# Revolution By Other Memes

Online Subcultures, Modular Ideologies And The Political Compass

## Team Members

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## Contents

# 1. Summary of Key Findings

Created in 2017, r/PoliticalCompassMemes grew in popularity 2020 as a space to classify political ideologies by locating all manner of phenomena - from the welfare state to Wojak avatars - on the political compass image macro. The memes address political style instead of political substance, treating issues and events as occasions to recalibrate the compass. Our analysis yielded four main findings: 1) 'meta' and 'based' memes that give insight into group identity and interplay between groups, 2) how symbols, public figures, and signs are remixed and utilized to build identity within the subreddit at large and within the political categories, and 3) how issue spaces provide insight into a politics of (memetic and stylistic) participation rather than serious political engagement.

# 2. Introduction

On June 30 2022, the "rapid response" team for Ron DeSantis's presidential campaign Twitter tweeted a short (now deleted) video first shared by an anonymous account attacking Donald Trump for allegedly supporting LGBTQ+ issues. The video referenced a range of memes recognisable from deep internet visual vernacular, including Giga Chad, Yes Chad, and Patrick Bateman. This can be seen as a blatant attempt to memefy politics and especially extreme/fringe political positions, hoping to push them into the mainstream.

The video quickly attracted attention on the r/PoliticalCompassMemes subreddit, where a version was shared with the video superimposed upon the Political Compass Meme image macro, positioning DeSantis in the extreme corner of the authright quadrant. Created in 2017, this subreddit with over half a million members grew in popularity in 2020 as a space to classify political ideologies by locating all manner of phenomena—from the welfare state to Wojak avatars—on the four quadrants of the political compass. The memes evacuate political figures, events, and issues of their

substance, treating them instead as elements of vernacular visual style that can be arranged and rearranged on the compass's quadrants. The subreddit is also marked by a pursuit of "based" (as opposed to "cringe") memes. Memes accepted as "based" tend either to subvert established political positions, identifying surprising connections across political ideologies, or to undo the political compass itself, reshaping its form to reimagine political style and reconfigure ideological polarities.
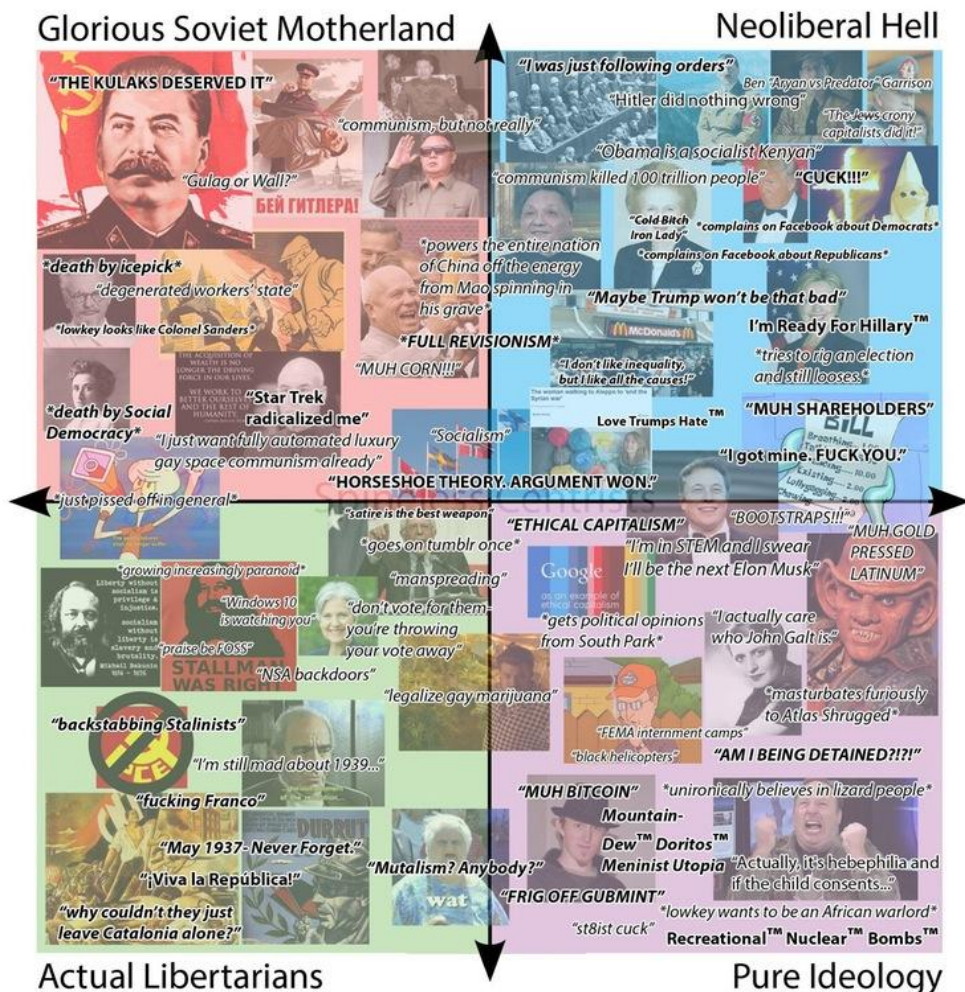


Despite its overt political branding, r/PoliticalCompassMemes is not dedicated to politics as such. It is not about successfully enacting policy or advancing positions on particular issues. Instead, it is focused on using the political compass to classify and organise all matter of phenomena around a set of "types." Discussion is oriented around creating stable "political" classifications by mapping features onto the compass. A large amount of discourse is dedicated to disagreement about what these categories signify, as well as "discovering" unlikely affinities between opposed

quadrants, what we describe as "speculative realignment." All of these are manifested in the visual culture of the forum, often associated with Wojak types.

# 3. Initial Data Sets

Our dataset was scraped from r/PoliticalCompassMemes on August 29, 2022 using 4Cat to query the Reddit API. This dataset is of particular value because Reddit has since changed its API, making it inaccessible for third-party applications on June 30th, 2023. The initial dataset contained 20,823,395 items, which created some problems since the CSV was over 5 GB. However, we later discovered that the dataset only contained 304,331 unique text and image posts, and the rest of the dataset consisted of comments.

4cat collects the following metadata from reddit: thread_id, id, timestamp, body, subject, author, author_flair, post_flair, image_file, domain, url, image_md5, subreddit, parent, score, and unix_timestamp. Once we removed comments, we focused primarily on the image_url, author_flair and score columns. Author_flair refers to the quadrant of the political compass that users place themselves, and consists of a variety of classifications from across and beyond the political spectrum . Our analysis primarily centered around the categories of authleft, libleft, centrist, authright, and libright.

# 4. Research Questions

The classic literature contended that subcultures sought to solve unresolvable problems in "imaginary'" ways, using style as a proxy for politics (Clarke et al 1975, Hebdige 1979). While recognizing a clear continuity, this project asks the following questions

- How do contemporary online subcultures translate 'serious' political ideas into playful vernacular formats like memes and slang?

- How can we characterise the engagement of online subcultures with contemporary politics-- as engaging directly with politics or as stylistic and more distanced engagement?

- How do online subcultures mix and match new "modular ideologies," how do their aesthetics relate to and differ from one another?

- What commonalities run across these seemingly divergent groups (for example demographic similarities, common enemies)?

- Which social and political issues dominated the conversation on the Political Compass Memes Subreddit from 2019 to 2022? Do different political ideologies as exemplified by author flair appear as particularly prominent voices on certain topics?

- How does the occurrence and significance of terms related to the issue of racism and police brutality change over time? How are certain political events reflected in changes to the usage of these terms?

# 5. Methodology

*Subgroup 1: Using Pixplot to explore visual semantic space*

Since the dataset of political compass memes was collected before the summer school, we focused on applying different methods of analysis to make sense of the data: mixed methods with the combination of quantitative methods using 4CAT and Pixplot as well as qualitative analysis. For each flair, we generated a random sample of 2000 memes to narrow the sample size. We then processed those random flair-based samples in Pixplot to get the clusters based on similarities of memes.

Next, using the Pixplot as our foundation, we applied a qualitative analysis on the frequent semiotic resources in each group of memes. We looked through all the clusters from each flair, and categorised frequent types of semiotic resources coded into memes. After we classified the clusters of semantic resources and symbols, we performed a comparative analysis based on flairs to figure out how serious political concepts are translated into memes.

*Subgroup 2: Investigating issue spaces*

The first step of data collection consisted of asking ChatGPT: "What are the most important issues being discussed by the American public since 2019?" The ten issues identified include: the Covid-19 pandemic, racial justice and police reform, climate change and environmental issues, gun control and mass shootings, immigration and border security, health care, economic inequality and minimum wage, voting rights, and education reform. Based on the AI-generated response, ten new datasets were created on 4CAT by filtering the 20 million items (including comments) dataset according to issue-related keywords. For racial justice and police reform, for example, the keywords included "BlackLivesMatter," "police reform," "police brutality," "racism," and "George Floyd," and for gun control and mass shootings, the keywords included "school shooting," "mass shooting," "gun control," "background checks," and "Second Amendment."

These ten datasets were then subjected to further analysis. To examine the ratio of author flair (a tag which points out the self-declared political alignment of a user) to issue, we analyzed each sub-dataset by counting the instances of author flairs with the help of 4CAT. These values were then manually transferred to an Excel sheet with rows 2-11 each covering an issue and columns B-F covering the original five author flairs. With the help of RAWGraphs, a stacked bar chart was created which visualizes a) the number of times keywords related to an issue were mentioned, and b) the distribution of author flairs per issue.
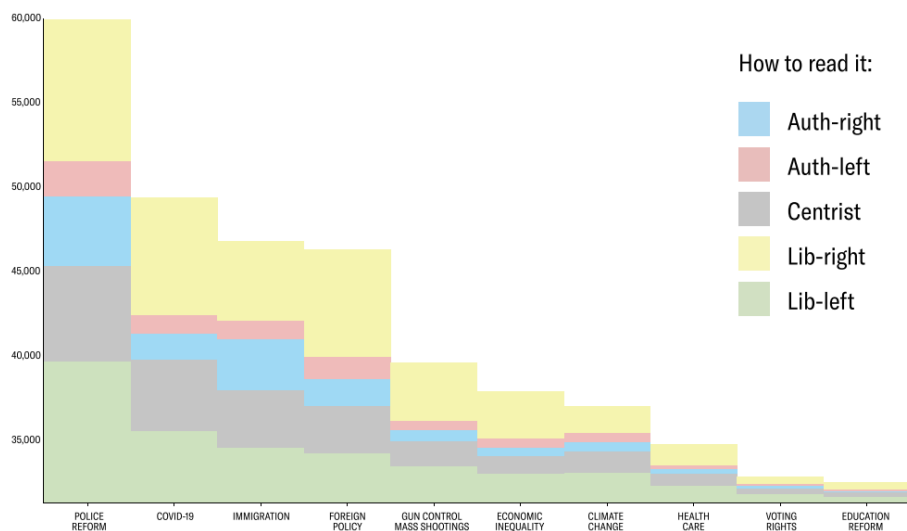
Since racial justice and police reform turned out to be the issue with most engagement overall, this issue was chosen for deeper analysis. The discourse on gun control and mass shootings was selected for its American-centric, dynamic, contemporary, and polarized character. 4CAT was used to split the body text of both datasets into separate words (tokenise) by month, to count all words, and to extract the top ten words. Then, a RankFlow diagram was created to visualize changes over time in the occurrence of the top ten words. Lastly, both diagrams were subjected to a close reading by looking for changes in the usage of words, and connecting these divergences to major political and social instances related to the issue of racism and guns in the United States.

*Subgroup 3: Characterising political engagement and relationship between subgroups*

We used various 4cat functions, such as ImageWalls, filtering, RankFlows, counting, tokenizing, and custom networks to explore the dataset and gain insight into our data. We explored users who changed their flair frequently, starting with the website BasedCount, and eventually via our own analysis of a gephi network created between author and author_flair. In our exploration of authors who frequently changed flairs, we stumbled upon the trend "cap-com unity", which served as a window into how the flairs relate to each other. From there, we also filtered by "com-cap", "unity", "horseshoe", and "duality" to shed more light on the relationships between style/aesthetics, political category, and group dynamics. We focused our attention on the most popular memes in the capcom, unity, and horseshoe filtered datasets, and performed content analysis to reach our findings.

# 6. Findings & Discussion

*Engagement with Socio-Political Issues:*



The issue of racial justice and police reform dominated socio-political conversations on the PCM subreddit. This was followed by conversations on Covid-19 (in particular, vaccines and maks), immigration and border security, and foreign policy. The individual conversations on different topics do not appear to be heavily dominated by

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one political ideology. Libright contributed most on most issues except for racial justice and police reform, climate change and environmental issues, and voting rights. Libleft or, where libleft dominated the conversation, libright always constitutes the second most engaged political ideology, except for the issue of immigration and border security, where centrist takes the second place. For all ten issues except for economic inequality and minimum wage, authleft posters engaged the least. Across all issues, the distribution of author flairs remains relatively stable, disproving the hypothesis that different political leanings hijack conversations on issues they are primarily associated with.

*No preference for particular issues among the various quadrants:*
Political issues show roughly equal discursive representation among political orientations. So, rather than racism being a particular issue for :libleft:, it becomes a category around which to orient political positions. We found that author flairs in posts and comments discussing racism were distributed more or less equally across the political spectrum. This indicates that racism, rather than a substantive political issue for a particular constituency or ideology, is simply grounds for meme construction, an interest that is shared by all political categories.

*Linguistic Expression of Socio-Political Issues: Gun Control and Mass Shootings*
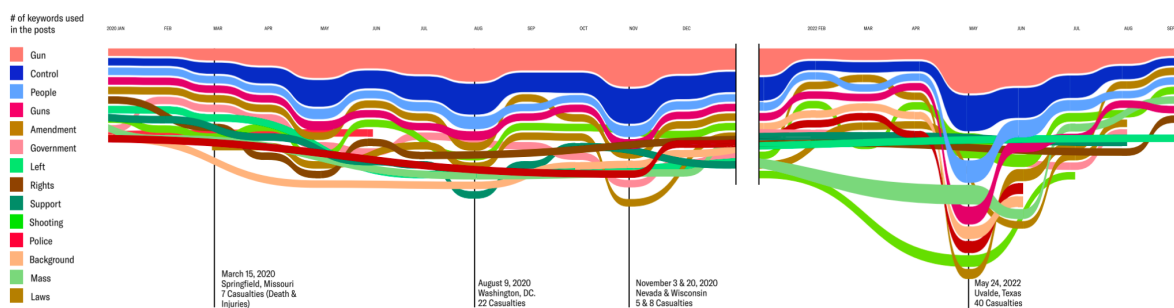


Next, the focus was turned to one particular issue in an attempt to examine how the occurrence and significance of terms related to this topic would change over time as well as how major political events would be reflected in changes to the usage of keywords. The discourse on "Gun Control and Mass Shootings" was selected for its American-centric, dynamic, contemporary, and polarized character. 4CAT was used to
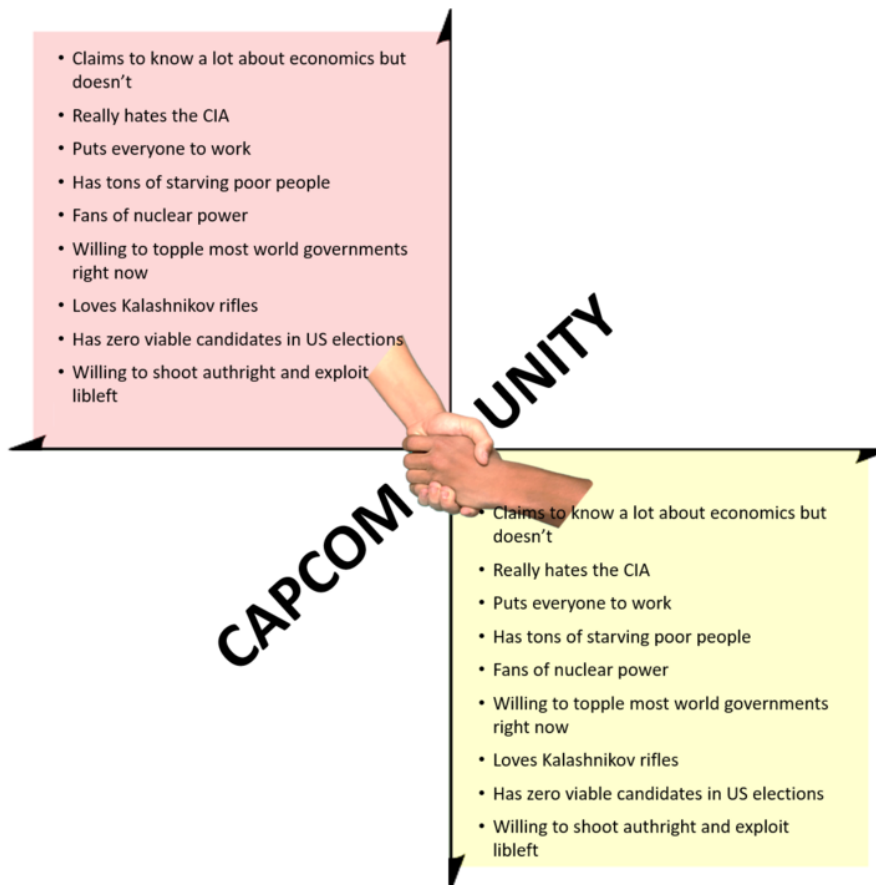
extract the top ten terms by month. Then, a RankFlow diagram was created to visualize changes over time. As becomes visible in the downward spikes, levels of engagement with the issue coincided with major events such as the Robb Elementary School shooting in Texas in May of 2022, or the presidential election in November of 2020. Independent of particular events, gun control constitutes a heavily debated issue, with [second] "amendment," "rights," and "background" [check] being mentioned consistently throughout the dataset. Interestingly, this issue appears to be perceived as a "left" topic, with this being the only top-term related to a political ideology.

*Referencing each other and a shared visual/verbal vernacular:*
Rankflow analysis of discourses among various political tendencies shows that the most frequently used words are other tendencies. This indicates that the focus of discussion is on the relationship to other groups, and their relative positioning, rather than the substance of the issues at stake. This is also additionally enabled by the fact that the groups and sub-groups, despite their differential political positions, all use the same shared verbal and visual vernacular to discuss and memefy politics. We hypothesise that this shared vocabulary creates a sense of the 'worthy other' when it comes to one's political/ideological adversaries and this creates a shared sense of belonging with one another, thus stabilising the collective identity of the subreddit at large.

*Instability and Political Imaginaries: CapCom Unity*

- Claims to know a lot about economics but doesn't
- Really hates the CIA
- Puts everyone to work
- Has tons of starving poor people
- Fans of nuclear power
- Willing to topple most world governments right now
- Loves Kalashnikov rifles
- Has zero viable candidates in US elections
- Willing to shoot authright and exploit libleft

CAPCOM UNITY

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In our exploration of the authors who frequently changed flairs, we found the concept of "capcom unity" which is shorthand for capitalist-communist unity. Capcom and unity memes have been a moderately popular trend for the last two years and consist of drawing attention to overlap between opposing categories. These comparisons are mostly playful and non-programmatic, often satirising the similarities and inconsistencies between different categories. These trends drew our attention to how the subreddit is obsessed with the instability of the political compass – in other words, how opposed categories, such as :libright: and :authleft:, might not be fully distinct from one another but actually have similar dispositions to the world. One way this could be understood is as a symptom of a similar obsession in political science research, of "realignment" of political constituencies. This is an idea with rather thin empirical justification, but with a strong appeal, as it seems to speak to unexpected political results, such as Trump's election. Memetically—that is, through the modular language of mashup—this is seen in "capcom" memes, which speculate on the "diagonalist" alignment of anarchocapitalist and statist socialist positions. It also bears

a strong resemblance—and outright adaptation in memes—to "horseshoe theory," the idea that the fringe left and fringe right tend to converge as they move away from the center. Horseshoe theory has an inherent appeal to political moderates, who view far left and far right beliefs as largely identical in their atavistic flight from balanced reasonableness.

*In/Outgroup Dynamics:*
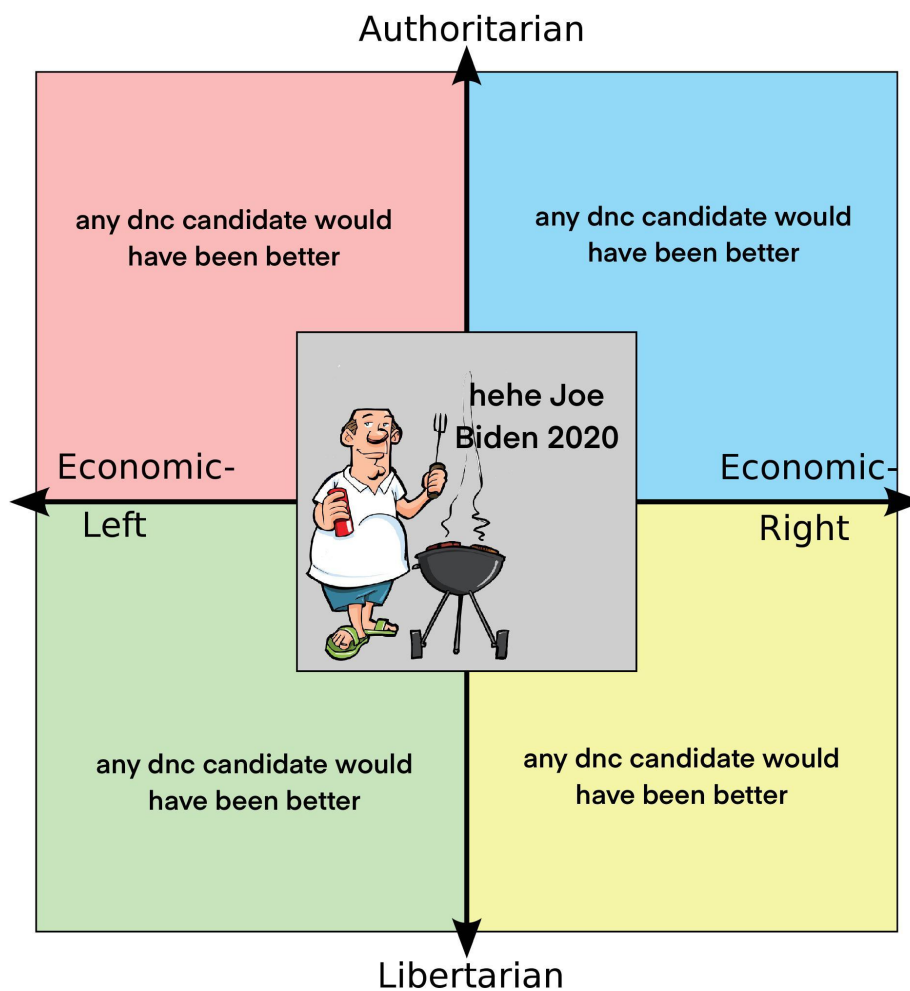


This tends to be inverted in the culture of the subreddit, overdetermined by the design of the compass as it is, where centrism, as a "normie" position tends to be ridiculed. And yet, in its "outsiderness," centrism also provokes a certain amount of fondness: centrist memes with balding grillpilled dads abound. This too has a resonance in our (read: the US's) particular moment in time, where the urgent challenges of millennial socialism and incipient fascism were both handily dispatched by Joe Biden, a barely cognizant, yet oddly charismatic pater familias.
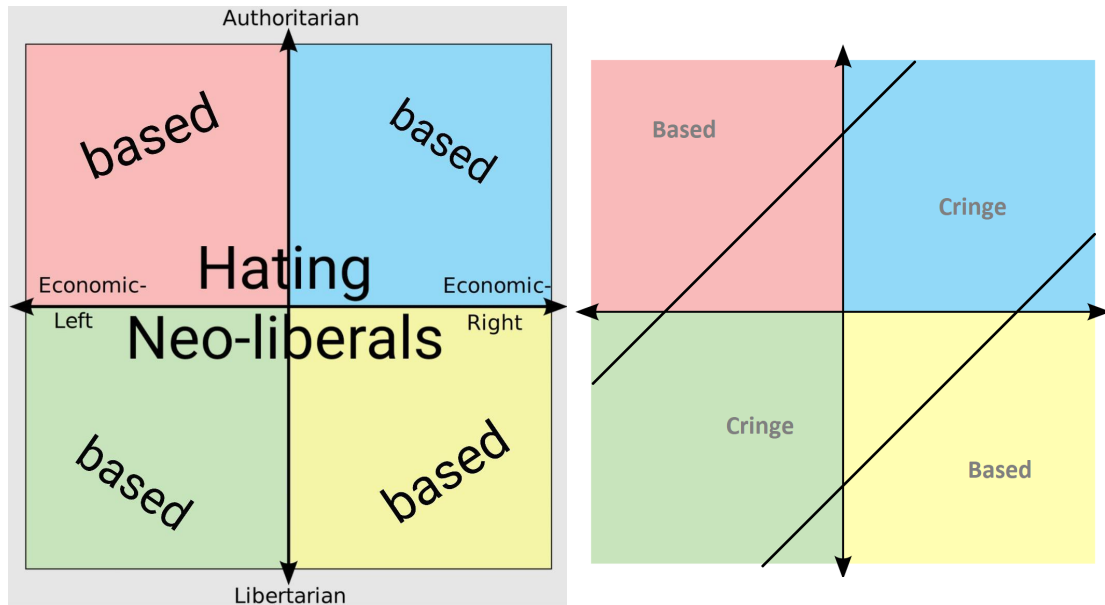
That the centrist possesses an outsider authenticity in the context of the culture of the subreddit can be described through the vernacular of digital culture: based. A based post on r/PoliticalCompassMemes is a kind of truth that penetrates the surface-level positions of the compass, revealing a transcendent reality that scrambles the categories of the Cartesian grid. Counterintuitively, perhaps, the most successful posts are not the ones that uphold the integrity of the compass, but the ones that subvert it. Through this subversion the poster demonstrates their intimate understanding of both the compass and the culture of the forum, and deliver the prime currency of forum culture: true novelty

*Semiotic resources*

Three frequent types of semiotic resources can be identified in each flair: public figures, flags, and symbols.

*Semiotic resources— flags:*

For the second type of frequent semiotic resources, flags serve as visual symbols of nations, ideologies, political parties, or movements. They are instantly recognizable and can represent a range of political positions and beliefs. Political compass memes often rely on stereotypes or generalisations to simplify complex political ideologies. Flags can be used to represent these stereotypes and convey a broad understanding of a country's political landscape or political leanings. For the third type of frequent semiotic resources, some symbols have become associated with specific ideologies or movements due to historical or cultural significance. These symbols may be incorporated into political compass memes as memetic references, capitalising on their recognizability and the associations they evoke.

Due to their historical significance and ideological implications, symbols associated with fascism and communism are commonly found within the left-wing quadrant of the political spectrum. Symbols such as flags and icons hold significant importance  in political movements, and those associated with fascism, like Nazi Germany's swastika, and communism, such as the hammer and sickle, have become recognizable representations of their respective ideologies. Over time, these symbols have acquired associations with broader concepts of authoritarianism and collectivism, resulting in their utilisation as symbolic shorthand for the Authleft quadrant.

*Semiotic resources—public figures:*

Public figures, especially politicians and influential individuals with specific political stances, are well-known to a wide audience, so that using images of public figures in memes allows for instant recognition and relatability. Public figures are often associated with specific political ideologies, parties, or policies. By featuring their images in memes, creators and users can convey a particular message or commentary on those ideologies or policies. Additionally, using images of public figures in political compass memes can tap into these cultural references, creating a shared understanding among meme enthusiasts. In our research, we identified two types of public figure representatives. Firstly, there were representative figures who were specifically selected to embody each flair in the political compass. These individuals were chosen to symbolise the different ideological positions within the compass. The second type of representation we observed involved using the same public figures, such as Kim Jong Un, and Stalin, but dressing them in different styles or depictions to represent each flair within the political compass. These figures, who are typically associated with authoritarian right ideologies, were utilised to convey various ideological stances in a more visually dramatic manner.

For instance, Kim Jong Un was portrayed wearing a humorous hat to signify a different ideological stance. By employing these visual cues and symbols, the representation of these public figures allowed for a more nuanced and distinctive portrayal of the different flairs within the political compass. By dressing the same

public figures in different styles or depictions, the aim is to frame and communicate distinct ideological stances visually, making them more visually appealing and easily identifiable for the audience. This approach adds an element of playfulness and creativity to the representation, while also conveying the underlying political ideologies.

*Semiotic Resources—symbols, countryballs and Wojak*



The use of spherical caricatures, referred to as "countryballs," to symbolise distinct nations and political ideologies, is a phenomenon rooted in digital culture. Originating from the webcomic "Polandball," these caricatures are portrayed as interacting with one another in manners that mirror geopolitical events, historical conflicts, and national and cultural stereotypes. The humour in these comics frequently stems from the intersection of these factors, further emphasised by the application of non-standard English to accentuate these stereotypes. The precise application of a "countryball" or an equivalent symbol can fluctuate significantly based on the creator's intention, sense of humour, and personal biases. The primary objective is to provide a visual manifestation of the political ideologies in each quadrant, offering a concise and straightforward method to comprehend their respective positions on the Political Compass.

*Semiotic Resources: Wojak*

*Libright Wojak*



*Authright Wojak*



*Authleft Wojak*



*Libleft Wojack*
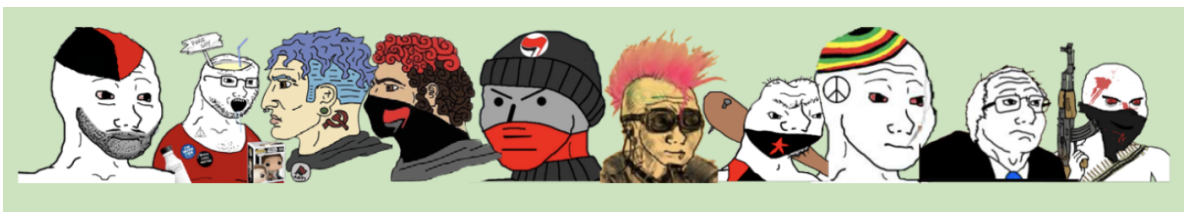


Wojak refers to a family of memes, originally derived from the "I Know That Feel" meme—including Soyjak, Doomer, Chad, Brainlet, NPC—each of which represents a different 'vibe'. A less charged icon than the notorious Pepe the Frog, Wojak functions as a meme template and a mascot used in different variations across all quadrants, rendering them all commensurate. Users personify their own positions on the compass and satirize those of others through these characters. The subreddit hosts a Google drive full of dozens of images for use in meme-making. Users modulate and build upon Wokaj to cover the political compass. This recontextualization represents

the process of meaning-making through social practices. Wokaj's variations tie to users' identities, making it especially interesting that the more "extremist" positions of authright and authleft possess more variations.

# 7. Conclusion



**Most upvoted meme on r/PoliticalCompassMemes*

Our multi-method analysis found that r/PoliticalCompassMemes is not dedicated to politics in the sense of successfully enacting policy or advancing positions on particular issues. Instead, a large amount of discourse is dedicated to disagreement about what these categories signify, as well as "discovering" unlikely affinities between opposed quadrants. Furthermore, we found that each quadrant repurposes similar symbols and figures and engages with issues from across the political spectrum, strengthening our claim that the subreddit is primarily concerned with playful and stylistic affiliation rather than serious political engagement and debate. This research is of particular importance in the context of contemporary U.S. politics and

understanding how younger generations engage with politics, as well as how subcultural style and irony bleed into the political realm. Further research could study how the upcoming U.S. presidential election affects political alignment and alliance-building on the subreddit, and how "unity" and "horseshoe theory" trends progress over time.

# 8. Project Posters
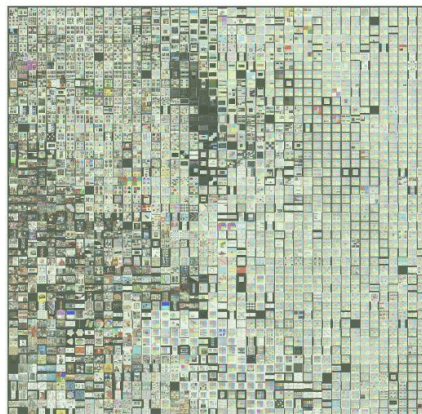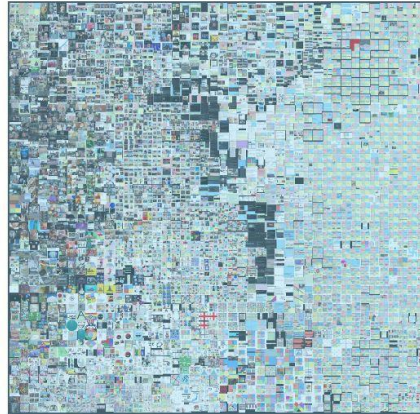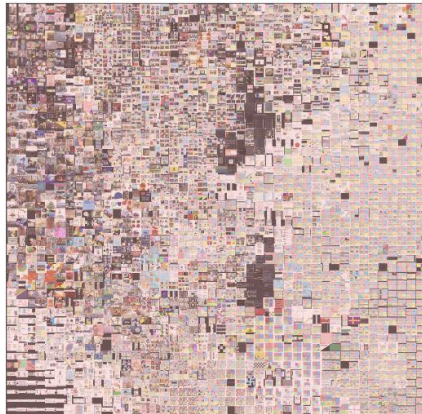
# POLITICAL COMPASS MEMES

We focused on applying different methods of analysis to make sense of the data: mixed methods with the combination of quantitative methods using 4CAT and Pixplot as well as qualitative analysis. Firstly, for each flair, we also collected 2000 memes from the whole dataset randomly to narrow the sample size. Secondly, we process each group of memes in Pixplot to get the clusters based on similarities of memes. Then, after we have results from Pixplot, our group applied a qualitative analysis on the frequent semiotic resources in each group of memes. We firstly look through all the clusters from each flair, and categorise frequent types of semiotic resources coded into memes. After we have different types, we do a comparative analysis based on flairs to figure out how serious political concepts are translated into memes.

**How do each of the quadrants translate "serious" political concepts into "vernacular" semiotic resources?**
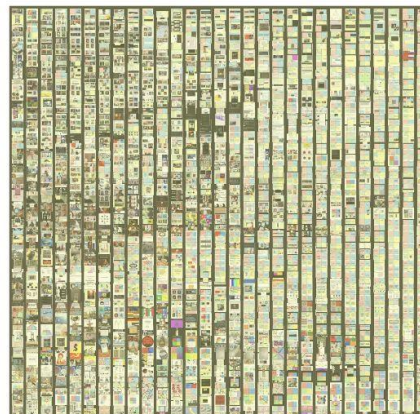








## Public figures

In our research, we identified two types of public figure representatives. Firstly, there were representative figures who were specifically selected to embody each flair in the political compass. These individuals were chosen to symbolise the different ideological positions within the compass. The second type of representation we observed involved using the same public figures, such as Kim Jong Un, and Stalin, but dressing them in different styles or depictions to represent each flair within the political compass. These figures, who are typically associated with authoritarian right ideologies, were utilised to convey various ideological stances in a more visually dramatic manner.



## Flags

Due to their historical significance and ideological implications, symbols associated with fascism and communism are common features of political compass memes. Symbols such as flags and icons hold significant importance in political movements, and those associated with fascism, like Nazi Germany's swastika, and communism, such as the hammer and sickle, have become recognizable representations of their respective ideologies. Over time, these symbols have acquired associations with broader concepts of authoritarianism and collectivism, resulting in their utilisation as symbolic shorthand.



- 🟥 Auth-left
- 🟦 Auth-right
- 🟨 Lib-right
- 🟩 Lib-left

## Symbols

Long predating the political compass genre, "countryballs" personify different nations as simply drawn spherical flags. The genre is used to comment on geopolitical events, stage historical conflicts and mock national stereotypes. Emphasized by the application of "bad English," these comics' reactionary humour stems from the intersection of these factors.
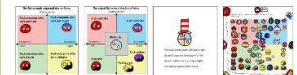


← Map of a random sample of 2000 memes for each flair

## WOJAK ANALYSIS



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### AUTHRIGHT



### AUTHLEFT



### LIBRIGHT



### LIBLEFT