Political Communication Tool in the 2024 European Elections

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About the project

The **From Jokes to Votes: Memes as a Political Communication Tool in the 2024 European Elections** is part of MJRC's **Media Content Analysis Series,** which focuses on systematically examining media output to uncover patterns in coverage, bias, framing, and editorial choices. This portfolio includes both thematic studies, such as crisis coverage, disinformation, and political framing, and cross-national comparisons of media narratives. In recent years, MJRC has integrated AI-driven tools and machine learning models into its methodology, enabling large-scale analysis of news texts, sentiment, and visibility trends across multiple languages and platforms. The work as part of this portfolio combines computational analysis with media research to expose trends in global media attention.

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A Media Studies student and journalist with a background in Political Science, focusing on memes as digital artefacts that shape online culture and identity, Marseglia wrote this study as part of her Young Researchers Program at MJRC.

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Introduction

A decade ago, memes were still a relatively niche form of online communication. Today, they have moved into the mainstream of everyday communication, becoming a normalised presence across social spheres that once seemed impervious to them. Politics has proved no exception: academic attention to the political role of memes intensified after the 2016 US presidential election, especially in work on Donald Trump's campaign and the alt-right digital ecosystem. Since then, scholarly interest in the topic has grown considerably. Researchers have identified in memes a previously underestimated capacity for identity construction, community building, and ideological mobilisation. This tendency has since spread well beyond the American context, giving rise to what may be described as the progressive memification of politics.

This study focuses on the 2024 European Parliament elections, chosen not only because of their proximity to the author, but also because they offer a useful opportunity for cross-national comparison. The Instagram and TikTok profiles of the three highest-vote parties in the four most populous EU member states, Italy, Spain, Germany, and France, were scraped during the final month of the campaign in search of memetic content. The same procedure was applied to a selection of two politically relevant influencers or influencer-like media figures per country, in order to assess whether these figures contributed to spreading or amplifying memes as a vehicle for political communication.

Prior to the analysis, a theoretical framework was reconstructed tracing the concept of the meme from its origins to the latest scholarship on its political relevance. The memes identified in the dataset were coded using categories derived from established academic frameworks, and the results were discussed in light of the patterns that emerged: most notably, the dominance of negative campaigning and irony among right-wing and far-right parties. The influencer analysis yielded fewer memes than anticipated, leading to the proposition that what these figures display is less a practice of meme-posting than the embodiment of a memetic attitude, a concept developed further in the concluding section.

The overarching aim of the study is to investigate whether the 2024 European elections saw a meaningful use of memes as vehicles for political messaging, by whom and in what form, whether they contributed to fostering a sense of community among audiences, and what role political influencers played in this broader communicative ecosystem.

Methodology

This study adopts a *netnographic approach* (Kozinets, 2015), combining systematic data collection with qualitative content analysis to examine the use of political memes during the 2024 European Parliament elections. The empirical corpus consists of all posts published between 10 May 2024 and 9 June 2024, the so-called "hot phase" leading up to and including the election period, on the official Instagram and TikTok accounts of the three highest-vote parties in four member states: Fratelli d'Italia, Partito Democratico (PD), and Movimento 5 Stelle (Italy); PP, PSOE, and Vox (Spain); RN, Renaissance, and PS-Place Publique (France); CDU, AfD, and SPD (Germany).[1] These four countries were selected for their demographic and economic significance and their capacity to represent broader regional trends across Southern, Western, and Central Europe. The two platforms were chosen for their visual-first architecture and their relevance to platform-native political communication, while the cross-platform design follows digital-methods approaches (Rogers, 2018).

Data collection was conducted through platform-specific scraping tools: Instagram's internal GraphQL API was accessed via an authenticated session, while TikTok content was retrieved using yt-dlp, with date filters applied in both cases to isolate the study period. Metadata including post identifiers, captions, hashtags, engagement figures, and media files were systematically archived. Across the full sample of 1,752 posts, items were screened for memetic content using Shifman's (2014) operational definition: a post was classified as a meme when it deployed recognisable internet formats, remix logic, ironic captioning, pop-cultural templates, or platform-native humorous conventions, created with awareness of pre-existing memetic content and designed for circulation and imitation. Of the 1,752 posts collected, 62 met this criterion and formed the analytical corpus.

Each meme was coded along seven dimensions: format (image, short-form video), visual style (remix, format-based, pop culture reference), rhetorical function (irony, humour), emotional appeal (anger, pride, fear), political message (negative campaigning, engagement, feeling good), and thematic scope (national vs. European issues). The possible presence of AI-generated content was noted during coding but is not analysed in this study. Coding was conducted qualitatively through frame analysis, examining how political subjects and issues are represented visually and textually. Quantitative engagement data were collected but not used in the present analysis and are flagged as a productive avenue for future research. Coding was conducted as an interpretive qualitative procedure; no intercoder-reliability test was performed.

[1] For the election results see:
https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/italy/index.html#country-results (Italy),
https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/spain/index.html#country-results (Spain),
https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/france/index.html#country-results (France),
https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/germany/index.html#country-results (Germany).

A parallel dataset was constructed for the influencer phase of the study. Two politically relevant influencers or influencer-like media figures per country were selected on the basis of political relevance, audience reach, and engagement with electoral themes, identified through a process of netnographic observation. The influencer sample comprises eight figures distributed across the four countries: Paul Ronzheimer and Tahsim for Germany; Alvise Pérez and Isaac Parejo for Spain; Giuseppe Cruciani and Cathy La Torre for Italy; and Akim Omiri and Cyril Hanouna for France. The same scraping tools, platforms, and temporal window were applied, yielding a corpus of 147 posts, of which just nine were classified as memes, all posted by Spanish influencer Isaac Parejo. This second dataset serves as a comparative lens to assess whether influencers function as independent communicative actors or as amplifiers of party-level memetic communication. The influencer sample is purposive rather than representative; it is intended to provide a comparative lens, not to support general claims about political influencers across the four countries.

Only publicly available posts from official or public-facing accounts were collected and analysed. The study did not analyse private accounts, private messages, or non-public user data.

The findings should be read in light of the study's limited scope. The corpus covers official party accounts and a small purposive sample of influencer or influencer-like accounts during the final month of the campaign. It does not capture the wider grassroots circulation of memes among ordinary users, fan communities, anonymous accounts, or cross-platform reposting networks. The analysis therefore identifies patterns in formal and semi-formal political communication, rather than the full memetic ecosystem of the 2024 European elections.

Memes, identity and community: what happens when digital artefacts acquire political relevance

The concept of the meme was originally introduced by biologist Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), drawing on the Greek term *mímēma* ("imitation") and modelled on the word "gene". In Dawkins' formulation, a meme constitutes a self-propagating unit of cultural evolution: an idea, image, style, behaviour, or tradition that spreads through imitation and is subject, like genes, to processes of variation and natural selection.

While this framework generated considerable enthusiasm in the natural sciences, its most productive application for the present study lies in the digital context, where the concept was substantially redefined and adapted to describe a very different kind of cultural transmission. The most operationally relevant definition is that proposed by Shifman (2014), who describes internet memes as: "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) created with awareness of each other; and (c) circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users". By this definition, memes are far more than isolated jokes or images: they are social objects, shaped by collective participation and constantly evolving through the contributions of countless users. They represent one of the most widespread types of content circulating on social media, serving to connect people, generate shared laughter, build a sense of belonging, and much more.

Beyond their entertainment function, however, memes carry significant ideological weight in the field of politics. They legitimise or delegitimise worldviews, generate communities of shared values, and contribute both to the formation of political identities and to growing processes of polarisation, as noted by Italian political communication scholars Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2019). In other words, memes draw boundaries: they create an "us" and a "them". A widely circulated meme describes the internet as a place to hang out, a metaphor that constitutes a premise for what will follow.

Online spaces are populated by distinct groups, differentiated by interests, sensibilities, and shared ways of speaking and thinking. Among the markers that define these groups, inside jokes hold a privileged place. As Denisova (2019) argues, memes require their audience to "complete the joke": understanding a meme presupposes familiarity with a specific cultural code, and this familiarity is itself a form of group membership.

It becomes clear, then, that memes operate on two interconnected levels: an internal one, shaping individual identity and a sense of belonging, and an external one, since groups that share a common identity naturally tend to coalesce into communities. Moreover, since the internet is by its nature a global network, memes also facilitate the movement of cultural units across national borders. Movements or ideologies that share similar values in different countries are therefore likely to develop a common visual and symbolic vocabulary that can spread internationally. Two definitions capture this dynamic particularly well: Shifman (2014) describes memes as "secret agents of globalisation", while Milner (2016) characterises them as a lingua franca, a shared language that transcends geographic and linguistic boundaries.

Inside the dataset: how memes were weaponised during European campaigning

Despite its relatively modest size, the dataset allows us to observe a number of significant trends emerging from the 2024 European Parliament elections. To begin with, there is a marked concentration of meme-posting among right-wing parties' official profiles. In France, the far-right Rassemblement National produced eight memes, compared to just one each from the left-wing alliance Place Publique-Parti Socialiste and the centrist Renaissance. In Italy, Fratelli d'Italia, the right-wing party often described as far-right, and the populist Movimento 5 Stelle each posted six memes, while the centre-left Partito Democratico posted only one. In Germany, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland published six memes, the Social Democratic Party five, and the Christian Democratic Union three. Spain produced the highest overall volume of memes: the Partido Popular leads with 13, followed by Vox with eight and the Partido Socialista with four.

Taken together, even within the limits of a small sample, the data paint a consistent picture: meme-posting is heavily concentrated among right-of-centre, right-wing and far-right parties, with some variation across countries. The reasons behind this pattern are likely multiple. Memes, by their nature, tend towards polarisation: they thrive on simplification, emotional impact, and the sharp delineation of opposing sides. These features align closely with the communication style of populist and far-right movements, which typically rely on clear-cut distinctions between an in-group and an out-group. This point will be developed further in the conclusions.

Regarding visual format, videos (53) significantly outnumbered still images (9). This reflects the platform environment studied here, where TikTok and Instagram Reels foreground short-form video. In terms of visual style, remixes dominate the dataset (32 cases), followed by the use of pre-existing formats and references to pop culture. The prevalence of remixes is particularly telling: this format allows political actors to repurpose footage from opponents' interviews, press conferences, or public appearances, embedding it within broader video compositions and manipulating it through the addition of sound effects, voice distortion, or comic editing to produce a satirical or critical result.

On the rhetorical level, irony (51 cases) is considerably more common than straightforward humour (11). The distinction between the two is important: while humour primarily aims to provoke laughter through linguistic and semiotic devices, irony produces meaning through the gap between what is literally stated and what is actually implied, often generating an outcome that deliberately contradicts expectations. This makes irony structurally predisposed towards critique rather than affirmative or celebratory communication, and this is reflected in the dominant emotional register of the dataset. The dominant communicative function in the memes analysed is attack, accounting for 42 out of 62 cases. Parties across the political spectrum made use of this mode, with two notable exceptions: the German AfD, whose memes rely exclusively on fear, a register that can be read as an even more aggressive form of political weaponisation, and Vox, whose content draws almost entirely on pride, a device through which memes can reinforce group cohesion and identity rather than targeting opponents.

These findings are also consistent with the most common type of political message conveyed through the memes: negative campaigning, present in 48 out of 62 cases. Memes are used predominantly to ridicule opponents, construct a negative image of rival parties or candidates, and undermine or trivialise their political positions. Negative campaigning was, of course, not born with social media, but the meme format has given both political actors and ordinary citizens a highly accessible and shareable tool through which to participate in this dynamic.

In order to assess the extent to which the European elections are treated as a genuinely supranational contest rather than as a series of simultaneous national elections, the presence of EU-related content within the memes was also measured. The findings suggest that the European dimension remains largely absent, at least in this sample: the majority of memes make no reference to EU-related topics whatsoever (42 cases). When European themes do appear, the most frequent are populism (7 cases) and immigration (4), followed by the AfD's specific cluster of immigration, gender policies, and food sovereignty.

Within the memes analysed, anti-Europeanism and voter mobilisation remain marginal across the parties studied. Memes, in this sense, function as nationally anchored cultural artefacts even when deployed within a transnational electoral context, and their use in relation to EU-specific topics is largely confined to right-wing and far-right parties.

The role of influencers in shaping political narratives

To complement the analysis of official party communication, this study also examined the degree to which political influencers contribute to a "memified" narrative of political reality. The figure of the political influencer has emerged over the past decade as a structural response to a specific challenge posed by the digital environment. In the chaotic and centrifugal world of the internet, where an overwhelming volume of content competes for attention at any given moment, cultural intermediaries have become increasingly necessary: figures capable of organising, filtering, and redirecting the flow of information towards audiences who share their interests and values. Around these intermediaries, genuine communities of followers who engage regularly with their content have formed.

Politics is one of the many fields in which influencer figures have emerged and consolidated followings. Influencers, broadly defined, are social media users who have built an audience thanks to their expertise on a specific subject and/or the authentic, ongoing relationships they cultivate with their followers. Within this broader category, political influencers occupy a specific niche. As Riedl et al. (2023) argue, "the category of political influencers includes social media users who do not come from an institutional background and whose notoriety and fame is platform-built".

Riedl et al. (2023), drawing partly on de Gregorio and Goanta (2022), distinguished several sub-categories of political influencers:

1. politicians who have adopted an influencer-like communication style on social media;
2. political influencers who function as opinion leaders, shaping the views of their followers on political matters;
3. influencers who have transitioned into political roles; and
4. journalists who have taken on the characteristics of political influencers in the way they engage with their online audiences.

In the sampled period, only one of the figures analysed, the Spanish alt-right influencer Isaac Parejo, posted content on his own profile that could clearly be classified as memes. Of the 40 posts analysed from his profile, nine were memes. This finding raises questions about why the dataset contained far fewer memes than expected, given the central role memes are widely assumed to play in online political communication.

A comparison with the existing scholarly literature offered a compelling explanation: what we are witnessing is a gradual but significant loosening of the meme from its status as a discrete, identifiable digital artefact. In the early 2010s, many widely recognisable memes took the form of image macros, a category identified and systematised by Shifman (2014) in Memes in Digital Culture. Since then, the internet has evolved at a remarkable pace. Over the course of just over a decade, memes have been reproduced, remixed, and transformed so many times, and across so many different cultural contexts, that they have progressively spilled beyond the boundaries of the purely digital space. They have become so deeply embedded in everyday culture that the line between online and offline has effectively dissolved: today, an attitude, a gesture, or even a throwaway remark can function as a meme.

More strikingly, a person, or rather, a carefully constructed public persona, can themselves become one. This is precisely what tends to happen with political influencers. Rather than posting content that follows a recognisable meme format, these figures communicate and persuade through what cultural journalist Frankie Pizá described as *memetic grip*.[2] He introduced the concept originally in relation to music trends, but it is readily applicable to any cultural phenomenon that flourishes online. It describes the capacity to arrest the user's attention and create an emotionally resonant surface through which more complex messages can be delivered.

By undergoing a process of memification, influencers are thus able to reach audiences that more conventional political communication formats would struggle to engage at all. This dynamic is particularly visible in the cases of Alvise Pérez, leader of the Spanish electoral list and political platform Se Acabó La Fiesta, and Italian podcaster Giuseppe Cruciani. Other figures included in the dataset, such as French broadcaster Cyril Hanouna, were selected on the basis of their relevance to this influencer typology but proved largely inactive during the campaign period.

[2] See more on Pizá's Instagram page here: https://www.instagram.com/frankiepiza/.

Conclusion

The research this analysis is anchored in has shown that, although memes are now used by parties during electoral campaigns, their use remains selective rather than pervasive. The distribution is nevertheless highly revealing: meme-posting is strongly concentrated among right-of-centre, right-wing and far-right political actors. The emotional and rhetorical devices that have long characterised right-wing populist communication (fear, anger, irony and the delegitimisation of opponents) have found a particularly effective vehicle in the meme format.

These digital artefacts can convey ideologically charged messages through humour, lowering the threshold for audiences to receive otherwise polarising or controversial content. Their entertaining nature also facilitates circulation and virality. The results therefore support the existence of a significant elective affinity between the communicative logic of right-wing populism and the formal affordances of the internet meme, as other scholars, including Messini (2025), have also argued.

Once the message is conveyed, it helps install a community-building logic that operates through the affirmation of shared identity and cultural belonging rather than through programmatic or deliberative content. It is therefore not accidental that the dominant political message across the corpus is negative campaigning, with engagement-oriented content representing only a marginal share of the total. As many scholars have noted, memetic logic often reinforces confirmation bias and widens the distance between the in-group and the out-group; it creates a digital us versus them.

One of the most interesting findings concerns thematic content: the majority of memes make no reference to European Union topics whatsoever, a paradoxical finding given the electoral context. When EU-related themes do appear, immigration and populism are the most frequent, deployed along predictable ideological lines. The dominant tone across the corpus is ironic, with humour playing a secondary and more ideologically varied role. This preponderance of irony is not incidental: as a rhetorical device, it allows politically charged content to circulate under the cover of entertainment, making critique more accessible and more difficult to contest.

Memes, in this sense, function primarily as instruments of attack and delegitimisation rather than as spaces for substantive political communication. They complement other formats, such as podcasts or television appearances, that are better suited to explaining programmes and intentions. But to understand their benefits fully, it is necessary to consider the broader informational environment in which political memes circulate. In the hypersaturated attention economy of social media, where content competes continuously for visibility, memes possess what cultural journalist Frankie Pizá calls memetic grip, an immediately recognisable surface capable of capturing attention and carrying more complex meanings. Although Pizá developed the concept in relation to music trends, it can usefully be extended here to online political content that relies on memetic dynamics. Their formal economy, cultural recognisability, and emotional charge allow them to stand out within an otherwise undifferentiated flow of content, functioning as an entry point into ideological narratives that would struggle to achieve equivalent reach in more conventional communicative formats.

At the level of political influencers, the findings of this research proved considerably more modest than anticipated. Their primary role appears to be not the direct production or circulation of memes, but rather the construction of the broader discursive environment within which memes acquire meaning and political salience. In this way, they contribute to the normalisation or delegitimisation of political positions through sustained, affectively resonant content. Figures such as Alvise Pérez or Giuseppe Cruciani do not post memes in the formal sense but display what may be termed a memetic attitude. This concept emerged from the analysis as a way to describe a communicative behaviour that draws on humour, self-referentiality, and cultural recognition to mirror and reinforce the memetic language already circulating within their communities.

In other words, this study identifies a phenomenon that warrants further theoretical attention: for a growing number of political actors, memetic logic has transcended the digital sphere to become a mode of political behaviour and self-presentation in the offline world as well. Characterised by exaggeration, self-referentiality, and the deliberate blurring of the boundary between the serious and the humorous, this logic structures the public personas of certain figures who do not simply use memes but become meme material themselves. This dynamic embodies what Salvia (2022) associates with the spirit of the Era of the Absurd, a cultural moment in which images have progressively displaced ideas, not merely as a symptom of intellectual impoverishment but as a response to it. In a world changing at a pace that outstrips the capacity to produce new political visions, images function as a substitute for ideas that have not yet been formed: they offer immediate affective orientation where new conceptual frameworks are lacking.

Finally, this research suggests that the meme cycle does not terminate with the post. The invitation to continue, remix, and re-elaborate remains structurally open, partly because of the logic associated with the Era of the Absurd. Many politicians and influencers do not provide their audience with ready-made memes. In other words, what Donovan et al. (2022) call the “meme war” is not primarily fought by official party accounts or political influencers, whose memetic output, as this study has shown, remains limited and strategically controlled. It unfolds instead in the grassroots layer of digital culture, where ordinary users collaborate, create, diffuse, and interact with memetic content across the full political spectrum.

In this sense, politicians, parties and influencers are closer to suppliers of weapons and resources in a meme war involving users and citizens. This bottom-up dimension of political meme culture remains largely beyond the scope of the present study and constitutes one of the most significant avenues for future research.

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AI tools were used in this research project for data collection and preprocessing purposes. Grammarly was used to correct grammar during the editing phase. No AI tool was used in drafting or shaping the analytical content of this study.

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