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Published online: 26 Jun 2024.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Parties vs. partisans: the real contest about what memes mean in election campaigns

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the different use of internet memes between political party organisations and partisan spaces. We analyse the relationship between organisational logics and memes as a genre characterised by participation. We conduct a mixed-methods analysis of the internet memes posted by five Australian political parties, their youth branches, and partisan meme spaces during the 2022 Australian federal election. We identify three styles of memetic content created by political parties and partisans: professional, generic, and participatory. We argue that these different kinds of meme each relate to particular organisational logics, with the hierarchical structures of professional election campaigns largely hollowing out the participatory potential of internet memes in both production and form.

Memes have become ubiquitous in discussion around digital campaigning in recent years, with growing attention on the function of social media in election campaigns and politics more generally (Dean 2019; Gibson 2020). This has become especially pronounced in news coverage. For example, coverage of the 2022 Australian federal election reported on a 'meme war' (Butler 2022), 'meme factory' (Dahlstrom 2022), and 'shitposting' (Wilson 2022) – all of which seems at first deeply unserious in the context of a first-order election. Academic research on internet memes in elections tends to emphasise the content and groups created by 'grassroots' partisan supporters outside of formal party organisation structures, which we refer to in this article as 'partisan spaces' (McKelvey, DeJong, and Frenzel 2023; see also: McLoughlin and Southern 2021; Moody-Ramirez and Church 2019). This tendency in academic research to view memes as the domain of peripheral, grassroots actors outside the direct control of the party appears to conflict with the popular media narrative (as illustrated by the above news articles) that party organisations are the key actors investing resources in competing meme strategies, as the production and circulation of internet memes becomes institutionalised within a party or campaign apparatus (Baulch, Matamoros-Fernández, and Suwana 2024; Burroughs 2020).

Beyond the horse-race narrative of who is winning the 'meme war' in any given election, we are interested in a potentially obscured contest between parties and partisans about what memes mean. In particular, we are interested in the tug-of-war between the party organisational logic anchored in hierarchical structures and professionalised, highly managed campaigns (Gibson 2020) – what has elsewhere been termed the '*vertical* models of linkage and engagement: leader-focused, centralised, bureaucratic organisations that market finished programs to the public' (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer 2018, 1658) – and memes as characterised by their participatory implications and the way their circulation and reproduction relies on specific subcultural understandings (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Shifman 2014). In this paper, we ask two questions. First, how is the organisational character of meme posters expressed in the way they use memes? Second, do memes across these various permutations provide a means for citizens to participate in election campaigns, or have internet memes become integrated into the professional repertoire of party organisations, losing their participatory potential in the process? To answer these questions, we conduct a mixed-methods study of the use of internet memes by five Australian political parties during the 2022 federal election: the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Liberal Party of Australia (Liberals) and its junior coalition partner the National Party of Australia (Nationals), the Australian Greens Party (Greens), and Pauline Hanson's One Nation (PHON).

Using quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff 2018), we first examine the salience and thematic focus of internet memes in a campaign context. Then, using critical visual analysis (Rose 2016) we examine the aesthetic qualities of a subsample of the memes, to explore how their production and circulation relates to the particular communicative and participatory imperatives of the campaign. This analysis is supplemented with several semi-structured interviews with meme creators working either with one of the parties' digital communications team during the 2022 election campaign, or alternatively, administrating a partisan meme space not formally affiliated with a party. These interviews provide further insights into the digital communications strategies of the parties, and the place of memes and participation in them.

We find, first, that internet memes constitute on average less than 15% of the images shared by Australian political parties, when taking partisan supporter meme pages out of consideration. During the 2022 federal election campaign, memes functioned primarily as a means of visual attack ads or negative campaigning, consistent with previous research that found memes are used primarily to mock or ridicule political opponents (McKelvey, DeJong, and Frenzel 2023), rather than promote a party's platform or policy agenda (McLoughlin and Southern 2021). Building from this initial quantitative work into the critical visual analysis, we identify three distinct styles of internet memes circulated by political parties and partisans: professional, generic, and participatory. These styles point to differences in aesthetic quality and production value (professional memes compared to generic and participatory memes) and the required subcultural knowledge for interpretation (professional and generic memes compared to participatory memes). We argue that these variations in aesthetic quality and required subcultural literacy reflect the participatory character of the content and the organisational logics of the social media users who post them.

Internet memes and political parties

Internet memes are groups of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and stance, created and circulated via the internet with awareness of each other (Shifman 2014). These shared characteristics constitute a template, which functions as the base from which users create unique variations (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2018). The ability for audiences to understand a specific meme instance often relies on specific (sub)cultural knowledge (Miltner 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Shifman 2014) with the successful diffusion of a meme contingent on it fitting the frames of the social networks in which they are produced (Spitzberg 2014). Memes fulfil a variety of social functions. These include the construction of shared values, identity formation and the maintenance of social boundaries (Gal, Shifman, and Kampf 2016; Katz and Shifman 2017; Shifman 2014). As a form of cultural capital, meme literacy distinguishes members of an in-group through their understanding of particular practices of memetic construction and so fulfils a gatekeeping function (Milner 2016; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). The choice to publish a particular meme in a particular digital space is one which 'co-constructs' both individuals as content creators and replicators, as well as a broader collective or community (Gal, Shifman, and Kampf 2016, 1701).

As a form of public discourse, memes about politics are a means of participating in normative arguments 'about how the world should look and the best way to get there' (Shifman 2014, 120). In this regard they fulfil three functions: persuasion or political advocacy, a form of grassroots action, and as modes of expression and public discussion (Shifman 2014). In the context of political campaigns, memes have been used to consolidate political allegiances, and through their virality influence broader political discourses (Dean 2019). Memes can make political messages more accessible to broader audiences, deactivating group boundaries through humour and the remixing of pop culture iconography (McSwiney et al. 2021). Though the policy content of political memes has typically been low, memes can still play an important informational role in bringing political content to those who otherwise may not see it (McLoughlin and Southern 2021). Typically, political parties have deployed memes to 'de-brand or deconstruct' (McKelvey, DeJong, and Frenzel 2023, 1636) and mock political opponents (Dean 2019). This makes them a useful form of negative campaigning, shoring up political identities and the alliances and antagonism associated with them (Dean 2019). That is, memes tend to make supporters feel better about their own party or candidates, while increasing dislike of opponents (Moody-Ramirez and Church 2019). However, memes appear to have little effect in shifting political ideology, with research suggesting that 'political memes are not vectors of persuasion' (Galipeau 2023, 448).

Partisan meme spaces which support a party, but are not directly party controlled, use memes as a form of participatory media during campaigns to build community and hence partisanship, rather than trying to sway voters to influence electoral outcomes (McKelvey, DeJong, and Frenzel 2023). These informal spaces for creating and sharing memes are viewed as a potential means of citizen participation in campaigning (Gibson 2015). These 'partisan scenes' provide a space for supporters to discuss issues in a more ideological and provocative manner than the party organisation itself (McKelvey, DeJong, and Frenzel 2023). At the same time, we know parties are courting meme makers and their followers to reach wider (read: younger) audiences (Kreiss 2016).

Indeed in some cases, political parties have hired or established 'meme factories' of content creators to churn out campaign content (Baulch, Matamoros-Fernández, and Suwana 2024).

The 2022 Australian federal election

The 2022 Australian federal election was announced on 10 April and took place on Saturday, 21 May. All 151 seats in the House of Representatives, and 40 (of 76) seats in the Senate were contested. The conservative Liberal-National Coalition government led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison was defeated and the Australian Labor Party led by Anthony Albanese was returned to government for the first time since 2013. Meanwhile, the Australian Green Party led by Adam Bandt achieved historic results, winning 3 lower house seats in Brisbane in the state of Queensland for the first time. On the other end of the political spectrum, Pauline Hanson's eponymous far-right party, Pauline Hanson's One Nation, performed so poorly that Hanson only narrowly managed to retain her seat in the Senate (McSwiney 2024). In terms of issues, the economy and economic management were most important among voters, with rising inflation and slow wage growth in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic raising widespread concern over the cost of living, followed by climate change and health (Cameron et al. 2022). Political leadership and matters of integrity also factored as a key issue determining how citizens voted (Cameron et al. 2022), with Morrison regarded as widely unpopular by the electorate (Gauja, Sawer, and Sheppard 2023; McAllister 2023).

Research design

We take a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff 2018) and qualitative visual analysis (Rose 2016). This is supplemented with four semi-structured interviews: three with people who had worked on a party's digital campaigns, and one with the creator behind one of the biggest partisan meme pages in Australian politics. We focus on Facebook and Instagram. Our sample includes (where available) the public Facebook pages and Instagram accounts for the five parties mentioned above, each of the parties' leader, youth branch, and one partisan meme page associated with the party (Table 1). Including these four page and account types covers a range of professionalism and organisation within the party, from the leader and national party at one end, to partisan meme pages on the other. The inclusion of party youth branches provides a middle ground between the two, as they tend to be formally associated with, but largely autonomous from, the central party and without the same expectations of professionalism.

Facebook and Instagram are selected as two of the most used social media platforms in Australia. While the technological affordances of both platforms encourage extensive use of visual media, Instagram is a specifically visual medium. The Instagram platform architecture is built around 'grids', profiles of still and video visual media uploaded and shared by the user. These materials remain on the user's grid unless taken down or hidden. This contrasts with other means of sharing visual media on Instagram like 'stories', which are automatically removed after 24 hours, or private messaging. The Facebook platform architecture includes several interfaces. We focus on Facebook

Table 1. Summary of Australian political party and partisan meme Facebook and Instagram accounts.

Party Family	Account	Type	Facebook	Instagram
ALP	Australian Labor Party	Party	AustralianLabor	australianlabor
ALP	Anthony Albanese	Leader	AlboMP	albomp
ALP	Australian Young Labor	Youth	YoungLaborOz	younglaboroz
ALP	ALP Spicy Meme Stash	Partisan	alpspicymemes	alpspicymemes
GRN	The Greens	Party	AustralianGreens	australiangreens
GRN	Adam Bandt	Leader	AdamBandtMP	adambandt
GRN	Australian Young Greens	Youth	AustralianYG	australianygs
GRN	Australian Green Memes for Actually Progressive Teens	Partisan	GreenMemes	–
LIB	Liberal Party	Party	LiberalPartyAustralia	liberalaus
LIB	Scott Morrison	Leader	scottmorrison4cook	scottmorrisonmp
LIB	Young Liberal Movement of Australia	Youth	YoungLibs	youngliberalsaus
LIB	Innovative and Agile Memes	Partisan	InnovativeAndAgileMemes	–
NAT	The Nationals	Party	TheNationalsAus	the_nationals
NAT	Barnaby Joyce	Leader	BarnabyJoyceMP	barnaby.joyce
NAT	Young Nationals	Youth	Young Nationals	–
NAT	The National Party of Memes	Partisan	NatPartyMemes	–
PHON	Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party	Party	OneNationParty	onenationoz
PHON	Pauline Hanson	Leader	PaulineHansonAu	senatorpaulinehanson
PHON	N/A	Youth	N/A	N/A
PHON	N/A	Partisan	N/A	N/A

pages, 'the most public parts of Facebook,' which constitute a 'mass media like one-to-many communication' (Rieder et al. 2015, 3–4). Pages are themselves comprised of various components, including a 'timeline' where all posted material is listed in chronological order (except for pinned posts). This is then broken up by specific tabs for still images ('photos'), pre-recorded video material ('videos'), and archived live video footage ('live').

Our data collection comprises all images posted to the public timeline or grid of the selected pages and accounts during 2022 federal election campaign (10 April – 21 May 2022), excluding profile and banner images, and video content. Content was collected via the CrowdTangle researcher API. This resulted in a total of 3,424 images (Facebook = 2142, Instagram = 1282). To make the data feasible for human coding, we first did an initial round of quantitative coding, manually identifying internet memes from this larger set of images (testing inter-coder reliability for this initial relevance on a sample of 30 images resulted in perfect agreement between the two coders). We identified a subset of 514 internet memes (Facebook = 331, Instagram = 183). We drew a random sample of 100 memes each from Facebook and Instagram to code in greater detail.

For the quantitative content analysis we coded for basic descriptive and compositional variables, such as: whether the image included *pop culture* references; whether the image referenced a *party leader* (either from the page's own party or an opponent); whether the image was *user generated* in the sense of being explicitly attributed to a user either in the image or accompanying text; whether the *tone* of the image was positive or negative; what *issue* the image related to, such as education or the environment; and whether the *aesthetic* of the meme was DIY (do-it-yourself) in the sense of being possible to create for individuals with no particular technical skills or software. These codes all met acceptable thresholds for intercoder reliability (see table A1 in Appendix for individual Krippendorff's alpha values). We included an open text field where we noted any recognisable meme templates.

We then undertook a more substantiative qualitative analysis of a subset of the memes, drawing on Rose's (2016) method of critical visual analysis to understand how visual media can be used to construct and represent the social world. Here, we pay close attention to the overall composition of a meme, including its aesthetic sophistication, and situate the memes in their broader political and cultural context. This was supplemented by semi-structured interviews, to better understand the intent and processes behind the production and circulation of internet memes in party and partisan spaces. Despite difficulties in gaining access, which was expected given the general culture of secrecy that Australian political parties operate in (Gauja and McSwiney 2019), we completed four interviews with a mix of party campaign staff and partisan administrators, drawn from three different parties covering a range of ideological orientations. These interviews provide critical firsthand insights into how memes are used in election campaigns, and the tensions between party and partisan memes.

Findings

The salience of memes in Australian election campaigns

From the number of internet memes posted, it is clear that memes constitute only a small proportion of the wider digital visual media created and circulated by Australian political parties during the 2022 federal election – at least on Facebook and Instagram. This is consistent with previous research that found the salience of political memes has been overstated in some contexts (McSwiney et al. 2021). Across all pages in our study, the mean proportion of image posts containing memes was 15% (although this average was as expected higher for partisan spaces at 28% compared with 13% for all other pages, and these proportions mask considerable variation in the number of posts by each page).

The Nationals did not create or circulate internet memes from any of their accounts, while the PHON national party organisation posted only a handful. Overall, the visual content of the Nationals and PHON is very limited compared to the ALP, Liberals, and Greens. While the other three parties posted internet memes, there are differences in the way they are distributed across the different types of pages and accounts sampled (Figure 1). For the ALP, the national party organisation posted more memes than the partisan meme space, but the accounts for the party leader Anthony Albanese and the youth branch posted no memes. For the Liberals, the national party organisation likewise posted most of the memes, with many also originating with the youth branch. However, though there was a Liberal party partisan meme space on Facebook it was inactive during the election, and Liberal leader Scott Morrison did not post any memes. In the Greens, the national party organsiation, leader Adam Bandt, youth branch, and partisan meme page all posted memes, though the greatest quantity was posted by the partisan space.

Among these three parties, several clear patterns emerged. First, in terms of content themes, the main topics each of the parties shared memes about generally followed their characteristic policy focuses (Figure 2). The ALP posted memes mostly on political trust (48%), followed by the economy (24%) and social services (20%). The Liberals also posted memes about political trust (25%), but not nearly as often as memes about the
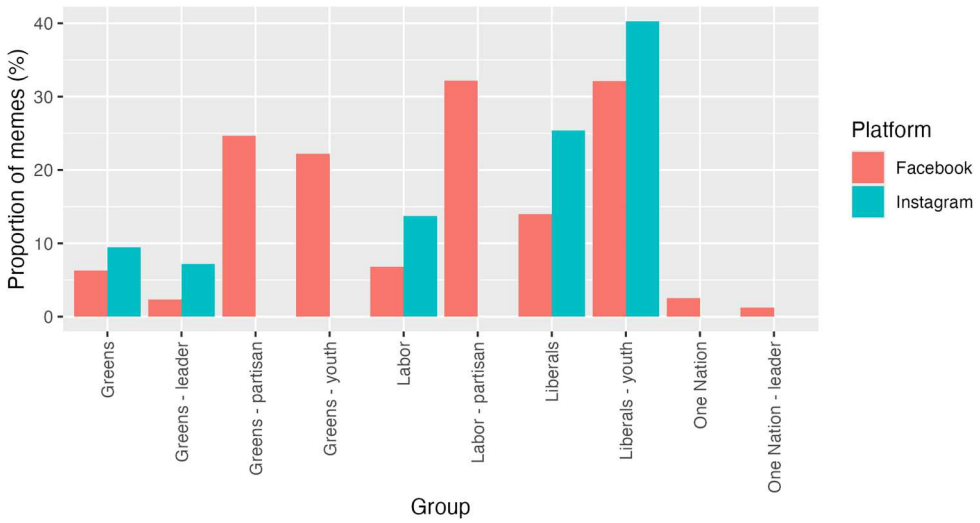
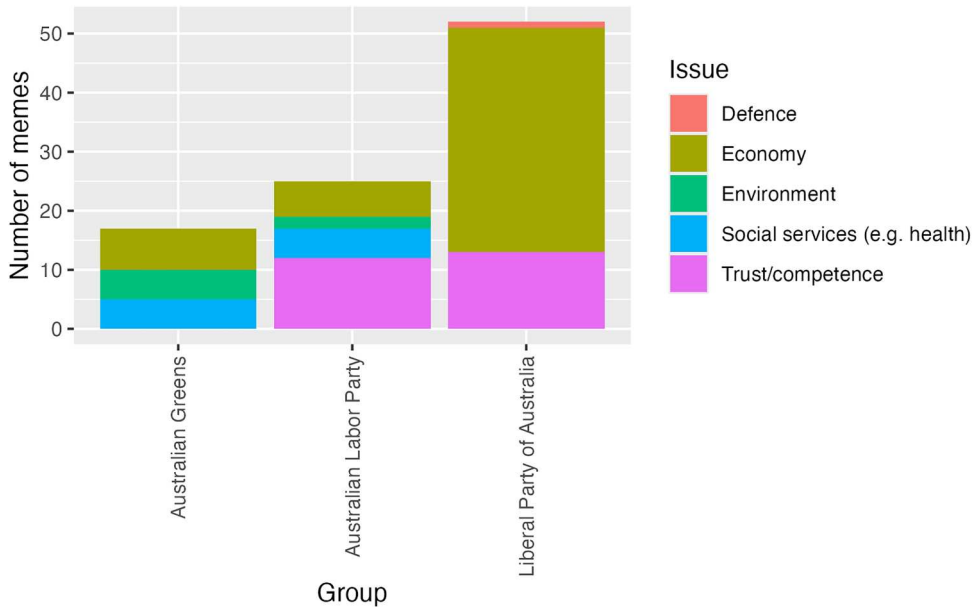**Figure 1.** Proportion of memes in posts per actor, by platform.

Figure 2. Key issues in memes, ALP, Greens, and Liberals.

economy (73%). The Greens focused on a mix of the economy (30%), social services (22%), as well as environmental issues (22%). Cost of living was a thematic emphasis across all three parties.

Second, and expectedly, pop culture references were frequently deployed, with 42% of our coded sample containing references to pop culture icons like the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* or science fiction franchise *Star Wars*. Third, memes rarely included images of the leader of the party sharing the meme (e.g. Liberal memes

rarely included Scott Morrison), but often referenced the leader of another party leader (e.g. ALP memes often included Scott Morrison). This was typically to mock or ridicule the leader of an opposing political party as a means of visual negative campaigning. Fourth, and relatedly, the ALP and Liberals appear to engage in a degree of content copying in terms of memetic templates used. For example, it was not uncommon for a meme posted by the ALP attacking the Liberals to be reposted by the Liberals shortly after but remixed to flip the attack on the ALP, and vice versa (Figure 3).

Last, participatory and user-generated content is quite minimal in the official election campaigns of the parties (i.e. circulated in posts by the accounts of the national party organisation or party leader). This applies in terms of both creator attribution (either in image or in accompanying text), as well as whether memes were cross-posted from youth branches or the partisan spaces. Memes shared by the ALP and Liberal parties in particular appear to be exclusively 'in-house' products created by those formally affiliated with the digital campaigns. In the case of the Greens, there
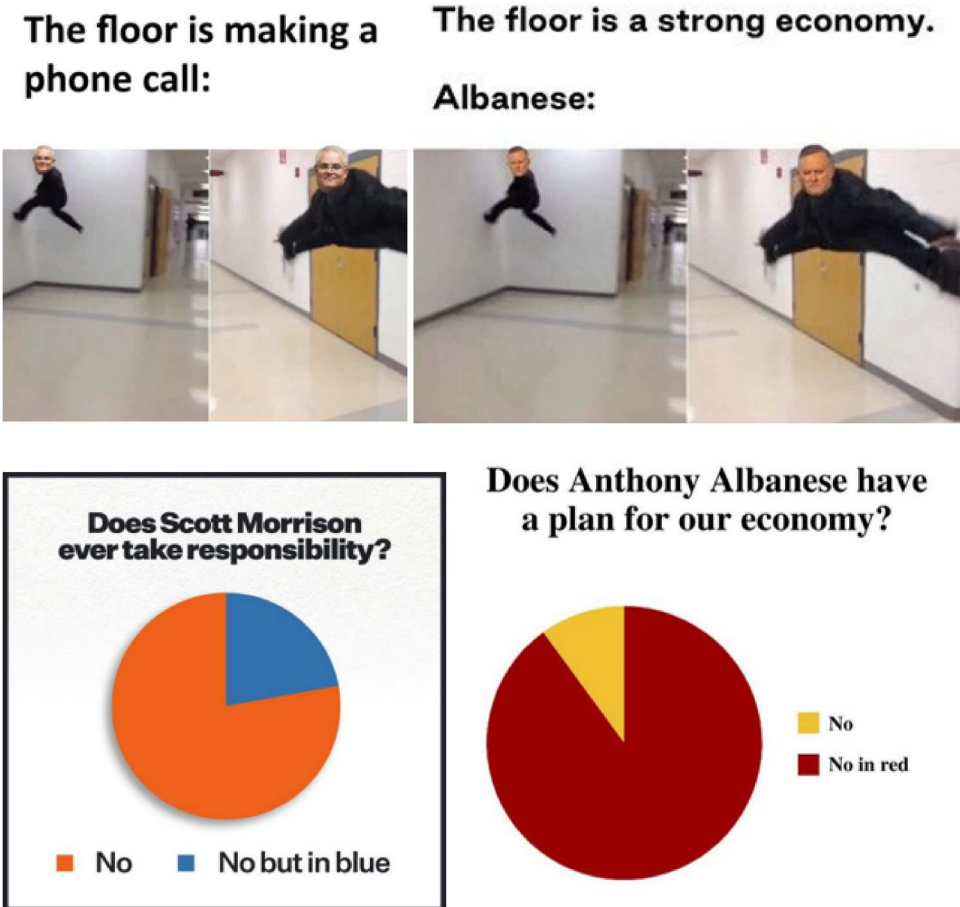

Figure 3. Examples of meme reproduction by the ALP (top left, bottom left) and Liberals (top right, bottom right) attacking the leader of the opposing party. Source: @AustralianLabor, @LiberalPartyAustralia, Facebook.

were some images circulated that originated in the partisan meme space and youth branch – though without attribution – or were follower submitted (and acknowledged in the accompanying text), but this was in the minority of the content posted by the Greens party overall.

Memetic styles in election campaigns

Building on our initial quantitative content analysis, our qualitative visual analysis identified three distinct styles of internet memes posted by the parties: professional, generic, and participatory. These styles reflect differences in the aesthetic and production quality of the memes, as well as the extent of subcultural knowledge required among audiences for the intended interpretation. Though inductively developed through our visual analysis, the three styles speak to previous research on the participatory dimensions of memes (McKelvey, DeJong, and Frenzel 2023; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Shifman 2014) and the growing professionalisation of meme production (Baulch, Matamoros-Fernández, and Suwana 2024; Burroughs 2020). They also capture the sentiment of internet culture slang used to describe different meme qualities. For example, the generic memes we identify tend to rely on highly saturated meme templates, and so in this sense respect, might be considered 'normie' memes in that their content is 'boringly conventional or mainstream' (Know Your Meme 2015).

Professional memes

Memes in the professional category all require a degree of sophistication with photo editing software on behalf of the creator, while lacking any significant subcultural knowledge to interpret. In the data, spoof movie posters are characteristic of this professionalised style of memes. These memes remix promotional posters from recognisable Hollywood films to ridicule political opponents. As Figure 4 shows, these images require some knowledge in the use of photo editing, with minimal deviation from the original promotional poster. There are no crude edges or poorly executed cut-and-paste edits. Color and font are extremely similar, if not identical, to those in the source material. Notably, this kind of meme was produced and shared almost exclusively by the accounts for the national party organisations of the ALP and Liberals. Aside from the pop culture references and the more humorous tone, these professionalised memes are not especially different from the non-memetic materials shared by these parties, such as regular campaign posters.

The better visual fidelity of these images is likely in part a product of the greater resources available to major parties in Australia. According to Clark Cooley, federal president of the Young Liberals and one of the administrators of the Young Liberal Movement of Australia page, 'Coalition central headquarters has a social media team of 15-20 people who run all the memes for the main pages and candidates'. The thematic direction of the content, and to some extent the overall creative control, is also top-down. A member of the ALP's organic content team within the digital campaign explained that the team would receive 'direction about what the theme is for the day or the week, through formal channels like [team leader] coming back from the director's meeting each morning and being like: this is what's on the agenda'. What distinguishes these professional memes from other memes in the data is the lack of play or experimentation.

Figure 4. Examples of spoof movie posters as professional memes shared by the ALP (bottom) and Liberals (top). Source: @AustralianLabor, @LiberalPartyAustralia.

They are (by the standards of the rest of the data) high-quality advertising products, which suggest little to no room for participatory input due to the greater technical skills involved in production.

Generic memes

Generic memes are those which the everyday social media user can be expected to understand and share. In this respect, they rely on widely circulating internet meme templates,
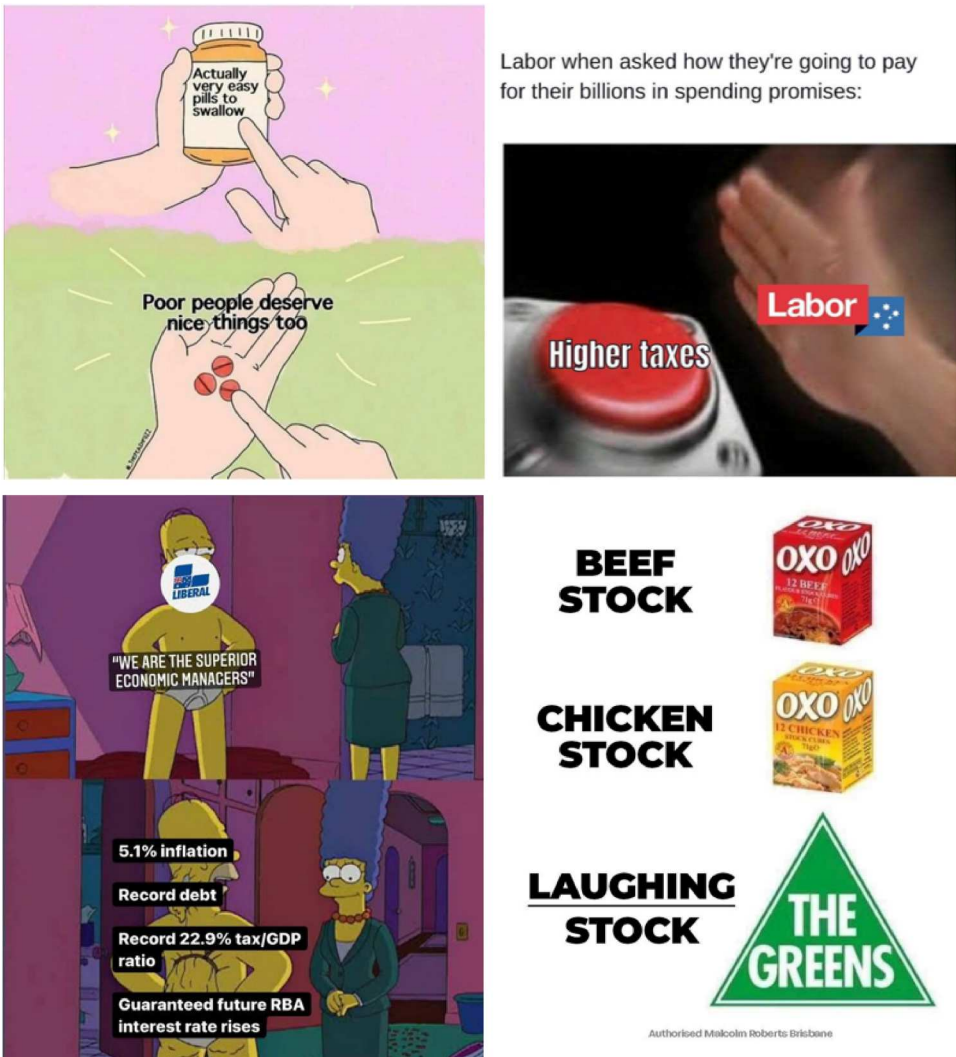
Figure 5. Examples of generic memes shared by the Australian Greens for Actually Progressive Teens (top left), Young Liberals (top right), ALP (bottom left) and Pauline Hanson's One Nation (bottom right). Source: @GreenMemes, @YoungLibs, @AustralianLabor, @OneNationParty.

but require no real subcultural knowledge to grasp the intended reading. They also require little-to-no technical sophistication to create, and can easily be made using online meme generators or through the insertion of minor elements like text (Figure 5). This makes generic memes ideally suited to the thinness of contemporary political communications in that they allow creators to take one simple message ('X has no plan for the economy') and recycle it through many different templates. Doing so enables creators to keep the novelty of the visual content alive (by rotating the meme the message is communicated through) while reinforcing the same strategic narrative.

Such memes also rely on common pop culture references like *The Simpsons*. The reason for this, explained Elizabeth Thomspon, a former convenor of the New South

Wales Young Greens who helps administer the Australian Young Greens Facebook page, is because the show 'plays a bit to people's comfort and familiarity … people like it when they get the reference.' The administer behind partisan meme page Australian Green Memes for Actually Progressive Teens agrees: 'I think your *Simpsons* references are very ubiquitous with political memes, not just in Australian, but everywhere … the best memes are timeless … we've all grown up with *The Simpsons*'. Interestingly, the accessibility of *The Simpsons* as a cultural reference has a standarising effect on the kind of memes produced. As Clark Cooley explained, though the Young Liberal Movement of Australia page tried to experiment with other references and templates, *The Simpsons* content was so successful that they kept returning to it for their memes:

> We tried different things out. We had a meme about the *Real Housewives of Melbourne*. We tried movies, we tried *Pokémon* … We tried a whole bunch of other stuff, *Star Wars*, all of this. But really what cut through is *The Simpsons*. I think maybe it's universal, maybe everyone knows it. You don't have to get *Star Wars* humour. Not everyone understands that, but everyone, everyone knows that [*The Simpsons* character] Homer is an idiot. So when we put a video with Anthony Albanese not knowing the unemployment rate, and Homer Simpson dubbed over the top, people get that.

Thanks to the ease of production and interpretation, generic memes account for most of the memes circulated by the parties during the campaign. These memes were present across the ALP, Liberals, Greens, and account for the only instances of meme-sharing by PHON. This kind of memetic content can be found across the accounts of national party organisations, youth branches, and partisan meme pages. That these low-quality visual products are being produced by youth branches and partisan meme pages is unsurprising given their limited resources, but their production and circulation by the accounts of the national party organisations is curious. These organisations – particularly the ALP and Liberals as Australia's two major parties – have well-staffed campaigns with dedicated digital communications teams. Based on the quantitative analysis, and confirmed in the interviews, these parties produce their content primarily in-house rather than sourcing it from follower submissions. So, while their content producers clearly have the capacity to create higher quality visual products like the professional memes discussed above, they are instead often choosing to mimic the low-budget, do-it-yourself aesthetic of generic memes for strategic purposes. Essentially, the parties are attempting to fake the participatory aesthetics of internet memes as a way of signalling authenticity, without having to actually engage the public in their creation and circulation.

Participatory memes

In contrast to the professional and generic memes, we identify a third group, participatory memes. Aesthetically, participatory memes are comparable to those in the generic meme category. What distinguishes them is the greater degree of subcultural knowledge required for interpretation.

The best example of participatory memes in the campaign originated in the Greens-supporting partisan page Australian Green Memes for Actually Progressive Teens. In particular, a set of image macro memes spruiking the Greens proposed billionaire tax (Figure 6). Here, the use of images like the glass-topped outdoor table and Coles

if you've had a deep late night conversation at one of these tables with your friends at 1am, you will not be affected by the Greens plan to tax billionaires and corporations

if you have dedicated an afternoon to being on a call to Centrelink, you will not be affected by the Greens plan to tax billionaires and corporations
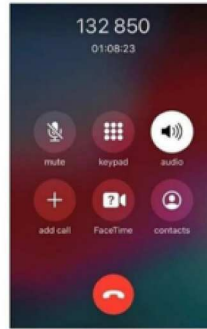
if seeing this email gives you anxiety, you will not be affected by the Greens plan to tax billionaires and corporations
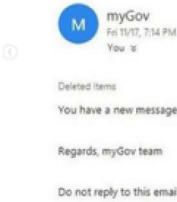
if your last party featured one of these bad boys, you will not be affected by the Greens plan to tax billionaires and corporations

Figure 6. Examples of billionaire tax memes. These memes, originally posted by the *Australian Green Memes for Actually Progressive Teens* partisan page were later picked up and reposted by accounts for the Greens party organisation and party leader Adam Bandt.

supermarket chocolate cake, and references to MyGov emails and calls to social service provider Centrelink, have a specifically 'ordinary' character to them. These visual cues are distinctly recognisable to a younger and typically more financially precarious Australian audience that is particularly active on social media, but are likely make little sense to those outside the intended audience. This is very much the creator's intent. As the page's administrator explained, they wanted to do something 'quintessentially Australian' with this content to really drive home the message that the vast majority of Australians would be unaffected by proposed tax: 'I Googled kind of like your *Buzzfeed* lists, like classic, "this is how you know you're Australian," that kind of thing'. The result is images which provoke a sense of authenticity, suggesting that the creator too is just like the intended audience, in that they also 'get' these distinctly Australian cues. In this respect, participatory memes differ from those in the professional and generic categories

in that they have an originality and specificity which allows the sharer to articulate a positionality as outside the party-professional clique.

This aligns with the more participatory nature of the Greens meme community. Memes shared by the party and party leader Adam Bandt were occasionally lifted from the partisan Green Memes for Actually Progressive Teens or Young Greens pages, which in turn were often submitted by the followers of these pages. Indeed, as the administrator of Green Memes for Actually Progressive Teens explained, once they posted the first few memes in the billionaires tax series, followers then started submitting their own, which would then be reposted to the page as an album to collate all the related content, with attribution to the submitting page followers.

Political memes between parties and partisans

Despite the hype, not all parties who engaged in digital campaigning posted internet memes. Pauline Hanson's One Nation posted only three memes and the Nationals posted none. This is surprising given the low production costs to make such content relative to other digital visual media like the *Please Explain* animated miniseries that PHON has been commissioning since 2021 (McSwiney and Sengul 2024), and in the case of the Nationals is at odds with the posting activity of their senior coalition partners the Liberals. Among the pages of parties that more frequently posted memes during the 2022 federal election campaign – the ALP, Liberals, and Greens – we find a clear relationship between the production and circulation of memes, and the type of organisation that shares the content. For the most part, when Australian political parties use internet memes, it is a top-down process, consistent with the institutionalisation and professionalisation of meme production in political campaigns elsewhere (e.g. Baulch, Matamoros-Fernández, and Suwana 2024; Dean 2019). What we call professional memes are the bulk of memetic content produced and shared by the main party pages and accounts of the ALP and Liberals, and to a lesser extent, of the Greens. With their high visual fidelity and a low threshold for interpretation, professional memes more closely resemble the corporate 'meme-jacking' advertisements of the 2010s (Milner 2016). This content is the most accessible for a broad audience of social media users, but in the pursuit of accessibility and reach effectively reduces the genre of internet memes to digital advertising.

However, there is a tension between the hierarchical logic of party and campaign organisation, and participatory internet cultures present on social media and meme audiences. This tension is found in the simultaneous use of professional memes and what we term generic memes, characterised by an amateurish do-it-yourself or 'internet ugly' aesthetic (Douglas 2014). What makes the DIY aesthetic of generic memes noteworthy is that paid party professionals who have the time to produce high quality content (professional memes) are also creating content that looks deliberately amateurish (generic memes). In effect, they are aping this DIY aesthetic for a specific communicative purpose: to fake the participatory ethos of meme cultures to make content appear authentic.

This mix of low-quality generic memes alongside the professionalised content (and wider high-budget digital campaign materials like campaign videos) can be explained

by the need for party organisations to speak to broad and diverse audiences. Our inter-viewee from the ALP campaign team suggested that this was because:

> The party permits, the party facade rather, not the structure, but the party voice permits a multitude of different voices and a multitude of different tonalities. So, you can have a Kar-dashian meme and anime manga meme go out under the same banner. And people intel-lectually appreciate that there are different tonalities within a bigger institutional voice.

Party leaders meanwhile rarely used memes during the campaign, with a partial excep-tion for Greens leader Adam Bandt. Likely, the lack of internet memes among party leaders is because the ironic and often frivolous tone of memes is incompatible with the performance of gravitas expected of most political leaders. As our ALP campaign interviewee explained:

> I think that the organisational level is better at empowering and permitting creativity for the same reason. They know that they need to have a breadth of voice, whereas I think when you get to an individual, a human, there is a clear or a desire to have a clear voice, and typically for that voice to … have a kind of dignity to it.

However, because of this need for more a closely controlled tone, and the top-down nature of meme production by professional party organisations, there is almost no scope for participation. No content that we analysed from the ALP or Liberals was crowd-sourced, either through user submissions, or reposting content from partisan meme pages or youth branches. Even within the party organisations, there is a highly ter-ritorial approach to content production across offices. For example, the ALP campaigner said that it was challenging for the organic content team within the digital campaign to get the content they wanted out via party leader Anthony Albanese's social media:

> His whole staff basically wanted to file off any rough edges. They didn't want anything going to him that they didn't think he would sign off, which meant that everything was extremely vanilla. I was able to add a little bit of colour into it, but it required a lot of consultation and fighting.

By contrast, memes shared by party youth branches and partisan meme spaces maintain a greater participatory potential, both in their production (with memes frequently user-submitted) and their visual style. For youth branches, their status as auxiliary party units affords greater flexibility to play with tone compared to the parent parties. For example, in the Young Liberals, Clark said their memes often affected the tone of 'rugby-boy, lads vibe … sort of schoolyard nonsense, high school level humour', something that would not be appropriate for the main party organisation. A similar freedom exists for the par-tisan pages, as the Green Memes for Actually Progressive Teens moderator explained: 'The page that I run, we can be a bit rogue in what we can post. There's less boundaries as opposed to your official Greens page'. This allows such spaces to, as Clark put it 'maybe reach a different demographic to those people following the former Prime Minister or the Liberal party main pages'.

For partisan and youth branch spaces, the participatory potential aligns with the more decentralised, bottom-up organisational structures. In this content, internet memes were viewed as a way for people to engage in politics, while also addressing gaps in campaign capacity by sharing the burden of content creation. Elizabeth explained that the Young Greens page had set up 'a group where people could submit their own content and we

would credit whoever made that content and essentially just give them the framework to do it.' Likewise, the moderator of the Greens partisan page would accept memes submitted by users either via direct messaging or in the comments under other posts on the page. This participatory approach to production helps to foster a sense of community around the pages, which the creators believe contributes to the wider Greens activist base: 'You have opportunities to, I guess, raise their engagement level from just a once off to following the page to then joining the party to then in volunteering and things like that. And those opportunities can occur within each post,' said the moderator of the Greens partisan page. There is also an ideologically affinity between the Greens and the participatory impetus of internet memes, as Elizabeth explained:

> You've got this ideology of grassroots democracy [in the Greens], but we need to be able to enact that. And I think that's more than just making sure everybody's heard at the meeting or consensus decision making. So, in the way in which we campaign … was by making it easier to be able to have the content bringing people in because it's how you build a movement, giving people something to do. And not [just] making them feel like they are, but generally showing them that they are making a difference.

We find a similar process in the content shared by the Young Liberals. As Clark explained, the Young Liberals also actively sought to encourage their community to submit content – though noting that here community takes on a much narrower definition in terms of the community of party members – estimating that at least 40% of memes shared by the Young Liberal Movement of Australia page were community submitted. However, the logic here is more about party competition than enacting participatory, grassroots democracy. As Clark explained, the Young Liberal Movement of Australia page had two strategies for their memes. The first, was the 'activation of our own members' to mobilise and reinforce existing partisan affiliations. The second:

> was wasting as much time as possible of our opposition … if I can put out a post which says it won't be 'easy under Albanese', and we get five-thousand interactions with that, that's five-thousand interactions that they [ALP supporters] are having with us rather than swing voters in North Sydney.

Only occasionally are there clear interactions between party and partisan memes in terms of cross-posting in our dataset, and when it occurs, it is mostly content diffusing from partisans to party pages and accounts after individual memes achieve virality. Nevertheless, the relationship between partisan and professional party spaces was generally seen as quite close, and generally supportive. 'I don't think we're competing at all,' the moderator of the Greens partisan page explained, adding that 'we're all helping each other'. Clark had a similar view: 'we're the same organisation, so we'll take that content and post it on our own.'

In the ALP and Liberals, it seems that the relationship between party and partisan spaces was particularly close, though the partisan and youth branch spaces acted autonomously. For example, Clark explained that the relationship between the youth branch page and the central digital campaign team was 'very close … we talk every day. If there's things that they have created that they've got extra, I have no problem throwing it up [on our page]. So sometimes that higher quality stuff does drip down to us.' In the ALP, our interviewee said that of the various ALP meme account across social media, a significant proportion are 'probably managed or owned by people who were connected to

the campaign', and had likely come to work on the official campaign because of their other social media accounts:

> It's not like the party directs or facilitates it in any way or resources it in any way. It's more that somebody within … the 'extended Labor cinematic universe' has just decided to make it [a meme page], and then by virtue of being reasonably good at it, ends up having a position in the campaign … There is a degree of collusion during the campaign, but it would be inaccurate to assume that it was an astroturfing exercise of the party cultivating all of these different groups off to the side.

Conclusion

Memes have, for the most part, become integrated into the communications repertoire of party organisations. At the same time, memes represent a limited – albeit conversation driving – component of the professional digital campaigns of Australia's major parties. Previous research suggests that this cut through does not improve policy knowledge among voters (McLoughlin and Southern 2021). Rather, political parties tend to use internet memes as a way of boosting brand recognition and exposure (McKelvey, DeJong, and Frenzel 2023). This is consistent with our findings that memes are primarily used by Australian political parties in a campaign setting as negative ads attacking political opponents, rather than positive policy proposals. An exception to this trend is the series of billionaire tax memes shared by some of the Greens party and partisan pages and accounts, discussed above.

We find that the way political parties use internet memes is less about finding innovative ways to engage a broader base of citizens in politics, and more about developing a narrow extension of the existing strategic communication repertoires of parties. The hope that followers of a party's social media will repost their content in their own networks, and so reach wider audiences, no doubt informs why Australian parties pursue memes as part of their digital campaigns (McSwiney 2021; see also: Galipeau 2023; McLoughlin and Southern 2021). But is this actually the case, and what electoral impact do memes have? As Galipeau (2023) notes, more research is needed regarding the effects (if any) memes have on vote choice or agenda setting. Our interviewees were no more certain. Elizabeth said they 'don't think many votes have swung through social media' and our interviewee from the ALP's organic content team was similarly uncertain: 'I don't know how many votes it wins'. Part of the problem, as Clark notes, is that the page and account administrators do not really know who the actual audience is: 'it's just so difficult to know whether or not we're just talking to our own people or we're actually talking to swing voters'.

Given this uncertainty, what seems most likely is that the production and circulation of memes in political campaigns is less about converting swing voters as it is engaging and energising existing members and supporters of a party (Dean 2019; McKelvey, DeJong, and Frenzel 2023). Their adoption seems in large part driven by party competition dynamics, especially if we consider the ways the major parties essentially copy the content posted by their opponents. As we demonstrate, the story for partisans is more complex. Here, memes serve a general function of engaging party supporters and members. However, they also play party-specific roles: representing

genuine efforts at practicing central ideological pillars of the party in the case of the Young Greens and Greens partisan spaces, or as a means of opposition campaign time-wasting – a rather literal kind of 'wasteful online play' (Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, and Dobusch 2018) – in the case of the Young Liberals. That internet memes derive so much media coverage is more indicative of journalistic and editorial interest, in that it provides a novel angle for campaign reporting with a potential youth focus, rather than reflecting the actual political impact of memes or their importance to a party's campaign overall.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

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Appendix

Table A1. Inter-coder reliability tests

Variable	Krippendorff' alpha
Pop culture	0.88
Party leader - own	1
Party leader - other	0.91
User generated	0.74
Tone	0.73
Issue	0.8
Aesthetic	0.69