



## Political memes as a communicative tool for shaping public opinion in election campaigns: A comparative analysis

**Klementin Mile\***

PhD in Politology, Lecturer  
European University of Tirana  
1000, Xhanfize Keko Str., Tirana, Albania  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0679-142X>

**Besian Zogaj**

Lecturer  
European University of Tirana  
1000, Xhanfize Keko Str., Tirana, Albania  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8955-8355>

**Abstract.** The aim of the study was to identify trends in the operation of political memes across various sociopolitical contexts and to ascertain their impact on the formation of public perceptions during election campaigns. To investigate the structure, tone, and dissemination of political memes across four electoral campaigns (United States 2016, Brazil 2018, Ukraine 2019, and India 2019), the methodological framework combined corpus and network analysis. This approach enabled the tracing of variations across platforms and types of digital interaction. The results demonstrate that political memes are complex visual-textual units that inform, affect, mobilise, discredit, and signal political belonging. Their dominant functions vary according to political context, platform architecture, and audience structure: emotional and discrediting memes intensified polarisation and reinforced candidate-related frames in the US; mobilisational and informational memes facilitated the construction of a "new" anti-system candidate and encouraged youth engagement in Ukraine; and WhatsApp-based memes supported targeted mobilization in Brazil. The findings further reveal that open platforms, such as X, Reddit, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, increase visibility, virality, and agenda-setting. Conversely, closed or semi-closed channels, like WhatsApp and Telegram, enhance group-based trust and targeted dissemination while reducing transparency and external verification. The study concludes that the influence of political memes depends on informational compression, emotional resonance, and identificational signalling, rather than any single communicative function. Ultimately, political memes represent an independent form of digital political communication capable of influencing public opinion through interaction with user communities, platform algorithms, and content. These findings have practical implications for media literacy initiatives, platform regulation, electoral communication analysis, and the development of rapid visual fact-checking techniques tailored to modern digital campaigns

**Keywords:** social media; digital communication; voter; campaign; mobilisation

### Introduction

The relevance of the research topic is determined by a digitalised society, where social media have become the rapid transformation of political communication in the main arena for public debate, manipulation and the

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\*Corresponding author ([klementinmile4@gmail.com](mailto:klementinmile4@gmail.com))

shaping of public opinion. In the era of info-capitalism, political messages increasingly take forms oriented not towards rational argumentation but towards the emotional engagement of audiences, which radically alters traditional mechanisms of political participation. Memes, as visual-textual units, have become one of the instruments of this shift: they combine elements of satire, humour, symbolic representation and ideological signalling, turning into a means of influence that simultaneously entertains, mobilises and shapes political identity. The relevance of the study was defined by the need to understand how exactly political memes affect voters' perceptions, their political behaviour and social orientations.

A review of the literature showed that the phenomenon of political memes has been studied from various theoretical and methodological perspectives, but remains insufficiently systematically conceptualised in the context of electoral behaviour. The study by S. Mukhtar *et al.* (2024) revealed the sociological and linguistic diversity of internet memes, viewing them as cultural replicators capable of reflecting social trends, generational differences and value conflicts. The authors stressed that memes are not merely a by-product of digital communication, but act as an instrument of social interaction that creates new models of collective expression. The work of F. McKelvey *et al.* (2023) showed that political communities on Facebook formed stable networks of social cohesion in which memes served as symbolic "markers" of group belonging. The authors argued that memes contributed less to persuading opponents than to consolidating internal solidarity, creating closed communicative spaces. The study by N.A.G. Matias *et al.* (2024) demonstrated that memes stimulated the political activity of student leaders through a combination of short forms, emotional content and social visibility. The authors stressed that memes not only reflected young people's mood but also acted as a catalyst for political participation, thereby confirming their role in shaping new practices of digital mobilisation. A. Halversen & B.E. Weeks (2023) investigated political memes from the viewpoints of producers, viewers, and outcomes, demonstrating that memes have both participatory and expressive purposes on social media. According to their findings, memes enable users to express political opinions, foster a sense of community, and interact informally but socially meaningfully with public issues.

In the bibliometric review by C. Kamath & S. Alur (2025), five main theoretical approaches to the analysis of meme communication were systematised: rhetorical, relevance-blending, humorous, evolutionary and conceptual blending. At the same time, the authors underlined the insufficient use of marketing theories to explain the mechanisms of the dissemination of political memes, which created a gap in the academic discourse. According to G. Anderau & D. Barbarrusa (2024), memes serve a variety of communicative purposes simultaneously,

such as humour, criticism, in-group signalling, and the simplification of difficult political concepts. This method is significant because it makes political memes comprehensible as multi-layered units that integrate identity marking, information, and evaluation into a single visual-textual form. The playful nature of meme-based political communication was highlighted by M. Mortensen & C. Neumayer (2021), who demonstrated that humour, irony, and parody are distinct forms of political participation rather than being divorced from politics. Their research showed that memes, particularly in online spaces where users engage through sharing, remixing, and commenting, can make political issues more approachable and emotionally compelling. Therefore, memes' "playfulness" should be viewed as a communication tool that spreads political meanings.

According to A.O. Smith & J. Hemsley's (2022) information-centred theory, memes are units of informational difference that evolve as they are copied, altered, and shared. This viewpoint is helpful because it reframes memes as dynamic information objects embedded in digital communication systems rather than just amusing artefacts. In this way, memes can be seen as condensed carriers of socially relevant meanings that record changes in focus, interpretation, and group assessment. Internet memes are crucial for information research, according to B.J. Tulloch (2023), because they contribute to the creation, sharing, and interpretation of knowledge in virtual spaces. The author demonstrated how memes can serve as unofficial documentary formats for users to document, dispute, and negotiate common perceptions of reality. Since memes preserve condensed traces of public mood, social reaction, and identity-based communication, this theory supports the interpretation of memes as "micro-documents" of collective sentiments.

Despite the growing body of research on memes as instruments of social interaction, political expression and identity construction, existing studies still tend to examine their communicative, emotional or informational functions separately. Insufficient attention has been paid to how these functions operate together in electoral contexts, particularly in relation to voters' perceptions, mobilisation and the formation of collective political meanings. This study addresses this gap by conceptualising political memes as multi-layered communicative units that simultaneously inform, affect, identify and document public sentiment during election campaigns. The aim of the present study was to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role of political memes in shaping public opinion during elections. The main objectives of the research were: to carry out a comparative analysis of political memes in the context of four electoral campaigns in different countries; to identify relationships between the platform of dissemination, the type of memetic content and the nature of its influence on electoral behaviour; and to assess the synergistic interaction between the informational, emotional and

identificational functions of political memes as factors in the formation of public opinion.

## Materials and Methods

The methodological basis for the study of political memes in electoral campaigns was built on an interdisciplinary approach combining elements of communicative, socio-technical, cultural and political analysis. The choice of this strategy was determined by the nature of the phenomenon of the political meme itself, which operates at the intersection of cultural representation, technological mediation and social interaction. Within the framework of the study, a combination of qualitative methods was used to ensure a comprehensive vision of the processes of creation, dissemination and functioning of political memes in the digital environment. The leading procedure was the use of the method of comparative analysis, which made it possible to juxtapose four empirical cases of electoral campaigns – the United States of America – USA (2016), Ukraine (2019), Brazil (2018) and India (2019). The criteria for case selection were: the existence of a documented empirical base of memetic content; the role of digital platforms in political communication; and the sociocultural and technological diversity of the contexts. The choice of these specific examples is justified by the fact that they represent different levels of development of digital infrastructures, distinct models of political participation and varied cultural traditions of perceiving humour and political satire.

To structure the data obtained, the method of systematising empirical indicators was used, which consisted in organising descriptions of platforms, technological features, meme types, functions and effects recorded in the studies by P. Davison (2020), L. Shifman (2014) and L. Bülow & M. Johann (2023). Analytical reports by the Pew Research Center (2025) were also examined. The material of the analysis consisted of corpora of memes collected within the aforementioned campaigns and documented in academic articles (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019; Reis *et al.*, 2020; Semotiuk & Shevchenko, 2023). In cases where the original sources recorded quantitative parameters (number of memes, reactions, platform types), these data were interpreted in a qualitative context – not for statistical verification but to outline typological trends. The method of classification was used to distinguish types of political memes – mobilisational, discrediting, emotional and informational – according to the criteria of functional orientation, emotional tone, semantic purpose and social response. This approach made it possible to structure the corpus of memes by functional categories and to relate them to the political tasks they perform.

The method of comparative platform analysis was applied to study the role of different social media in the dissemination of political memes. For each platform, three criteria were considered: technical features affecting content circulation; advantages for the spread of

political messages; and potential risks or constraints. This approach made it possible to trace how the architecture of a platform and its algorithmic mechanisms determine the nature of the visibility and emotional impact of memetic content. The methodological approach was based on comparing data from the official resources of leading social platforms (X; Facebook; Instagram). This made it possible to obtain a representative picture of the functioning of political memes in different digital environments. For deeper analysis, data from other popular platforms (TikTok; WhatsApp; Reddit) were also used, which ensured comprehensive coverage of the main channels for the dissemination of visual political content. In the course of the study, the method of criterial comparison was also employed, involving the juxtaposition of the characteristics of memetic practices across a number of indicators: type of content, mechanism of dissemination, emotional valence, degree of platform openness, form of user participation and level of political influence. This made it possible to construct a generalised model of the impact of socio-technical conditions on the political effectiveness of memes. The assessment of differences between open (X, Reddit, TikTok, Instagram) and closed (WhatsApp, Telegram) platforms was carried out according to the parameters of data accessibility, transparency of algorithms and disinformation potential.

One of the methods applied was the empirical-descriptive method, which made it possible to generalise documented cases of meme use during electoral campaigns and to present them in comparative form. This method enabled not only the description of the functioning of political memes, but also the explanation of the socio-communicative mechanisms of their influence. Each case was considered as a contextual unit, taking into account the political culture of the country, the level of digital media literacy, the dominant communication channels and the specific features of the target audience. The method of interpretive generalisation was used to construct analytical conclusions on the basis of comparing meme types, platforms and political effects. This method made it possible to integrate individual observations into a coherent conceptual model of the interrelations between the semiotic properties of memes, the technical structure of platforms and the social behaviour of users.

## Results

### Theoretical foundations for the analysis of political memes in electoral processes

In the academic literature, the political meme should be regarded as an interdisciplinary phenomenon: it is simultaneously a cultural unit, a visual-verbal construct and a communicative act that exists within the ecosystem of digital networks. The classical starting point – D. Dawkins's memetics approach as a metaphor of cultural replication – is supplemented by studies of internet memes which treat memes as minimal "figures"

of digital discourse with stable formal features and high variability of meaning in the process of reproduction (Davison, 2020). L. Shifman (2014) provided an interpretative impetus by defining a meme as a content unit that combines form, content and mechanism of dissemination, and by emphasising the role of intertextuality and remix culture in the creation of political meaning. The symbolic function of the political meme lies in the fact that, through simple visual-verbal substitutions, complex political phenomena are reduced to easily recognisable markers. A meme functions as a “sign” that condenses a set of connotations (historical allusions, memetic templates, cultural clichés) into a compressed form characteristic of networked culture. This makes it possible to create cultural memory rapidly and to manipulate interpretative frames. Symbolic condensation is stronger under conditions of high emotional involvement and weaker fact-checking; therefore, memes are most effective where the audience relies on socially sanctioned collective “shelves” of meaning rather than on detailed factual information (Shifman, 2014).

In the socio-technical dimension, the political meme is the product of interaction between content, users and platform algorithms. The large-scale impact of memes as a political instrument is conditioned not only by their semantic density but also by the technical capacities of platforms – the nature of the news feed, personalisation algorithms, the mechanics of reposts and the existence of closed chats/groups (where control over information flows is more difficult). This is evident in statistical reports on platform use: according to Pew Research Center (2025), around half of adults in the United States at least occasionally obtain news from social media (53% for news as of 2025 on social networks), which defines the potential scale of memetic content’s impact on the information environment. At the global level, approximately 60-64% of the population use social networks (depending on the source), which further increases the importance of these instruments in political communication. Algorithmic selection and ranking of content partly determine which memes become viral. In algorithms that optimise displays according to engagement metrics (time on site, number of interactions), content with high emotional valence (anger, humour, shock) is favoured in terms of reach. As a result, memes that appeal to emotions have a greater likelihood of “taking off” and therefore of amplifying the frames they contain. This principle explains why memes serve less for reasoned discussion and more for emotional mobilisation: platforms “reward” such forms of content in their very architecture.

The more general notion of communication technology can also be used to interpret political memes. In this way, a meme is a technologically mediated form of social interaction that modifies the rhythm, scale, and emotional density of political communication rather than just a digital image or amusing message. Since the medium itself changes the circumstances in which mes-

sages are created, disseminated, and understood, this interpretation is consistent with M. McLuhan’s (2001) view of media as “extensions” of human perception and social action. The structure of digital platforms, where social relationships, visibility, and symbolic power are organised through communication flows, intensifies this transformation in networked political communication (Castells, 2009; 2010). According to social communication theory, memes serve as ritualised forms of group participation in addition to being information carriers. According to J.W. Carey’s (2008) cultural approach to communication, meme-sharing can be viewed as a way for users to reproduce group values, preserve shared meanings, and symbolically engage in public life. Though in a condensed, emotive, and frequently ironic form, J. Habermas’s (1989) concept of the public sphere is pertinent for explaining how memes enter digital public discourse and contribute to the formation of public opinion. Memes can therefore be viewed as micro-level communication acts that take part in macro-level public meaning-making processes.

The way users exchange memes to convey agreement, irony, solidarity, or distancing from specific political positions is particularly indicative of the social-interactive nature of memes. Memes, GIFs, and emojis promote relationship-oriented online communication by promoting emotional expression, self-disclosure, and social connection, as demonstrated by R.X. Peng & J. Chen (2025). In the context of political communication, this means that a meme serves as a relational signal: reposting or responding to it signifies participation in a particular interpretive environment, recognition of shared codes, and community membership in addition to content transmission. Consequently, a meme’s ability to link informational content with interpersonal and group-based interaction is what gives it its communicative value. In addition, political memes can be thought of as a way to record public opinion. They preserve condensed traces of collective reactions, fears, expectations, and conflicts at a specific historical moment, but they do not document public attitudes in the same way as surveys or official statistics. P. Pascual-Ferrá *et al.* (2025) showed that social media memes may contribute to early public opinion formation around public health threats. In this way, memes serve as unofficial micro-documents of public opinion, documenting how online communities interpret political events symbolically and emotionally.

The multimodal structure of memes reinforces this documentary role. Political memes rely on multimodal recontextualisation, which combines images, captions, cultural allusions, and political frames to create new meanings, as demonstrated by L. Bülow & M. Johann (2023). M. Johann (2022) went on to say that memes are a type of social media political expression that is connected to users’ political interests and engagement. As a result, the meme should be viewed as a small-scale communicative technology that simultaneously informs, affects,

identifies, and documents: it transmits political information, elicits an emotional reaction, indicates group affiliation, and leaves a trace of collective public interpretation. The distinction between open networks (X, Reddit, public Facebook pages, Instagram) and closed/semi-closed ones (WhatsApp, Telegram) has significant implications for the nature of memetic influence. Open networks allow memes to “flow” quickly into mass visibility and to be observed by researchers; closed platforms facilitate targeted, undocumented dissemination, which complicates external verification and increases the risk of information operations. Empirical cases illustrate this differentiation: during the 2018 electoral campaign in Brazil, WhatsApp served as a channel for the mass spread of political disinformation and memes in the form of images/audio messages, which affected the informational landscape in regions with high WhatsApp penetration. Academic reports and analytical work indicate that, because data from closed groups are difficult to access, it is harder to assess the full effect, yet examples of coordinated message dissemination are well documented (Cruz *et al.*, 2019). Empirical observations from specific campaigns show that the 2016 US pres-

idential primaries and the election more broadly were among the most “memified” in recent history; researchers documented large-scale discussions on Reddit which shaped narratives around the candidates (for example, memes depicting Donald Trump in paradoxical/heroic or caricatural images), and these discussions spilled over into traditional media or served as a source for targeted political adverts (Owen, 2016).

Quantitative engagement indicators make it possible to assess the intensity of memetic phenomena but not always their political effectiveness. For instance, corpora of memes collected for the 2019 Ukrainian campaign show thousands of unique images and tens of thousands of reactions; studies of comparative meme typology record the predominance of ironic and positive tones in memes supporting V. Zelenskyi, which correlated with the growth of his visibility among younger audiences on social networks. However, a direct causal link between meme views and the act of voting remains methodologically difficult to prove (panel data and experiments would be required) (Pidkuimukha & Kiss, 2020). A comparison of platforms and their significance for political memes is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Comparative characteristics of platforms and their significance for political memes**

Platform	Technical and communicative features determining memeability	Advantages for the dissemination of political memes	Limitations and risks of memetic influence
X	Open data structure; retweets as a mechanism of secondary distribution; algorithmic support for trending topics; hashtag system; integration with journalistic and analytical API interfaces.	Maximum speed of information circulation; formation of cross-platform information waves; heightened visibility for political journalists and researchers; possibility to track network dynamics of memes in real time.	Character limit per post; algorithms' preference for emotionally polarised content; spread of bot activity; risk of discourse radicalisation.
Facebook / Instagram	Algorithmically personalised news feed; system of groups and pages; visually oriented content; opportunity for paid promotion of posts; mechanisms of social validation (likes, comments, reactions).	Broad demographic reach; emotional-visual impact of memes; high effectiveness of targeted political advertising; flexible formats (images, video, stories).	Algorithmic opacity; tendency towards information bubbles; risks of censorship or restrictions on political content; active dissemination of disinformation via closed groups.
Reddit	Modular community structure (subreddits); hierarchical voting system; strong content moderation; high degree of internal cultural codification.	Deep thematic specialisation; high content quality in niche subcultures; effectiveness of memetic chains within individual communities; potential for “organic” political discussion.	Limited overall reach beyond the platform; segmented audience; weak cross-platform integration; risk of echo chambers.
WhatsApp / Telegram	End-to-end encryption; large groups and broadcast lists; support for multimedia content; minimal oversight by platforms.	High speed of horizontal content circulation; possibility of targeted mobilisation of local voter groups; effectiveness in regions with high mobile internet penetration.	Lack of public analytics and monitoring tools; increased risk of disinformation and manipulative campaigns; impossibility of external verification of sources.
TikTok	Recommendation algorithm based on behavioural patterns; short video formats; possibilities for remixing; use of trends and audio tracks as social markers.	Extremely high virality among young people; strong visual-emotional saturation; potential for political socialisation through humour and cultural adaptation of messages.	Algorithmic “black box”; rapid “burn-out” of content; dependence on trend cycles; risks of indirect political propaganda through cultural patterns.

Source: compiled by the authors

The data in the table show that different social platforms create specific conditions for the circulation of political memes, determined by their technical architecture, algorithmic principles and users' cultural practices. X functions as a space of rapid political reaction, where, thanks to open feeds and the retweet mechanism, memes quickly acquire “trend” status and influence the

agenda, particularly through interaction with the journalistic environment. At the same time, the brevity of the format and the presence of bot activity create risks of manipulation and oversimplification of political messages. Facebook and Instagram are oriented towards visual appeal and broad audience reach, which makes them optimal for emotionally intense or visually symbolic

memes. However, the closed nature of some groups, censorship-related restrictions and the spread of disinformation lower the analytical transparency of processes in these networks. Reddit forms a segmented ecosystem in which political memes circulate within thematic communities, encouraging deep irony, meta-discursivity and user self-reflexivity, but limiting overall reach. WhatsApp and Telegram provide a high level of trust and targeting, yet their closed nature complicates monitoring and creates conditions for the uncontrolled spread of fake content. TikTok, in turn, shapes a new paradigm of political communication through video memes – short, remixed forms capable of rapidly mobilising a youth audience, although they are characterised by low stability of informational effect.

Thus, the technical features of platforms determine not only the speed and scale of meme dissemination, but also the very structure of political discourse in the digital environment. In digital electoral campaigns, political memes perform a variety of strategic functions that can be classified into types: mobilisational, discrediting, emotional and informational. These types are not strictly isolated; they overlap, but they enable analytical differentiation of mechanisms of influence. Mobilisational memes are oriented towards activating action (registering to vote, reposting, participating in a campaign); discrediting memes towards undermining the trustworthiness or legitimacy of opponents; emotional memes towards creating or intensifying the audience's emotional involvement (anger, pride, humour); informational memes towards conveying facts, instructions or raising awareness (for example, how to check fake news) (Anderau & Barbarrusa, 2024). In each case, the analytical value lies in the fact that identifying the type of meme makes it possible to structure content analysis and to interpret its potential impact on public opinion, political attitudes and behaviour. Mobilisational memes have the clear aim of stimulating action or consolidating group participation. In an electoral context, this function is relevant for campaigns seeking to mobilise young or passive voters. A meme carrying the message "Go vote" which receives a high level of reposting becomes a digital form of traditional "get out the vote" tactics. In the academic literature, such memes are classified as grassroots action/mobilisational (Chagas *et al.*, 2019).

Discrediting memes are oriented towards undermining the image of a political opponent or institution. They include satirical or caricatural depictions aimed at eliciting a negative reaction, devaluing or reframing meanings. In the study "Effects and perception of multimodal recontextualization in political internet memes", the authors note that humorous memes directed against political actors were used to construct "heroic or villainous images" and had higher engagement on social media (Bülow & Johann, 2023). For example, in the United States during elections, memes portraying a candidate as incompetent or corrupt became popular and could

reinforce a negative frame (Al Afnan, 2025). This discursive function is crucial for understanding how memes may operate not merely as humour but as an instrument of delegitimisation. Emotional memes focus on eliciting an emotional response – anger, joy, humour, pride, fear – through visual-verbal means. Empirical research shows that memes with high emotional valence are more likely to be reposted and to spread more widely. For example, a study of the younger generation (Generation Z) demonstrated that greater exposure to political memes correlates with a higher level of political participation and with the perception of memes as "meaningful" within political discourse (Foreman-Braunschweig, 2025). This link between emotionality, attention and engagement suggests that emotional memes have the potential to influence attitudes, even if not directly behaviour.

Informational memes serve to transmit news, facts, instructions or to enhance media literacy. Research from Spain (Zamora Medina *et al.*, 2021) analysed memes during electoral debates and found that among them were infographics, meme-images explaining candidates' positions or encouraging fact-checking. In this case, memes function as "micro-narratives" of informational communication, condensing complex political discourse into a compressed visual-textual format. Given audiences' low attention span for text, informational memes are an adaptive form of political communication. These types of memes are interconnected: mobilisational memes contain an emotional component (for example, a call to "become part of the movement" accompanied by an image of an energetic group); discrediting memes stand at the intersection of emotional and informational (they convey negative information but in humorous or satirical form); emotional memes may serve as instruments of mobilisation or discrediting; informational memes may serve mobilisation (by raising awareness) or reducing discrediting (through fact-checking).

### **Empirical analysis of the impact of political memes in electoral campaigns**

For the empirical analysis, four electoral campaigns were selected that represent different sociocultural and technological contexts: the USA (2016), Ukraine (2019), Brazil (2018) and India (2019). In each case, political memes served as an element of digital communication with varying levels of reach, audience engagement and informational impact. In the case of the USA (2016), research showed that Facebook pages dedicated to political memes emerged as spaces for discussing the candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019). The authors note that memetic content on such pages was predominantly negative in tone towards the candidates and used humorous or satirical imagery (for example Trump's hairstyle or the email scandal involving Clinton) (Goodrich, 2019). In the case of Ukraine (2019), a study analysed a corpus

of 1,121 memes covering the period from March 2019 to December 2020 (Semotiuk & Shevchenko, 2023). The article shows that these memes included ironic, satirical and serious visual-verbal representations of the candidates Volodymyr Zelenskyi and his predecessor Petro Poroshenko. For Brazil (2018) and India (2019), research documents the collection of data from the WhatsApp messenger, including image-memes disseminated during electoral campaigns in these countries (Reis *et al.*, 2020). This work highlights the role of the messenger as a platform for politically significant visual content.

A comparison of electoral campaigns in different countries revealed that the dominant type of meme depends

on the technological, sociocultural and political specificity of the country. In countries with high messenger penetration (Brazil), informational and mobilisational memes disseminated via WhatsApp gained importance; in countries with high polarisation and an active digital youth population (USA), emotional and discrediting memes dominated the digital discourse; in countries undergoing renewal of political leadership (Ukraine), mobilisational and informational memes about an anti-system candidate became more influential. Thus, meme typology provides an analytical basis for comparative research. The characteristics of political meme types are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2. Characteristics of political memes in electoral campaigns**

Country / campaign	Main platform/channel	Dominant type of memes	Typical themes	Key function
USA 2016 (presidential)	X, Reddit, Facebook, Telegram	Emotional/Discrediting	Polarisation, candidate persona, scandals	Amplifying emotional resonance; discrediting the opponent and mobilising the base
Ukraine 2019 (presidential)	Facebook, Instagram	Mobilisational/Informational	Anti-system stance, "new leader", change	Constructing the image of a "new candidate"; raising awareness and engaging young people
Brazil 2018 (presidential)	WhatsApp, Facebook	Informational/Mobilisational	Disinformation, corruption, anti-system messages	Mass targeting via messenger; increasing participation; influencing regional voting
India 2019 (general)	Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok	Emotional/Mobilisational	Nationalism, youth, digital campaign	Emphasis on youth participation; creating viral content; stimulating activity

**Source:** compiled by the authors based on T. Goodrich (2019), M. Moody-Ramirez & A.B. Church (2019), C.C.V. Machado *et al.* (2019), J.C.S. Reis *et al.* (2020), L. Pidkuimukha & N. Kiss (2020), O. Semotiuk & V. Shevchenko (2023)

The analysis of platforms for the dissemination of political memes shows that each communication channel has unique characteristics that determine its potential for influence. X provides rapid viral spread through its open feed and hashtags but encourages superficial perception through its short format. Facebook and Instagram, with their visually oriented algorithms, effectively engage audiences but form isolated echo chambers. Reddit offers deeper discussions within niche communities but limits mass reach. Closed messengers (WhatsApp, Telegram), thanks to targeting and trust within groups, become instruments of influence in particular countries, as demonstrated by the Brazilian experience, although research into their role is complicated by privacy. TikTok, by contrast, engages young people through video format and remix culture, but the speed at which content is updated makes it difficult to assess the stability of its impact. Thus, the effectiveness of political memes depends not only on their content, but also on the specific features of the platform, its algorithms, the target audience and the sociocultural context, which requires a differentiated approach to analysing their role in electoral campaigns.

In empirical observation, political memes appear simultaneously as condensed informational units, catalysts of emotional reactions among the audience and markers of group identity. The informational function is

manifested in the ability of memes to convey meaning in a compressed form – from factual lines to instructions ("how to check a fact", "where and when to vote") – in a format that is easily remixed and retransmitted. Empirical data and corpus studies show that memes fulfilling an informational function are often accompanied by higher indicators of immediate reach within their target community (Vosoughi *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, memes served as a condensed record of narratives about candidates. The emotional function of memes consists in their capacity to intensify the audience's emotions – humour, sarcasm, anger, pride or disgust – thereby raising engagement and virality. Experimental and corpus studies find that content with high emotional valence is more likely to be reposted; at the same time, the emotional marking of a message weakens normative standards of fact-checking on the part of the recipient, reducing motivation for counter-argumentation and rational processing of information. In political science terms, this produces two lines of consequence: first, emotional memes enhance the visibility of particular frames; second, they demonstrated communication strategies aimed at emotionally framing candidates. This explains why, during intense campaigns, emotional and discrediting memes display informational resilience even after publications by fact-checkers. Paradoxically, according to S. Vosoughi *et al.* (2018), it is precisely their

“ease” of understanding that makes them robust in attitudinal memory.

The identificational function of memes is manifested in their role as symbols of group belonging and markers of “in-group/out-group”. A meme can serve as a marker of political identity: liking or reposting a meme functions as a social signal to network contacts and simultaneously confirms membership in a particular political cluster. Network studies (sociometry of remixes, cluster analysis) show that memes circulate within dense communities with a high level of internal cohesion, where repeated remixes reinforce the overall narrative and contribute to the consolidation of group identity. The use of memes as identificational markers has a direct implication for political mobilisation: memes not only inform or elicit emotion, they create a sense of “we”, which in itself is a driving force of political behaviour. Analytically, as stated by S.C. Woolley & P.N. Howard (2017), this means that measuring the impact of memes must take into account changes in the structure of networked support and communicative practices. The political and practical implications for regulation and practice are that systemic interventions must take into account the composite nature of meme functions. Since memes simultaneously inform and mark identity, response policies should include several layers: raising digital and media literacy to reduce informational vulnerability; greater transparency of algorithms and platform-level measurement of virality indicators to reduce the algorithmic advantage of emotional content; rapid fact-checking mechanisms adapted to visual formats; and, in the case of closed messengers, support for independent research and partnerships between scholars and platforms (since closed channels complicate external verification and scholarly monitoring). The Oxford Internet Institute and other centres have gathered evidence of the industrialisation of manipulation on social media, highlighting the need for comprehensive policies rather than mere censorship or technical “filters” (Woolley & Howard, 2017).

Interpretation of the findings indicates that memes operate as a multifunctional tool of political communication; their impact is determined not only by the nature of the content, but also by the structure of the audience (level of digital literacy), the character of the social field (degree of polarisation) and the architecture of platforms (open feeds vs closed messengers). The scientific imperative lies in moving from descriptive mapping of meme corpora to synthesised, causally oriented studies that combine corpus analysis, sociometry and individual experiments or panels. For political decision-making and the development of regulatory instruments, it is necessary to rely on such multi-factor empirical conclusions rather than solely on indicators of reach or virality.

## Discussion

In the context of political communication, the findings confirmed that political memes play a multifunctional

role, combining informational, emotional and identificational components. The synergistic interaction of these functions revealed a complex structure of memetic influence which was not reducible to a simple instrument of political campaigning, but instead constituted an autonomous mechanism of socio-psychological action. Comparison with other academic works made it possible to situate the results within the broader context of research on digital political participation, discursive practices and network mobilisation. Comparison of the findings with the conclusions of P. Saccomanno (2025) showed that both studies converge in treating political memes as an effective but not self-sufficient instrument of political communication. A common logic can be traced in the works: memes increased citizens’ engagement with political content, but their influence was mainly limited to the emotional-cognitive level. The researcher defined memes as a phenomenon that activated young people’s political awareness but did not contribute to the formation of stable political convictions. Similarly, the analysis of the four electoral campaigns showed that memes performed informational, emotional and identificational functions without demonstrating causal power in changing political attitudes. However, the synergistic interaction between meme functions identified in the present study broadened P. Saccomanno’s approach, as it revealed not only communicative but also structural-psychological effects, mediated by levels of digital literacy and polarisation.

Comparison with the results of B. Heiskanen (2017) revealed a shared understanding of memes as a mechanism of political participation that went beyond traditional communication channels. B. Heiskanen emphasised that during the 2016 US elections, memes created an alternative discourse that allowed audiences to react to political events in real time and to participate in the political process through cultural codes. Similar processes were observed in the analysis of the Ukrainian case in 2019, where memes produced effects of identification and mobilisation, particularly among young people. However, unlike the American context, where emphasis was placed on the participatory potential of memes, the findings of the present study also highlighted their informational and discrediting aspects. The evidence from the USA on the faster spread of false news confirmed B. Heiskanen’s observations regarding the capacity of memes to turn into an instrument of manipulation rather than merely self-expression. Thus, both studies concur in recognising the dual nature of memes – as a factor in democratic participation and, at the same time, as a risk for the quality of political discourse. Comparison with the research of A. Halversen & B.E. Weeks (2023) showed close correspondence in understanding memes as an inclusive form of political expression. The researchers demonstrated that memes served as a platform for the participation of diverse groups – from politically active users to those previously apathetic – which aligns

with the synergistic effect between emotional and identificational functions found in the present study. As in the conclusions of A. Halversen & B.E. Weeks, there is an observable increase in online expression and political engagement through humorous and satirical formats. However, the analysis of the four electoral campaigns supplements these observations by pointing to the dependence of memetic influence on platform type and on the level of digital literacy of audiences, going beyond A. Halversen & B.E. Weeks' initial conclusions. Whereas they focus on the correlation between exposure to memes and political outrage, the present findings demonstrate a more complex mechanism in which digital skills shape users' ability to interpret content critically. This indicates that memes not only stimulate political participation, but also shape a cognitive-emotional field in which mobilisational, informational and destructive effects intersect.

Comparison with the study by M. Johann (2022) shows significant conceptual and empirical overlap. M. Johann defines political memes as a form of political expression closely linked to users' level of interest in political processes and to the intensity of their activity. The findings confirmed this link, since participation in creating and spreading memes was seen as part of broader participatory practices in the digital sphere. In particular, in the Ukrainian case in 2019, memes not only performed informational and mobilisational functions, but also stimulated young people's political engagement through humour, identification and emotional association with the candidate. However, unlike M. Johann, who focuses mainly on active user participation as a factor in political effectiveness, the present study's results point to a more complex interaction between the level of digital literacy, the degree of polarisation and the type of platform. These parameters shaped the strength of meme influence, generating differences between cases in countries with varying levels of development of the digital environment. In Brazil in 2018, the WhatsApp platform provided a localised mobilisational effect, whereas in Ukraine in 2019 memetic activity was concentrated mainly in open networks, creating an effect of mass engagement. Thus, M. Johann's conclusions about the relationship between memes and political participation are supplemented by the clarification that this relationship is multi-layered, mediated by the socio-technical parameters of the communication environment. The detected synergy between the emotional, informational and identificational aspects of memes indicates that their influence extends beyond the traditional theory of political participation and encompasses the cognitive-affective dimension of mass digital communication.

Comparison with the study by P. Misra (2024) highlighted another aspect of the issue – the tension between the democratisation of political communication and the risks of its destructive transformation. The researcher argued that memes are an instrument of influence

which simultaneously mobilises diverse audiences and facilitates the spread of prejudice, disinformation and verbal aggression. In this context, the findings of the present study align with his observations: in the cases of the USA (2016) and Brazil (2018), a combination of virality, emotionality and discrediting potential of memes was recorded. However, the present study expands P. Misra's approach by showing that these phenomena are not universal but depend on the level of digital literacy and the structure of the political space. In countries with higher digital competence (as among parts of the youth in the EU or Ukraine), memes tended to perform primarily informational and identificational functions, whereas in environments with low levels of critical content evaluation (as in some regions of Brazil), they became a means of emotional manipulation. P. Misra's conclusions on the erosion of political discourse through meme virality are consistent with the observed risks of causal fallacy, where the speed of dissemination is not accompanied by substantive accuracy. At the same time, within the present study, this process is viewed not only as a threat but as a regular stage in the evolution of digital communication, which requires not restriction but the development of regulations aimed at increasing algorithmic transparency, media literacy and the quality of public dialogue.

It is important to consider the algorithmic architecture of digital platforms when interpreting the results of this study. Ranking systems, recommendation systems, and engagement-based feeds all influence the visibility, repetition, and audience reach of political memes, which do not spread in a neutral communicative environment. In their extensive study of Twitter, F. Huszár *et al.* (2022) demonstrated that algorithmic systems may amplify political content unevenly, meaning that some messages gain more visibility due to the technical logic of the platform as well as their semantic appeal. This directly relates to political memes, as their ability to effectively communicate depends on whether platform algorithms convert them from isolated amusing posts into widely circulated political signals. This algorithmic aspect contributes to the explanation of why identity-based and emotionally charged memes frequently gain more traction than messages with complex information. According to H. Metzler & D. Garcia (2024), algorithmic mechanisms and social drivers interact to produce digital media effects. While algorithmic mechanisms include personalisation, recommendation, and engagement optimisation, social drivers in the context of political memes include humour, anger, irony, group identity, and affective resonance. As a result, the impact of memes is not solely generated by content; rather, it results from the interaction between users' emotional reactions and the platform systems that give preference to content that can elicit attention, reactions, and redistribution.

The social-informatics perspective, which holds that communication technologies should be examined as

socio-technical systems rather than as passive means of information transmission, is also consistent with this interpretation. J. Rose & O. MacGregor (2021) demonstrated how algorithm-driven persuasion is ingrained in digital platform architecture, where users' interactions with and interpretations of persuasive content are shaped by interface design, data flows, and automated ranking systems. When it comes to political memes, this means that a meme's ability to communicate depends not only on its visual-verbal format but also on the technical circumstances surrounding its visibility, recommendation, repetition, and social validation. Comparison with the work of M.A. Al Afnan (2025) shows convergence in the conclusion that political memes are a communication tool that influences voter behaviour and structures public opinion. However, unlike Al Afnan's study, which stresses the dichotomous nature of memes – as drivers of mobilisation and, simultaneously, of disinformation – the results of this study show that memetic effects are not only polarising but also adaptive, depending on the context of political culture and the level of digital literacy. The patterns identified in the electoral campaigns of the USA, Ukraine and Brazil indicate that memes do not merely reflect political polarisation but actively reproduce it, forming network structures that mutually reinforce emotional reactions.

Comparison of the results with existing theoretical models demonstrated that political memes do not perform their functions in isolation, but in interdependence, creating network effects that extend beyond individual platforms. All of the studies compared confirm the importance of the emotional component as a mechanism of influence, but it is in this study that it is shown how the emotionality of memes is combined with their informational and identificational roles, generating a synergistic effect. This approach makes it possible to explain the differing effectiveness of memes in the contexts of the USA, Brazil, Ukraine and India. In the USA, emotional intensity combined with high replication frequency; in Brazil, with the social integration of messengers; in Ukraine, with the symbolic re-imagining of a political leader as an "anti-system hero". Thus, the study's findings are consistent with global trends while also extending them by showing that memetic influence is not only an instrument of polarisation but also a form of cultural adaptation of political discourse. Political memes emerge not merely as a means of manipulation, but as mediators of social emotions which shape political participation through humour, identification and emotional resonance, thereby opening a new avenue of research in digital political communication.

### ■ Conclusions

The study has shown that political memes function as complex, multifunctional instruments, combining informational, emotional and identificational functions. Empirical analysis of four electoral campaigns demonstrated

a clear relationship between platform type and the nature of memetic influence. In particular, it was found that in the case of Brazil in 2018, WhatsApp served as the main channel for disseminating political memes, affecting the informational landscape in regions with high penetration of this messenger. In Ukraine in 2019, analysis of a corpus of 1,121 memes revealed a predominance of ironic and positive tones in memes in favour of V. Zelenskyi, which correlated with increased visibility among younger audiences. The study's empirical findings showed that political memes serve as context-dependent electoral communication tools whose impact varies based on audience composition, platform architecture, and national political circumstances. A comparison of the campaigns in the USA in 2016, Ukraine in 2019, Brazil in 2018, and India in 2019 revealed that emotional and discrediting memes were particularly prevalent in highly polarised environments, while informational and mobilising memes became more important in campaigns that depended on messenger-based dissemination, anti-system narratives, or youth engagement. Memes function as multifunctional communication units that simultaneously inform, emotionally engage, and mark group identity, thereby shaping collective perceptions within the digital public sphere. In this regard, the empirical results verified that memes played a role not only in the dissemination of political messages but also in the formation of networked group belonging, the reinforcement of political attitudes, and the symbolic framing of candidates.

The results demonstrate how various memes can be used to mobilise audiences, bolster candidate images, or frame opponents within particular platform environments, which has practical implications for the development of electoral communication strategies. Political actors, campaign teams, and communication experts may find this analysis useful in developing more context-sensitive tactics that take into consideration the identifying, symbolic, and emotional roles memes play in influencing public opinion. The main limitation of the study lies in its primary focus on correlational relationships between the spread of memes and political processes, which does not allow causal relations to be definitively established without the use of experimental methods. Future research should therefore develop a multi-methodological approach combining corpus analysis, social network analytics and controlled experiments to identify the causal impact of political memes on the formation of public opinion and electoral behaviour.

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## Політичні мему як комунікаційна технологія конструювання суспільної думки в електоральних кампаніях: порівняльний аналіз

**Клементін Міле**

Кандидат політичних наук, викладач  
Європейський університет у Тирані  
1000, вул. Ханфізе Кеко, м. Тирана, Албанія  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0679-142X>

**Бесіан Зогай**

Викладач  
Європейський університет Тирані  
1000, вул. Ханфізе Кеко, м. Тирана, Албанія  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8955-8355>

**Анотація.** Метою дослідження було виявити закономірності функціонування політичних мемів у різних соціально-політичних контекстах та з'ясувати, як вони впливають на формування громадської думки під час виборчих кампаній. Для вивчення структури, тону та поширення політичних мемів у чотирьох виборчих кампаніях (США, 2016; Бразилія, 2018; Україна, 2019; Індія, 2019) методологічна база поєднувала корпусний та мережевий аналіз. Це дозволило простежити варіації між платформами та типами цифрової взаємодії. Результати показують, що політичні мему є складними візуально-текстовими одиницями, які інформують, впливають, мобілізують, дискредитують та позначають політичну приналежність. Домінуючі функції мемів варіюються залежно від політичного контексту, архітектури платформи та структури аудиторії: емоційні та дискредитуючі мему посилюють поляризацію та закріпили фрейми, пов'язані з кандидатами, у США; мобілізаційні та інформаційні мему допомогли сформувати «нового» антисистемного кандидата та заохотити участь молоді в Україні; а мему на базі WhatsApp сприяли залученню молоді в Бразилії. Результати також показують, що відкриті платформи, такі як X, Reddit, Facebook, Instagram та TikTok, підвищують видимість, вірусність та формують порядок денний, тоді як закриті або напівзакриті канали, такі як WhatsApp і Telegram, підвищують групову довіру та цільове поширення інформації, одночасно знижуючи прозорість та зовнішню верифікацію. Дослідження показало, що вплив політичних мемів залежить від ступеня стиснення інформації, емоційного резонансу та сигналів ідентифікації, а не від якоїсь однієї комунікативної функції. У дослідженні зроблено висновок, що політичні мему є самостійною формою цифрової політичної комунікації, здатної впливати на громадську думку шляхом взаємодії з користувачькими спільнотами, алгоритмами платформ та контентом. Отримані результати мають практичне значення для ініціатив з медіаграмотності, регулювання діяльності платформ, аналізу передвиборчої комунікації та розробки методів швидкої візуальної перевірки фактів, адаптованих до сучасних цифрових кампаній

**Ключові слова:** соціальні мережі; цифрова комунікація; виборець; передвиборча кампанія; мобілізація