

## Between Meme and Reality: Youth Perceptions of Politics and Politicians in the Digital Age

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# **Between Meme and Reality: Youth Perceptions of Politics and Politicians in the Digital Age**

## **Abstract**

In a context shaped by growing political disengagement among youth and the migration of civic discourse to digital platforms, it is essential to examine how adolescents perceive politics, how they position themselves in relation to it, what professional value they attribute to political figures, and the degree of trust they place in them. Given the prominent role of social media in their everyday lives—particularly meme-based content—it becomes especially important to analyze how young people understand the representation of politics and political actors in these digital productions. This study addresses these questions through four focus groups conducted with a representative sample of Spanish adolescents aged 16 and 17—just before they are eligible to vote. This stage is especially formative, as it is when enduring attitudes toward the democratic system begin to take shape. The findings reveal a critical and rejecting attitude toward politics, perceived as a system of social control detached from participants' realities. Politicians are strongly associated with systemic corruption and management practices that inspire distrust. While memes are a routine part of their digital consumption, participants recognize their propagandistic and polarizing function. Of particular concern is the normalization of hostile and delegitimizing discourse toward politicians in these digital artifacts—an influence that often operates beneath conscious awareness and contributes to shaping a predominantly negative perception of politics within this age group.

**Keywords:** News media, Memes, Young, Politic, Politicians, Spain

## **Introduction**

The steady decline in youth political participation and growing disaffection toward traditional parties has become a pressing concern across many established democracies. Recent data in Spain reinforce this concern. According to a recent voting intention poll (Junquera 2025), individuals aged 18 to 24 exhibit the highest rate of electoral abstention (35%) and simultaneously account for the largest segment of far-right voters (24% for Vox). This dual pattern—political disengagement and support for far-right populism—raises critical questions about how young people relate to contemporary democratic systems.

Two principal explanations are often used to understand youth abstention. The first, political alienation or “positive abstention,” occurs when individuals deliberately choose not to vote as a form of protest. The second, political apathy or “negative abstention,” stems from disinterest and disengagement. According to Dahl et al. (2018), the key difference between the two lies in the degree of political awareness present. However, the academic community has yet to reach a consensus on which form is more prevalent among adolescents.

Young people's relationship with politics has evolved dramatically in recent decades. Increasingly, their participation takes less conventional forms, such as protest movements, collective action, digital activism, or engagement in social causes (Pickard 2019). It is also expressed in the critical perception of political actors and institutional

functioning. In the British context, for instance, research has found that many young people associate politics with centralized government and view it as a distant elite disconnected from youth issues and overly complex in nature (Henn and Foard 2014).

Socialization agents play a significant role in shaping adolescent political orientation, including family (Green 2021), school environments (Malafaia, Neves and Menezes 2021), and peer groups (Connors 2020). However, social media platforms have emerged as especially powerful spaces for political socialization, identity formation, and engagement. This influence stems not only from the ubiquity of digital platforms in adolescents' daily lives but also from their growing distrust of traditional media and adult authority figures, including educators and politicians (Kaskazi and Kitzie 2023). Much of their political knowledge is shaped not by intentional information-seeking, but by incidental exposure to content encountered while browsing social media (Van Erkel and Van Aelst 2020). At this age, political identities tend to be shaped more by emotional and social cues—such as affinity or aversion to parties and leaders—than by ideological understanding (Lay et al. 2023).

The impact of social media on political engagement varies according to young people's socioeconomic background (Grasso and Giugni 2022) and broader sociocultural context (Oosterhoff et al. 2022). Even the tone of elite political discourse has been shown to influence levels of youth apathy (Giugni and Grasso 2025). In this landscape, it becomes essential to examine what adolescents know and believe about politics—how they define it, whether they see it as relevant to their lives, and how they view political actors in terms of competence and trustworthiness. These insights are crucial, as they may shape young people's future democratic participation (Stattin, Amnå, and Russo 2023).

This study addresses these questions through a qualitative investigation involving Spanish adolescents aged 16 and 17—just before their first eligible voting experience. It pays particular attention to the role of memes, which have become highly influential communicative tools within youth social media culture. Within the digital ecosystem, memes constitute a common communicative resource among adolescents. They are also frequently used as a medium to ridicule or delegitimize political actors (Paz, Mayagoitia and González Aguilar 2021) and, indirectly, the political system itself. The following sections explore two key dimensions: the opportunities and risks that social networks pose as sites of youth political engagement, and the function of memes as discursive resources in adolescents' digital public sphere.

## **Social networks and youth political engagement**

A growing body of research has shown that members of Generation Z view social media as one of the most accessible platforms for staying informed and engaging with current events (Marchi, 2017; Ronald & Wong, 2022). At the same time, they tend to regard these platforms as credible sources of news. These characteristics enhance social media's potential to foster political engagement (Garrett, 2019) and underscore its mobilizing power—particularly among youth populations (Ahmed & Gil-López, 2024; Ekström & Shehata, 2018), and more specifically among those not yet eligible to vote (Kaskazi & Kitzie, 2023). For instance, Bowyer et al. (2017) found that satirical political videos on YouTube can help increase political knowledge among adolescents.

Access to information and the credibility inspired by social platforms are enhanced by the simplified presentation of political content. Schmuck et al. (2022) describe how influencers who present political topics in clear and relatable ways can generate interest in politics—though this may also promote political cynicism by

trivializing important issues (Song et al., 2020). Along these lines, Bischof and Senninger (2018) warn that binary representations often lead to oversimplified perceptions of politics and political actors. In other words, while social media can facilitate political learning, it also presents risks. These include difficulty distinguishing between accurate and false information, exposure to biased or partisan content, and information overload—all of which may lead to erroneous interpretations. The risk is compounded by peer influence: adolescents are more likely to engage politically when they observe their peers doing so, reinforcing collective behavior patterns (James et al., 2016).

Recent research (Philipps et al., 2025) has also identified various types of political users on social media, each with distinct engagement patterns and levels of interest. Access to political content—and the ability to form political opinions based on it—is therefore unevenly distributed. While politically engaged youth often translate what they see into concrete action, those less connected to politics tend to consume content with more symbolic or entertainment-oriented value, such as memes, which rarely lead to political mobilization (Ahmed & Gil-López, 2024). Social media also contributes to fragmentation and polarization (Klinger et al., 2023). Platforms like TikTok allow for political expression but also raise concerns about the spread of misinformation and extremism (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Bail et al., 2018).

Polarization—driven in part by the rise of populist movements (Fuller et al., 2022)—often manifests in hostile discourse aimed at politicians, particularly those in power (Agarwal et al., 2021), and disproportionately targets female politicians (Lacalle et al., 2025). This trend is visible across multiple countries (Bauschke & Jäckle, 2023; Gorrell et al., 2018), including Spain (Said-Hung, Moreno-López, & Mottareale-Calvanese, 2023), and typically includes critiques of politicians' qualifications, personalities, and moral integrity.

In summary, social media represents a complex space where entertainment, civic education, political discourse, and social interaction converge. The dominance of emotionally charged, personal expressions rooted in everyday experience (Paz-Rebollo et al., 2023) often hinders constructive, cross-cutting dialogue. Rather than fostering inclusive engagement, it tends to deepen group-based divisions. Memes, as a prominent form of emotionally driven and simplified political communication, are a central part of this ecosystem—with the capacity to both engage and distort young people's political understanding.

### **The ambivalent role of memes in young people's political sphere**

Digital memes clearly illustrate how content circulating on social media can be both simple and effective. Their viral and replicable nature allows users to respond almost instantly to relevant political, social, or cultural events. A form of communication thus emerges that overflows traditional media structures (Pidkuimukha and Kiss 2020), from which young people have increasingly disengaged. Memes do not merely convey information; they also encapsulate attitudes and ideological positions toward specific events, figures, or political institutions. They offer an alternative political discourse that, while often lacking argumentative depth, carries significant emotional and symbolic impact. As a result, they have evolved from mere entertainment objects into political propaganda tools that consolidate narratives and amplify messages (Niebuurt 2021).

Several studies have shown that political memes do not serve a single purpose. While some aim to influence public opinion, they also perform relational and communal functions. They act as mechanisms for group identification, symbolic cohesion, and

political socialization among users with shared ideological leanings (McKelvey, DeJong and Frenzel 2021). This dimension is essential for understanding why political parties, leaders, and even institutions have begun to integrate memes into their digital communication strategies (Wiggins 2017). Their goal is not only to capture young people's attention but also to actively participate in the cultural dynamics of digital environments.

The impact of memes on young people's engagement with politics is especially noteworthy. Several factors help explain their influence on younger generations. First, they simplify complex issues using accessible language and visually engaging formats, which facilitate access to political information (Malafaia, Neves and Menezes 2021). Second, they transform serious topics into playful and entertaining content, increasing visibility and virality (Cortesi and Gasser 2015; Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl and Dobusch, 2018). Because of their versatility, memes can provoke emotions ranging from pleasure, connection, and enjoyment to indignation, depending on the context (Dean 2019).

Humor plays a central role in their dissemination and impact. Vromen (2016) emphasizes its importance as a channel for expressing political sentiments, particularly among adolescents, who are the focus of this study. Humor not only makes messages more digestible but also encourages engagement. When young people relate to these messages, they tend to participate more actively in online political conversations. Memes also facilitate message appropriation and reinterpretation, encouraging interaction and debate among users. Nonetheless, Heiskanen (2017) warns that these messages have a greater impact within ideologically homogeneous communities. In such settings, memes reinforce pre-existing beliefs and consolidate group identity, especially among adolescents whose social circles are primarily peer-based. This trend may also limit exposure to divergent perspectives.

There is also critical debate surrounding the informative value of memes. McLoughlin and Southern (2021) argue that due to their brevity and humorous tone, memes contain limited political information and therefore cannot significantly increase political knowledge. Aminulloh et al. (2022) extend this critique by suggesting that memes primarily elicit emotional and persuasive responses. From this perspective, memes shape political feelings, stances, and opinions in a specific direction. Their persuasive power also entails risks. Chagas (2024) identifies memes as tools of disinformation. Moreover, they can function as instruments of (de)legitimation of ideas, leaders, and movements, shaping public perceptions in biased or manipulative ways (Nieuburt 2021; Halversen and Weeks 2023).

Additionally, there is growing evidence of the strategic appropriation of memes by far-right parties, which have developed sophisticated methods to insert symbols, codes, and aesthetics from digital youth culture into their content. As Askanius and Keller (2021) point out, these practices aim to make radical discourse more appealing to younger audiences by drawing on familiar cultural expressions. This symbolic appropriation highlights that memes are far from neutral; they are cultural devices that actively intervene in the digital political sphere, particularly in the realms frequented by young users.

This study aims to explore how symbolic, affective, and discursive frameworks shape adolescents' perceptions of institutional politics and political actors, as well as their opinions about memes that deal with these issues. The following research questions are posed:

RQ1. How do Spanish adolescents aged 16 and 17 understand politics, and what level of interest do they express toward it?

RQ2. What kind of training do young people consider necessary to pursue a political career, and what professional value do they assign to politicians?

RQ3. What role do digital memes play in shaping young people's views of politics and political actors?

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at examining the ways in which Spanish adolescents conceptualize politics, envision political careers, and interpret the representation of political figures on social media. This methodological approach enables the exploration of both explicit expressions and the emotional, symbolic, and cultural layers embedded in young people's discourse. Focus groups were selected as the primary technique, well-suited for capturing the collective construction of meaning and interactional dynamics.

## **Sample and Data Collection Procedures**

The research involved 26 adolescents aged 16 and 17, organized into four focus groups. The sample was intentionally structured to reflect geographical and self-perceived socioeconomic diversity, including participants from the north, center, west, Basque Country, and Catalonia. Group 1 (6 participants) consisted of individuals from the north and center with an upper-middle socioeconomic background; Group 2 (8 participants) included participants from the Basque Country with a middle socioeconomic profile; Group 3 (7 participants) gathered adolescents from the north, west, and center, primarily from middle and upper socioeconomic backgrounds; and Group 4 (5 participants), from Catalonia, presented a middle socioeconomic profile. According to the 2024 CIS Barometer, 57.2% of Spaniards identify as middle class. The territorial selection allowed for the comparison of discourses from differentiated sociopolitical contexts, which enriched the analysis and facilitated the identification of both shared and divergent elements across different regions.

The focus group sessions were held online via Microsoft Teams in December 2024. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was moderated by a trained researcher who facilitated open and inclusive dialogue.

A semi-structured discussion guide (Appendix I) was employed, organized into three thematic axes aligned with the study's research questions:

1. Youth conceptions of politics and personal involvement: exploring adolescents' understanding of politics, their level of interest, and how they evaluate their own political engagement or disaffection.
2. Perceptions regarding political career pathways: assessing what qualifications and conditions adolescents consider necessary for entering politics, what barriers they identify, and the importance they assign to education, personal networks, or personal qualities.
3. Digital political representation through memes: examining adolescents' interpretations of how both politics as a concept and political actors are portrayed on social media, with special attention to memes as vehicles for ideological messaging, political criticism, and the normalization of hate speech. To enrich the conversation and elicit spontaneous responses, participants were shown six real-life memes widely circulated on platforms such as X and Instagram, all involving explicit or implicit political content. Memes were

used as thematic prompts to observe adolescents' spontaneous reactions and the interpretive frameworks they activate when confronted with satirical, offensive, or polarizing content. The selection of the meme corpus followed criteria of thematic relevance (explicit political content), ideological diversity, and the presence of elements potentially linked to hate speech. In Spain, ideology-based hate is among the most prevalent forms of reported hate crime (Ministerio of the Interior 2023), and political memes play a significant role in disseminating such expressions (Paz, Mayagoitia and González Aguilar 2021).

A summary of the six memes presented is included in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Description of Memes Shown to Participants.

No.	General Theme	Political Figure(s)	Meme Text	Visual Description	Predominant Tone	Hate Speech Content
1	Immigration and pensions	VOX	"An unaccompanied minor gets €4,700/month. Your grandma gets €426/month"	Comparative poster showing an elderly woman and a partially obscured young immigrant, suggesting unjust economic treatment	Critical-aggressive	Against unaccompanied foreign minors (MENA)
2	Political authoritarianism	General (no direct mention, implies extreme ideologies)	"There are too few executions"	Minimalist cartoon of a figure holding a shotgun; ironic and violent suggestion about executions	Humorous-aggressive, ironic	Promotion of political violence
3	Rejection of political leader	Pedro Sánchez	"This pimp thug is not my president. No means No! Pass it on!"	Photograph of Pedro Sánchez accompanied by aggressive, derogatory text in capital letters	Insulting-aggressive	Discrediting personal attack
4	Catalan independence	Catalan independence supporters (generic)	No explicit text	X-ray of a human skull filled with feces, accompanied by Catalan independence symbols (estelada, yellow ribbon)	Offensive-insulting	Against Catalan independence supporters
5	Explicit political violence	VOX and far-right groups	"One day we'll get the satisfaction"	Stylized image showing a violent slap against a figure with VOX and far-right symbols	Violent-aggressive	Incitement to physical violence
6	Contempt for voters	Santiago Abascal (VOX) and supporters	"The dog whisperer," "The cat whisperer," "The illiterate fascist-poor whisperer"	Humorous and insulting comparison of Abascal with popular media figures, implying his voters are ignorant	Humorous-insulting	Classist and ideological insults toward VOX voters/supporters

While the general structure of the discussion guide remained consistent across groups, minor adaptations were made for the sessions in the Basque Country and Catalonia to reflect relevant local political issues. All sessions were audio-recorded with prior informed consent and were later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

## Analytical Strategy

Data were analyzed using MAXQDA software, which supported systematic coding, organization, and retrieval. The coding process combined deductive strategies—guided by the predetermined themes in the discussion guide—with inductive analysis to identify emergent categories and subthemes from participants’ natural discourse. The main analytical dimensions were categorized into three broad thematic domains, in alignment with the study’s research questions, as outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Topics and codes of analysis.

<b>Thematic Axis 1: CONCEPTUALIZATION OF POLITICS AND INVOLVEMENT</b>			
Code	Subcode 1	Subcode 2	
Definition of politics	Social control		
	Ideology		
	Government		
	Social organization		
	Power		
	Decision-making		
Level of knowledge	Low		
	Medium		
Political system in Spain	Do not identify the political system		
	Do identify the political system		
Left/Right	Don't know		
	Left characteristics	PSOE	
		Communism	
		Friendly	
		Social	
		Modern	
	Right characteristics	Progressive	
		Falangism	
		Pro-business	
		PP	
		Patriotic	
		Liberal	
		Individualist	
Upper class			
Conservative			
Political activity	Has not participated		
	Has participated	Debate group	
		Banner making	
		Rally	
		Protest	
<b>Thematic Axis 2: POLITICAL CAREER</b>			
Code	Subcode 1	Subcode 2	
Known politicians	Names		
	Knowledge level	Party identification	
	Medium of knowledge	Friend group	
		Family	
		Social media	
Political career	Characteristics/steps	Television	
		Study political science	
		Join a party	
		Gain social support	
		Political stance/ideology	
	Political knowledge		
	Difficulty	Anyone can do it	
Not everyone can do it			
Corruption	Don't know		
	Political system is full of corruption		
	Political system is not full of corruption		

Trust in politics	Trusts	
	Does not trust	
	Significant variables	Countries
		Political level
		Disinformation
<b>Thematic Axis 3: TREATMENT OF POLITICS AND POLITICIANS ON SOCIAL MEDIA</b>		
Code	Subcode 1	Subcode 2
Memes	Hate speech	Recognized
		Not recognized
	Objectives	Humor
		Incite hate
		Fame/interactions
	Effects	Influence
		Disinformation
		Discrimination
		Division
		Hate
		Annoyance
	Humor	

This dual strategy enabled the systematic classification of content while also facilitating the identification of discursive patterns and interpretive frameworks used by participants to make sense of the political domain. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving minors. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Complutense University of Madrid (Ref: CE\_20240509\_02\_SOC). Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their legal guardians. Confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation were fully respected throughout the research process.

## Findings

The findings are structured around three core thematic axes: how politics is conceptualized and the extent of youth engagement; perceptions surrounding political careers; and the portrayal of politics and political figures on social media, particularly through memes.

### *Conceptualizations of Politics and Youth Engagement*

*Definitions of politics: power, social control, and organization*

Participants provided a range of definitions of politics, spanning from functional to critical perspectives. While not always technically defined, their responses demonstrated an intuitive grasp of politics' role in collective life. Commonly mentioned concepts included ideology, decision-making, government, and social organization.

"Politics is ultimately about ideas. Everyone has their own ideas and that's how they identify politically." (Group 1 – 3-12-2024 – General)

"I would add that it's about making joint decisions, because ultimately, that's what politicians do—or at least try to do." (Group 2 – 10-12-2024 – Basque Country)

Some participants expressed more critical perspectives, framing politics as a tool of social control. Power was a recurring theme, seen as central to the functioning of politics.

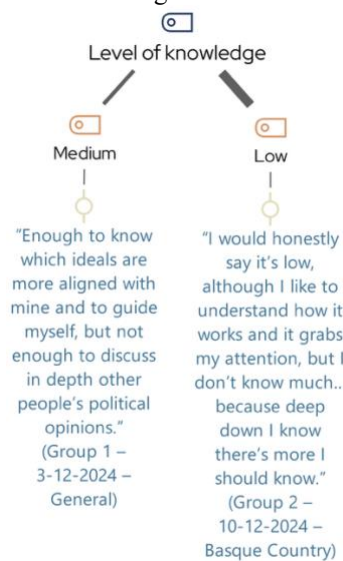
"Well, for me, politics is a system to control society..." (Group 2 – 10-12-2024 – Basque Country)

"It's like... I don't know, like a meeting where decisions are made, right? I don't know... Power, too, I guess." (Group 4 – 19-12-2024 – Catalonia)

*Political knowledge and system understanding*

Regarding political knowledge and system understanding, most participants correctly identified Spain as a parliamentary monarchy, suggesting a basic level of political literacy, although the depth of understanding varied considerably (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Self-perceived level of political knowledge.



In addition to the institutional model, the study explores participants' understanding of ideological categories, such as left and right. Three levels of familiarity emerged: some showed confusion or lack of knowledge; others gave simplistic, binary definitions; and a third group linked ideologies to core values—identifying the left with social or progressive values and the right with traditional, conservative, or liberal positions. These differences point to unequal ideological literacy but also reflect the internalization of common reference points to differing extents (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Definition of Right and Left.



When asked about forms of political participation, a general trend of formal disengagement was observed. Most participants reported not having taken part in organized political activities, such as party membership, attending rallies, or participating in debate groups. Attending protests was the most frequent political action, suggesting a more spontaneous than structured form of involvement. This suggests that, although there is some awareness of political issues, it does not translate into a structured or sustained commitment.

"Well, I've been to a protest, but I haven't gone as far as attending a debate."  
(Group 1 – 3-12-2024 – General)

Politics was often seen as distant or inaccessible, which may explain low levels of practical engagement.

### ***Political Careers***

#### *Recognized politicians and political career paths*

All participants named at least one political figure, with Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez mentioned most often. Media visibility strongly influenced recognition. Social media, television, and family were cited as main information sources, underscoring that public recognition is not solely linked to institutional status but also to digital and media presence.

"I was going to say the most well-known [politicians] are the party leaders. And, for example, Ayuso [President of the Community of Madrid] or other figures who make a lot more noise than the rest." (Group 3 – 11-12-2024 – General)

To enter politics, participants suggested having a clear ideology, securing social support, joining or founding a political party, and knowing how the political system works. These elements are perceived as minimum requirements to begin a political career.

"A politician is someone who shares their opinion and tries to get as many people as possible to think like them. If no one agrees with you, you can't become a politician." (Group 4 – 19-12-2024 – Catalonia)

"Join a political party. Or start one if you disagree with the current ones. Then get selected by that group until you become its top candidate." (Group 1 – 3-12-2024 – General)

Others highlighted the value of academic preparation, such as degrees in political science or law. This blend of ideology, social backing, and formal education reflects a complex and demanding view of professional politics.

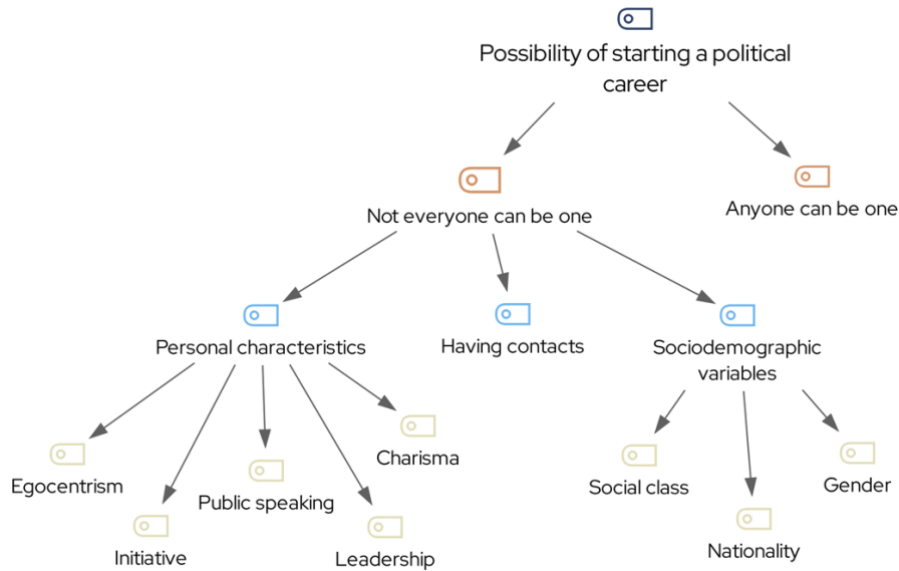
"To be a politician, ideally you should study something politics-related—political science, for example, or international relations... so you know what your job is about." (Group 3 – 11-12-2024 – General)

#### *Is politics open to everyone?*

While participants generally agreed that anyone could theoretically enter politics, they pointed out multiple practical barriers. Structural factors like gender, class, and nationality were noted, along with the importance of strategic networks. Success was seen as

dependent not only on merit and ideas but also on access to power circles. Traits like leadership, initiative, public speaking skills, charisma, and even self-centeredness were also deemed important. These views reflect a critical stance toward a political system perceived as selective and exclusive (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Requirements to begin a political career.



### *Trust in Politics*

Corruption emerged as a central concern. Many viewed the political system as tainted, which led to widespread distrust of parties and institutions.

"Most politicians are two-faced; they pretend to be something they're not and break promises..." (Group 4 – 19-12-2024 – Catalonia)

Some participants maintained a more optimistic view, acknowledging the potential for genuine, service-oriented politicians.

"Do I think there's corruption? Yes, I do. But I don't think all politicians are corrupt. I still have faith. Like I said, I believe there are some who want to help people, not just get rich." (Group 1 – 3-12-2024 – General)

Participants also reported the difficulty of accessing truthful and verified information due to the proliferation of conflicting narratives in media and social networks.

"Depending on the channel you're watching, they tell you one thing or another." (Group 4 – 19-12-2024 – Catalonia)

Altogether, perceived lack of transparency, and favoritism and inequality fueled a strong sense of alienation and skepticism. It was also suggested that the higher the level of power achieved, the greater the temptation to engage in corrupt practices.

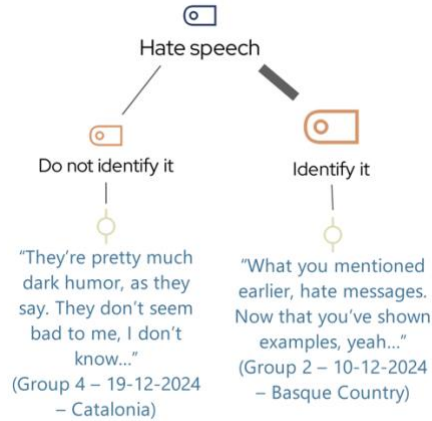
"I think the closer you are to power, the more tempted you are to get even more power [...] Everyone's different, but I think once you have a lot of power, you want more and you become corrupt." (Group 3 – 11-12-2024 – General)

### *Politics on Social Media: Memes*

### *Detecting Hate Speech*

During the group sessions, participants analyzed a series of memes containing explicit political content. Most were able to identify elements of hate speech in the images, highlighting their potential to fuel polarization and hostility (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Identification of Hate Speech in the Memes Shown.



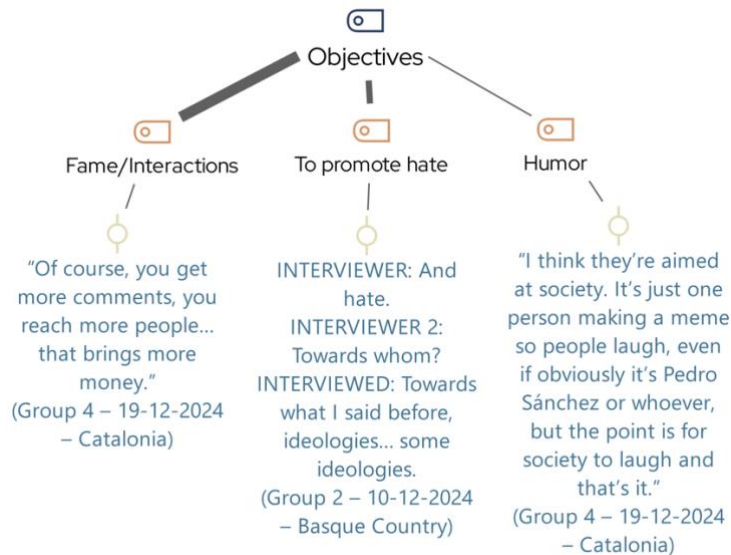
Young people pointed out effects such as social division, the generation of negative emotions (like annoyance, anger, or hate), misinformation, and discrimination. These effects are seen as particularly serious when such content is disseminated widely and without control.

"I think memes tend to polarize the extremes because when you agree with them, it reinforces your views. And if they're against you, it just makes you want to push back even harder." (Group 1 - 3-12-2024 - General)

### *Motivations Behind Memes*

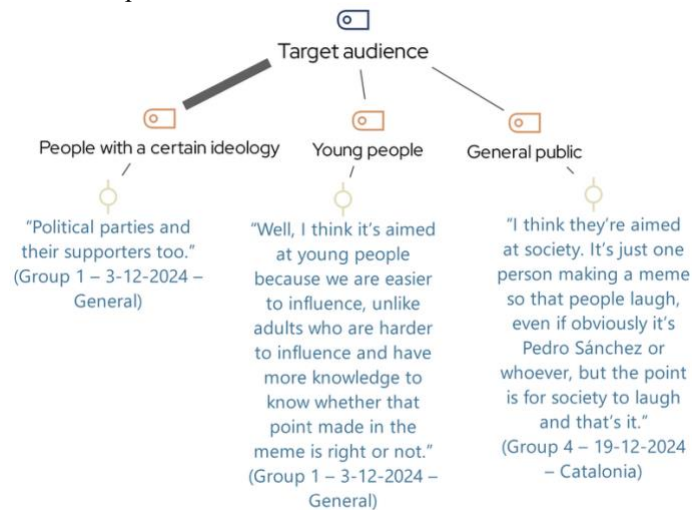
Participants identified various motivations behind meme creation (Figure 5). First, the pursuit of visibility on social media—through likes, comments, and shares—appears to be one of the main drivers. Ideological goals were also noted, such as inciting hatred or attacking opposing political views. Finally, many participants highlighted the humorous nature of these memes, which for some constitutes the main purpose, even beyond their potential political impact.

**Figure 5.** Objectives of People Who Create or Share These Memes.



Participants identified distinct target groups. First, ideological supporters who see memes as reinforcing shared values. Second, ideological opponents, with whom the intention is to provoke a reaction of rejection. Third, their peer group, perceived as especially exposed to such content due to digital saturation and limited political literacy (Figure 6). Some also suggested memes are designed for mass appeal rather than a specific demographic.

**Figure 6.** Profile of Meme Recipients.



### ***Balancing Humor and Boundaries***

Reactions to the memes fluctuated between defending free expression and concern about negative outcomes. Many considered humor a valid form of critique but recognized that certain memes could cross lines and provoke conflict, especially in public forums.

"The concern is that people who disagree might feel... that violence is being directed at them. Because, of course, then you go on Twitter and it's full of

comments from people who think differently, all insulting the person who posted the meme." (Group 4 – 19-12-2024 – Catalonia)

"For me, it's not concerning. I think most people take it in a humorous way. I don't think anyone expresses it that directly or goes so far beyond the line." (Group 3 – 11-12-2024 – General)

This tension is shaped by context: while in private circles the content may be interpreted as a joke, in public or anonymous spaces it can have more problematic effects. These observations suggest a normalization of this discourse among youth, who demonstrate fluency in the visual and rhetorical codes of digital meme culture.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Spanish adolescents aged 16 and 17 understand and experience politics through a dual lens: on one hand, they express a sense of distance from institutional politics; on the other, they maintain a symbolic and connection with it. Regarding RQ1, the findings suggest that adolescents hold an intuitive but uneven understanding of political phenomena. While they clearly identify its structural dimensions—government, decision-making, and the exercise of power—they also associate it with mechanisms of social control. It reflects a critical and, at times, skeptical perception of the political system. This duality aligns with previous discussions on youth political disaffection, which does not necessarily equate to disengagement. In this case, it reflects a conscious attitude of rejection or alienation toward a system perceived as corrupt, exclusionary, or disconnected from their realities. This supports the conclusions of Henn and Foard (2014) regarding the British context.

The phenomenon is further intensified by the limited formal participation of youth in traditional political structures, despite their sensitivity to certain social issues. As Pickard (2019) notes, the distance that young people maintain from the system does not imply an absence of political stance, but rather manifests through alternative forms of participation. These forms can be described as more emotional and contextual. Politics, therefore, is understood not only through institutional frameworks but also through lived and affective experiences. This pattern holds across genders and geographic regions.

Although participants did not express explicit partisan affiliations, their definitions of left and right ideologies reveal, on the one hand, stereotypical responses. On the other hand, participants demonstrated limited knowledge of actual political ideologies. For example, right-wing politics was described as encompassing both ideologically opposed positions (such as falangism and liberalism) and merely diverse ones (like liberalism and patriotism). In the case of the left, the term 'social' lacked any meaningful parallels that could clarify its doctrinal content, and the only related term mentioned was 'friendly'. These associations reflect affective polarization, as noted by Lay et al. (2023), within the Spanish context described by Proaño, Peña and Saalfeld (2022), and highlight the effectiveness of political propaganda strategies on social media (Niebuurt 2021). This form of symbolic alignment with the left appears as a culturally inflected leftism, encompassing both political stance and, above all, a sense of disconnection or estrangement from the system.

In relation to RQ2, youth perceptions of political careers oscillate between meritocratic ideals and a skeptical realism. On one hand, ideological commitment and education are valued as necessary qualifications. On one hand, ideological commitment and education are valued as necessary qualifications; on the other hand, structural barriers such as social class, gender, or social capital are identified as significant obstacles.

Moreover, the widespread perception of corruption as a systemic practice—particularly on social media (Said-Hung, Moreno-López and Mottareale-Calvanese 2023)—fuels cynicism and distrust toward politicians and contributes to a perception of politics as a contaminated space.

Regarding RQ3, the data confirm that adolescents are politically socialized through digital content, with memes serving as a particularly powerful medium (Garrett 2019; Kaskazi and Kitzie 2023). Like influencers (Schmuck et al. 2022), memes simplify political discourse, increasing its accessibility but also heightening risks such as biased interpretation, reinforcement of prejudice, and political polarization. Participants are aware of both the humorous potential and the negative impact of political memes—especially those containing hate speech, discrimination, or symbolic violence. This ambivalence highlights their dual role as tools for playful engagement and vehicles of misinformation (Halversen and Weeks 2023; Chagas 2024).

Participants' ability to discern the intent and effects of these memes—while continuing to consume or validate them—suggests a high level of digital literacy in symbolic interpretation. However, it also reveals a concerning normalization of hostile discourse, particularly in ideologically aligned spaces (Heiskanen 2017). In these contexts, memes not only reinforce preexisting beliefs but also serve as mechanisms of group cohesion, as noted by McKelvey, DeJong and Frenzel (2021), reinforcing the notion of a segmented digital public sphere shaped by algorithmic filtering and ideological affinity.

Although this study offers an approach to understanding how youth perceive politics in the digital environment, it presents several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its results. First, the qualitative design does not allow for generalization to the broader Spanish adolescent population. Despite efforts to ensure regional and socioeconomic diversity, the sample was limited to 26 participants. Second, the meme analysis was based on a purposive selection of six examples. While useful for eliciting discussion, this limits the ability to generalize findings to the broader ecosystem of political memes.

These limitations point to several avenues for future research aimed at deepening the understanding of the relationship between youth, social media, and political culture. Complementary quantitative studies could help identify statistical patterns in youth political perceptions and explore correlations between social media use, educational attainment, class, and political interest. Given the global nature of meme culture, comparative cross-national research could uncover both universal patterns and culturally specific trends. Furthermore, experimental and neurocognitive methods focusing on affective responses to memes could offer deeper insights into their persuasive power, their role in fostering polarization, and their function in political socialization.

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## Appendix

### 1. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF POLITICS AND INVOLVEMENT

- Definition of politics: How would you define politics?
- What do you think is your level of political knowledge? (low, medium, high)
- Would you be able to say what political system exists in Spain?
- What is the left, and what is the right?
- Do you currently engage or have you ever engaged in any political activity? (e.g., attending a demonstration, going to a rally, distributing campaign flyers, being a member of a party's youth organization or a student union, etc.)

### 2. POLITICAL CAREER

- Who do you think are the most well-known politicians at the national and regional levels? Do you know their political parties? Why do you know them? (e.g., you've heard people talk about them, seen them on TV, etc.)
- How do you think someone becomes a politician? Is it an easy or difficult path? What kind of person do you think can become a politician? What do you think is required to become one? What are the steps of a "political career"?
- Agree or disagree dynamic (and explain why):
  - "All politicians are the same, none can be trusted."
  - "The political system is generally full of corruption."
  - "Politicians are one of the reasons why the country is not doing better."
  - "Politicians don't understand the problems that affect most people. They're disconnected from reality."
  - "People should pay more attention to what happens in politics, because it affects them more than they think."
  - "It's understandable that citizens are tired of politics."
- In general, do you trust politics?
  - Do you trust it more or less than in other areas of the country or abroad? Are there regions in Spain where politicians are more honest or dishonest?

### 3. POLITICS AND POLITICIANS ON SOCIAL MEDIA. MEMES

- Presentation of six images:
  - What do you see here? Who are the main figures?
  - Is a specific issue being portrayed? Do you recognize any hate speech in these posters? What's your opinion of them?
  - What emotions or feelings do you think these posters appeal to?
  - What impact do you think these figures have on those who view them?