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The Rise of Populist Parties through Digital Media:

The case of *Alternative für Deutschland* and *Podemos*

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To my parents,
who never stopped believing in me

"But we need to think that despite it all, one day,

we can eventually come to understand one another"

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Summary

Questa tesi esplora il ruolo che i media hanno avuto, e tutt'ora hanno, nell'ascesa al potere in particolare dei partiti di destra, focalizzandosi soprattutto sulle strategie usate in queste piattaforme e gli effetti che queste ultime hanno sulla percezione pubblica. In questi ultimi anni, i partiti di destra hanno continuato a sfruttare sia i media tradizionali sia i media digitali per migliorare e spargere il loro messaggio e i loro valori; in modo da plasmare il discorso politico e ottenere sostenitori. Questa ricerca esamina l'uso della retorica populista nelle campagne mediatiche, insieme al *targeting* strategico di specifici tipi di media e canali di social media per ottenere il riconoscimento di gruppi di elettori chiave. A seguito di un'introduzione sull'origine del populismo e il suo uso nei media, il centro di questa tesi è l'analisi di due casi di studio di due partiti provenienti da paesi diversi: per la destra populista è il partito tedesco *Alternative für Deutschland*, e per la sinistra populista è il partito spagnolo *Podemos*. Gli ultimi due capitoli cercheranno di fare luce su come le strategie mediatiche non solo influenzino gli elettori, ma aiutino anche i partiti, soprattutto di destra, ad avere successo e quindi guadagnare consenso. Le conclusioni di questa tesi servono a sottolineare il ruolo significativo dei media nella formazione di quello che è oggi il panorama politico contemporaneo, offrendo spunti di riflessione sulle dinamiche in evoluzione tra media, politica e potere.

Introduction

In recent years, democracies around the world have undergone significant political shifts, driven in large part by the rise of populist movements. In particular those caused by the rise of populist movements. This change has been pronounced particularly in Europe, where both far right and left-wing populist parties have gained significant favour. How was this achieved? These movements capitalized on economic anxieties, cultural injustices and widespread dissatisfaction with traditional political elites. One of the main factors that facilitated this rise has been the evolution of digital media. Online platforms have reshaped political communication, providing populist actors with powerful tools for mobilization, voter outreach and narrative control. Thus, this thesis analyses the role of digital media in the rise of populist parties, with a particular focus on *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), a far-right party, and *Podemos*, a left-wing populist movement in Spain. By examining these two cases, the aim is to provide a general understanding of how digital platforms shape contemporary political communication. Influencing, in this way, electoral outcomes and reshaping the relationship between political actors and the public.

The growing importance of populist movements has sparked intense academic and public debate, with much of the discourse centring on economic and social conditions that enable their rise. Even though these structural factors are without doubt important, digital media has become an equally vital force in shaping contemporary populism. Digital platforms—ranging from social media networks such as Facebook[1], X[2], Tik Tok[3] and Instagram[4], to alternative news websites—have revolutionized the way political parties communicate, offering populist actors a direct channel to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and engage with voters in real-time.

[1] Facebook is a social media founded in 2004 that allows users to post, direct messaging and interact with other users of the platform. This application reached its peak of popularity in the early 2010s, where, besides the United States, it started to spread all around Europe.

[2] X is a social media formally known as Twitter. Contrary to Facebook, in this platform it is more common not use the person's real name, so the users normally adopted nicknames. Even though one of the functions included the possibility of direct messaging, on X the more common features are posting and "retweeting".

[3] Among all the social media platforms cited Tik Tok is the most recent one. It was first founded in 2016 under the name musical.ly and later became known as Tik Tok. The platform allows the creation and sharing of videos often paired with a part of a song or a sound. The posts in this application tend to go viral quickly thanks to the algorithm featured in the platform.

[4] Instagram is a social media platform founded in 2010. The features of this social network comprehend the possibility to share and post photos and videos for your followers to see, comment or like. In the recent years it also adopted the possibility for users to share videos in what can be considered as "Tik Tok style", these are called "reels".

This study is particularly relevant in the current years. Given the fact that digital media not only amplifies populist rhetoric but also fosters political polarization and the dissemination of misinformation. The parties aforementioned present compelling case studies due to their strategic and effective, in some cases, use of digital platforms to disseminate their political messages, increase the number of followers and challenge mainstream political narratives. Examining these parties provides valuable insights into digital populism for contemporary democracy.

Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and *Podemos* are two distinct manifestations of populism in Europe, each rooted in different ideological traditions but sharing common strategies in their utilization of digital media. AfD, founded in 2013, has evolved, it changed its focus and went from an anti-Eurozone protest party to a full nationalist, anti-immigration force that has had a non-indifferent impact on German politics. As previously mentioned, one of the reasons for its success can be attributed to its strategic utilisation of social media platforms to critique mainstream political parties and mobilise supporters. In fact, the party has taken advantage of digital platforms to frame contentious issues such as migration and national identity in ways that resonate with disaffected voters, often employing provocative narratives. On the other hand, *Podemos* emerged in Spain in 2014 as a left-wing populist response to economic difficulties, corruption and the subsequent failures of traditional parties. The movement, like many others, in the recent years tried to participate on social media to construct an inclusive, bottom-up approach to politics, highlighting grassroots democracy and citizen engagement. *Podemos* positions itself as a progressive force advocating for social justice and participatory democracy. The complete opposite of AfD, whose primarily appeals is directed to nationalist and nativist sentiments. Despite these ideological differences, both parties have relied on digital media as a central tool in their political strategy, making them ideal subjects for this comparative analysis.

This thesis aims, then, to investigate the extent to which digital media contributes to the success of populist movements, using AfD and *Podemos* as case studies. The research will be guided by the following key questions:

- How do AfD and *Podemos* utilize digital media to construct and disseminate their political messages?
- How do their digital strategies are these two strategies different?
- And most importantly, why it seems that the techniques deployed by the far-right parties are more successful than the one used by left wing parties?

By addressing these questions, this work seeks to offer a more in-depth understanding of the digital populism phenomenon, highlighting the mechanisms through which digital technologies are reshaping political landscapes.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative content analysis of social media posts, campaign materials and digital engagement patterns with quantitative data on online interactions and audience demographics. Additionally, through a series of viral content of both parties, as well as case study comparisons, this thesis will provide deeper insights into the strategic decisions behind AfD's and *Podemos*' digital media usage. The study will primarily focus on the period between 2014 and 2024–with some posts of the beginning of 2025,–a time of significant digital evolution and political turbulence in both Germany and Spain. Furthermore, to add to the methodology used in this thesis, it is worth mentioning that from November 2024 to February 2025 I was in Berlin to do an internship, where I had the chance to witness the effects of the propaganda of the far-right party, *Alternative für Deutschland*. In this political period, in fact, the German population–and parties– is preparing itself for the German national elections that are bound to happen on the 23rd of February. In the months while I was there the parties involved in the participation to these elections were engaging themselves into what can be called non-digital political propaganda, meaning having different stands around the city and distributing informative flyers. However, some events in particular stood out to me, these events will be better deepened in the conclusion of this thesis, since they will affect the conclusions drawn from this work.

Moving on, to the structure of this thesis, already briefly mentioned in the summary, the order and content of the chapters are the followings: the first chapter provides a theoretical framework for understanding populism, digital media, and their intersection in modern political communication. Focusing in particular on the history of populism and how this phenomenon came to be. The second chapter starts by listing a series of examples concerning the way the far-right parties around the world used said social media as a propaganda tool. In particular, the focus of this part is the historical and political evolution of AfD through the use of digital media. Finally, the third chapter starts with some examples of propaganda of the left-wing parties, then the focus moves to analyse the digital strategies employed by *Podemos*, including its use of social media and the way these are adopted is different than the ones used by the Afd.

In my personal opinion, populism's rise in the digital age is one of the most interesting developments in contemporary politics. And the analysis of the mechanisms through which these movements take advantage of digital media is fundamental for assessing their impact on democracy and on the social sphere. With the insights on the cases of AfD and *Podemos*, this

thesis tries to contribute to the ever-growing body of literature on digital populism. Through this research one can gain a deeper understanding of how digital media shapes modern political movements and what can be done to foster a more informed and democratic digital environment.

1. Populism: an analysis of its origins, its features and its spreading through media

"I believe that a proper grasp of populism also helps deepen our understanding of democracy".[5]

1.1 Definition

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on the concept of populism and how it evolved through history in different parts of the world. The aim is to explore the origins of this political phenomenon by examining the historical, economic and social factors that have shaped its development, focusing on the techniques used to gain consent among people. By tracing the trajectory of populism from its early expressions to its modern incarnations, this part will provide a comprehensive understanding of how populist rhetoric and strategies have evolved in response to shifting political landscapes. The objective is to analyse the key moments in the history of populism, identify the common themes that link past and present movements, and assess the impact of populism on democratic governance.
The main questions addressed in this chapter will be the followings:

- What is populism?
- How has populism evolved throughout history?
- Which social media techniques were the most used in recent years for propaganda purpose?

This last point will be the last topic to be addressed since it acts as a link to the other two chapters of this work, introducing a deeper analysis the two specific populist movements chosen for this analysis, respectively *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) for far-right populism and *Podemos* for left-wing populism.

[5] Müller J. W., *What is Populism?,* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, pp. 1-160, p. 16

To start this chapter, it is important to first answer the question "What is Populism?". The etymology of the term itself originates from Latin *populus* meaning "people"[6], adding after the word the suffix "ism".

Populism has, thus, emerged as one of the most significant political forces in the contemporary world, shaping electoral outcomes and redefining the relationship between citizens and the political elites. As a political phenomenon, it is notoriously difficult to define due to its fluidity and adaptability across time and contexts. While populist movements have emerged in various regions, from Europe and the Americas to Asia and Africa, their underlying principles share a common thread: a rejection of the political elite, a critique of the status quo and an appeal to "the people" as the legitimate holders of power. This increasing influence invites critical analysis, not only of its current manifestations but of its origins, evolution and the socio-political contexts that give rise to populist movements. There are different approaches that focus on studying and analysing populism; the one more useful to the purpose of this chapter is the structuralist approach. This approach suggests that "… populism emerges when three conditions are present: the recent formation of middle classes, particularly urban ones; antagonism between the middle and upper classes; and the opening of physical and social space that arises when the distance between the middle and lower classes diminishes, creating opportunities to participate in the construction of a new society."[7]

With the quotation afore mentioned, what can be understood is that "*populism is not new*"[8]. This is the first statement of Nadia Urbinati's book *Me the People*. "It is a new issue but not a new phenomenon, it emerged along with processes of democratisation in the nineteenth century and since then its forms have mirrored the forms of the representative governments it has challenged."[9] These first three lines of the book imply that populism is a sort of mirror of the representative democracy systems it intended to counteract or challenge; there is a sort reciprocal imitation. What is interesting, is that this specific phrasing of the phenomenon of populism could be associated with the idea of "populism seen as a shadow" conceptualised by Müller. With this concept in mind, one can consider, for example, the narrative of populist radical right, which is manufactured by different pieces and events (acting then, as the mirror of the democracy they want to counteract), but this does not signify that they these events and

[6] Online Etymology Dictionary, https://www.etymonline.com/word/populism

[7] Campos-Herrera G. and Umpierrez de Reguero S, *Populism in Latin America*, Latin American Politics and Society, Spring 2019, Vol. 61, No. 1, Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Miami, pp. 148-159, p. 149, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26779154

[8] Urbinati N., *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Harvard University Press, 2019, pp. 1–266, p.1

[9] Ibidem

pieces are all false. It does not matter how opposed one may feel towards any political movement, the wrong attitude is to consider everything of a political stand completely false. Each political stand arises from some issues that current times are posing, each political stand is, then, an answer.

However, what is noteworthy today about dealing with populism is the intensity and pervasiveness of its manifestations. Governments must find a way on how to deal with populism, since it is indeed becoming a central necessary issue of our time. How populism is conceptualised is also a new issue, because even though populism is everywhere worldwide, the ability to study populism is currently limited, as Urbinati explains "Either it was simply conceptualised as a subspecies of fascism or it was studied as a form of government that was thought to be limited of the West, and particularly to Latin American countries."[10] This second aspect was indeed prevalent while studying the phenomenon during the last years. Latin America was, in fact, thought to be a sort of distortion of democracies with mixed authoritarian regimes. "Moreover, the very notion of populism tends to receive a negative connotation in both the scholarly and public debate, since it is commonly analysed as a pathological phenomenon."[11]

Nadia Urbinati continues her analysis of populism by stating her being aware of the importance of populism movement since the early 1990s, because of the birth of the first Berlusconi government and the then-new political party "Forza Italia", which contributed to radically change the Italian party system by overcoming the asset that was rooted in the so-called "first republic" and inside the face of the second republic. She was already observing the Italian and other political systems, at the time she underlined the importance of this change following the remarks made by her mentor, Norberto Bobbio, who published "*Destra e Sinistra*", particularly to take into consideration this massive change in the Italian politics. Thus, she was aware of the importance of this issue, but in the core centre of democracy they were not.

By now populism has affected all the main countries, a case of note are the US the moment Donald Trump came into the office. In fact, in 2016 the presidential contest has widely been described in the media with Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders being both populists, one for the right and the other for the left.[12] Thus, it was seen as a problem connected to the national construction in former colonised countries, meaning countries which have to deal with the

[10] Urbinati N., *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, p. 1

[11] Mudde C. and Rovira Kaltwasser C., *Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America*, Government and Opposition, April 2013, Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 147-174, Cambridge University Press Stable, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26347391

[12] Müller J. W., *What is Populism?*, p. 15

legacy of colonisation and did not have a strong history or a strong liberal democracy. Yet now it affects also the very centre of democracy.

A few scholars suggested that populism might have a positive role to play in contemporary democracies. Once, it was seen mainly as a problem that was marginal and only a few scholars saw it with a positive connotation, now more scholars and citizens were attracted to it. They perceived populism as a legitimate call for power by the ordinary men. In particular, there is a school of thought which saw populism as beneficial for current democracies, not just in a moral perspective but because it intends to retrieve sovereignty and place it again to the legitimate call for power of the ordinary men. These ordinary men are the same that for years have been subjected to a declining political influence (declining incomes); in this same period the majority of the people felt that they were not able to influence, to have a say in the functioning of ordinary politics. This evolving of events brought some scholars to have a positive view of populism, seeing it as an opportunity to rejuvenate democracy and as a weapon that the left may use to defeat the right.

Taking into consideration the case of the United States, where populism begun to spread, there has been, in the last years, a growing number of scholars which are sympathetic with populism, meaning an electoral success of populism candidates. However, this success of populism in the electoral campaigns is aimed in particular towards the right wing, in fact, the followings are some statistics of the 2020's elections in the United States "nearly two-thirds of Populist Right (66%) identify as Republicans, while roughly a quarter (26%) lean toward the Republican Party. Just 7% identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party."[13]

In Urbinati's remark, the term populism is still most often used as an ideological tool, not an analytic one. Thus, her stand is that populism has to be considered in analytical terms, not ideological ones.[14] It should be seen as an important feature of current politics and being considered in an analytic-centric way. It is not supposed to be used to stigmatise or to try to mobilise people.

Turning once again to Urbinati's book, she is highlighting that populism is not a political idea or a specific political family, she is saying that it is a type of project of government. It is a different way to conceive democracy in its foundational aspect. Populism in power can then be perceived as a *form of representative democracy*. In her own words, "populism in power is a form of representative government that is based on a direct relation between the leader and

[13] Pew Research Center, *Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology*, November 2021, pp.1 – 169, p. 55, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/11/PP_2021.11.09_political-typology_REPORT.pdf

[14] Urbinati N., *Me the People*, p. 28

those in society who are deemed to be the "right" or the "good" people: those whom the leader claims to unify and bring to power and whom the elections reveal but do not create.".[15] There is a "good people" of whom the leader perceive itself as a representative of, the populist people is then not the entire people within a given country or nation. Because there must be the good people with the majority and who is somehow dispossessed of its powers and then there is within the same country a part of citizens who are not the good people, who is the part to be opposed to and in the populist narrative these are the elites (i.e. political or economic elite).

The concept of populist people is a dichotomy one, it is a result of a dichotomic view of the society: which is divided into the two afore described. In substance, the idea of "good people" is an ideological construction, if there are "good people" then there must be also its counterpart, being "bad people". This dichotomy is the engine that pushes society in the populist perceptive and, is the way in which political representation should be organised. A sort of elitist principle combined with a dichotomy theory (sovereignty for the populist movement is of the people).

Historically, one of the other main characteristics of the populist movement has been its being a flexible ideology that transcends traditional political boundaries, finding a home on both the right and left of the political spectrum. It is not exclusive and finding a political compass is not always easy.

Being not a new phenomenon then, the term that is now used to refer as "populism" has its origins in the 19th century, when its ideas began to take shape in response to economic inequality and rapid social change. Early populist movements emerged as reactions to the increasing difficulties posed by the modernization, hence the subsequent industrialization, and the perceived disconnect between the ruling class and the ordinary people. Some examples of this movement could include the agrarian populists in the United States and the *Narodnik* in Russia.

This movement is defined as an ideology which pits "the people" against a corrupt elite. However, the precise meaning of "ordinary people" and the nature of the elite can vary depending on the context in which populism arises. Some populist movements define the people in nationalistic terms, emphasising ethnic or cultural homogeneity, while others decide to focus on class struggles or anti-globalist sentiments. This adaptability allows the populist movement to gain support in diverse social and political environments. Thus, allowing populism to emerge as a multifaceted and frequently contentious force in the global political landscape.

[15] Urbinati N., *Me the People,* p. 12

Populism's adaptability also means that it can take on vastly different ideological positions. In Müller's book (citing Carlos de la Torre *Populist Seduction in Latin America*), he describes populism as "a drunken guest at a dinner party: he's not respecting table manners, he is rude, he might even start 'flirting with the wives of other guests.' But he might also be blurting out the truth about a liberal democracy that has become forgetful about its founding ideal of popular sovereignty."[16]

Right-wing populism, which is the focus point of this thesis, for the majority emphasizes nationalism, anti-immigration policies and a rejection of multiculturalism; while left-wing populism typically focuses on economic redistribution, social justice and a critique of neoliberalism. Nevertheless, despite their ideological differences, both right- and left-wing populists share a common critique of the political establishment, accusing it of betraying the interests of the people, favouring the "corrupted" elites.

Theoretical approaches to populism range from understanding it as a "illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism"[17] (as theorized by Cas Mudde) to seeing it as a political logic or discourse (as argued by Ernesto Laclau).

Ideologically, populists position themselves as defenders of the "common people", but this ideological foundation is often thin and adaptable. The focus on style is critical, as populist leaders frequently employ highly emotional, simple, and direct rhetoric to mobilize supporters and undermine establishment politics.

For this question, it is useful to take into consideration "*What is Populism?"* by Müller. Focusing mainly to "the seven theses on populism" found in the conclusion of Müller's book:

Seven Thesis on Populism	**Interpretation**
First: Populism is neither the authentic part of modern democratic politics nor a kind of pathology caused by irrational citizens. It is the permanent shadow of representative politics. There is always the possibility for an actor to speak in the name of the "real people" as a way of contesting currently powerful elites. There was no populism in ancient Athens; demagoguery perhaps, but no populism, since the latter exists only in	This is a strong view on populism, which is considered as a permanent shadow (not a positive connotation) of representative politics. A shadow is something that originates from an object or a person, hence, the form of the shadow reproduces what it originates from. Thus, it retains the features of representative politics only in a way that if it is something obscure like a shadow is. This is a metaphor, but what is important is that there is a direct link

[16] Müller J. W., *What is Populism?*, p. 14
[17] Ibidem

representative systems. Populists are not against the principle of political representation; they just insist that only they themselves are legitimate representatives.	between what is representative politics and populism. Representative politics always contains the possibility for an actor to speak in the name of the real people as a way of contesting currently powerful elites. This is a dichotomic view of the society. If a system is entirely authoritarian it does not entail the representative power of people, this is not populism because there is no representative politics.
Second: Not everyone who criticizes elites is a populist. In addition to being antielitist, populists are antipluralist. They claim that they and they alone represent the people. All other political competitors are essentially illegitimate, and anyone who does not support them is not properly part of the people. When in opposition, populists will necessarily insist that elites are immoral, whereas the people are a moral, homogeneous entity whose will cannot err.	Populists are anti-pluralist; thus, society must be divided into two parts, not more. There is no need for a plural organisation of society and politics. The will of the people is expressed and not overshadowed; it is particularly emphasised. Also, in a way of wanting to get rid of all the intermediate bodies that have been developed over time to channel and to express.
Third It can often seem that populists claim to represent the common good as willed by the people. On closer inspection, it turns out that what matters for populists is less the product of a genuin process of will-formation or a common good that anyone with common sense can glean than a symbolic representation of the "real people" from which the correct policy is then deduced. This renders the political position of a populist immune to empirical refutation. Populists can always play off the "real people" or "silent majority" against elected representatives and the official outcome of a vote.	Müller is the least sympathetic with populism, and, in fact, there is a sort of derogative attitude towards it. However, here he is saying something which is very similar to when Urbinati said that the concept of populist people was a construction. Here he is stating that, what political goal for populists amounts to, is a symbolic representation of the real people, it is not something like a real issue, but more like a symbolic representation. Also, the real will of people is not really respected but it is mainly projected and constructed and symbolically transmitted. The stress is, then, on the symbolic representation.
Fourth	This comment highlights a key critique of populism: while it appears to encourage direct

While populists often call for referenda, such exercises are not about initiating open-ended processes of democratic will-formation among citizens. Populists simply wish to be confirmed in what they have already determined the will of the real people to be. Populism is not a path to more participation in politics.	democracy through referenda, it often seeks only to validate decisions that populist leaders claim to reflect "the will of the people." The process is not about fostering genuine public debate or expanding political participation but rather reinforcing a predetermined narrative. Populists frame their vision of "the real people" as monolithic, and referenda become tools to confirm their version of popular will rather than open up space for more democratic deliberation.
Fifth Populists can govern, and they are likely to do so in line with their basic commitment to the idea that only they represent the people. Concretely, they will engage in occupying the state, mass clientelism and corruption, and the suppression of anything like a critical civil society. These practices find an explicit moral justification in the populist political imagination and hence can be avowed openly. Populists can also write constitutions; these will be partisan or "exclusive" constitutions designed to keep populists in power in the name of perpetuating some supposed original and authentic popular will. They are likely to lead to serious constitutional conflict at some point or other.	This thesis is mainly judgemental, but it is implied that populists are deeply convinced to represent the real people. This comment provides a critical perspective on populist governance, highlighting how populists can effectively control state mechanisms, while prioritizing their own interpretation of representing the "true" will of the people. The mention of practices, such as clientelism and corruption, suggests that their rule often undermines democratic institutions and civic engagement. The idea that populists can draft constitutions that serve their interests indicates a manipulation of legal frameworks to entrench power, raising concerns about the potential for constitutional crises.
Sixth Populists should be criticized for what they are—a real danger to democracy (and not just to "liberalism"). But that does not mean that one should not engage them in political debate. Talking with populists is not the same as talking like populists. One can take the problems they raise seriously without accepting the ways in which they frame these problems.	This statement emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between criticizing populism as a threat to democracy while still engaging in meaningful political debate with populists. It suggests that engaging with populists does not require adopting their rhetoric or framing of issues but rather addressing the underlying concerns they raise in a constructive and critical manner. This specific thesis aims to uphold democratic values while acknowledging and responding to the grievances that fuel populist movements.

Seventh Populism is not a corrective to liberal democracy in the sense of bringing politics "closer to the people" or even reasserting popular sovereignty, as is sometimes claimed. But it can be useful in making it clear that parts of the population really are unrepresented (the lack of representation might concern interests or identity, or both). This does not justify the populist claim that only their supporters are the real people and that they are the sole legitimate representatives. Populism, then, should force defenders of liberal democracy to think harder about what current failures of representation might be. It should also push them to address more general moral questions. What are the criteria for belonging to the polity? Why exactly is pluralism worth preserving? And how can one address the concerns of populist voters understood as free and equal citizens, not as pathological cases of men and women driven by frustration, anger, and resentment? The hope is that this book has suggested at least some preliminary answers to these questions.	This last thesis argues that populism does not serve as a corrective to liberal democracy in the way it often claims—by bringing politics closer to the people or restoring popular sovereignty. Instead, it highlights a genuine issue: certain parts of the population are unrepresented, either in terms of their interests or identity. However, it rejects the populist notion that only their supporters are "the real people" and the sole legitimate representatives. The text suggests that populism, while flawed, challenges defenders of liberal democracy to address failures in representation and to engage more deeply with moral questions about inclusion, pluralism, and how to treat populist voters as legitimate citizens, not as driven by negative emotions.

Seven Thesis on Populism, Jan-Werner Müller[18]

Having described the main features of what can be called a "populist movement", this first chapter will continue by employing a historical-comparative approach, examining populist movements across different periods and regions across the world. Covering a period of time that goes from the first forms of "ancient populism" to the 19th century agrarian revolutions in both the USA and Russia, from the spreading of populist governments in Latin America to the populism rise in nowadays' Europe.

[18] Müller J. W., *What is Populism?*, p. 70, 71

1.2 The origins of Populism and its development

The roots of populism can be traced back to the classical world, particularly in the political practices of ancient Greece and Rome. Figures such as Cleon in Athens and the Gracchi brothers in Rome employed early forms of populist rhetoric, appealing to the masses by positioning themselves against established elites. For example, taking into consideration *the Populares* against *the Optimates*, which can be considered the political divide of the Late Roman Republic, "the antagonism caused by the factionalism inherent in the last decades of the Republic was a defining factor in the decline and eventual fall of the political system that consummated the rise of the new imperial government."[19] The division at the time comprehended the *Populares* and the *Optimates*. The former aimed to increase the power of the people, focusing primary on the interests of the plebeians. They were opposing to the elites of the Senate and for this reason, the politicians of the *Populares* can be associated to, what today are called, "modern populists".[20] The latter (the *Optimates*) were, instead, politicians in favour of the traditional elites and the Senate. Their aim was to preserve the status quo and influence the traditional ruling class. "Famous among the optimates were the orator Marcus Tullius Cicero and the general and later dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla."[21]

However, focusing on modern times, the origins of what today is called modern populism can be traced back to the 19th century, when economic and political disruptions caused by industrialization led to widespread discontent among various groups. "Throughout the 1880s, local political action groups known as Farmers' Alliances sprang up among Midwesterners and Southerners, who were discontented because of crop failures, falling prices, and poor marketing and credit facilities."[22] In the United States, the Populist Party (or People's Party), founded in the 1890s, arose from agrarian grievances, advocating for the rights of farmers who felt marginalized by industrial capitalists and bankers. This movement, while short-lived, laid the foundation for future populist rhetoric, which would frequently invoke the image of a struggling, virtuous majority pitted against an out-of-touch elite.

Similarly, in late 19th-century Russia, the *Narodnik* (or "populists") sought to mobilize the peasantry against the ruling Tsarist regime. "Because Russia was a predominantly agricultural

[19] Kantor U., *Populists of the Late Roman Republic*, The Collector: Ancient History, 2023, https://www.thecollector.com/populists-late-roman-republic/

[20] Kantor U., *Populists of the Late Roman Republic*

[21] Ibidem

[22] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia), *Populist Movement*, Encyclopedia Britannica, (2024, June 3), https://www.britannica.com/event/Populist-Movement

country, the peasants represented the majority of the people (*narod*): hence the name of the movement, *narodnichestvo,* or 'populism.'"[23] The activities of the *Narodniki*, contrary to the People's Party in the United States of America, developed before 1890s, already in the late 1860s and early 1870s there was a movement known as *khozhdenie v narod* ("going to the people"), where young intellectuals, dressed in common clothes, canvased rural regions and incited the peasantry to rebel against the government. These actions caused police persecution, arrests, and political trials of the *Narodniki,* the most famous mass trial of which was the "trial of the 193"[24] (1878).[25]

Thus, to sum up, the *Narodniki* rejected the rapid modernization and industrialization occurring in Russian cities, instead idealizing rural life and traditional communal structures. While their efforts ultimately failed to achieve widespread revolution, the *Narodnik*'s emphasis on the will of the common people and their critique of elite governance foreshadowed later populist movements across the world.

Switching the focus on the European interwar period, Europe saw the rise of leaders who exploited the economic crises and social unrest following World War I. Leaders such as Benito Mussolini in Italy used what today can be considered "populist strategies" to gain power by appealing to nationalistic sentiments and promising to restore the dignity of "the people". The populist movements of this era often blurred the lines between democratic and authoritarian governance, creating a fertile ground for the rise of fascist and authoritarian regimes. In fact, as Müller states "National Socialism and Italian Fascism need to be understood as populist movements —even though, I hasten to add, they were not just populist movements but also exhibited traits that are not inevitable elements of populism as such: racism, a glorification of violence, and a radical 'leadership principle.'"[26]

As already mentioned in the previous part, European populism in the early 20th century was also closely associated with nationalism. For example, it is worth mentioning the case of Italy. Benito Mussolini's rise to power was not solely due to his party's military strength. Instead, his success was rooted in nationalist populism, which thrived on fears of economic decline and social chaos after the First World War. Thus, his Fascist Party promised to recreate Italy's national pride by eliminating the influence of corrupt elites and restoring the Roman Empire's glory. Germany followed a similar path, where the Nazi Party of Adolf Hitler used populist

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[23] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, *Narodnik*, Encyclopedia Britannica, (2014, December 14), https://www.britannica.com/event/Narodnik

[24] The trial consisted of 193 students and other "revolutionaries" charged with populist propaganda against the Russian Empire.

[25] Britannica, *Narodnik.*

[26] Müller J. W., *What is Populism?,* p. 75

rhetoric to appeal to the frustrations of the working and the middle classes. In fact, these social classes had been devastated by the Treaty of Versailles and the economic crisis of the 1920s. Hitler's populist rhetoric was not just about nationalism—it was about identifying the "enemies of the race". Jews, communists and political opponents became scapegoats for Germany's hardships. His promises of a strong, authoritarian state resonated with those desperate for stability. Both Mussolini and Hitler successfully weaponised populist rhetoric to gain power and presenting themselves as the rightful voice of the people against ineffective elites.

Moving the focus to the other side of the world, in Latin America populism took on a distinct character, shaped by the region's specific socio-economic challenges, which were different from the European ones, such as dependence on agricultural exports, uneven industrial development and deep class divisions These challenges encompassed dependence on agricultural exports, uneven industrial development, and deep class divisions. The dissemination of populist ideologies and parties in Latin America is often referred to as the "pink tide" phenomenon, a term coined to denote the success of populist leaders such as Rafael Correa, Evo Morales, and most notably, Hugo Chávez[27] the early 20th century, populist leaders emerged as charismatic figures who promised to modernize their nations and address the grievances of the working class and rural poor.

> "In contrast to Europe, Latin America has a rich tradition of populist leaders, movements and parties since the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, it is possible to identify three 'waves of populism' in Latin America: classic populism of the 1940s and 1960s (for example, Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil), neoliberal populism during the 1990s (for example, Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Carlos Menem in Argentina) and finally radical leftist populism since the 2000s (for example, Chávez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia)"[28]

One of the most notable examples of Latin American populism during this period was Argentina's Juan Domingo Perón. Perón rose to prominence in the 1940s by advocating for labour rights, social welfare programs and economic independence from foreign powers. He built a mass political movement, Peronism (considered the "classical populism", "which constituted a response to the crisis of the 'infamous decade' and the growth of working class

[27] Müller J. W., *What is Populism?,* p. 9
[28] Mudde C. and Rovira Kaltwasser C. *Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America*

demands in the new economic context of the post-war period"[29]), through the gaining of consensus among the working class and positioning himself as a protector of the "common people", building the image of the leader willing to fight against the oligarchs who had dominated Argentina's political and economic life. Perón's main policies, which included the nationalization of the key industries and the expansion of social services, were designed to redistribute wealth and reduce the influence of foreign capital. His populist rhetoric emphasized national sovereignty, social justice and economic nationalism, which resonated with the urban working class, known as the *descamisados* (the shirtless ones). Peronism became a lasting political force in Argentina, shaping the country's politics for decades.[30]

Similarly, in Brazil, Getúlio Vargas, often referred to as the "Father of the Poor," employed populist strategies during his presidency (1930-1945 and 1951-1954). Vargas portrayed himself as a champion of the working class, implementing labour reforms, creating social security systems, and establishing state-controlled industrialization policies. Like Perón, Vargas used state intervention to stimulate economic growth and reduce foreign dependency, which endeared him to the lower classes, "he introduced the largest change in capital/labour relations of the century."[31] Vargas's political rhetoric was grounded in an appeal to national unity, social inclusion, and the fight against economic exploitation by foreign interests and domestic elites. His populism was a mixture of authoritarianism and social reforms, which allowed him to maintain widespread support despite his autocratic tendencies.

The other case taken in consideration is Mexico. However, it is interesting to point out that regarding the spreading of the populist narrative, "The sociologist, Jansen … holds that the first country that experienced this new political practice was Peru, during its 1931 presidential elections. His contribution, therefore, not only raises an interesting case study but also challenges those academics who identify Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil as the pioneers of populism in Latin America."[32]

In Mexico, populism was deeply intertwined with the legacy of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). Leaders like Lázaro Cárdenas, who served as president from 1934 to 1940, embodied the revolutionary spirit of populism through the promotion of land reforms and the nationalization of the oil industry. In fact, Cárdenas redistributed millions of acres of land to peasants and established state-owned enterprises to control key sectors of the economy. His

[29] Grigera J., *Populism in Latina America*, International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique, September 2017, Vol. 38, No. 4, Special Issue: Populism in World Politics (September 2017), pp. 441-455, p. 447

[30] Ibidem

[31] Grigera J., *Populism in Latina America* p. 450

[32] Campos-Herrera G. and Umpierrez de Reguero S. *Populism in Latin America*

populist policies aimed at reducing inequality and asserting Mexico's sovereignty in the face of foreign exploitation, particularly from the United States.

The emergence of populism in these contexts was not only a reaction to economic hardship but also a response to the cultural and political changes that modernization brought. The rapid pace of industrial growth, the increasing distance between elites and ordinary citizens created fertile ground for populist movements to challenge the established order. In many ways, the populism of the 19th century and of the beginning of the 20th century reflected a broader anxiety about the consequences of modernity, an anxiety that continues to resonate in the populist movements of today.

1.3 Modern Populism in Europe in the 20th century

"Populism is a relatively new phenomenon in Europe that has come to prominence with the formation of the populist radical right party family in the 1980s. The parties that belong to this family share three ideological features – nativism, populism and authoritarianism – and their electoral fortunes have differed widely, from strong and fairly stable parties such as the Italian Northern League (LN)"[33]

Modern European populism is a complex political phenomenon that mixes old features of populism and even some modern elements. These elements comprehend: nationalism, right-wing ideology and a rejection of established political elites. The roots of this movement are deeply intertwined with the socio-economic and political radical changes that followed the Second World War. Thus, understanding its rise requires an exploration of post-war nationalism and the evolution of right-wing movements, as well as how they have shaped contemporary European politics.

It is more accurate to start with an historical background. The end of the Second World War in 1945 left Europe devastated, with millions of lives lost and entire cities in ruins. In the aftermath, European nations faced the challenge of rebuilding their societies and economies, while also grappling with the psychological and moral scars of fascism and totalitarianism, "the whole direction of political development in postwar Europe has been toward fragmenting

[33] Mudde C. and Rovira Kaltwasser C. *Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America*

political power."[34] Nationalism underwent a transformation, after being associated with aggressive expansionism and racial superiority. In fact, post-war nationalism in Europe initially focused on rebuilding national pride within the framework of democratic values, economic cooperation and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Müller argues that "it is the particular approach to addressing the Eurocrisis – for shorthand, technocracy – that is crucial for understanding the present-day rise of populism."[35]

In the early post-war years, Western Europe leaned toward integration, with projects like the European Coal and Steel Community (1951) and later the European Economic Community (1957). These institutions were designed to promote interdependence between European nations, thus making another war in Europe less likely. The idea of a shared European identity began to emerge, especially in Western Europe. This especially due to the memory of the horrors of nationalism gone awry that led many to support supranational organizations like the European Union (EU).

However, nationalism did not disappear entirely. In Eastern Europe, where the Soviet Union exerted control over most of the region, nationalist movements were often suppressed. But these would only resurface later in the form of anti-Soviet and anti-communist resistance. By the time the Cold War ended, nationalism in these countries took on a new form, whose values were deeply rooted in demands for sovereignty, cultural recognition and independence from Moscow's influence.

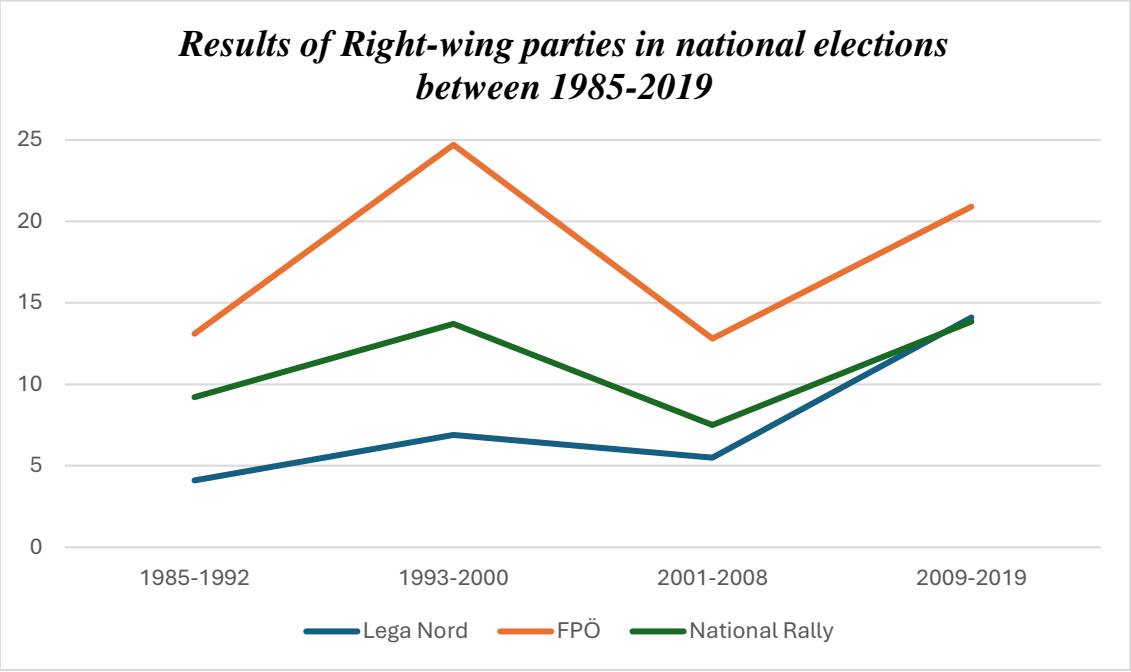
The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent integration of Eastern European countries into the European Union in the 2000s reshaped the political landscape of Europe. Many believed that Europe was moving toward an era of stability, democracy and liberal values. This period of optimism also coincided with new challenges, these being: economic crises, growing concerns over immigration and the increasing influence of globalization. These factors provided fertile ground for the resurgence of right-wing populism.

Right-wing movements in post-war Europe had long been marginalized due to their associations with fascism and Nazism. However, by the 1990s and 2000s, these movements began to recreate themselves. How did they manage to do that? Many right-wing populist parties abandoned overtly racist or authoritarian rhetoric and instead focused on themes like national sovereignty, cultural preservation and opposition to the perceived overreach of the EU.[36] They tapped into anxieties about immigration, particularly from non-European countries, and framed their

[34] Müller J. W., *What is Populism?,* p. 75
[35] Ivi p. 77
[36] Polakow-Suransky S. *The ruthlessly effective rebranding of Europe's new far right*, The Guardian, Nov 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/01/the-ruthlessly-effective-rebranding-of-europes-new-far-right

opposition to multiculturalism and globalism as a defence of European identity. An article of The Guardian titled "*The ruthlessly effective rebranding of Europe's new far right*", describes this new European far right as different, "from Denmark to the Netherlands to Germany, a new wave of rightwing parties has emerged over the past decade-and-a-half."[37]

These anxieties were aggravated by the financial crisis of 2008 and the Eurozone debt crisis. In countries like Greece, Italy and Spain, strict measures imposed by the EU sparked resentment and fuelled a growing anti-EU sentiment. Meanwhile, in Northern and Western Europe, countries like France, the Netherlands and Austria saw a growing interest in right-wing populist parties.[38] The rise of parties such as France's National Front (now National Rally), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), and Italy's Lega Nord signalled a broader trend across Europe, where right-wing populism was no longer on the political fringes but had become a formidable force.



The data and the statistics in the graph above were taken for *Lega Nord* from *Il Giornale*[39], for FPÖ from *Statista*[40] and for National Rally from *L'Express*[41].

[37] Polakow-Suransky S. *The ruthlessly effective rebranding of Europe's new far right*
[38] Ibidem
[39] Curridori F. *Da Bossi a Salvini, ecco i 30 anni di storia della Lega Nord*, Il Giornale, Dic 2019, https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/bossi-salvini-ecco-i-30-anni-storia-lega-nord-1801808.html
[40] Henrich P., *Ergebnisse der Nationalratswahlen in Österreich von 1945 bis 2024*, Statista, Oct 2024, https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/274303/umfrage/endergebnis-der-nationalratswahl-in-oesterreich/
[41] Parmentier A. *Législatives : 4 graphiques pour comprendre le score historique du RN*, L'Express, Jul 2024, https://www.lexpress.fr/politique/legislatives-4-graphiques-pour-comprendre-le-score-historique-du-rn-JW74OO3H7FFWFPOOOQHA2KSORQ/

One of the biggest forces driving European populism has been immigration—especially from countries in North Africa and the Middle East. The increase of refugees during the Syrian Civil War, combined with broader instability in the region, pushed immigration and security concerns to the forefront of political debates. Right-wing populist parties framed immigration not only as an economic threat but also as a cultural one, arguing that large-scale immigration was undermining European values, traditions, and social cohesion.[42]

This sense of cultural anxiety is central to the appeal of populist movements. Populist leaders frequently claim to represent the "real people" and position themselves as defenders of national identity against the forces of globalization, multiculturalism and distant political elites. These elites, they argue, are out of touch with the everyday concerns of ordinary citizens. The rise of figures like Marine Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Viktor Orbán in Hungary reflects this dynamic. Each of them has built a political platform centred on nationalism, sovereignty, and resistance to supranational institutions like the European Union.[43]

The EU, once widely seen as a pillar of stability and economic prosperity, has increasingly become a target of populist frustration. Euroscepticism—opposition to the EU—is a common theme among right-wing populists, who argue that Brussels imposes regulations and policies that override national interests. This sentiment was more than ever evident in the Brexit referendum of 2016, where a majority of British voters opted to leave the EU. Led by figures like Nigel Farage, the Leave campaign successfully portrayed the EU as an unaccountable, bureaucratic institution that threatened British sovereignty.

The success of Brexit sent a ripple effect across Europe. Populist leaders saw it as proof that national interests could override the EU's authority. In Hungary and Poland, Viktor Orbán and the Law and Justice Party (PiS) have openly clashed with Brussels over issues like migration, judicial independence, and human rights, framing their defiance as a defence of national sovereignty and Christian values.[44]

But the rise of populism is not just about immigration or the EU. It also reflects a broader frustration with traditional political parties, a growing distrust of elites, and the social and economic disruptions brought by globalization. Many voters feel left behind and unheard, and populist leaders have been remarkably successful at tapping into that discontent.

Some see this populist wave as a necessary correction—a way for ordinary citizens to reclaim power from distant bureaucracies. Others worry that its emphasis on nationalism, rejection of

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[42] Polakow-Suransky S., *The ruthlessly effective rebranding of Europe's new far right*

[43] Greven T. *The Rise of Right-wing Populism in Europe and the United States: A Comparative Perspective*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, May 2016, https://dc.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/RightwingPopulism.pdf

[44] Ibidem

pluralism and suspicion of liberal institutions could pose a serious threat to democracy. As the debate between national sovereignty and European integration continues, populist movements are likely to remain a defining force in Europe's political landscape for years to come.

1.4 Populism and Decolonization

Moving on, it is also fundamental to consider that both populism and decolonization were two of the most significant political phenomena to shape the last two centuries, in particular in the Global South. Decolonization refers to the process through which former colonies gained independence, especially after the Second World War. These two phenomena are deeply linked in the Global South, as populist movements often emerged in the wake of decolonization, appealing to nationalist sentiment and offering a voice to the disenfranchised. "Decolonization became both a practical process of independence and a philosophical movement, aimed at reversing the cultural and psychological effects of colonial rule."[45]

The Global South, which includes Latin America, Africa, and much of Asia, experienced a wave of decolonization following the Second World War. The colonial powers, weakened by the war and pressured by rising nationalist movements, were unable to maintain their hold over territories in Africa and Asia. In Latin America, the struggle for independence had occurred much earlier, in the 19th century, but the region continued to face a form of colonial domination, but this time related to being economic dependent on the United States and Europe.[46]

Decolonization was not only a political and economic process but also a cultural one. It involved dismantling the colonial ideologies that had shaped governance, education and society in these regions. Nationalist movements, often led by charismatic leaders, mobilized the masses with promises of self-determination, equality and the end of exploitation by foreign powers. In many cases, these movements had, as in other cases mentioned before, strong populist characteristics, framing the struggle as one between a downtrodden "people" and the foreign colonial or neocolonial elite. The leaders of these movements used populism's features as a method to

[45] Betts R. F., *Decolonization*, Routledge, 2004, pp. 1 - 144

[46] Mudde C. and Rovira Kaltwasser C. *Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America*

assert national identity, pitting the common people against the elite, both local and foreign, focusing on the aspect of "ethno-nationalist populism".[47]

Once independence was achieved, many newly liberated nations turned to populism as a political strategy to unify diverse populations and maintain control. Leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana and the previous ones cited concerning the countries in Latin America, among others, adopted populist rhetoric to galvanize support. They often portrayed themselves as the embodiment of the "voiceless", mainly in Latin America, where "contemporary populism … favours the political representation of groups that have been discriminated against and whose voices have not been taken into account by the establishment."[48]

In many cases, populist leaders implemented social reforms aimed at improving the lives of the poor and marginalized. However, these movements often relied on centralized control, and many populist leaders became authoritarian over time. The initial promises of social justice and equality were frequently undermined by corruption, inefficiency, mainly concerning the economic establishment.[49]

One of the defining characteristics of populism in the Global South is its relation to neocolonialism. Even though formal colonialism ended in the mid-20th century, many countries in the Global South continued to experience economic and political domination by former colonial powers or new hegemonic actors, like the United States. This new form of imperialism, known as neocolonialism, has been a persistent source of populist outrage.

Populist leaders in the Global South have often railed against foreign interference and exploitation, tapping into nationalist sentiment. For instance, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela positioned himself as a leader of the Global South resisting U.S. imperialism and neoliberal economic policies. Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution was explicitly anti-imperialist and sought to create a new economic and political order in Latin America that would be free from the dominance of Western powers. Chávez's rhetoric was based on the rejection foreign domination, calling for a revival of nationalist and regional solidarity.[50]

Similarly, in post-colonial Africa, leaders like Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe used anti-imperialist rhetoric to rally support against perceived neocolonial forces. Populist nationalism

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[47] Forsdick, C., Mark, J. and Spišiaková, E., *Introduction. From Populism to Decolonisation: How We Remember in the Twenty-First Century*, Modern Languages Open, 0(1), 2020, p. 17, https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.342.

[48] Mudde C. and Rovira Kaltwasser C. *Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America*, p.17

[49] Ivi p.14

[50] Ivi p.17

in Africa often became a double-edged sword, where resistance to imperialism led to internal authoritarianism.[51] In fact, while such leaders were able to maintain popular support by framing themselves as defenders of national sovereignty, their regimes often became increasingly repressive, and their economic policies frequently led to disastrous outcomes.

In recent decades, populism in the Global South has evolved in response to the challenges of globalization. The forces of economic globalization have aggravated inequality and weakened the sovereignty of many nations. Instead, earlier populist movements were primarily focused on achieving political independence and resisting foreign interference.[52] The neoliberal turn in the global economy, paired with the spreading and power of transnational elites, has increased the number of new populist movements.

In countries such as Brazil, India and the Philippines, populist leaders have emerged who claim to represent the common people against a corrupt elite that is aligned with foreign interests. Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Narendra Modi in India have used populist rhetoric to position themselves as defenders of the nation against globalization's negative effects. Both Bolsonaro and Modi lean toward right-wing nationalism, thus, their populist strategies are similar: "both represent themselves as the 'people incarnate' standing up to cosmopolitan elites and liberalism run amok."[53]

Populism has also faced significant criticisms. Populist leaders often centralize power in the executive, undermining democratic institutions and the rule of law.[54] In many cases, they scapegoat minorities or opposition groups, fostering division and weakening national unity.

Moreover, populist policies, particularly those aimed at resisting neocolonialism or globalization, have often failed to deliver long-term economic prosperity. Nationalization and protectionist policies have frequently led to economic stagnation, inflation and increased poverty.[55] The focus on short-term populist gains has sometimes come at the expense of sustainable development.

The intersection of populism and decolonization has profoundly shaped the political trajectories of countries in the Global South. Populism provided a means for post-colonial leaders to consolidate power and implement reforms in the name of "the people," and it continues to serve as a potent political tool for mobilizing resistance to neocolonialism and globalization.

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[51] Dorraj, M. *Populism and Corporatism in the Middle East and North Africa: a Comparative Analysis*, Chin. Polit. Sci. Rev. 2, 2017, pp. 288–313, https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-017-0072-0

[52] Polakow-Suransky S., *The ruthlessly effective rebranding of Europe's new far right*

[53] Heller P., *The age of reaction: Retrenchment populism in India and Brazil*, International Sociology, 35(6), 2020, pp. 590-609, p. 592 https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580920949979

[54] Ivi p. 591

[55] Ivi p. 597

However, the long-term effectiveness of populism in addressing the challenges of post-colonial governance remains debated, with many populist regimes ultimately falling short of their promises of economic justice and political autonomy.

> "While that association is largely lost today, the origins of "populism" in the United States in particular still suggests to many observers that populism must at least on some level be "popular" in the sense of favoring the least advantaged or bringing the excluded into politics—a sense that is reinforced by a glance at Latin America, where the advocates of populism have always stressed its inclusionary and emancipatory character in what remains the most economically unequal continent on the globe."[56]

1.5 Media's influence on Populism propaganda

A significant driver of populism's rise in recent years has been the role of the media, which has both facilitated the spread of populist ideas and served as a battleground for populist leaders to spread their propaganda. Understanding the media's influence on populist propaganda requires an examination of how both traditional and digital media function as platforms that amplify populist messages, the psychological mechanisms that make populism attractive and the broader societal implications of this dynamic. For example, "The sudden rise of Halla-aho from "nowhere" to electoral success, that is, his rise to politics through the unconventional paths of blogging illustrates the shift in the dynamics between the media and right-wing populism that began to take shape across Europe in late 2000s."[57]

It is important to understand first that the media's influence on populism can be divided into two main categories: traditional media (television, newspapers, and radio) and new media (social media platforms, like: X, Facebook, Tik Tok, etc.). Each of these plays a unique role in disseminating populist propaganda.

1. **Traditional Media**: these type of media, especially television and print, played a crucial role in shaping public opinion. Populist leaders often seek to harness these platforms to

[56] Müller J. W., *What is Populism?,* p. 22

[57] Horsti, K. and Saresma, T., *The role of social media in the rise of right-wing populism in Finland*, The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism, 2021, pp. 376-385, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003004431-40

reach wide audiences and frame their messages. For example, figures like Donald Trump in the U.S. and Viktor Orbán in Hungary have used televised rallies, press conferences and interviews to spread populist rhetoric. These outlets emphasize national sovereignty and anti-immigration stances. Traditional media can sometimes unwittingly amplify populist messages, for example, "many traditional media outlets in Hungary provide a very narrow image of the political and social reality, as well as of what it means to be a Hungarian"[58], even if critical, thus providing these movements with visibility and legitimacy. The sensationalist nature of some news outlets, which focus on conflict and drama to boost viewership, aligns with populists' confrontational style, allowing their messages to reach larger audiences.

2. **Digital Media**: defined like "communication technologies that enable or facilitate user-to-user interactivity and interactivity between users and information, and the main point in the definition is that the one-to-many model of traditional mass communication is challenged by the possibility of many-to-many communication via the Internet."[59]

The rise of social media platforms like Facebook, X and Tik Tok has drastically transformed how political messages are communicated. "Online media and social network platforms offer politicians new communication channels."[60] Populist leaders and movements have proven capable to use these platforms to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, thus, directly engaging with their base through tweets, posts and videos. These platforms are well-suited for populist propaganda because they allow for direct communication with followers, often unfiltered and unmediated by fact-checking institutions. Moreover, social media algorithms prioritize content that generates engagement, often amplifying sensational, emotionally charged messages—precisely the kind that populist propaganda thrives on.

Populist propaganda, in fact, often taps into deep-seated anxieties and desires within a population, using the media to exploit these emotions. This kind of movement tends to flourish in periods of economic uncertainty or political instability. During these times, people may feel alienated from traditional political elites or disillusioned with institutions, which creates fertile

[58] Fielitz M. and Thurston N., *Post-Digital Culture of the Far Right*, Majuskel Medienproduktion GmbH, Wetzlar, 2019, pp. 1 – 211, p. 77, https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446706

[59] Gunn E., *New Media and Politics*, Annals of the International Communication Association 41/3-4, 2017, pp. 220-227

[60] Ernst N., Engesser S., Büchel F., Blassnig S. and Esser F., *Extreme parties and populism: an analysis of Facebook and Twitter across six countries*, Information, Communication & Society, 20:9, 2017, pp. 1347-1364, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2017.1329333

ground for populist messages that promise a return to a more stable, secure, and homogenous past.

It is especially in this period of "digitalization" of populism that "the superlative authority of the audience", mentioned by Nadia Urbinati, spreads. This concept implies to take into account the transformations that, particularly the internet, have introduced in political movements and in the capacity that every single individual has now to express itself. Internet becomes a way for every single individual to express themselves[61]. Thus, the audience and the ordinary many who are able to express themselves through the internet are the new political subject.

The media plays a critical role in amplifying these emotional appeals.[62] Through selective framing, sensationalized coverage, and repetition, the media can create an environment in which populist ideas appear not only plausible but also urgent. This is particularly true when media outlets focus on issues like immigration, crime or economic downturns—topics that populist leaders often use to stoke fear and resentment. The media's focus on these issues, whether through intentional bias or commercial interest in higher ratings, reinforces the narratives central to populist propaganda: that society is under threat from external or internal enemies and that only a strong, decisive leader can restore order.

Additionally, digital media platforms often create "echo chambers" where users are exposed primarily to information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs. This phenomenon allows populist propaganda to emerge in isolated spaces where dissenting views are minimized. Populist leaders and movements use these spaces to further radicalize their followers and spread conspiracy theories, all with little external challenge.[63]

The media does not only passively convey populist messages but also actively shapes the political discourse in ways that benefit populism. One of the most important ways this occurs is through the media's preference for conflict-driven, sensationalist stories. Populist leaders, with their provocative rhetoric and polarizing positions, provide the kind of spectacle that the media thrives on. By giving extensive airtime and column inches to populist figures, often framing their controversial statements as newsworthy events, the media helps normalize their ideas and grant them legitimacy.

Moreover, some media outlets align ideologically with populist movements, either explicitly supporting their agenda or adopting their talking points to cater to a particular audience

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[61] Urbinati N., *Me the People*

[62] Macdonald S., Yilmaz K., Herath C., Berger J. M., Lakhani S., Nouri L., and Conway M., *The European Far-right Online: An Exploratory Twitter Outlink Analysis of German & French Far-Right Online Ecosystems*, May 2022, Research Report, pp. 1 – 48, p. 29

[63] Fielitz M. and Thurston N., *Post-Digital Culture of the Far Right*, p. 171

segment. In such cases, the media not only amplifies populist messages but also becomes an active participant in the dissemination of populist propaganda. Fox News in the United States, for example, has been criticized for providing a platform for Trump's populist agenda, often framing news in ways that reinforce populist narratives.[64]

The media's role in amplifying populist propaganda has significant consequences for democratic societies. Populism, especially when it adopts authoritarian tendencies, can erode democratic norms by undermining trust in institutions, promoting anti-pluralist sentiments and fostering division. When the media becomes a tool for populist propaganda, it risks weakening its role as a check on power and a source of reliable information. Furthermore, the populist assault on the media itself—through accusations of "fake news" and claims of bias—can further degrade public trust in journalism.[65] By delegitimizing independent media, populist leaders can more easily propagate their version of reality without scrutiny, further concentrating power and weakening democratic accountability.

In order to achieve its primary goal, the old right movement used mainstream internet platforms to spread its propaganda; 15 years ago, this technique was considered very innovative for the time. The populist movements started to use mainly platforms like X, and they adopted a sort of catchy and seemingly ironic style, using memes. The use of coded language and coded images is important to this kind of political party, because it conveys controversial, racist, and also antisemitic, meaning to the general public without an aggressive attitude, in sort of harmless way but at the same time permeating the imagination of the public. "It is the rapid and 'viral' spread of online memes and messages that has shifted the linear relationship between symbol and meaning to one characterized by more random associations."[66]

Another tool is the subversion of cultural events, for example, by making people laugh at events like the holocaust or using a sort of appropriation of memories (i.e., *white genocide*: somehow, the aim is to compare what happened in the 1940s to what is, allegedly, happening "now", in this case, magnifying its importance).

[64] Bump P., *The unique, damaging role Fox News plays in American media*, The Washington Post, Apr 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/04/unique-damaging-role-fox-news-plays-american-media/
[65] Fielitz M. and Thurston N., *Post-Digital Culture of the Far Right*, p. 156
[66] Ivi p. 130

Pepe the Frog[67]

Cartoon remix. Text on the bullets: culture of guilt ("Schuldkult"), Islamism, liberalism, degeneration, communism and political correctness.[68]

[67] This is an example of meme found on the Internet, depicting Pepe the Frog as a nazi, a member of the KKK (Ku Klux Klan) and also as Hitler himself.
[68] Fielitz M. and Thurston N., *Post-Digital Culture of the Far Right*, p. 143

The intent to cause confusion and turn narratives upside-down, like the appropriation of memories and events, are common tropes used in the anti-EU narratives. Highlighted is the trope of the appropriation of memories, which is the most used by the radical right. Another example is referring to Jews by calling them "rootless", it is, in fact, an antisemitic attitude by considering Jews as the "people without roots".[69]

Thus, the old right had, and still has, this edgy appearance that was able to attract young generations, which is always a key feature for a new political movement, because it is able to involve and include a new part of the population.[70]

Furthermore, the use of these techniques (i.e. memes, appropriation of memories, etc.) amplified an already existing aspect of the populist radical right narrative, which is precisely the intent of showing what is behind the scenes. In the radical right's mindset, there is always something hidden. This aspect is one of the core features of the radical right movements. It can be described by their use of history, which is used as a sort of cyclical occurrence that shows where the human race is headed (teleological aspect). The bottom line in radical right's thought is that there is an idea of degeneration that current societies are experiencing to which the right political movement must react. This aspect of "something possessing a hidden meaning" has been a recurrent aspect of populist radical right, even with the use of memes.[71]

All things considered, the media plays a dual role in the rise of populism: it is both a platform for the dissemination of populist propaganda and, at times, an unwitting accomplice in its spread. Whether through traditional or digital channels, the media's focus on sensationalism, conflict, and emotionally charged content has made it an effective tool for populist leaders to connect with disaffected segments of the population. As populism continues to shape global politics, understanding the media's role in facilitating its rise is crucial for addressing the challenges it poses to democratic societies. By recognizing how media amplifies populist messages and learning to navigate the complex relationship between populism and journalism, societies can better safeguard the principles of democratic governance.

> "However, populists, more than other politicians, benefited from this new digital environment. Focussing on the three classic actors interacting in democratic systems –

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[69] De Bruin R., *European union as a road to serfdom: The Alt-Right's inversion of narratives on European integration*, Journal of Contemporary European Studies, 2021, pp. 1 – 15, p. 6, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2021.1960489

[70] Fielitz M. and Thurston N., *Post-Digital Culture of the Far Right*, p. 75

[71] Macdonald S., Yilmaz K., Herath C., Berger J. M., Lakhani S., Nouri L. and Conway M., *The European Far-right Online,* p. 34

politicians, journalists and citizens – it is clear that (i) populist actors have adapted better than others to the digital environment; (ii) the disinformation phenomenon is putting a strain on the journalistic system; and (iii) the potential of the Web is seldom used to achieve political goals, while forms of online incivility and hate speech are increasingly spreading in all major democracies. These three phenomena together seem to contribute to the rise of populism."[72]

1.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, over time populism has undergone a profound evolution, shaping both democracies and authoritarian regimes in different ways. Its flexibility and inherent contradictions make it a complex political phenomenon. It can both give a voice to the marginalized while also destabilizing democratic institutions.

The analysis of populism reveals a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has evolved significantly from its origins in the 19th century to its current manifestations in the 21st century. These radical shifts fueled its rise, laying the foundation for movements that would continue to transform throughout the 20th century.

Throughout the 20th century, populism adapted to different historical and political contexts, from the rise of authoritarian populism in interwar Europe to the leftist populist movements in Latin America. Despite these variations, the core principles remained consistent: opposition to elites, an appeal to "the common people," and a deep scepticism toward established political institutions. However, the specific grievances and demands of populist leaders evolved alongside societal changes.

In the 21st century, populism has found new momentum, driven in large part by the rise of social media platforms. Digital platforms have revolutionized the way populist leaders engage with their supporters, allowing them to bypass traditional media and communicate directly. This shift has reinforced the "us versus them" narrative, deepened political divisions, and helped populist movements spread faster than ever before. The rapid spread of information—and misinformation—on these platforms has heightened populism's appeal, particularly among those who feel disconnected from mainstream politics.

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[72] Nomos-Verlag, *Digital populism. How the Web and social media are shaping populism in Western democracies*, AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino, December 2021, https://iris.unito.it/retrieve/e27ce434-21ec-2581-e053- d805fe0acbaa/Digital%20Populism_preprint.pdf

Overall, the persistence and adaptability of populism underscore its enduring relevance in global politics. As political landscapes continue to shift, especially in the digital era, populism will likely remain a powerful force, reflecting both the anxieties and aspirations of diverse populations across the world.

The next two chapters of this thesis will focus on this last aspect, meaning the development and use of digital media of two specific parties: *Alternative für Deutschland* (far-right) and *Podemos* (left-wing).

2. The Rise of Far-Right Populist Parties Through Social Media: an analysis of the German party "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD)

"People respond to images in a stronger way than to text. By using images, we can do excellent memetic warfare and bring our narratives to the people"[73]

2.1 The Rise of Far-Right Populist Parties Through Social Media

In recent years, far-right populist parties have emerged as powerful forces in global politics, challenging traditional political norms and institutions. A critical element of their success lies in their strategic use of social media. Platforms like *Facebook*, and the former *Twitter* (now *X*, and will be referred to now on as so), *YouTube*, *Instagram* and *Tik Tok* have become essential tools for these movements to communicate their messages, gaining an increasing support and bypassing traditional media. By exploiting social media's algorithms and broad reach, far-right populists have managed to reshape the political landscape in ways previously unimaginable.

In today's world, digital media provides a new and unusual platform for direct communication with the people, thus, the far-right populist leaders are able to spread and create their messages unfiltered[74]. This is not the case for traditional media, which often subjects political rhetoric to editorial scrutiny; in fact, social media allow users to publish almost any content immediately and without a "waiting period". This instantaneously posting aligns with the far-right's anti-establishment narrative, which positions mainstream media as part of an elite conspiracy against the "common people".

Moreover, the structure of social media platforms encourages the sharing of emotionally charged content. In fact, posts that provoke outrage, fear or anger tend to generate a higher engagement, as these emotions prompt users to share and comment. Furthermore, what helps the rhetoric of right-wing posts on social media is that the "far-right media content shared in online ecosystems can be produced and circulated, either intentionally or unintentionally, to

[73] Fielitz M. and Thurston N., *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right,* p. 107
[74] Urbinati N., *Me the People*

fuel othering and/or conspiratorial rhetoric."[75] Far-right populist parties take advantage of this tendency by framing their messages on a wide variety of different topics such as national identity and feminism. By amplifying and spreading this content, these parties can dominate the online discourse and attract a wide amount of attention to their posts. They employ several strategies to maximize their impact on social media, for example one key tactic is the use of targeted advertising. Taking advantage data analytics, these parties can craft specific and personaliseed messages for specific demographic groups, improving their ability to create a stable base of supporters.[76] For example, messages emphasizing economic insecurity might be directed at working-class communities, while those focusing on cultural preservation might target rural or older populations.

As already mentioned in the past chapter and it still is a focus point in this one, another strategy is the use of memes, viral videos and other forms of digital culture. These formats have proven to be particularly effective at engaging younger audiences and conveying complex ideas in a simple but relatable manner. Memes, in particular, are used as a vehicle for humour, irony, and satire, which can mask the underlying extremism of far-right ideologies while making them more palatable to mainstream audiences.[77] Additionally, far-right populists have adeptly utilized the interactive features of social media to build a sense of community among their followers. Through hashtags and live streams, they foster a participatory environment where supporters feel connected to the movement. This sense of belonging is further reinforced by the narrative that their voices are being suppressed and cut by elites, making their online interactions feel like acts of resistance.

The rise of far-right populists on social media poses significant challenges to traditional political institutions and norms. One major concern is the erosion of trust in democratic systems. With the promotion of conspiracy theories and discrediting opponents, far-right movements undermine public confidence in political processes and institutions. For example, claims of electoral fraud or "rigged systems" can delegitimize elections and create a climate of scepticism. Furthermore, social media's echo chamber effect exacerbates political polarization. Algorithms prioritize content that aligns with the users' existing beliefs, creating insular communities where dissenting opinions are rarely encountered. This dynamic strengthens the

[75] Macdonald S., Yilmaz K., Herath C. and Berger J. M., *The European Far-right Online: An Exploratory Twitter Outlink Analysis of German & French Far-Right Online Ecosystems*, 2022, May, pp. 1-48, p. 34, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360877275_The_European_Far-right_Online_An_Exploratory_Twitter_Outlink_Analysis_of_German_French_Far-Right_Online_Ecosystems

[76] Fielitz M. and Thurston N., *Post-Digital Culture of the Far Right*, p. 171

[77] Ivi p. 130

ideological rigidity of far-right supporters, making compromise and dialogue increasingly difficult.

In today's world, governments and tech companies have begun to take steps to address the influence of far-right populists on social media. Regulatory measures, such as stricter oversight of political advertising and efforts to combat misinformation, are being implemented in many countries.[78] Platforms have also introduced content moderation policies to limit the spread of hate speech and extremist ideologies. However, these measures are not without controversy. Some may argue that excessive regulation risks infringing on freedom of expression and could be used to suppress legitimate political dissent. Moreover, far-right movements often frame such interventions as evidence of their persecution, further fuelling their anti-establishment narrative.

The rise of far-right populist parties is deeply intertwined with the transformative power of social media. With the use of these platforms, they have disrupted traditional political structures and cultivated a new form of grassroots mobilization. While their success highlights the democratizing potential of social media, it also underscores its vulnerabilities to exploitation and manipulation. Addressing these challenges requires a delicate balance between protecting free expression and preserving democratic integrity. As technology continues to evolve, so too must the approaches to safeguarding the political discourse from the destabilizing effects of extremism.

2.2 Examples of Far-Right Populist Use of Social Media

To illustrate how far-right populist parties have used and took advantage of social media to rise to power, here are examples from various countries. These cases highlight the strategies, tactics, and impacts mentioned earlier.

[78] Council of the EU, *EU introduces new rules on transparency and targeting of political advertising*, European Council, Council of the European Union, 2024, March 11, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/03/11/eu-introduces-new-rules-on-transparency-and-targeting-of-political-advertising/

1. The United States: Donald Trump and X

Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign exemplifies the effective use of social media, particularly X, by a far-right populist leader. Trump completely bypassed traditional media channels to communicate directly with his audience, using short and provocative tweets that resonated with his base.

His key strategy involved the employment of emotionally charged rhetoric to energize supporters, such as calling immigrants "criminals" or "rapists" and framing the mainstream media as "fake news". For what concerns his viral content; his tweets often went viral, amplifying his reach far beyond his follower count. For example, his tweets about building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border became rallying cries for his campaign. Through hashtags like #MAGA (Make America Great Again), Trump cultivated an online movement, creating a sense of belonging among his supporters. To better comprehend the capacity and structure of his posts here it is an example:

> "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the "Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times." Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"
>
> Wrote by Trump on X, January 3rd of 2018[79]

2. Brazil: Jair Bolsonaro and WhatsApp

Jair Bolsonaro's rise to the presidency of Brazil in 2018 showcased the role of private messaging platforms like WhatsApp in spreading far-right populist ideas.

The key strategy of Bolsonaro's campaign involved the leveraging of WhatsApp to disseminate memes, videos, and misinformation. These messages often emphasized themes of anti-corruption, nationalism and anti-communism. His campaigns involved the spreading of fake news stories, such as claims about opponents' supposed connections to corruption or paedophilia, spread widely through WhatsApp groups, influencing voter perceptions. An

[79] Trump D. J. (2018), [X], 3rd of January, Available at: https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/948355557022420992?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E948355557022420992%7Ctwgr%5E8560ace6e2621fd66bd8ff759491b89c7dc8f4c5%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2018%2F01%2F02%2Fpolitics%2Fdonald-trump-north-korea-nuclear%2Findex.html

example is reported by The Guardian "after the French far-right leader Marine Le Pen's described some of Bolsonaro's comments as "extremely unpleasant", the Influencers quickly published a meme accusing her of being a communist."[80]

Above all, by tapping into informal, peer-to-peer networks, Bolsonaro's campaign reached millions of Brazilians, especially in areas with limited access to traditional media, making his campaign more appealing to people connected to their roots.

3. Hungary: Viktor Orbán and the Anti-Immigration Campaigns

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party have used social media to reinforce their anti-immigration and nationalist agenda.

The key strategy of Orbán's government aimed at flooding social media with posts and ads portraying migrants as threats to Hungarian culture and security. During the 2015 European migrant crisis, Fidesz used Facebook to circulate images and videos depicting chaos at Europe's borders, fuelling public fear. In a study called *Fidesz & Co. flooded social media with anti-Western hostile disinformation in Hungary's election campaign, reaching EU spending records*, it can be seen how in 2024 the Fidesz party spent a greater amount of money on political ads on Facebook and Google in comparison to the opposition parties.[81]

By capitalizing on Facebook's algorithms, which prioritize content that generates strong emotional reactions, Fidesz ensured that its anti-immigration message reached a broad audience.

4. Germany: Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Facebook

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) party has used Facebook (and not only) extensively to build its base and propagate its anti-immigration and Eurosceptic messages. Since this particular party is the focus of this thesis, more examples and a deeper insight will be explained in the following passages.

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[80] Nemer D., *The three types of WhatsApp users getting Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro elected*. The Guardian, 2018, October 29, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/25/brazil-president-jair-bolsonaro-whatsapp-fake-news

[81] Political Capital, *Fidesz & Co. flooded social media with anti-Western hostile disinformation in Hungary's election campaign, reaching EU spending records*, 2024, https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/Uncovering_analyzing_debunking_and_researching_sponsored_disinfo_project_summary_2024.pdf

The key strategy of this party was to produce a steady stream of provocative content designed to stir outrage, such as posts criticizing Chancellor Angela Merkel's refugee policies. By framing itself as the voice of "ordinary Germans" ignored by elites, the AfD encourages followers to interact with and share its posts, amplifying its reach.

5. Sweden Democrats' Rise on Twitter

The Sweden Democrats (SD) have effectively utilized Twitter to mainstream their nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric, reshaping the political landscape in Sweden and expanding their influence. "As they have also received mostly negative coverage in the mainstream media, a raft of alternative media have sprung up in support of the Sweden Democrats, self- defined as 'alternative' to the mainstream media."[82]

The "alternative media" comprehended online newspaper and the use of digital media, SD leveraged party accounts, far-right influencers and coordinated online networks to amplify their anti-immigration stance, portray themselves as champions of Swedish identity and discredit political opponents.

Viral tweets framed immigration and multiculturalism as existential threats to Swedish culture and safety, often employing fear-driven narratives to polarize public opinion and consolidate support among nationalist voters.[83]

6. Italy: Matteo Salvini and Instagram

Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's far-right *La Lega Nord* party, has effectively used Instagram to craft a populist image that appeals to a broad audience.

Salvini's key strategy combines political messaging with personal posts, such as selfies at rallies or casual pictures of him eating Italian food, to appear relatable. "One of the most recent and prominent examples are "*Meno Europa, Più Italia*" (Less Europe, More Italy) post series"[84], used in the months leading up to June 2024 for the upcoming parliamentary European elections. All of the posts concerned for this campaign incorporated Salvini's main values.

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[82] Schroeder R., *Social Theory after the Internet: Media, Technology, and Globalization*, UCL Press., 2018, p. 68, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20krxdr

[83] Ivi p. 69

[84] Akhmetova A., *Crafting the Populist Persona: Matteo Salvini's Social Media Strategy*, Global History Dialogues, 2024, October 21, https://globalhistorydialogues.org/projects/crafting-the-populist-persona-matteo-salvinis-social-media-strategy/

An example of the campaign used by Salvini[85]

In Italy (and also in other countries) Salvini's persona became known for his use of memes and humorous posts to make his hardline stances on immigration and the European Union more digestible.

By focusing on a visual platform like Instagram, Salvini has successfully connected with younger voters who might not engage with traditional political discourse.

7. The Philippines: Rodrigo Duterte and Facebook

Rodrigo Duterte's 2016 presidential campaign in the Philippines relied heavily on Facebook, the dominant platform in the country, to spread his populist and often violent rhetoric.

The key strategy of Duterte's team was using paid "troll farms" to flood Facebook with posts praising him, attacking opponents and spreading misinformation. Viral posts glorified Duterte's harsh anti-drug policies, including extrajudicial killings, framing him as a strongman who would restore order. A study from the University of Oxford "said that Duterte's team of 400 to 500 cyber troops post nationalistic and pro-government comments and interact with dissenters through harassment and individual targeting."[86]

[85] Salvini M., *Un'Europa islamizzata che cancella le sue radici? No, grazie. Sì a libertà e diritti per donne e ragazze! Per PIÙ ITALIA e meno Europa, scegli la Lega. MENO 14 #8e9giugnovotoLega*, May 25, https://www.instagram.com/p/C7YV0WyM7j_/?igsh=MTZ6cjhjOHNqaHhveA%3D%3D

[86] Matsuzawa, M., *Duterte camp spent $200,000 for troll army, Oxford study finds*, Philstar.com., 2017, June 24, https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/07/24/1721044/duterte-camp-spent-200000-troll-army-oxford-study-finds

Supporters formed Facebook groups and pages to organize rallies and defend Duterte from critics, creating a highly engaged online base.

8. Modi's Religious Nationalism on X

Narendra Modi's political ascendancy in India has been closely tied to his adept use of X, "like Trump, Modi used Twitter to circumvent traditional media to engage directly with his populist base of supporters and to challenge the elite and the media"[87], leveraging the platform to amplify his vision of Hindu nationalism and consolidate his support base.

The key strategy of Modi's team was to utilize an ecosystem of influencers, official accounts to promote his image as a decisive leader, glorify Hindu identity, and discredit opposition voices critical of his policies. Tweets often invoked cultural and religious symbols to rally Hindu pride, while subtle and overt messaging framed Muslims and other minorities as threats to India's unity and progress. Thus, his supporters, organized into digital communities, mobilized online campaigns to amplify hashtags, trend narratives supporting Modi's policies, and counter dissenting voices, fostering a highly active and loyal follower base.

These various examples show how far-right populists exploit social media's power to reach, influence people. While their tactics vary, common themes include the use of emotionally charged rhetoric, disinformation and direct engagement to avoid the more complications of traditional media and build grassroots movements. The success of these strategies highlights once more the urgent need for thoughtful regulation and digital literacy initiatives to counteract their divisive effects on society. Now, it will be clearer with a deeper insight into the story of the far-right German party *Alternative für Deutschland*.

2.3 The Case Study of Alternative für Deutschland

The *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), a far-right political party in Germany, has effectively utilized digital media as a milestone of its political strategy to gain prominence in German politics. Founded in 2013 by a group of economists and academics, the AfD initially emerged

[87] Schroeder R., *Social Theory after the Internet: Media, Technology, and Globalization*, p. 70

as a Eurosceptic party, opposing the European Union's (EU) handling of the Eurozone crisis and advocating for Germany's withdrawal from the euro currency. Its early rhetoric centred on fiscal conservatism and the protection of national sovereignty, resonating with a growing segment of the population frustrated by the perceived economic risks posed by EU policies. As Fielitz and Thurston point out "since its foundation in 2013 as an anti-Euro platform, the party has seen a meteoric rise as it continually drifts towards the far-right fringes."[88]

However, the party's focus shifted dramatically in 2015 during the European migrant crisis, when Germany welcomed over one million refugees, many of them fleeing conflict in the Global South countries, like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. This event marked a turning point for the AfD, as it began to adopt a broader nationalist and populist agenda. The party positioned itself as a defender of German identity and culture, opposing what it described as the erosion of traditional values due to immigration and multiculturalism. This newfound value attracted a more diverse and politically disenchanted voter base, including those who felt not represented by Germany's mainstream political consensus led by Chancellor Angela Merkel's centrist policies. As John Feffer writes "In Germany, the extremist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) became the third-largest party in 2017 even as the government was banning neo-Nazi organizations."[89]

The rise of the AfD also coincided with broader societal trends that provided fertile ground for its growth. Germany, like many Western democracies, was experiencing increasing dissatisfaction with traditional parties. The declining influence of established media outlets and the proliferation of alternative information sources on the internet created opportunities for insurgent movements to amplify their messages and connect directly with potential supporters. The AfD capitalized on this environment by embracing digital media, replacing the traditional media, as a powerful tool for outreach, mobilization and narrative control. In fact, in May 2018 Alternative für Deutschland national X account reached 118,000 followers and counted more than 400,000 likes on Facebook.[90]

It has been noted that from its early days, the party displayed an acute awareness of the shifting dynamics of political communication in the digital age. Recognizing the declining trust in traditional media among its target demographic, the party sought to bypass conventional gatekeepers of information, such as newspapers and public broadcasters. Instead, it turned to the internet and social media platforms to build a parallel communication infrastructure. This

[88] Fielitz M. and Thurston N., *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right*, p. 160
[89] Feffer J*, Right Across the World: The GlobalNetworking of the Far-Right and the Left Response*, Pluto Press, 2021, pp. 1-180, p. 2
[90] Fielitz M. and Thurston N., *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right*, p. 160

allowed them not only to disseminate its message without the filter of critical journalism but also to foster a sense of community among its supporters, who often felt marginalized by mainstream political discourse.

With the use of these new digital platforms, the AfD evolved from a niche party into a formidable political force, securing representation in the Bundestag for the first time in 2017, gaining 94 seats.[91] Its ability to mobilize large-scale support through digital channels demonstrated the transformative power of social media in modern politics, particularly for outsider parties seeking to challenge the status quo. "In celebration of its success that year, the AfD sponsored a convention in Koblenz that brought together a group of these like-minded European leaders. Movement headliners Marine Le Pen from France, Geert Wilders from the Netherlands, and Matteo Salvini from Italy all participated."[92] The party's rise, however, also sparked intense debates about the role of digital media in fostering extremism and disinformation, raising critical questions about the future of democracy in Germany and beyond.

> "In an interview with DW, Marcus Schmidt, the press officer for the AfD parliamentary group, admits that: 'Without Facebook, I don't believe that the AfD could have become successful so quickly.' Using Facebook as a channel to its supporters allows the AfD to bypass established media outlets and spread its messages directly — many of which are openly racist, nationalist and factually false."[93]

This chapter delves into the specific strategies employed by the AfD in its digital media campaigns, the effects of these tactics on its rise to power and the broader implications for democratic politics in an era increasingly shaped by digital communication. By understanding this party's approach, one can acquire a better grasp on how digital tools are reshaping the political landscape and the challenges they pose to established democratic norms.

As mentioned briefly in a paragraph before, the *Alternative für Deutschland*'s strategic use of digital media stems from its outsider status in German politics. Early in its rise, the party faced scepticism and limited access to mainstream media channels. To overcome this, they adopted social media as a primary tool for reaching its base. Platforms such as Facebook, X and Tik Tok

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[91] The Federal Returning Officer, *Distribution of seats, Bundestag election 2017, Germany Final result*, https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2017/ergebnisse/bund-99.html

[92] Feffer J. *Right Across the World*, p. 2

[93] Pitt M. and Pfeifer, H., *Far-right AfD is a social media superpower*, dw.com, 2021, August 29, https://www.dw.com/en/german-election-far-right-afd-outperforms-competitors-on-social-media/a-59004003

provided the party with direct channels to communicate its message without relying on traditional media outlets that were often critical of its policies.

Facebook, in particular, became a key battleground. The AfD's official Facebook page, alongside those of regional branches and affiliated individuals, disseminated provocative content designed to go viral. Posts frequently highlighted issues such as immigration and national identity. By tapping into existing anxieties and frustrations, the AfD successfully amplified its reach among disaffected voters. Its digital campaigns were marked by consistent engagement with users, including rapid responses to comments, which fostered a sense of community among supporters.

> "Successful posts by the AfD seek to trigger emotion: stoking fear of immigrants, crime and downward social mobility, while playing upon anger with Merkel and the country's 'elites.' Vivid, provocative messages and emotional catchphrases are key to the populists' social media strategy. Weidel was successful with the catchphrase 'banana republic,' for example. Speaking of the handling of the recent dramatic flooding in Germany, she claimed: 'Those in power let Germany degenerate into a banana republic, where citizens cannot be warned and protected against disasters despite precise knowledge of what is coming.'"[94]

The AfD demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of social media algorithms. By crafting emotionally charged and sensationalist content, the party ensured higher engagement rates, which algorithms prioritized for visibility. This strategy allowed the AfD to dominate discussions on contentious topics like the refugee crisis and European integration, effectively setting the agenda on digital platforms.

Moreover, the AfD employed data-driven tactics to target specific demographics. For instance, younger voters received messages emphasizing sovereignty and opposition to political correctness, a major example of a tactic to entertain the younger viewers will be analysed in the chapter regarding the party's use of the platform called Tik Tok, while older demographics were targeted with content focusing on cultural preservation and economic fears.

The AfD skilfully used digital media to frame itself as the voice of the "silent majority" and as a counterforce to the perceived elitism of established political parties. Through memes,

[94] Pitt M. and Pfeifer, H., *Far-right AfD is a social media superpower*

infographics, and videos, the party portrayed itself as an authentic and relatable alternative to what it described as a disconnected political establishment.

Meaning: If you don't make it into the private sector after your SPD career because you don't have the qualifications, there's always the SPD candidate for chancellor

Bjorn Höcke's (President of the AfD party) Facebook post of a meme representing one of his political opponents, Martin Schulz, with stereotypical Jewish physical attributes.[95]

Party-affiliated blogs, online news sites and social media channels disseminated articles and videos that reinforced the party's worldview. These outlets often blurred the lines between opinion and news, presenting the AfD's positions as objective truths.

Their digital strategy also involved exploiting disinformation and amplifying divisive content. Studies have shown that the party's social media accounts frequently shared misleading or false information to incite outrage and deepen social divides. For instance, during the 2015 refugee crisis, the AfD propagated exaggerated claims about crime rates and welfare abuse by migrants, fueling xenophobic sentiments.[96] This approach not only energized the party's base but also forced mainstream parties to address the issues framed by the AfD, inadvertently legitimizing

[95] Hübscher M., *Likes for Antisemitism: The Alternative für Deutschland and Its Posts on Facebook*, In Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism, 2020, Vol. 3, Issue 1, pp. 11-33, p. 17

[96] MacGregor M, *Fact check: False and misleading claims by AfD's Alice Weidel in German TV interview*, InfoMigrants, 2024, July 16, https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/58420/fact-check-false-and-misleading-claims-by-afds-alice-weidel-in-german-tv-interview

its narratives. The resulting polarization benefited the AfD by consolidating its support among voters disillusioned with centrist politics.

The AfD's use of digital media has had a profound impact on German politics. It allowed the party to achieve electoral breakthroughs at both regional and national levels, securing representation in the Bundestag and numerous state parliaments. By fostering a sense of urgency and crisis, this party mobilized voters who had previously felt politically alienated, significantly shifting the political landscape in Germany.

However, the party's tactics have also raised concerns about the health of German democracy. The spread of disinformation and the normalization of extremist rhetoric have contributed to a more polarized and fragmented political environment. The AfD's success has encouraged other far-right movements across Europe to adopt similar digital strategies, underscoring the transnational implications of its approach.

2.4 The AfD's Strategic Use of Facebook in Modern Politics

The use of Facebook by the *Alternative für Germany* (AfD) party acts in this thesis as one of the main case studies of how populist political movements leverage social media to shape public discourse. As already mentioned, the party has utilized Facebook as a primary tool for political communication, blending emotional appeals and algorithmic targeting to amplify its message and reach. The posts often include provocative headlines or memes designed to provoke reactions and shares. By doing so, the AfD exploits Facebook's algorithm, which prioritizes highly engaging content, to increase visibility and reach.

This approach, alike to all the social media platforms that the party adopted, allowed the AfD to build a sense of community among its followers. Supporters frequently engaged in comment sections, debating, sharing personal stories and expressing solidarity with the party's positions. This interactive aspect of Facebook strengthens their grassroots appeal and helps to cultivate a loyal and active supporter base. Unlike traditional campaigns reliant on costly media buys or in-person rallies, Facebook enables the AfD to sustain an ongoing, decentralized dialogue with its followers at a fraction of the cost. Since the AfD often portrays traditional media as biased against its positions, these new and digital media platforms are a new and improved way of

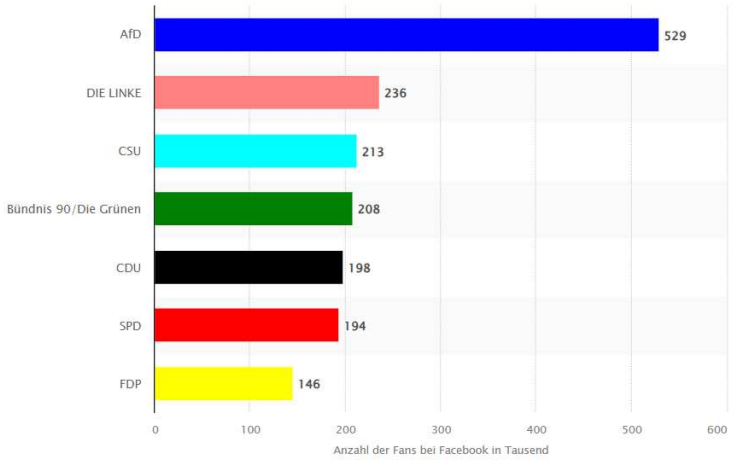
communicating. This direct communication channel is particularly advantageous for a party that thrives on portraying itself as an outsider challenging the political and media establishment. The party often uses Facebook to frame current events in ways that align with its ideological perspective, and to address a part of the population that is not familiar with the advent of "younger" digital media, like Tik Tok or X. For instance, during the height of the European refugee crisis, the AfD's posts frequently included imagery and language emphasizing chaos, crime, and cultural erosion, reinforcing its anti-immigration stance.

> "The massive incitement case concerns a video posted in 2017 by Deggendorf's local AfD branch that criticized a protest by asylum-seekers. The demonstrators were carrying out a hunger strike and protesting against the conditions at a migrant processing center in the town. The livestreamed video garnered hundreds of 'insulting, hateful, and xenophobic comments,' reported Bayerischer Rundfunk, who was shown the comments that are currently under investigation.
> 'Is it hunting season?' asked one user.
> Others used insulting and racist terms and called for the protesters to be gassed or sent to the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz."[97]

These posts were often accompanied by appeals to patriotism and warnings about threats to Germany's social fabric. By shaping these narratives on its terms, the AfD has successfully set the agenda on several contentious issues.
The AfD's success on Facebook is not merely a result of its content but also its strategic use of the platform's tools. Facebook's algorithms reward posts that generate high levels of interaction, such as likes, shares and comments. By crafting polarizing content that triggers strong emotional responses, the AfD ensures that its posts are widely distributed, often beyond its immediate follower base.

[97] Staudenmaier R., *Hundreds probed over AfD anti-refugee video comments*, dw.com, 2019, August 10, https://www.dw.com/en/germany-afds-anti-refugee-facebook-video-sparks-massive-incitement-probe/a-49973325

Selected parties in Germany by number of fans on Facebook in October 2024



"In October 2024, the number of AfD fans on Facebook was around 529,000, making it the most popular German party in terms of the number of fans on Facebook. The left had 236,000 Facebook fans at the time of the survey."[98] To this day the number of followers is 620.149, and the like to the official page is around 530,000 (est. 31st December 2024)

In addition, the AfD has employed Facebook's microtargeting capabilities to reach specific demographics with tailored messages. Using data-driven insights, the party can target users based on their interests, and online behaviour. This personalized approach enables the AfD to maximize the impact of its messaging and expand its influence across diverse voter segments.
The AfD's use of Facebook has also been marked by the strategic deployment of controversial and sometimes misleading content. With provocative statements or sharing articles from fringe sources, the party can generate public attention and media coverage, effectively using controversy as a form of free advertising. While such tactics often lead to accusations of spreading disinformation, they also serve to reinforce the AfD's narrative of being a party willing to challenge taboos and speak uncomfortable truths.
For example, during election campaigns, the AfD has been accused of sharing manipulated statistics or selective anecdotes to support its claims about crime rates among immigrants. Some of the claims are the followings: "…We have exploding crime figures, foreigner criminality (and) migrant violence, because we have open borders…"[99] and "… Afghans are the people with the highest crime rate …"[100] These claims and many others were factchecked by

[98] Statista, *Parteien in Deutschland nach der Anzahl der Fans bei Facebook 2024*, 2024, December 12, https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/726002/umfrage/parteien-in-deutschland-nach-der-anzahl-der-fans-bei-facebook/
[99] MacGregor M, *Fact check: False and misleading claims by AfD's Alice Weidel in German TV interview*, InfoMigrants, 2024, July 16, https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/58420/fact-check-false-and-misleading-claims-by-afds-alice-weidel-in-german-tv-interview
[100] Ibidem

InfoMigrants, taking into considerations the proper statistics. However, while these posts are frequently debunked by fact-checkers, the corrections often fail to reach the same audience as the original content, leaving a lasting impression among many viewers. This highlights the challenges of combating disinformation in the age of social media and the effectiveness of the AfD's approach in exploiting these dynamics.

Overall, despite all the positive interactions that Facebook brought to the party, the platform has also exposed the party to significant criticism and scrutiny. Accusations of spreading hate speech and disinformation have led to calls for greater regulation of the platform and, in some cases, the removal of specific posts or accounts associated with the party. Facebook itself has faced pressure to crack down on harmful content, and changes to its algorithms and content moderation policies have occasionally reduced the reach of the AfD's posts.

Moreover, the party's reliance on Facebook has made it vulnerable to shifting trends in social media usage. As younger demographics migrate to platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or newer networks, the AfD must adapt its strategies to maintain relevance. Additionally, increased public awareness of the manipulative tactics used by political actors on social media may lead to greater scepticism toward the party's messaging among certain voter groups.

To sum up, the party's use of Facebook exemplifies how populist movements can effectively take advantage of digital media to amplify their message and shape public discourse. By combining emotionally resonant content, algorithmic exploitation and targeted content, the party has successfully navigated the digital landscape to become a formidable political force in Germany. However, this strategy also raises critical questions about the ethical implications of social media in politics, the role of disinformation, and the responsibility of platforms like Facebook in curbing harmful content.

2.5 The AfD and the Use of TikTok for Propaganda

However, now it is time to move from what is considered as an "older" social media, which is Facebook, to a newer one, and that would be Tik Tok. In recent years, as already stated, the AfD has sought innovative ways to reach and influence younger voters. As social media platforms become increasingly integral to modern political campaigns, the AfD has strategically used TikTok—a platform popular with Gen Z and millennials—to promote its messages. "Drüppel attributes the success of the AfD on TikTok, among other things, to the fact that the party has

been active on TikTok for much longer than others."[101] Interestingly, their use of TikTok is not confined to just political slogans or speeches. "In addition, according to Drüppel, populist content is frequently clicked. 'They polarize and evoke an emotional reaction. This encourages us to react to the content and, for example, to take a stand in the comments or forward the content to someone,' she says. This in turn leads to the algorithm playing out the content more."[102]

In the context of the use of this platform, the far-right German party has tapped into the power of music, especially by using popular songs, to enhance the emotional appeal of their content. One of the most notable examples is their use of songs by Italian DJ Gigi D'Agostino, whose music became synonymous with the dance culture of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

TikTok, as mentioned, is the dominant social media platform for young people today, with over a billion active users worldwide. The platform's combination of short-form video content and algorithmic recommendations makes it particularly powerful for viral trends and movements. Unlike older platforms like Facebook or X, TikTok's primary mode of interaction is through music and visually stimulating content. This makes it especially effective in capturing the attention of users quickly and efficiently, especially when paired with catchy songs and popular trends. For political groups like the *Alternative für Deutschland*, the platform offers a unique opportunity to target younger, politically disengaged voters in ways that traditional forms of campaigning do not. "AfD party leader Alice Weidel was one of the top five political influencers on TikTok in Germany, the study noted. AfD politician Ulrich Siegmund of the eastern German state of Saxony-Anhalt was in first place with more than 400,000 followers."[103]

In their TikTok videos, the AfD frequently deploys visually charged imagery of Germany, such as the German flag, historical symbols and dramatic visuals of urban landscapes. These videos often highlight a sense of cultural decline or loss, a recurring theme in the AfD's rhetoric. The intention is clear: to evoke a sense of nostalgia and national pride, targeting an audience that might feel disconnected and not represented anymore from traditional political discourse. However, the most effective part of these videos (and also the most recent example) often comes from the strategic use of music, in particular the works of Gigi D'Agostino.

Gigi D'Agostino's music is an iconic part of the Euro-dance and electronic music scene. His most famous tracks, such as "*L'Amour Toujours*" and "*Baila*," evoke a deep sense of nostalgia

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[101] Vogel H. and Schmitt E*., TikTok als "scharfes Schwert" im Wahlkampf? Wieso die Plattform immer mehr in den politischen Fokus rückt*. SWR Aktuell, 2024, September 8, https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/baden-wuerttemberg/tiktok-soziale-medien-wahlkampf-afd-100.html

[102] Ibidem

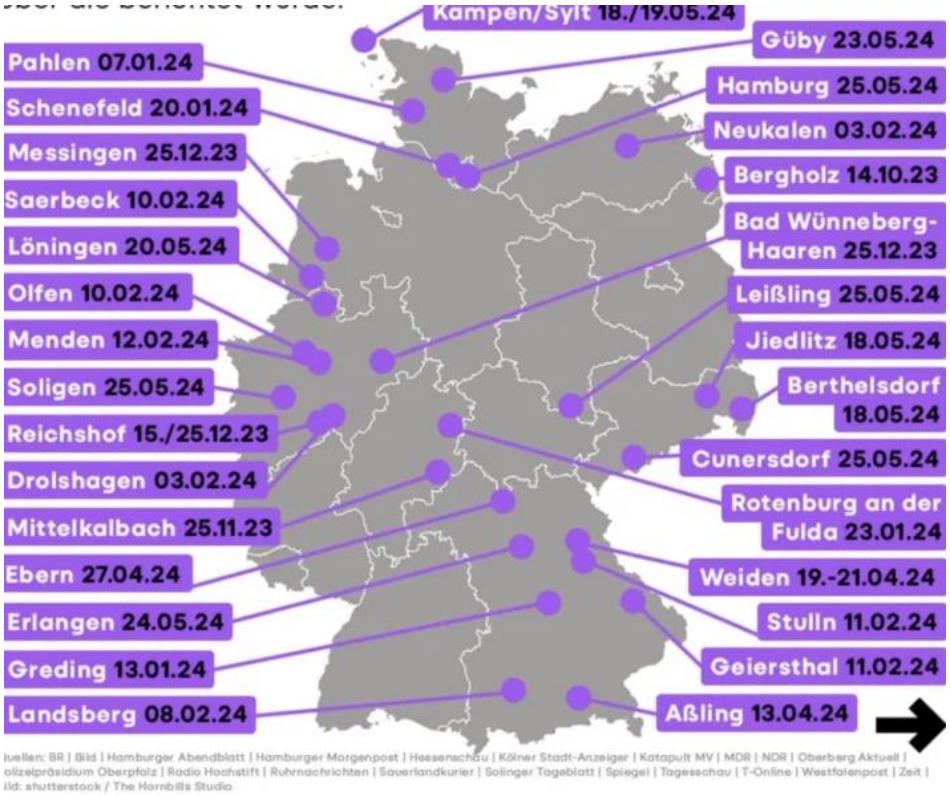
[103] Dw.com, *Far-right AfD appears as strongest German party on TikTok*, Politics – Germany, 2024, April 6, https://www.dw.com/en/far-right-afd-appears-as-strongest-german-party-on-tiktok/a-69264717

for the late 1990s and early 2000s, a period when Europe's rave culture was at its peak. The music itself is characterized by catchy melodies, emotional hooks, and a rhythmic drive that easily lends itself to both dancing and, more importantly, emotional engagement. Thus, his songs are known all around Europe.

The main characters of this propaganda are two particular songs of Gigi D'Agostino, respectively "*L'Amour Toujours*" and "*Bla Bla Bla*". The first song "has been turned into a far-right anthem in Germany with the use of a racist slogan, and has been sung for months by young Germans attracted by the rhetoric and political messages of an increasingly radical right-wing in the country."[104] The words of the song were distorted and the words sang in these episodes were "*Deutschland den Deutschen, Ausländer raus*" which means "Germany to the Germans, out with the foreigners". In the first video that went viral with this distorted version of the song "One of the boys holds two fingers under his nose (a gesture that alludes to Adolf Hitler) and raises his right arm – to the beat of the music – in a way that might be reminiscent of the Nazi salute."[105]

[104] Baccini F., *In Germany there is a problem with "L'amour toujours" on the right*, Eunews, 2024, May 29, https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/05/29/what-the-remake-of-lamour-toujours-in-the-extreme-right-tells-us-about-young-german-voters/

[105] Ibidem



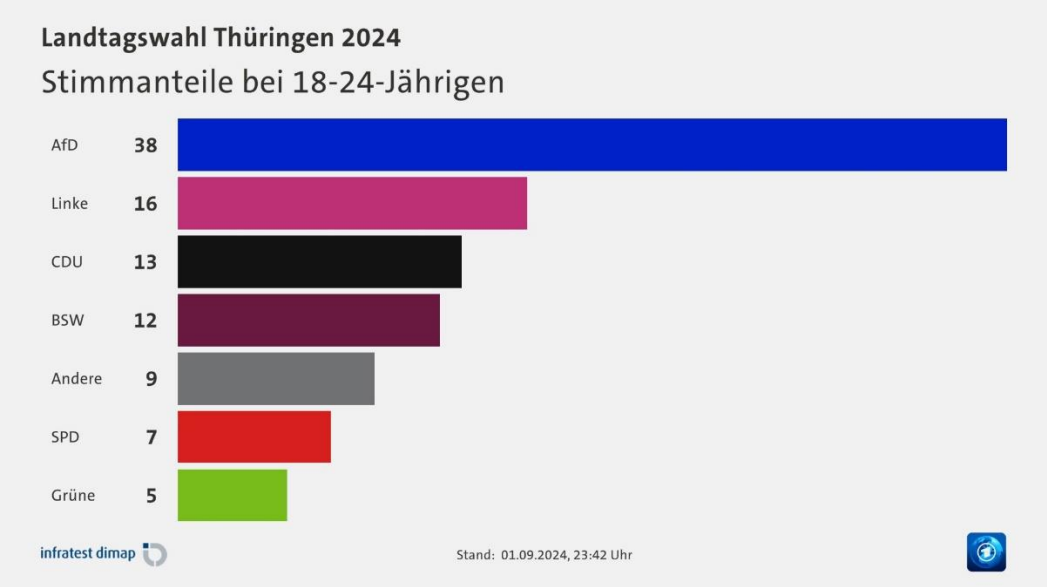
This map shows all the places in Germany where incidents of using the song *L'amour toujours* with the racist slogan "*Deutschland den Deutschen, Ausländer raus*" have been recorded from January 2024 to May 2024[106]

In 2024, the song was banned in a variety of different contests, one of them being the Oktoberfest Festival in Münich, to avoid unpleasant events from happening. "'We want to ban it and I will ban it', Oktoberfest boss Clemens Baumgärtner (CSU) told the German news agency dpa. 'There's no place for all that right-wing bullshit at the Wiesn,' he added, using the colloquial name for the event."[107] Besides the banning of the songs, this event had repercussions even in some companies, like Vodafone and *Deutsche Bank*, because, allegedly, the employers recognised some of the employees in the videos and dismissed them. Also, the German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser, guest to a talk show, criticised the slogan, saying it was inhumane and racist.[108]

However, this event repeated itself a few months later of the same year (2024), when another song by Gigi D'Agostino called "*Bla, bla, bla*" was used as a mean of propaganda, where the words distorted this time were saying '*AfD, Deutschland braucht AfD*', which translated in

[106] Baccini F., *In Germany there is a problem with "L'amour toujours" on the right*
[107] Weinert, F., *How did Gigi D'Agostino's techno classic about love become far-right hate song in Germany?*, Euronews, 2024, May 28, https://www.euronews.com/culture/2024/05/28/how-dagostinos-techno-classic-became-a-right-wing-hate-song-in-germany
[108] Ibidem

English means ‘AfD, Germany needs the AfD’. This remix of the songs went viral on the platform Tik Tok, where a significant amount of young people was dancing to the distorted song. Between memes and conspiracy theories, the AfD has created a real ‘parallel universe’ on social media, where fake news, conspiracy theories and extremist slogans are mixed.[109] This strategy used by the party is appealing to the younger viewers, because it gives the idea that the AfD is a new party, and it pays attention to issues that concern younger people. In general, in all the videos on TikTok, the leaders of the party appear as “ordinary” people, where they seem funny and spontaneous, giving the viewers a different image of the party, which contrasts the one portrayed on traditional media.



This graph shows how a majority of young people voted for the *Alternative für Deutschland* in the September Elections in Thuringia in 2024[110]

Furthermore, music has long been a tool for political messaging. From revolutionary anthems to protest songs, music has the power to unite and manipulate. In the case of the AfD, the strategic use of D’Agostino’s songs—through their association with a specific cultural moment—functions as a form of emotional propaganda. The AfD’s manipulation of music,

[109] Graziani C., *Germania, anche Bla Bla Bla di Gigi D’Ag diventa un inno dell’estrema destra su TikTok*, Berlino Magazine, 2024, November 14, https://berlinomagazine.com/2024-germania-anche-bla-bla-bla-di-gigi-dag-diventa-un-inno-dellestrema-destra-su-tiktok/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR0EqQ3Y_1RARHsL2NqaNfUK9Dj95_Lnz8JCG_BkvYxzQ4FR5erEHlNHjMU_aem_2THoF8Lc4u04gxtiOG6NqA [translated]

[110] Tagesschau, *Thüringen-Wahl: Stimmanteile bei 18-24-Jährigen* | tagesschau.de., 2024, September 1, tagesschau.de. https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2024-09-01-LT-DE-TH/charts/umfrage-alter/chart_1733552.shtml

alongside visual imagery, is an attempt to create an atmosphere of belonging and collective memory. The political implications of this are significant because it allows the party to bypass more overtly political content and instead appeal to voters on an emotional level. By using a familiar musical aesthetic that appeals to the emotions, the AfD can make its political messages seem less aggressive and more relatable. It is less about stating direct political opinions and more about creating an environment where viewers subconsciously align with the values and emotions embedded in the music. In this sense, the AfD is engaging in a form of "soft propaganda," where the music itself becomes a vehicle for spreading far-right ideologies.

> "'There is no correlation between TikTok use and voters' choices, but they cannot be completely separated either,' he said. In two major regional elections in Germany in 2023, the AfD saw the biggest gains among young voters. 'TikTok played a role in that,' said Hillje. One of the main reasons the AfD is able to reach young voters is that the major German parties have limited presence on TikTok. While politicians in other countries, such as Barack Obama, France's President Emmanuel Macron, Argentina's President Javier Milei, Poland's President Donald Tusk and many others have been very successful in publishing short videos, nothing much comes from Germany's political elite. Hardly any well-known politicians and very few politicians from the governing parties are active on TikTok."[111]

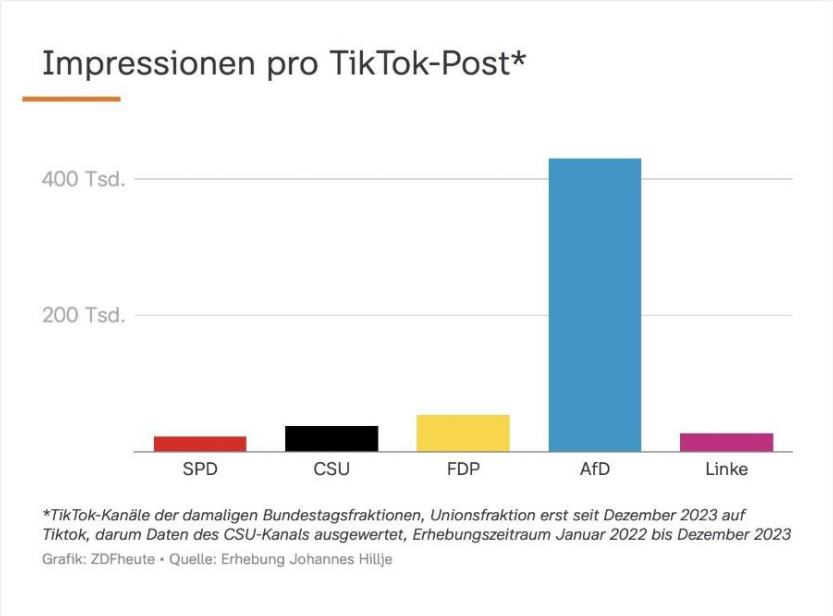
The AfD's use of TikTok is indicative of a broader trend in political communication, where the traditional methods of engaging voters through speeches and debates have given way to more fluid and visual forms of discourse. The "TikTok-ification" of politics, where short-form video clips are designed to grab attention, simplify complex issues and provoke emotional responses, is a phenomenon that has reshaped modern ways of make propaganda. This embrace of this new form of communication, along with its use of music, highlights the extent to which politics has become a form of entertainment, aimed at winning emotional support rather than rational debate. In this environment, platforms like TikTok become less about delivering detailed political manifestos and more about crafting a narrative that appeals to viewers' emotions and senses of identity. The AfD, by using Gigi D'Agostino's music and showing themselves as "ordinary" people, is actively participating in this trend, leveraging the power of nostalgia and

[111] Pfeifer H., *Germany's AfD on TikTok: The political battle for the youth*. dw.com, 2024, March 30, https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-afd-on-tiktok-the-political-battle-for-the-youth/a-68690661

rhythm to create a politically charged emotional experience for its audience. In doing so, the AfD is contributing to the evolving landscape of political communication, where emotional resonance often takes precedence over logical argumentation.

Hence, their use of the platform to spread its message reflects a new, more visually and emotionally driven approach to political propaganda. In this way, the AfD not only adapts to the changing landscape of political communication but also highlights the increasing role of music and emotion in shaping modern political ideologies. Whether or not this approach will be successful in the long term remains to be seen, but it is clear that the fusion of music, social media, and politics is a potent combination that will shape the future of political campaigns.

Researcher Johannes Hillje shows on the platform X, how big is the advantage on Tik Tok of the AfD in comparison to the other parties:



In one of his posts, he says: “Im Durchschnitt werden AfD-Videos dreimal so häufig aufgerufen wie die Videos aller anderen Parteien zusammen”[112] meaning that the videos of Afd are seen three times as much as all the ones of the other parties.

[112] Hillje J., (2024), [X], February 11, Available at: https://x.com/JHillje/status/1756623880280522944?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1756623880280522944%7Ctwgr%5Eb20c0bb642ee81385069c507954f0a0dcb29aca7%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facta.news%2Farticoli%2Fafd-germania-tiktok (Accessed 30th December 2024)

2.6 The Alternative für Deutschland strategy on X

The history of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and its use of X is closely tied to the party's broader rise in German politics and its strategic adoption of digital platforms. Following there will be a quick overview of the party's history with the platform.

During the early years of the foundation of AfD, the party began using X and other social media platforms to communicate directly with the public, again, bypassing what they perceived as biased coverage by mainstream media. Their early tweets focused on economic critiques and raising awareness of their positions. During the 2015 European migrant crisis, the AfD shifted its focus to immigration and cultural issues, adopting more hardline stances. This transition was reflected on X, where the party's messaging became more provocative and polarizing.

Their audience on X grew significantly during this period as they capitalized on public frustration with immigration policies. The party effectively used hashtags and controversial statements to draw attention and dominate online political discussions. In the 2017 federal elections, the AfD became the third-largest party in the Bundestag, and their X activity increased in numbers. The party often targeted Chancellor Angela Merkel and her immigration policies. Critics accused the AfD of using X to spread misinformation and stoke fears around immigration, Islam, and the EU. Investigations suggested some of their support online was amplified by bots or coordinated networks, though the party denied involvement.

Nowadays, the AfD's use of X has continued to generate controversy. During the pandemic, the party used Twitter to criticize lockdowns, vaccines and other public health measures, often aligning with conspiracy theories. The party has faced temporary account suspensions and content moderation on X, which they framed as censorship and proof of bias against their viewpoints. In fact, "Together with other extremists and the ultra-right AfD, the identitarian movement infiltrated a series of protests against the German government's quarantine policies."[113] To this day, the AfD official account on X counts a total of 323,609 followers (est. 30th December 2024).

With Elon Musk taking over X in 2022 and relaxing content moderation policies, the AfD and its supporters reported fewer restrictions. This sparked a resurgence in their activity on the platform, allowing them to post more freely. Recently, taking into consideration the same Elon Musk, on the 20th of December of 2024 he wrote on his platform "Only AfD can save

[113] Feffer J., *Right Across the World*, p. 74

Germany"[114]. To which Alice Wiedel replied "Yes! You are perfectly right, @elonmusk! Please also have a look into my interview on President Trump, how socialist Merkel ruined our country, how the Soviet European Union destroys the countries economic backbone and malfunctioning Germany!"[115] This post by Elon Musk endorsing Germany's far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* party has ignited accusations of election interference, promoting racism ahead of the upcoming elections in February.

Through the years, besides the latest example of Elon Musk, there have been different moments where the AfD has garnered significant attention for several controversial tweets by its members. From a chronological point of view the first episode happened in 2018, when in response to the Cologne police tweeting New Year's greetings in multiple languages, including Arabic, Beatrix von Storch, deputy leader of the AfD parliamentary group, tweeted '*Was zur Hölle ist in diesem Land los? Warum twittert eine offizielle Polizeiseite aus NRW auf Arabisch? Glaubt ihr, damit die barbarischen, muslimischen, gruppenvergewaltigenden Männerhorden zu besänftigen*', which translates into "What the hell is going on in this country? Why is an official police page from NRW tweeting in Arabic? Do you think this is to appease the barbaric, Muslim, gang-raping hordes of men". Her tweet was deleted, and her account was temporarily suspended for violating hate speech rules. The Cologne police filed a criminal complaint against her for hate speech.[116] Around the same time the AfD member of the Bundestag, Jens Maier, attracted attention on X with a racist comment about Noah Becker, the son of tennis legend Boris Becker. After Noah Becker, son of tennis legend Boris Becker, mentioned experiencing racial discrimination in Berlin, a tweet from AfD MP Jens Maier's account referred to Noah as "The little half-negro simply seems to have received too little attention, otherwise his behavior cannot be explained."[117] The tweet sparked widespread outrage, and a year later in 2019, "the Berlin Regional Court (LG) has sentenced AfD Bundestag member Jens Maier to pay Noah Becker 15,000 euros plus interest and out-of-court legal costs of around 520 euros."[118]

Another known episode concerning the AfD history on Twitter takes place in 2020, when what is called the "Hanau attack" happened. The Hanau attack on February 19, 2020, involved a far-right terrorist shooting targeting two shisha bars in Germany, killing nine people of migrant backgrounds. The attacker, Tobias Rathjen, also killed his mother before taking his own life.

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[114] Musk E., (2024), [X], December 20, Available at: https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1869986946031988780
[115] Weidel A, (2024), [X], December 20, Available at: https://x.com/Alice_Weidel/status/1870005427817287940
[116] DOMRADIO.DE., *Polizei Köln stellt Strafanzeige gegen Beatrix von Storch*., domradio.de., 2018, January 2, https://www.domradio.de/artikel/polizei-koeln-stellt-strafanzeige-gegen-beatrix-von-storch
[117] Lto, *AfD-Richter Maier nennt Noah Becker einen kleinen Halbneger*, Legal Tribune Online, 2018, January 3, https://www.lto.de/recht/nachrichten/n/jens-maier-afd-richter-bundestagsabgeordneter-rassistischer-kommentar-noah-becker
[118] Ibidem

He left behind a manifesto expressing racist and conspiracy-laden views.[119] Following the tragic shooting, the AfD tweeted a link to the perpetrator's website, attempting to distance the party from the attacker's ideology.

"Anyone who has read the 'manifesto' of the murderer of #Hanau (web.archive.org/web/2020022007...) and then tries to link this madman in any way to our politics must accept the accusation of unscrupulously instrumentalising this terrible act."[120]

This episode shocked Germany, and to the post one person responded, "If you don't share the same worldview as the attacker, delete the tweet and stop sharing his writings!"[121] This reaction from the people on the web caused the deleting of the post with a subsequent apology from the party.

In any case, despite some of these episodes being non-flattering for the right-wing party, X has proven to be fundamental and instrumental in helping the AfD reach national and international audiences, particularly during election cycles and the party, in one way or another, has always been the talk of the town. Their provocative posts often influence broader public debates, forcing other parties and media to respond. While X has bolstered their visibility, it has also solidified their image as a polarizing force in German politics. The AfD continues to rely heavily on X as part of its communication strategy, demonstrating the platform's importance for modern political movements.

[119] Redaktion, *19. Februar 2020: Anschlag in Hanau*, bpb.de., 2022, February 18, https://www-bpb-de.translate.goog/kurz-knapp/hintergrund-aktuell/505333/19-februar-2020-anschlag-in-hanau/?_x_tr_sl=de&_x_tr_tl=it&_x_tr_hl=it&_x_tr_pto=sc [translated]
[120] Leistner A., *Far-right AfD under fire for tweeting link to Hanau attacker's site,* Euronews, 2020, February 20, https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2020/02/20/far-right-afd-under-fire-for-tweeting-link-to-hanau-attacker-s-site?utm_
[121] Ibidem

2.7 The #AfDAnmachsprüche Trend: the development for the AfD's Martyrdom Narrative

Adding more details to the party's use of X, there is a particular phenomenon worth mentioning. In the ever-evolving world of social media, political movements frequently find themselves navigating both the opportunities and challenges posed by viral trends. One such trend, the *#AfDAnmachsprüche*, briefly surged in popularity and garnered significant attention in Germany.[122] The trend, originating in 2016, involved users sharing satirical, often absurd, and deliberately provocative "pickup lines" that were supposedly used by members or supporters of the far-right Alternative for Germany party. While these lines were designed to mock the party's extreme positions and polarizing rhetoric, the reaction from the AfD itself highlighted an interesting dynamic: the party managed to co-opt the narrative, portraying itself as a victim of unfair treatment and misunderstanding. In doing so, the AfD was able to adopt the role of a martyr, strategically deflecting criticism and solidifying its position as the champion of free speech and "common sense." The *#AfDAnmachsprüche* trend emerged as a response to the AfD's controversial and inflammatory rhetoric, which often stirred national debates on issues such as immigration, nationalism, and the European Union. The hashtag, which translates roughly to "AfD pick-up lines," was popularized by social media users who sought to parody the party's language and behaviour. The lines, which were intentionally absurd and laden with sarcastic humour, ranged from crude jokes to exaggeratedly political statements designed to caricature the party's positions. The underlying aim was to mock the AfD's perceived social awkwardness, its reliance on populist tactics, and its consistent courting of controversy. For example, some of the "lines" might include statements like "I want to immigrate into you uncontrollably"[123] or "Would you like to have a candlelight dinner in front of the burning refugee shelter?"[124] The humour, while often sharp and critical, was clearly aimed at exposing the extremism and anti-immigrant sentiments that many associated with the AfD. Despite being the target of widespread ridicule, the AfD's response to this particular trend was not one of retreat or defensiveness. For example, the official account of the AfD-Heidelberg took active part in this "X-trend campaign", and actually started to reply with a couple of sentences that

[122] Schirmer S., *Diese AfD-Anmachsprüche sind lustig, aber...,* DER SPIEGEL, 2016, December 31, Hamburg, Germany https://www-spiegel-de.translate.goog/politik/deutschland/afdanmachsprueche-wie-sich-twitter-nutzer-ueber-die-partei-lustig-machen-a-00000000-0003-0001-0000-000001100926?_x_tr_sl=de&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=sc
[123] Ivkovic D., *Die besten Tweets zu #AfDAnmachsprüche*, Twitterperlen, 2016, December 31 https://www.twitterperlen.de/best-of-afdanmachsprueche/
[124] Ibidem

summarised some of the core values of the party. The first case is the post "#AfDAnmachsprüche Feminism is cancer."[125], followed by another remark "#AfDAnmachsprüche Es gibt nur zwei Geschlechter."[126] (which translates to: There are only two genders). Furthermore, instead of being ridiculed by the creation of the trend, another post by the same X account was "Schön, wie die Twitter die #AfD mit einem Hashtag nach dem anderen abfeiert. Danke. #AfDAnmachsprüche"[127] (whose translation is: Nice how Twitter celebrates the #AfD with one hashtag after another. Thank you.).

However, another strategy of the party and its supporters was to quickly turn the situation into an opportunity to cast themselves as victims. The ridicule, they argued, was not a fair critique of their policies or positions, but an example of the political and cultural elite's hostility toward their movement and their supporters.[128] By framing the backlash as an attack on "ordinary people" and "free speech," the AfD was able to invoke the rhetoric of martyrdom that has long been a feature of populist politics. In a series of statements, party leaders and supporters claimed that the trend was an example of the "mainstream media" and "liberal elites" actively trying to silence the AfD and its supporters. They accused their critics of reducing complex political discussions to crude mockery rather than engaging with the substance of their arguments. The *#AfDAnmachsprüche*, they argued, was part of a broader pattern of unfair treatment that demonized their party and its followers. AfD leaders like Alice Weidel and Jörg Meuthen used the hashtag as a platform to reinforce their narrative of victimhood, portraying themselves as martyrs fighting against a tide of political correctness and social intolerance. They emphasized that the party's positions were legitimate expressions of democratic will, not extremist views, and that the backlash was symptomatic of an elite that was out of touch with the concerns of ordinary Germans.

The strategy of portraying themselves as martyrs is not a new one for the AfD. Like many populist parties, they have long relied on the narrative of being an underdog, misunderstood by both the political establishment and the media. This narrative is potent because it taps into the emotions of disenfranchised voters who feel ignored, stigmatized, or misrepresented by the mainstream political class. By positioning itself as a victim of mockery and persecution, the AfD was able to shift the focus away from the actual substance of its positions and onto the

[125] AfD-Heidelberg, (2016), [X], December 30, Available at: https://x.com/AfD_HD/status/814946228467335168 (Accessed 30th December 2024)
[126] AfD-Heidelberg, (2016), [X], December 30, Available at: https://x.com/AfD_HD/status/814946397220929536 (Accessed 30th December 2024)
[127] AfD-Heidelberg, (2016), [X], December 30, Available at: https://x.com/AfD_HD/status/814945924359356416 (Accessed 30th December 2024)
[128] Schirmer S., *Diese AfD-Anmachsprüche sind lustig, aber…*

idea of free expression. This not only deflects criticism but also reinforces the idea that the party's views are somehow "taboo" or "dangerous" in the eyes of the establishment. Such a narrative can foster a sense of solidarity and defiance among supporters, who may feel that their political beliefs are under attack by a biased system.

Moreover, the AfD's embrace of the martyrdom narrative allowed it to appeal to voters who are sceptical of the political correctness associated with the mainstream parties.[129] The portrayal of the AfD as a victim of cultural elites plays into the broader populist themes of anti-establishment rhetoric and "us vs. them" narratives. By presenting itself as a martyr, the AfD was able to cast itself as the true voice of the people, standing up against a perceived cultural and political hegemony.

However, how did it influence public perception? The *#AfDAnmachsprüche* trend and its subsequent co-option by the AfD illustrate a broader phenomenon in which satire and mockery are increasingly weaponized in political discourse. Even though the original intent of the trend was to expose the AfD's extremist positions in a humorous light, it inadvertently gave the party the chance to construct a narrative of victimhood and resistance. For many of the party's supporters, the backlash served to confirm their belief that the mainstream political establishment was out to get them, thus strengthening their resolve to support the AfD. However, for critics of the party, the AfD's ability to turn satire into a story of martyrdom does not necessarily diminish the party's polarizing impact. While it may have shifted the narrative in the short term, the underlying issues of xenophobia and anti-democratic rhetoric that define the AfD remain contentious and continue to fuel divisiveness in German politics.

Thus, this trend, originally conceived as a satirical way to mock the far-right AfD party, ultimately gave the party an opportunity to play the victim and portray itself as a misunderstood martyr. This tactic of shifting the focus from ideological critique to accusations of persecution is a common feature of populist movements. Framing the backlash as an attack on free speech, the AfD was able to solidify its standing as the champion of ordinary people and deflect attention from its more controversial positions. All things considered, this trend underscores the power of narrative in shaping political discourse and the ways in which even ridicule can be repurposed to further political goals.

[129] McGuinness D., *Germany's far-right AfD: Victim or victor?*, BBC News, 2019, September 2, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49549670

2.8 Conclusion on the case of the Alternative für Deustchland

The *Alternative für Deutschland*'s rise to power underscores the transformative potential of digital media in contemporary politics. With the mastering of the art of social media communication, exploiting algorithms, the AfD was able to build a formidable political movement that disrupted Germany's postwar political consensus. While its success highlights the democratizing possibilities of digital platforms, it also serves as a tale about the risks of disinformation, polarization and the erosion of democratic norms. As political actors continue to innovate in the digital space, societies must come to terms with the challenges of maintaining a healthy, inclusive democratic discourse in the face of increasingly sophisticated digital campaigns.

The rise of the party has been profoundly shaped by their strategic use of social media platforms such as X and TikTok. These digital tools have provided the AfD with unparalleled opportunities to mobilize support and foster a sense of victimhood and martyrdom, which are central to their populist ideology. Social media platforms have become indispensable tools for far-right parties to disseminate their messages, challenge mainstream narratives and engage with specific groups that feel marginalized or disenchanted with the political establishment.

In the case of the AfD, social media has facilitated a shift toward more personalized, interactive and often divisive communication strategies. The AfD has utilized platforms like Facebook to spread populist messages, create targeted content and well-crafted campaigns, and mobilize supporters around issues such as immigration, national identity, and antisemitism.[130] The AfD's posts frequently emphasize the perceived failure of the political establishment to address the concerns of ordinary citizens, portraying themselves as defenders of the "silent majority" against the political elite. This framing not only helps to gain support but also to maintain a narrative of grievance and alienation that resonates with their voter base.

Moreover, the AfD's strategic use of TikTok has further amplified their reach and influence, especially among younger voters. The platform has allowed the AfD to create viral videos that simplify complex political issues and appeal to emotions. By tailoring content to reflect themes of cultural identity, nostalgia, and anti-establishment sentiment, the AfD has managed to establish a foothold among younger audiences who may be skeptical of traditional political institutions. For instance, TikTok trends like *#AfDAnmachsprüche*, which mocked politically correct language and cultural norms, were instrumental in reinforcing the party's narrative of

[130] Hübscher M., *Likes for Antisemitism: The Alternative für Deutschland and Its Posts on Facebook*, p. 1

victimhood and cultural decline. This not only bolstered the AfD's populist discourse but also contributed to their growing sense of political martyrdom.

The *#AfDAnmachsprüche* trend illustrates how the AfD skillfully cultivates a martyrdom narrative, positioning itself as a victim of politically correct censorship and social marginalization. By focusing its discourse on themes of exclusion and victimization, the AfD has successfully promoted a narrative of political persecution, portraying the party as the defender of "true" German identity against cultural erosion and outside influences.

In summary, the rise and popularity of the AfD can be largely attributed to its effective use of social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and X. Through these platforms, the AfD has not only succeeded in amplifying its populist rhetoric but also in creating a sense of political martyrdom that resonates deeply with its supporters. Using social networks targeting certain viewers, AfD challenged the media account, contributed to complaints, and established a status as a voice in the citizen constituency. At the same time, political parties voted with modern political discourses with abilities and efficiency and were able to improve their existence in German political landscapes.

In the next chapter the focus will shift from right-wing parties to left-wing parties, in particular to *Podemos*, a left-wing party of Spain. Because to better understand the impact of the strategy of right-wing parties, in this case of the AfD, it is necessary to take into consideration its other counterpart in a different scenery and in a different political background.

3. The Left Response: an analysis of the Spanish party Podemos

"His students were there to study power, and the powerful can be challenged"[131]

3.1 The Dynamics of Social Media in Politics: Left-Wing vs. Right-Wing Strategies

Political parties, regardless of ideology, recognize the potential of the social media platforms to reach vast audiences, shape public opinion, and engage with voters. In fact, "social media, in the political field, allow the segmentation of messages according to the interests of the audience."[132] However, the strategies employed by left-wing and right-wing parties often differ significantly in tone and execution. While left-wing parties have made significant strides in leveraging social media, their strategies are sometimes viewed as less impactful than those of their right-wing counterparts. This chapter will explore these differences, examining the reasons behind the varying effectiveness of their social media campaigns.

These platforms facilitate rapid dissemination of messages, real-time engagement with audiences, and the ability to target specific demographics with tailored content. Left-wing parties often use social media to promote messages of social justice, equality, and inclusivity. Their campaigns tend to focus on:

- Policy-Driven Content: they frequently share detailed proposals and discussions on issues like climate change, healthcare, education and workers' rights.
- Community Building: left wing parties, like the far-right parties, use social media to create and research a sense of community among supporters. Campaigns often include calls to action, such as volunteering or attending events, aiming to build momentum

[131] Tremlett G., *The Podemos revolution: how a small group of radical academics changed European politics*, The Guardian, 2015, March 31, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/31/podemos-revolution-radical-academics-changed-european-politics

[132] Lozano Hernández N., Miquel-Segarra S., & Zomeño Jiménez D., *TikTok as a political communication tool: the case of Podemos and the Spanish Popular Party with regard to the "only yes is yes" law [TikTok como herramienta de comunicación política: el caso de Podemos y el Partido Popular en la ley del "solo sí es sí"].* Revista Latina de Comunicación Social, 82, 2024, pp. 1-25, p. 3., https://www.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2024-2262

from the ground up. This sense of belonging often forms the backbone of progressive movements.

- Fact-Based Communication: these parties often prioritize factual accuracy and nuanced discussions over sensationalism. This approach reflects a commitment to informed debate but can sometimes fail to capture the attention of casual or undecided voters. However, it builds long-term credibility with audiences who value substance over spectacle.
- Coalition Building: left-wing campaigns frequently collaborate with activist groups to spread their messages. These partnerships enhance credibility but can dilute the clarity of the party's own voice. For example, campaigns addressing climate action might involve environmental organizations.
- Inclusive Narratives: inclusivity is a hallmark of left-wing social media strategies. By representing diverse voices and addressing the concerns of marginalized groups, left-wing campaigns aim to create a sense of unity and shared purpose. However, balancing this inclusivity with a cohesive, central message can be challenging.

The relative effectiveness of these strategies often hinges on the nature of social media platforms themselves. Algorithms favour content that generates strong engagement, such as likes and comments. Right-wing strategies, with their emphasis on emotional resonance and controversy, naturally align with these dynamics. In contrast, left-wing strategies, which prioritize depth and accuracy, may struggle to achieve the same level of engagement.

In fact, right-wing content often prioritizes engagement over education, sacrificing nuance for virality. While left-wing parties aim to inform and persuade, their messages can seem less compelling in a fast-paced digital environment. The coalition-building approach of left-wing parties, while inclusive, can result in fragmented messaging. Multiple voices and causes may dilute the impact of their core narrative. In fact, left-wing parties are often hesitant to use sensationalism or humour, fearing it may undermine their credibility and this may seem less appealing to a younger audience. Social media algorithms are not ideologically neutral; they prioritize content that sparks strong reactions. Right-wing parties' strategies align more closely with these biases, giving them an edge in visibility and reach.

To improve and make more appealing the effectiveness of their social media campaigns, left-wing parties could consider some of the following strategies: balancing emotion and facts by incorporating emotional storytelling into fact-based messaging and this can make content more

engaging without compromising credibility. For instance, sharing personal stories related to policy proposals can humanize complex issues.

Furthermore, utilizing memes, short videos and interactive content can help left-wing parties connect with younger, digitally native audiences. TikTok campaigns or Instagram Reels that creatively frame progressive policies can capture attention and inspire action. Another idea could be to simplify key messages while maintaining depth can make left-wing campaigns more accessible and shareable. Focusing on one or two overarching themes per campaign can help unify their narrative. Understanding what content works and amplifying it strategically is key.

Left-wing parties could focus on creating content that looks genuine or also spread interactive spaces on social media. A few examples could be: regular Q&A sessions and direct responses to users' concerns, these techniques can foster trust and loyalty.

While left-wing parties have made significant strides in understanding the dynamics of social media social media, their strategies often prioritize depth and inclusivity over virality and simplicity. In contrast, right-wing parties have utilized techniques that align more closely with the engagement-driven dynamics of social media platforms. By adapting their approaches to better resonate with digital audiences while maintaining their ideological principles, left-wing parties can enhance their effectiveness in the social media arena. Ultimately, the challenge lies in striking a balance between authenticity and adaptability in an ever-evolving digital landscape.

3.2 Examples of Left-Wing Social Media Strategies in Action

Left-wing parties in particular, have utilized social media to champion causes like social justice, environmentalism and economic equality. The main themes in their propaganda usually are inclusivity and community-building. However, giving real-world examples provide a clearer picture of how these approaches manifest in practice. This part examines specific instances where left-wing parties and movements have successfully employed social media, illustrating their strategies and highlighting areas for growth.

Following, there will be some examples of the strategies used by the parties:

1. **The United States: The Green New Deal and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez**

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), a member of the U.S. Democratic Party, has utilized Instagram and X to advocate for the Green New Deal. One example is her post on X on the 3rd of March 2019:

> "I also fly & use A/C
> Living in the world as it is isn't an argument against working towards a better future.
> The Green New Deal is about putting a LOT of people to work in developing new technologies, building new infrastructure, and getting us to 100% renewable energy."[133]

In her key strategy, AOC uses Instagram Stories to break down complex policies into digestible content, often employing infographics and live Q&A sessions to engage younger audiences. These campaigns resonate with the so-called Gen Z audiences, making complex topics more accessible.

Another example is a video posted on YouTube explaining the Green New Deal, with AOC words and illustrations by Molly Crabapple. The video published is about "how, in the nick of time, a critical mass of humanity in the largest economy on earth came to believe that we were actually worth saving."[134]

By engaging directly with her followers, AOC fosters a sense of accessibility and dialogue, reinforcing trust among her base.

2. **The United Kingdom: Labour Party and NHS Advocacy**

The UK Labour Party has consistently used social media to defend the National Health Service (NHS) from privatization threats. One of the many examples is the touching video of a small business owner called Charlie, the caption of the post is "This Labour Government chooses investment over decline. For our NHS, for our schools, and for small business owners like Charlie."[135] The UK Labour Party under leaders like Jeremy Corbyn

[133] Ocasio-Cortez A., (2019), [X], 3rd of March, Available at: https://x.com/AOC/status/1102021054363586561
[134] Ocasio-Cortez A. and Crabapple M., "A Message From the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez", YouTube, uploaded by The Intercept, 2019, April 17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9uTH0iprVQ&ab_channel=TheIntercept
[135] The Labour Party, (2024), [X], 3rd of December, Available at: https://x.com/UKLabour/status/1863984707383230956

and Keir Starmer has used social media to outline policies on taxing the wealthy and investing in public services. Campaigns often include detailed videos and infographics shared on X and Facebook, explaining how these policies would benefit ordinary citizens. The Labour Party frequently partners with trade unions to amplify workers' rights campaigns. During strikes and labour disputes, coordinated social media efforts between Labour and unions like Unite and GMB highlight the struggles of workers while advocating for policy changes.

The key strategy consisted in the labour's campaigns featuring personal stories from healthcare workers and patients to humanize the issue. Hashtags like #SaveOurNHS trended during the 2019 general election, drawing significant attention to the party's healthcare proposals. The party used this at its advantage publishing posts and videos against the words of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson.[136] Labour partnered with unions and activist groups to amplify their message, creating a coalition of supporters online.

3. The United States: Bernie Sanders and Grassroots Mobilization

Bernie Sanders' campaigns have heavily relied on grassroots support amplified through social media platforms like X and Reddit[137]. Sanders' team used social media to organize volunteer-driven events, such as phone banking and canvassing, ensuring widespread voter engagement. U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' social media campaigns often focus on factual presentations of issues like income inequality and healthcare, in fact recently he wrote on X:

> "Elon Musk is wrong.
>
> The main function of the H-1B visa program is not to hire "the best and the brightest," but rather to replace good-paying American jobs with low-wage indentured servants from abroad.
>
> The cheaper the labor they hire, the more money the billionaires make."[138]

[136] The Labour Party, (2019), [X], 10th of December, Available at: https://x.com/UKLabour/status/1204506070476935168

[137] Reddit is a social media platform where users can discuss and vote on content across various topics. Users can post text, links, images or videos, and others can upvote or downvote content to influence its visibility.

[138] Bernie Sanders, (2025), [X], 2nd of January, Available at: https://x.com/SenSanders/status/1874918027982172626

His team shares charts, statistics, and expert opinions to bolster their arguments, ensuring that followers are well-informed about his policies. The slogan "Not Me. Us." became a rallying cry, shared widely across platforms to emphasize collective action, over the years it became the official motto of Bernie Sanders' party.[139] Through platforms like Reddit's r/SandersForPresident, supporters self-organized to fundraise and promote Sanders' progressive agenda, and where nowadays is still possible to find recent posts related to the matter.[140]

4. Germany: Die Linke and Worker Advocacy

Die Linke (The Left) in Germany has leveraged social media to amplify labour rights campaigns and build grassroots movements. The party collaborates with unions to share workers' stories and advocate for higher wages and better working conditions. Posts highlighting strikes and labour protests often gain traction, encouraging broader participation. For example, in 2020 the party made a post on X putting the spotlight on the protests happening in Berlin against the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland*.

"In front of the #FDP headquarters in Berlin: Protest against the breaking of taboos by @fdp and @CDU in #Thuringia. #noafd"[141]

[139] Example of a post on X by Bernie Sanders where he uses his motto: "*The workers who are working so very hard to organize, who are standing up and fighting for justice are an enormous inspiration to me, and a reminder that if we stand together, there is nothing we cannot accomplish.*
Not me, us." wrote on the 7th of December in 2021, https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/1468263964723200000
[140] Posts available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/SandersForPresident/?rdt=51153
[141] Die Linke, (2020), [X], 5th of February, Available at: https://x.com/dieLinke/status/1225117636561903622

Die Linke's social media accounts frequently interact with individual activists, creating a dialogue that strengthens ties with their base.

5. New Zealand: Jacinda Ardern and COVID-19 Response

During the pandemic, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern used social media platforms like Facebook and its feature "Live" to communicate directly with citizens. Ardern provided regular updates, answering questions and sharing scientific data to ensure transparency.

Her empathetic and informative broadcasts often went viral, earning praise for their clarity and approachability. During the COVID-19 pandemic, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern effectively utilized Facebook Live to communicate government policies.[142]

Her transparent and empathetic approach included answering questions in real time and sharing scientific data. This strategy-built trust and ensured widespread public compliance with health measures.[143]

Ardern's ability to foster trust through direct communication helped unify New Zealanders during the crisis.

6. Canada: New Democratic Party (NDP) and Housing Advocacy

The NDP frequently uses X and Facebook to highlight issues such as housing affordability and tenant rights. On the 8th of October of 2024, the party itself writes on X:

> "The Liberals and Conservatives have had their chance to fix the housing crisis - they continue to side with corporate landlords.
>
> Now these same corporate landlords are using AI technology to raise your rent.
>
> We've moved a motion to have them testify before Parliament. By sharing infographics and expert-backed data, the NDP positions itself as a credible voice on economic justice."[144]

[142] Wilson S., *Three reasons why Jacinda Ardern's coronavirus response has been a masterclass in crisis leadership, The Conversation*, 2020, April 5, https://theconversation.com/three-reasons-why-jacinda-arderns-coronavirus-response-has-been-a-masterclass-in-crisis-leadership-135541

[143] Ibidem

[144] NPD, (2024), [X], 8th of October, Available at: https://x.com/NDP/status/1843756463984103558

Posts exposing corporate landlords' exploitative practices often generate widespread attention. The NDP frequently uses X and Facebook to present detailed critiques of conservative policies and promote their progressive agenda.

The NDP's campaigns encourage followers to share their own housing struggles, creating a collective narrative around the issue.

7. Spain: Podemos and LGBTQ+ Rights

Podemos uses social media to promote LGBTQ+ rights and inclusivity. One of their posts on X quotes what Irene Montero said during an interview: "*Los derechos de las mujeres son una cuestión de derechos humanos: todas las mujeres y todas las personas LGBTQ deben disfrutar del derecho a desarrollar sus vidas en paz y sin discriminación*". ("Women's rights are a human rights issue: all women and all LGBTQ people must enjoy the right to live their lives in peace and free from discrimination".)[145]

Podemos has been vocal on issues of LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice, and economic inequality. The party writes:

> "*Ocho homófobos marcan a un chico con la palabra "maricón". Hace unos meses asesinan a Samuel por homosexual. Desde 2015 las agresiones al colectivo aumentaron un 67,5%. Y aún tenemos que soportar que Vox señale a diario al colectivo y que el PP salga a defenderlos. No todo vale.*"[146]

Their social media campaigns frequently showcase news and events regarding this topic, ensuring diverse representation and fostering inclusivity.

Campaigns feature testimonials from LGBTQ+ individuals, emphasizing the human impact of progressive policies. Posts celebrating Pride Month and advocating for anti-discrimination laws often go viral. Podemos' inclusive messaging fosters solidarity among diverse groups of supporters. However, this party and its use of digital media in particular will be the focus of the following sections of this chapter.

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[145] Podemos, (2022), [X], 8th of August, Available at: https://x.com/PODEMOS/status/1556690883210317831

[146] Podemos, (2021), [X], 7th of September, Available at: https://x.com/PODEMOS/status/1435153526561329153 ("Eight homophobes label a boy with the word 'faggot'. A few months ago, Samuel was murdered for being homosexual. Since 2015, aggressions against homosexuals have increased by 67.5%. And we still have to put up with Vox pointing the finger at the collective on a daily basis and the PP coming out to defend them. Not everything goes.")

8. Argentina: Ni Una Menos Movement

The Ni Una Menos[147] movement, supported by left-leaning parties, uses social media to combat gender violence. Campaigns highlight stories of victims and survivors, creating urgency around the issue. An example of the spreading of this movement, even among left political parties, is this post by the leftist party *Partido Justicialista*:

"Thousands of women mobilised across the country with the same demand: to put an end to male violence.

There is no #NiUnaMenos without public policies and without a budget."[148]

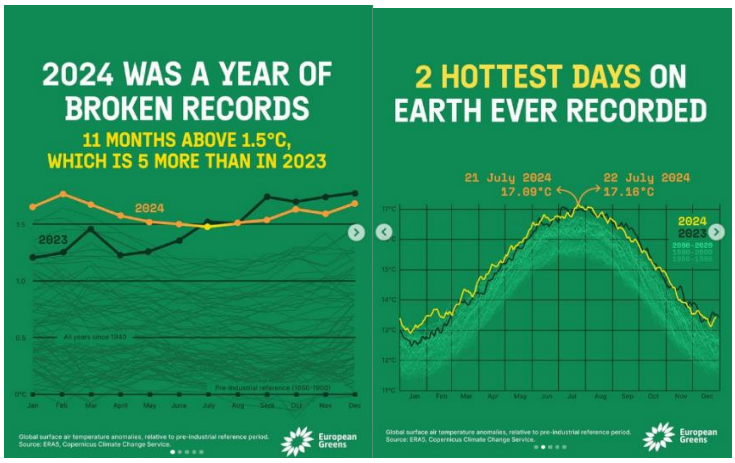
Hashtags like *#NiUnaMenos* galvanize support and spark international conversations. The movement's grassroots approach unites activists across borders, strengthening its impact.

9. European Union: European Green Party's Instagram Presence

The European Green Party uses Instagram to share visually engaging content on climate issues:

[147] A movement started in Argentina in 2015 because of the brutal murder of Chiara Paez, a 14-year-old girl who was killed by her boyfriend due to her pregnancy.

[148] Partido Justicialista, (2019), [X], 4th of July, Available at: https://x.com/p_justicialista/status/1135688741719281666



For example, this is the most recent post (according to today's date 14.01.2025) concerning the climate change aspect.[149]

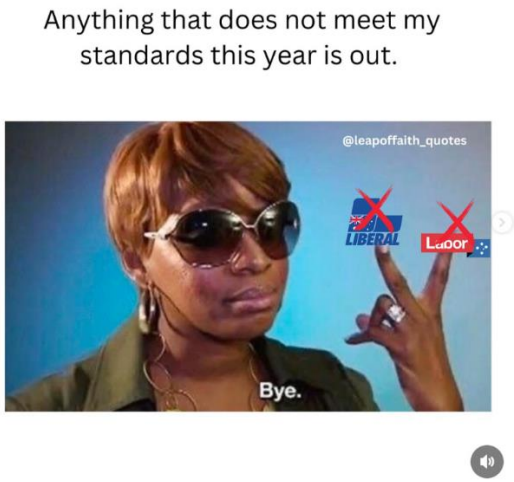
The European Green Party uses Instagram to share visually engaging content about renewable energy and environmental policies. Through infographics, short videos, and stories, they've cultivated a strong following among environmentally conscious voters.

Infographics and short videos simplify environmental policies for a broad audience. Posts about renewable energy milestones and environmental success stories frequently gain traction.

The party's Instagram strategy attracts environmentally conscious voters, particularly younger demographics.

Other examples include the Australia's Green Climate Action, where the Australian Greens party frequently uses Facebook and Instagram to promote their climate policies. They share visually engaging content, such as graphics showing the impact of renewable energy investments, to educate and mobilize voters and also memes to show their discontent with failures of the government, like in the example right below:

[149] European Greens, *We don't mean to sound like a broken record but 2024 was the hottest year ever recorded. Highest global temperature anomaly, with +1.62°C compared to pre-industrial times. Highest global temperature ever recorded, 2 days in a row. Most days in a row of extreme heat in Southern Europe. Almost 50% of of Earth experienced extreme drought. Extreme rainfall. Extreme wildfires. More hurricanes. Many lives lost. Many houses lost. We have the solutions, we just need to put the ACT into ACTION*., January 11, https://www.instagram.com/p/DErXhJaOvbm/?img_index=2



Instagram Post (14.01.25)[150]

Worth mentioning is also one of the most important movements of today's world, The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. A movement that exemplifies community-building on social media. Platforms like X and Instagram were instrumental in organizing protests, sharing educational resources, and amplifying marginalized voices. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter united millions globally, creating a sense of solidarity among activists and supporters. Based on a research published in 2023, the hashtag itself reached more than 44 million posts on X with more than a half being published in 2020.[151]

Regarding the more general aspect of the use of social media, left-wing campaigns emphasize inclusivity by representing diverse voices and addressing the concerns of marginalized groups. Like the Trans Rights Advocacy in the U.S., where Progressive politicians like Elizabeth Warren have used platforms like X to advocate for transgender rights, sharing personal stories from trans individuals and proposing concrete policy measures. One of her posts of 2021 recites: "Six years ago today, the Supreme Court affirmed marriage equality. But the fight for LGBTQ+ rights is far from over. Trans Americans—especially trans children—are under attack. Trailblazers like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson have shown us how to fight back. #Pride"[152].

While these examples show the potential of left-wing social media strategies, there is still room to grow and improve those same strategies. In fact, to enhance their effectiveness, left-wing campaigns could, for example, combine emotion with facts. Meaning that emotional

[150] Australian Greens, This year, you have a choice, January 14th, https://www.instagram.com/p/DEyvo3SSNFC/?img_index=1

[151] Bestvater S., Gelles-Watnick R., Odabaş M., Anderson M. and Smith A., #BlackLivesMatter Turns 10, Social media, online activism and 10 years of #BlackLivesMatter, Pew Research Center, 2023, June 29, pp. 1-59, p. 14, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2023/06/PI_2023.06.29_BLM-turns-10_FINAL.pdf

[152] Elizabeth Warren, (2021), [X], 26th of June, Available at: https://x.com/ewarren/status/1408792306333929475

storytelling paired with fact-based content can create a balance that resonates with a broader audience. What probably is also missing is the simplification of key messages and focusing on central themes can improve clarity and cohesion. However, the main part that the left-wing parties' social media strategy is lacking is the engaging with creative formats. With this, it means that the parties should try to take advantage of the full potential of social media and maybe take some "inspiration" from the right-wing parties. In this sense, the first pivotal point would be to start experimenting with humour and trends; especially memes is fundamental, given the tendency they have to become viral over the internet.

Left-wing parties and movements have demonstrated the power of social media in advancing progressive causes. Through the examples mentioned before, it is clear that these strategies emphasize inclusivity more than everything else. By learning from successes and addressing challenges, left-wing campaigns can continue to harness the full potential of social media in shaping a more equitable future.

Following this general overview of the left-wing parties' use of digital media, the focus will now move to a more specific and interesting case, and that would be the Spanish party *Podemos* (already mentioned above). Even though the way the social media are deployed in the case of AfD and in the case of *Podemos* is very different, studying and analysing both is interesting to better comprehend how today's ways of handling politics are changing.

3.3 The history of the Spanish Party Podemos

> "At the start of the 2008 academic year, Pablo Iglesias, a 29-year-old lecturer with a pierced eyebrow and a ponytail greeted his students at the political sciences faculty of the Complutense University in Madrid by inviting them to stand on their chairs."[153]

Podemos ("We Can") is a Spanish political party founded in early 2014 amidst the backdrop of widespread dissatisfaction with the traditional political establishment in Spain. This dissatisfaction was fuelled by the lingering effects of the 2008 financial crisis, austerity measures and widespread corruption scandals. In fact, the quote at the beginning of this section mentions Pablo Iglesias, one of the founders of the Podemos party, asking his student to reenact

[153] Tremlett G., *The Podemos revolution: how a small group of radical academics changed European politics*

one of the most famous scenes of Dead Poets Society, "Iglesias's message was simple. His students were there to study power, and the powerful can be challenged"[154]. *Podemos* emerged as a significant force in Spanish politics, characterized by its left-wing populist approach and commitment to social justice, economic equality and participatory democracy.

The first signs of the foundation of *Podemos* can be traced to the indignados movement (15-M Movement) that swept across Spain in 2011. This grassroots movement, driven by young people and activists, criticized the failures of traditional political parties, high unemployment rates, and the erosion of public services. The indignados movement laid the groundwork for the creation of a political platform that could translate these demands into institutional action.

Podemos was officially founded in January 2014 by a group of academics and activists, including Pablo Iglesias, Ñigo Errejón, Juan Carlos Monedero, and Carolina Bescansa. "But when they launched their own political party … many dismissed it. With no money, no structure and few concrete policies, it looked like just one of several angry, anti-austerity parties destined to fade away within months."[155] The party's initial strategy focused on engaging with disenfranchised citizens through online platforms and town hall meetings, emphasizing transparency and direct participation. *Podemos* sought to challenge the dominance of Spain's two major political parties: the centre-right Partido Popular (PP) and the centre-left Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE).

Podemos quickly gained traction among voters dissatisfied with the status quo. In the 2014 European Parliament elections, the party secured an impressive 8% of the vote, winning five seats.[156] This unexpected success established *Podemos* as a credible alternative to traditional parties and catalysed its rapid growth.

On the 31st of January 2015, Iglesias went up on stage in Madrid during the *Manifestación de Podemos #YoVoy31E* and to encourage his followers at the end of this speech, he shouted "*Podemos sognar, Podemos vencer*" (We can dream, We can win).[157] By the time of the 2015 general elections, *Podemos* had become a major political force. Running on a platform that called for increased social spending, progressive taxation, and measures to combat corruption,

[154] Tremlett G., *The Podemos revolution: how a small group of radical academics changed European politics*
[155] Ibidem
[156] European Parliament, *Results by national party - 2014-2019, Spain - Final results*, https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/national-results/spain/2014-2019/constitutive-session/
[157] Ramón Robles J., *Manifestación de Podemos #YoVoy31E. 31 enero 2015*, YouTube, uploaded by juanravideonews, 2015, January 31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56FcqJnqFlY&ab_channel=juanravideonews

the party secured 20.7% of the vote and 69 seats in the Spanish Parliament.[158] This marked a historic moment, as *Podemos* broke the traditional two-party dominance and reshaped the political landscape in Spain.

The party defines itself as a left-wing populist party, drawing inspiration from movements in Latin America, such as the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. The party's rhetoric often pits "the people" against "the elites," emphasizing the need to empower ordinary citizens against entrenched political and economic interests.[159]

Taken directly from the Podemos political manifesto[160], the party's policy proposals have included these main aspects:

- Economic Justice: Increasing the minimum wage, implementing progressive taxation.
- Social Equality: Expanding public healthcare and education, advocating for gender equality and promoting LGBTQ+ rights.
- Democratic Renewal: Fighting corruption, increasing transparency, and introducing mechanisms for direct democracy.
- Environmental Sustainability: Promoting renewable energy and addressing climate change through ambitious green policies.

Despite its early success, *Podemos* faced significant challenges, including internal divisions and strategic disagreements. The relationship between Pablo Iglesias and Ñigo Errejón became particularly strained, reflecting differing visions for the party's future. Iglesias advocated for a more confrontational approach, while Errejón favored building broader alliances and a more moderate tone. These tensions culminated in Errejón's departure from *Podemos* in 2019 to form a new political platform, *Más País*.[161] This schism weakened *Podemos*'s influence and highlighted the difficulties of maintaining cohesion within a rapidly growing and ideologically diverse party.

In the November 2019 general elections, *Podemos* entered into a coalition government with the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), marking the first coalition government in Spain since the restoration of democracy in 1978.[162] Pablo Iglesias served as the Second Deputy Prime

[158] Kassam A., *Spanish election: national newcomers end era of two-party dominance*, The Guardian, 2015, December 21, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/20/peoples-party-wins-spanish-election-absolute-majority

[159] Tremlett G., *The Podemos revolution: how a small group of radical academics changed European politics*

[160] Podemos, *Documento Político*, https://podemos.info/documentos/

[161] Garí M., *Radiance and sunset of Podemos - reasons for a farewell*, Forth International, Quatrième Internationale / Cuarta Internacional, 2020, September 9, https://fourth.international/en/europe/273

[162] Ibidem

Minister and Minister of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, advocating for progressive reforms within the government.

As part of the coalition, *Podemos* played a crucial role in advancing policies such as implementing rent controls and introducing measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic's economic impact. However, being in government also brought compromises and criticism from its base, as some felt the party had moderated its stance to remain part of the coalition. "UP has made a cataract of concessions, even renouncing aspects of the programme agreed with the PSOE and has silently consented to important political setbacks and economic decisions."[163]

Podemos has faced declining electoral support in recent years, partly due to internal conflicts, competition from other leftist parties, and the challenges of transitioning from an anti-establishment movement to a governing party. Pablo Iglesias stepped down as party leader in 2021, signalling the end of an era for *Podemos*. Despite these setbacks, *Podemos* has left an indelible mark on Spanish politics. The party's emergence disrupted the traditional two-party system, introduced new ideas into the political discourse, and demonstrated the potential for grassroots movements to influence institutional politics. *Podemos*'s legacy continues to shape debates around social justice, economic inequality, and democratic renewal in Spain.

3.4 Podemos and the Strategic Use of X: A Case Study in Digital Political Engagement

The rise of social media has transformed political communication globally. Among the many political organizations that have leveraged these tools, *Podemos* stands out as a case study of effective use of X to amplify its message and disrupt traditional political paradigms in Spain. This chapter explores how *Podemos* used X strategically, examining its innovative methods and presenting examples of its impactful digital campaigns.

X, with its brevity and immediacy, provided an ideal platform for *Podemos* to articulate its message of change and reach a broad audience.

Podemos utilized the platform to cultivate a persona that was relatable, direct and participatory. Unlike traditional parties, which often communicated in formal and hierarchical tones, *Podemos* emphasized transparency and a conversational style. Party leaders, especially Pablo

[163] Garí M., *Radiance and sunset of Podemos - reasons for a farewell*

Iglesias, actively engaged with users, responding to questions and critiques. In 2023, contested a post and a subsequent interview of Ignacio Escolar, the director at *elDiario.es*, when Escolar replied to his post, Iglesias did not stop the exchange. Instead, he engaged in the conversation and replied with:

> "Thank you for your response @iescolar but, in my modest opinion, in the first news item you bet on a biased approach that hid an evidence that does appear in the second news item: that it is Más Madrid and Compromis (the bulk of Más País) who have always rejected unity in Madrid and the Valencia region. They only accept it if they see themselves as a minority, as in Andalusia with respect to UP or in Rivas with respect to IU. It was not so difficult to count, but you had to want to count it. Hugs"[164] (translation)

This is just one of the many examples one can find on his X account, it is clear that Iglesias is not afraid of confrontation both in real life and in social media, engaging and replying to anything that he stands for.

This approach created a sense of proximity and inclusion among supporters. The platform became a virtual megaphone for the party's mobilization campaigns. Hashtags like *#SíSePuede* ("Yes, it is possible") and *#UnidosPodemos* ("United We Can") attracted supporters around key issues, from anti-austerity protests to housing rights. These hashtags trended nationally, amplifying their reach and fostering a sense of collective action. Impressive and noteworthy is the video posted by the party with the hashtag *#UnidosPodemos* where the people of Jerez are singing the hymn in support of Andalucia[165].

In a media landscape often dominated by conservative outlets, *Podemos* used X to bypass traditional gatekeepers. The party shared live updates, videos, and infographics that simplified complex political issues, effectively democratizing information. This strategy resonated particularly with younger voters, who were more likely to consume news via social media.

During its campaign in 2015, the party used X to gain more supporters and highlight the importance of the rise of the party. Using the hashtag *#PodemosRemontada* ("Podemos Comeback"), the party posted about a conference happening on the 13th of December 2015 given the imminent Spanish elections of that year, to invite citizens to vote for their party, reinforcing its commitment to participatory democracy. This approach not only generated innovative policy ideas but also fostered a sense of community among supporters. One of the

[164] Iglesias P., (2023), [X], 19th of April, Available at: https://x.com/PabloIglesias/status/1648643330530586624
[165] Podemos, (2016), [X], 23rd of June, Available at: https://x.com/PODEMOS/status/746067576950788096

posts with said hashtags goes: *"¿Quién ha roto el acuerdo de convivencia? ¿La gente o los privilegiados?*"[166] ('Who has broken the coexistence agreement - the people or the privileged?'), highlighting once more the strong populist trait of the party.

In response to austerity measures imposed during Spain's economic crisis, *Podemos* effectively used X to channel public frustration. Multimedia content highlighting the human impact of economic policies gained widespread traction, positioning *Podemos* as a champion of the disenfranchised, and this has been one of its main characteristics since the early days of the party and still continues to be one to this day. On the 1st of June of 2024, the official X page of Podemos posted a video of Irene Montero, member of the party, quoting what she says in the video: "*La austeridad es incompatible con los derechos sociales. No es justo que la banca haya ganado 583.000 millones de euros en 2023 y no pague más*"[167] ('Austerity is incompatible with social rights. It is not fair that the banks have earned 583 billion euros in 2023 and will not pay more').

To emphasize this rhetoric of being "one of the people", the party was often seen using the hashtags *#benditagente #malditacasta* ("Blessed people" and "Damned caste"). This strategy helped to underline the importance and the spotlight that the party itself put on the people, making sure that the message was always delivered clearly. A simple example of a post with the hashtag is the following: "'*La fraternidad es la mejor vacuna contra la corrupción y los recortes sociales.' @Pablo_Iglesias #BenditaGente*"[168] ('Fraternity is the best vaccine against corruption and social cuts.').

Podemos also leveraged the platform to champion feminist causes. Campaigns like *#NiUnaMenos* ("Not One [Woman] Less") aligned the party with global movements against gender-based violence, attracting progressive voters and reinforcing its commitment to social justice. The party took active part in the spreading of the hashtag, the first posts with it were from 2015 and to this day they never stopped to post with it when it is concerning feminist causes, showing their growing support.

Podemos' innovative use of the social contributed significantly to its rapid rise. However, the heavy reliance on it also posed challenges. Critics argued that the party's focus on digital engagement sometimes overshadowed on-the-ground organizing, and the immediacy of social media occasionally led to missteps or controversies. Additionally, as the party matured, maintaining the grassroots and participatory ethos that defined its early days became

[166] Podemos, (2015), [X], 13th of December, Available at: https://x.com/PODEMOS/status/676121604141809664
[167] Podemos, (2024), [X], 1st of June, Available at: https://x.com/PODEMOS/status/1796866532678795472
[168] Podemos, (2015), [X], 5th of December, Available at: https://x.com/PODEMOS/status/673228682819833856

increasingly challenging. The transition from an insurgent movement to an established political force required balancing the spontaneity of social media with the demands of governance.

Podemos' strategic use of X exemplifies how digital platforms can transform political engagement, particularly for emerging parties challenging entrenched systems. By prioritizing accessibility, mobilization and transparency, *Podemos* redefined political communication in Spain, inspiring movements worldwide. However, as the party's experience shows, digital strategies must be complemented by robust offline efforts to sustain long-term success. X, while a powerful tool, is only one piece of the broader puzzle of political change.

3.5 The Use of Instagram by Podemos: Strategy and Examples

Among the many platforms the *Podemos* party employs, Instagram stands out as a cornerstone of its digital strategy. Through this visually driven medium, *Podemos* connects with its followers, amplifies its messages and cultivates a narrative of transparency and progressive ideals. This part focuses on another important social media present in almost everybody's lifestyle nowadays, Instagram, and, especially, how *Podemos* uses it as a political tool, detailing specific strategies and concrete examples.

Instagram's emphasis on visuals and its wide reach among younger demographics make it an invaluable tool for political engagement. *Podemos* employs a multi-pronged strategy to maximize the platform's potential. They capitalize on Instagram's visual appeal to communicate its values and activities. High-quality photographs, graphics and videos showcase events, protests, and campaigns, humanizing the party and making it relatable to diverse audiences. For instance, on the 18th of January 2025, the Instagram account of the party, @ahorapodemos, posted an image of people protesting in favour of Palestine with the writing "Today on the streets with @ionebelarra to demand more international pressure for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza and an end to the occupation and apartheid by the terrorist state of Israel. #freepalestine #palestine" (translated).[169]

The party uses reels[170] to break down complex policies into digestible content. For example, on the 18th of June 2024, Irene Montero posted a reel on the party's main account explaining the

[169] Podemos, *Hoy en las calles con @ionebelarra para exigir más presión internacional para que el alto el fuego en Gaza sea definitivo y se ponga fin a la ocupación y el apartheid por parte del estado terrorista de Israel*., 2025, January 18, https://www.instagram.com/p/DE-iHO_g20W/?img_index=1

[170] Reels are short videos posted on Instagram that resemble the format of a Tik Tok

progress made concerning the abortion law and how the constitutional court recognised that 16- and 17-year-old girls can ask for an abortion without needing the authorization of a legal guardian.[171] This type of content is made to both encouraging the sharing of news and discussion.

Instagram's Stories with polls and Q&A features are utilized to foster direct engagement. By soliciting input on policies or encouraging followers to participate in virtual events, *Podemos* fosters a sense of ownership and involvement among its supporters. During Spain's national elections, *Podemos* used Instagram polls to gauge public opinion on various campaign issues. For example, one of the most recent uses of this feature happened with the approaching of the European Parliament elections of June 2024:

"What are the reasons why you will vote this 9th of June?"[172]

This kind of content encouraged the people to reply and express their opinions, and some of these were posted by the party in the following highlight: "because the advancement of the ultra-right in Europe is something I really dread", "protecting the equality and progress because I want the life to be feminist, ecologic and multicultural", "improving living conditions in general" and "I believe that Europe directly influences Spain. We need to stop the genocide and stop the ultra.right"[173] By sharing these posts and stories created by its supporters, *Podemos* amplifies grassroots voices. This not only extends the party's reach but also reinforces its image as a movement driven by ordinary citizens.

Instagram serves as a primary channel for promoting rallies, conferences, and protests. Through visually appealing posters and countdown features, *Podemos* keeps its followers informed and

[171] Podemos, *Una buena noticia para todas*, 2024, June 18, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C8XhjKkKtxr/
[172] Podemos, *Europeas: ¿Cuáles son las razones por las que vas a votar este 9 de junio?*, 2024, May, https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/18025922060497637/
[173] Podemos*, Europeas: Replies to ¿Cuáles son las razones por las que vas a votar este 9 de junio?,* 2024, May, https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/18025922060497637/

energized. Sharing anecdotes and surveys, like the one mentioned before, creates an intimate connection with followers, enhancing trust and relatability.

During the 2019 general elections, *Podemos*' Instagram feed was a vibrant mosaic of candidate profiles, rally highlights, and calls to action. Posts often featured slogans such as "*Un Gobierno Contigo*" ("A government with you") accompanied by dynamic visuals of enthusiastic crowds. Among the many posts of that period of time, one stood out, where one member of the party is standing in front of a crowd and one sentence in particular captured the attention of the people: "*Creo que nosotros somos una herramienta colectiva de cambio, pero el motor para que las cosas cambien de verdad es la sociedad civil organizada*"[174] ('I believe that we are a collective tool for change, but the engine for real change is organised civil society').

Furthermore, the party frequently uses Instagram to advocate for social justice issues. On International Women's Day, the party's account shared a series of posts celebrating female emancipation and emphasizing its policies on gender equality. Each post included impactful imagery and quotes to drive engagement. One impactful quote that summarizes the main points of the party ideals: "The bodies of women and of people of the LGBTIQA+ are not battlefields, and sexual assault is not a weapon of war. If they touch one of us, they touch all of us".[175]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, *Podemos* used Instagram to disseminate critical information, share public health guidelines, and update followers on government measures. Infographics outlining economic relief programs gained significant traction among followers seeking clarity on available resources.

To add up, *Podemos* has focused its attention also on issues like global warming. For instance, in 2021 the party posted a reel featuring the huge impact that global warming is having on the world and some solutions to decrease the developing of this phenomenon.[176]

Like with X, the strategic use of Instagram has had a profound impact on *Podemos*' political journey. The platform has improved the youth engagement in politics: by meeting young voters on a platform they frequent, *Podemos* has solidified its appeal among the youth, a demographic critical to its success. Furthermore, the emphasis on user-generated content and interactive features, like the ones mentioned before, has turned followers into active participants, fostering a sense of collective ownership over the party's agenda. And, the visually appealing and shareable nature of Instagram content has helped the party expand its reach beyond traditional

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[174] Podemos, *Creo que nosotros somos una herramienta colectiva de cambio, pero el motor para que las cosas cambien de verdad es la sociedad civil organizada*, 2019, October 28, https://www.instagram.com/p/B4KO-giFGEX/

[175] Podemos, *Este 8M también luchamos en las calles por la paz, el fin del genocidio y el no a la guerra. #FeministasPorLaPaz*, 2024, March 8, https://www.instagram.com/p/C4P5oOjK1Os/?img_index=3

[176] Podemos, *Cambio Climático*, 2021, August 11, https://www.instagram.com/p/CScFYqUKr5w/

media, particularly among international audiences. The use of key issues like labour rights, women rights, and environmental policies during their campaigns and in their Instagram posts, has influenced conversations both online and offline regarding the party and its work in those fields. Also, the posts showing its being involved in protests for these same rights aid the party's image and highlight, once again, the core values it stands for and is willing to fight for.

However, even though Instagram has proven to be a useful and engaging tool, it is not without risks. The platform's algorithm can limit organic reach, requiring strategic use of hashtags and collaborations. Additionally, maintaining a balance between visually appealing content and substantive messaging is crucial to avoid being perceived as superficial. Thus, *Podemos*' use of Instagram exemplifies the transformative potential of social media in modern politics. By leveraging the platform's features for storytelling, engagement, and advocacy, the party has built a dynamic digital presence that resonates with its audience.

3.6 The Strategic Use of Tik Tok by Podemos: A Comprehensive Analysis with Examples

Among all the social media platforms, TikTok, as cleared in the previous chapter. stands out as a space dominated by younger demographics and characterized by its emphasis on entertainment and creativity. *Podemos*, like AfD, is a notable example of how political entities entered the sphere of Tik Tok and took advantage of its algorithm. Through a combination of strategic messaging, tailored content, and an understanding of platform trends, *Podemos* has engaged a younger audience, amplified its messages, and built its online presence.

The platform's global rise as a social media platform has made it a crucial space for political communication. To this day (21st of January 2025), since its joining in 2020, *Podemos*' Tik Tok account counts 446.1K followers and 10.5M likes.

Podemos has prioritized TikTok as a key channel to reach potential young voters and communicate its progressive ideals in a relatable and entertaining manner, furthermore, the same party "is the account of a political party at national level with the highest number of followers since its first post in January 2020."[177] Even though, the numbers of visualization of the party's videos are significantly inferior in comparison to the ones of the AfD.

[177] Lozano Hernández N., Miquel-Segarra S., & Zomeño Jiménez D., *TikTok as a political communication tool*, p. 6

Podemos has embraced the platform but in a different way, meaning that their content is not related to specific trends[178] going viral just to gain visibility and followers. Their content resembles the reels published on Instagram, only more centred on speeches and debates. The only post published by the party that could resemble a trend is the "2024 recap", which reminded of the viral "Spotify Recap". However, even in this case, the post is not made to be funny or entertaining, it shows the milestones that Podemos achieved during the year month per month. Furthermore, even if it follows a trend, the post is among the ones with less views.[179] Instead of creating funny content, the left-wing party focuses its energy on showing what opposes its beliefs and the true controversies of Spain's politics. For instance, on the 11th of December of 2024, @ahorapodemos posted a series of two images: the first was depicting Pedro Sanchez, the Prime Minister of Spain since 2018, holding up his fist singing "*The Internationale*"[180]; the second slide shows a picture of Sanchez and Giorgia Meloni, Italian's Prime Minister coming from a far-right party, shaking hands. These two images have the writings "*Un día cantan La Internacional…* (first picture) *…otro día condecoran a fascistas* (second picture)."[181] (One day they are singing The Internationale and then another day they are rewarding fascists)

In other contexts, *Podemos* uses TikTok to present its leaders in a more approachable and relatable manner. Irene Montero frequently appears in videos discussing feminist policies or in debates that underlines the core values of their politics. Another figure ever-present is Ione Belarra, a Spanish politician from *Podemos*, who, especially in the last months of 2024 has focused on the housing problem of Spain and in Tik Tok's video she always appears fighting for what she believes in, she says: "*El problema de vivienda en España es que un fondo buitre compre un edificio de viviendas y eche a la calle a una señora de 80 años*"[182] ("The housing problem in Spain is that a vulture fund buys a block of flats and throws an 80-year-old woman onto the street.")

[178] A trend on Tik Tok is creative formats, ideas, and behaviors that get a lot of attention on TikTok and end up going viral.

[179] Podemos [@ahorapodemos] *Nuestro RECAP de 2024 y un deseo para 2025: continuar construyendo una izquierda fuerte y transformadora. #podemos #recap2024 #parati* [Video], TikTok, (2024, December 31), https://www.tiktok.com/@ahorapodemos/photo/7454626929254141217

[180] "The Internationale" is an international anthem that has been adopted as the anthem of various anarchist, communist, socialist, democratic socialist, and social democratic movements.

[181] Podemos [@ahorapodemos] *El PSOE cada vez más indistinguible del PP #meloni #izquierda #ppsoe #fyppp* [Video], TikTok, (2024, December 11), https://www.tiktok.com/@ahorapodemos/photo/7447142446422576416

[182] Podemos [@ahorapodemos] *"El problema de vivienda en España es que un fondo buitre compre un edificio de viviendas y eche a la calle a una señora de 80 años". @Ione Belarra* [Video], TikTok, (2024, September 17), https://www.tiktok.com/@ahorapodemos/video/7415660069490052384

Staying relevant on TikTok requires an understanding of its ever-evolving trends. *Podemos* has, as gathered, a different way of approaching the subject. Even when they are trying to engage in memes the response of their followers and comments in general is not very effective and does not get the response they were aiming for. On the 12th of May, 2024, the account posted two images taking inspiration from a meme that was going viral at the time:

Trend: *Perro Mordedor – Perro Labrador*[183]

"First Picture: Petro says to Netanyahu (Prime Minister of Israel) that he will be known in history as a mass murderer, and asks him to stop the massacre happening in Gaza

Second Picture: Petro Sánchez to one of the ministries of the Netanyahu government 'Israel is partner and a friend of Spain'"[184]

Thus, it was important to mention these few examples of memes because with these the party did not have success, in fact, to this day (21st of January 2025) the latter post counts a total of 63 likes and only 1 comment. It is among the posts with less interactions, even though it follows the latest trends. With this multiple example one could notice how the engagement of the *Podemos* with memes, at least on Tik Tok, is not really successful and has the opposite effect compared to the popularity of the *Alternative für Deutschland* memes.

[183] Trend that takes inspiration from the saying: barking dogs never bite, or in Spanish *perro ladrador, poco mordedor*

[184] Podemos [@ahorapodemos] *team Petro:el Petro mordedor y el Perro ladrador...* [Video], TikTok, (2024, May 12), https://www.tiktok.com/@ahorapodemos/photo/7368080643755937057

However, all things considered regarding this platform, the party itself is not unpopular or less followed. Only its most famous content regards serious videos, concerning the explanation of some new politics programs or debates of any kind. In the account there is a series of 88 videos all concerning the housing policies and crisis in Spain, with some of them having even near to 3M views and more than 450K likes.

Another one of the main issues *Podemos* focuses on, on Tik Tok, are the LGBTQIA+ rights. Having pinned on its profile a folder with all the videos relevant to the cause, the Spanish party shows its undeniable support. This series of videos comprehends a number of protests in favour of these human rights, interviews and also people talking about their own personal experience and how the party is helping them.

Last but not least, one of their other pinned folders on Tik Tok concerns their feminist-related videos. With these latter ones the case is the same, all of their videos concerning this matter are more viewed and commented, even though they do not entertain any kind of "funny" content. In between these sums of videos, among the most view is the Irene Montero speech, famous for the phrase: "Culpabilizar a la víctima se llama Machismo"[185] (Blaming the victim is called Sexism / Chauvinism).

Despite all the failed techniques used by *Podemos*, the party's strategy TikTok strategy has translated into measurable success, because *Podemos* is one of the most influential political accounts in Spain. More importantly, the platform has allowed *Podemos* to reach more members and create a sort of community on the platform, who actively participate in discussions, share content, and amplify the party's messages.

Like all the other platforms mentioned, even Tik Tok does not come without its difficulties. One may argue that the platform's focus on entertainment may lead to an oversimplification of complex political issues, same critic could be done to both Instagram and X. Additionally, there is a risk of alienating older voters who may perceive TikTok campaigns as frivolous or unprofessional. To address these concerns, *Podemos* has balanced its TikTok strategy with more traditional forms of communication, ensuring a comprehensive approach that appeals to diverse demographics.

Podemos' use of TikTok demonstrates the potential of the platform as a tool for political communication. By embracing the unique characteristics of TikTok, the party has successfully engaged younger audiences, humanized its leaders and amplified its progressive policies. Through real-world examples—from addressing the housing crisis to promoting protests for

[185] Podemos [@ahorapodemos] *Esto de @irenemontero_ ✊🏻 #irenemontero #8m #feminismo* [Video], TikTok, (2023, March 8), https://www.tiktok.com/@ahorapodemos/video/7208138916363373830

human rights—Podemos has shown how political entities can adapt to emerging digital landscapes to remain relevant and impactful. As TikTok continues to grow, its role in shaping political discourse will likely expand, offering lessons for other parties seeking to connect with the next generation of voters.

3.7 Conclusion on the case of Podemos

All things considered, the Spanish political party *Podemos* has then emerged as a groundbreaking force in European politics, characterized by its innovative approaches and strategic use of social media. This party's journey reflects a broader shift in how left-wing movements navigate the political landscape, employing digital platforms to amplify their voices and redefine the relationship between citizens and political organizations. By examining the history, strategies and practical applications of their social media engagement, one is able to uncover an intricate narrative that illustrates not only the unique trajectory of *Podemos* but also the transformative potential of social media in modern politics.

As mentioned, *Podemos* arose during a period of profound social and economic upheaval in Spain. The financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent austerity measures left many Spaniards disillusioned with traditional political parties. *Podemos* capitalized on this sentiment, aligning itself with the *indignados* movement and channelling widespread frustration into a coherent political platform. Unlike established parties that relied on conventional modes of campaigning and communication, Podemos embraced innovative and revolutionary methodologies. Central to their approach, and above all to today's approach, was the strategic use of social media, which became a cornerstone of their identity and success. Social media not only allowed the party to disseminate its message widely but also served as a platform for participatory democracy, where citizens could directly engage in policy discussions and decision-making processes.

The dynamics of social media in politics reveal striking contrasts between left-wing and right-wing strategies. Right-wing entities often focus on reinforcing traditional values and provoking emotional responses through polarizing and sometimes sensational content. In contrast, *Podemos* exemplifies how left-wing movements can utilize social media as a tool for inclusivity and community building. This approach goes beyond broadcasting messages; it fosters a sense of collective ownership and shared purpose among supporters. With the creation of an online

ecosystem where followers feel heard and valued, *Podemos* has been able to cultivate a loyal and engaged base that actively participates in their campaigns and amplifies their reach.

The history of *Podemos*' social media strategies underscores their innovative and adaptive nature. From the early days of their formation, the party recognized the potential of platforms like X, Facebook, and YouTube to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and connect directly with the public. Through targeted campaigns, viral hashtags and real-time engagement, *Podemos* not only disseminated their policies but also created a sense of immediacy and authenticity. This digital-first approach enabled them to reach younger, tech-savvy demographics who were often disenchanted with conventional politics. Furthermore, their emphasis on transparency and accountability resonated with voters seeking an alternative to the opaque practices of established parties. *Podemos*' strategic use of X exemplifies their mastery of digital political engagement. The platform's immediacy and interactivity allowed the party to engage in real-time discussions and challenge opponents' narratives. This approach not only increased their visibility but also reinforced their image as a dynamic and responsive political entity. The use of hashtags, live-tweeting events, and directly addressing citizens' questions showcased their commitment to participatory democracy, further solidifying their connection with their supporters.

Instagram has played a pivotal role in shaping Podemos' visual identity and broadening their appeal. The platform's emphasis on visual storytelling allowed the party to humanize its leaders, showcase behind-the-scenes moments, and create emotionally resonant narratives. Through Instagram Stories and Reels, *Podemos* provided timely updates, highlighted campaign milestones, and engaged with followers in a more personal and relatable manner. By blending professional content with user-generated material, they cultivated an image of authenticity and approachability. This strategy not only strengthened their bond with existing supporters but also attracted new followers who were drawn to their creative and visually compelling content.

TikTok, as a newer addition to their social media arsenal, has allowed *Podemos* to connect with an even younger demographic. The platform's unique blend of entertainment and information has proven to be an effective medium for conveying political messages in a concise and engaging format. Their TikTok videos highlight key policies, critique opponents, and celebrate their grassroots origins, all while maintaining a tone that is accessible and shareable. This innovative use of TikTok underscores the party's adaptability and commitment to staying ahead of the curve in digital communication.

The success of *Podemos* on social media is not merely a product of their technological savvy but also a reflection of their core values and political philosophy. Their emphasis on

transparency, inclusivity, and participatory democracy is woven into every aspect of their digital strategy. By creating platforms for dialogue and collaboration, they have empowered citizens to become active participants in the political process. This approach challenges traditional hierarchies and redefines the role of political parties in a digital age, where engagement and authenticity are paramount. *Podemos*' digital approach illustrates that meaningful connections and participatory frameworks can foster loyalty and collective action that transcend conventional political boundaries.

Moreover, *Podemos*' social media strategies offer a roadmap for responding to rapid changes in public sentiment and emerging digital trends. By continuously innovating and experimenting with new tools and formats, the party has managed to stay relevant in an ever-evolving digital landscape. Their ability to adapt to shifts in platform algorithms and societal contexts underscores the importance of flexibility in political communication. Whether it involves pivoting towards more video-centric content, integrating interactive features like polls and Q&A sessions, *Podemos* has consistently demonstrated a forward-thinking approach that ensures their message resonates across a broad spectrum of users.

Podemos' story also sheds light on the broader implications of social media in shaping political discourse. Platforms like X, Instagram, and TikTok have not only amplified the voices of political movements but also transformed the way citizens interact with political actors. In a digital age marked by information overload and rapid content consumption, *Podemos*' strategies emphasize the importance of cutting through the noise with creativity and clarity. Their success suggests that effective political communication is not merely about visibility but about fostering trust and creating a sense of shared purpose among constituents.

The broader impact of *Podemos*' strategies extends beyond their immediate political context. They serve as a case study for how left-wing movements globally can leverage digital tools to counteract structural disadvantages and build grassroots momentum. With the promotion of inclusivity and dialogue, *Podemos* has demonstrated that social media can be a powerful equalizer, enabling smaller and newer political entities to challenge established power structures and engage with diverse audiences. Their achievements highlight the potential for digital platforms to serve as arenas for democratic innovation and grassroots mobilization, offering lessons that extend well beyond the Spanish political landscape.

In conclusion, the story of *Podemos* is another important example of the transformative power of social media in reshaping political landscapes. From their origins as a grassroots movement to their position as a major political force, the party has consistently pushed the boundaries of what is possible in digital engagement, and not only. Their innovative strategies have not only

amplified their message but also redefined the relationship between citizens and political institutions. By setting a precedent for how left-wing movements can thrive in an increasingly interconnected world, *Podemos* has left an indelible mark on modern political discourse, offering both inspiration and a blueprint for others seeking to harness the power of digital communication.

Conclusion

The rise of populism in the digital age represents one of the most consequential developments in contemporary politics. Through the exploration of *Alternative für Deutschland* and *Podemos*, this thesis has showed how digital media platforms have facilitated the dissemination of populist rhetoric, altered political communication and reshaped the relationship between political actors and the electorate. The interplay between populism and digital technology has not only transformed traditional political mobilization but has also raised significant concerns regarding democratic integrity, misinformation, and political polarization.

A key finding of this research is the asymmetry in the effectiveness of digital strategies between far right and left-wing populist movements. AfD has masterfully utilized digital platforms such as Facebook, X and TikTok to create a sense of urgency and crisis, crafting emotionally charged narratives that resonate with disaffected voters. Their strategy based on taking advantage of social media algorithms and viral content has proven highly effective in expanding their influence and consolidating their base. The case of *Podemos*, in contrast, highlights the challenges faced by left-wing populist movements in achieving similar levels of digital traction. Even though *Podemos* has embraced digital participation and tried to rely on the grassroot mobilization of the people, its messaging lacks the same emotionally provocative and polarizing impact that has enabled AfD to dominate online discourse. This discrepancy raises important questions about the inherent dynamics of digital populism and the broader implications for political competition in the digital era. Moreover, the thesis underscores the role of digital media in fostering political polarization. Social media platforms, by design, amplify content that elicits strong emotional reactions, thereby reinforcing preexisting biases and limiting exposure to alternative perspectives. The weaponization of disinformation and meme culture by populist actors, particularly those on the far right, has further aggravated the already existing societal divisions, making meaningful political dialogue increasingly difficult. The AfD's ability to manipulate digital spaces to disseminate xenophobic and nationalist sentiments exemplifies the potential dangers of unchecked digital propaganda.

The case studies of AfD and *Podemos* also shed light on the broader implications for democratic governance. The increasing reliance on digital platforms for political engagement has shifted the power dynamics of political communication, enabling populist leaders to speak directly to their audiences. While this has democratized access to political discourse, it has also undermined journalistic accountability and contributed to the erosion of trust in mainstream

institutions. The spread of conspiracy theories, as seen in the AfD's online presence, further highlights the challenges posed by digital populism to democratic stability.

Nevertheless, this thesis also aims to emphasize the potential for digital media to be harnessed for positive democratic engagement. The success of *Podemos* in mobilizing grassroots participation demonstrates that digital tools can be used to foster civic engagement and participatory democracy. The challenge moving forward lies in developing strategies to counter the negative effects of digital populism while preserving the benefits of online political engagement. This requires a multifaceted approach, including stronger digital literacy programs, regulatory measures to combat misinformation and greater accountability from social media platforms in mitigating the spread of extremist content.

All things considered, the findings of this thesis highlight the urgent need for political actors to engage critically with the evolving relationship between populism and digital media. As technology continues to evolve, so too must the strategies for safeguarding democratic integrity in the digital age. While populism is not a new phenomenon, its adaptation to the digital landscape presents unprecedented challenges that require nuanced and proactive responses. By understanding the mechanisms through which populist movements exploit digital platforms, one can work towards fostering a more informed and democratic digital environment that resists the polarizing forces of contemporary populism. Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, it is important to notice how, even though the success of AfD through social media is noteworthy, it is not the only component that will assure the success of the party. In fact, during my stay in Berlin I had the chance to take part in a protest happening in the city against the *Alternative für Deutschland* and these same protests spread all around Germany, from Köln to Tübingen. In these times of political instability, these recent protests happening in a country where the AfD is the party with the most following on social media, show that nowadays digital media is indeed an important part of the political sphere. However, it also demonstrates how the data gained only through the interactions on digital media is not the only fundamental one and how especially in big cities, like Berlin, there will always be people ready to fight for the their rights.

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