

Engagement or Expression? A Comparative Study of Facebook Politics in Twelve European Countries

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Abstract: *This article examines how citizens engage with political actors on Facebook across twelve European countries, focusing on the nature and intensity of user interaction. Drawing on a dataset of over 70,000 Facebook comments on posts by national-level political leaders, we conduct a comparative content analysis to categorise digital expressions such as clicktivism, civic engagement or political participation. We also assess how political actors use Facebook to promote interaction and participatory behaviour. Our findings reveal that while Facebook provides a platform for political communication, most user engagement consists of low-effort, expressive behaviours with limited deliberative depth. Substantive forms of civic engagement and political participation are comparatively rare. The analysis also shows that few politicians use Facebook to encourage citizen participation or engage in two-way communication. These findings highlight the discrepancy between the platform's participatory affordances and their actual utilisation. Rather than driving transformative political participation, Facebook serves primarily as a space for symbolic and affective expression. By mapping variations across countries and political roles, this study contributes to a more grounded understanding of digital engagement in contemporary democracies.*

Keywords: *political participation, Facebook, political engagement, social media*

Introduction

Social media¹ serves diverse political functions, including influencing public opinion, mobilising support, disseminating information (as well as misin-

¹ Social media are internet-based platforms for mass personal communication that facilitate interactions among users and derive their value primarily from user-generated content (van Bavel et al. 2024; Carr & Hayes 2015). As such, social media encompass various platforms, including social networks such

formation and disinformation), enhancing civic engagement, and shaping political campaigns and discourse (e.g. Bossetta 2018; Gainous et al. 2021; Vaccari & Valeriani 2021; Hunter 2023). Digital technologies play a significant role in shaping, transforming and challenging political ideas and participatory trends in modern democracies, even if they represent only one of many agents driving these transformations. As Botero Arcila and Griffin (2023) argue, digital technology exerts its influence through its affordances, which refer to the ways in which technological features enable or constrain particular actions and interactions. They note that ‘different technologies make certain actions and interactions easier or harder to perform. All things being equal, things that are easier to do given particular affordances are likelier to be done, while harder things are less likely’ (Botero Arcila & Griffin 2023: 19).

In general, social media’s affordances play an integral role in shaping political participation by enhancing visibility (Kim & Ellison 2021), fostering interaction (Jenkins 2006), enabling community building (Vaccari & Valeriani 2021) and reducing barriers to engagement (Theocharis et al. 2022). As platform affordances vary considerably in how they influence political behaviour (Bossetta 2018), this article focuses specifically on Facebook (FB), the social network most commonly used both for news consumption (Newman et al. 2024) and political communication by politicians (Pedersen 2022).

Over the past decade, Facebook has maintained a prominent position among online platforms for news consumption. However, recent algorithmic changes introduced by Meta that deprioritise news have led to a decline in Facebook’s use for this purpose – from 36% in 2014 to 26% in 2024. Despite this reduction, Facebook remains the leading platform for news consumption (Newman et al. 2024).

Drawing on a dataset of over 70,000 Facebook comments, this analysis reveals that while individuals do engage in political communication on social media, such interactions rarely qualify as substantive political participation. Although Facebook’s technical features enable interactive communication and provide direct access to political actors, these affordances are seldom used to influence political outcomes – whether at the level of actors, institutions or structures. Instead, Facebook discussions predominantly serve as a platform for users to express emotions, opinions and concerns, rather than to advocate for or against changes to the political status quo.

This article has two primary objectives. First, it offers a descriptive and comparative analysis of how citizens engage with political actors on Facebook across twelve European countries. It examines the forms and intensity of user partici-

as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and others. Despite the distinct features inherent to different platforms and applications, scholars commonly use overarching terms like ‘social media’ or ‘digital media’ in their analyses. In this text, we adopt the term ‘social media’ accordingly.

pation – ranging from low-effort clicktivism to more substantive expressions of civic engagement and political participation. Second, the article contributes to theoretical debates on digital political behaviour by applying an affordance-based framework to assess how Facebook's platform architecture enables or constrains different types of political engagement. Rather than evaluating Facebook's impact on political institutions or citizen attitudes directly, the study focuses on observable patterns of interaction and the extent to which platform affordances are leveraged by both users and politicians.

Social media as a tool for political participation

The interactive nature of social media platforms fosters civic and political engagement by enabling individuals to participate in political discourse, share their views and mobilise for causes they care about. Some theoretical frameworks suggest that this increased engagement can contribute to a more inclusive political process, making it more representative of diverse voices. Civic engagement and political participation are believed not only to revitalise democracy (Saud et al. 2023) but also to promote greater accountability and improve human well-being (Gainous et al. 2021).

The affordances of social media play an important role in shaping users' interactions with political content and their engagement in civic activities, thereby influencing democratic processes. First, social media enhances the visibility of political messages and events by enabling political parties and activists to quickly reach a broad audience. The platform architecture facilitates content sharing, which amplifies messages within users' networks. This phenomenon aligns with the 'two-step flow of communication' model (Soffer 2021), whereby information disseminates rapidly through interpersonal connections. Second, the affordance of persistent conversation on platforms like Facebook supports sustained dialogue on political issues, creating an environment for deliberation (Halpern & Gibbs 2013; Jennings et al. 2021). This interactive feature fosters deeper engagement with political content compared to traditional media or offline settings. Third, platforms such as Facebook and X facilitate the formation of associations and communities centered around shared political interests. By joining such groups, users gain a sense of belonging and are often motivated toward collective action, effectively linking online interactions with offline political activities (see e.g. Contri et al. 2023). Finally, social media significantly lowers barriers to political participation (de Zúñiga et al. 2024) by reducing the logistical and financial costs associated with organising and disseminating information about political initiatives. Within this framework, it is reasonable to posit that the unique affordances of social media platforms substantively shape political participation by making it more accessible and efficient.

However, while social media offers unprecedented opportunities for civic discourse, it simultaneously presents challenges to meaningful political participation. Several scholars have pointed out critical limitations in social media's model of political engagement, raising concerns about deliberative quality as well as motivational and cognitive barriers. Online political discussions often lack substantive depth, with platforms potentially reducing complex discourse to superficial interactions (Schäfer et al. 2024). Moreover, political participation through social media is mediated by psychological factors such as self-efficacy and outcome expectancy. These cognitive mechanisms suggest that not all digital interactions translate into genuine political participation (Theocharis & Quintelier 2014).

Thus, central questions in the academic study of online political activity are: What types of political actions are occurring on these platforms? Can they be classified as political participation, or are they better understood as forms of civic engagement? Alternatively, are these online activities a distinct phenomenon that cannot be easily compared to offline political actions? (e.g. see Gibson & Cantijoch 2013; Theocharis et al. 2022). To address these questions, it is essential to clarify the conceptual differences between the terms *involvement*, *engagement* and *participation*, which are often used interchangeably. This distinction will be useful in categorising the types of political activities that take place on Facebook.

While this article highlights users' participatory affordances, it is also essential to acknowledge that political actors play a significant role in shaping the dynamics of engagement on social media. As early as 2000, Stromer-Galley noted that politicians were reluctant to use interactive features due to fears of losing control. Subsequent studies, such as Jackson and Lilleker (2009), found that political communication on social platforms often remained one-way, with parties prioritising control over interaction. This tendency continues today, as many politicians use social media primarily as broadcasting tools, bypassing traditional media to communicate directly through controlled channels. Acemoglu, Ozdaglar and Parandeh-Gheibi (2010) describe such actors as 'forceful agents' – those who seek to influence others without being influenced themselves. These practices significantly shape the nature and tone of user engagement.

That said, social media platforms – especially Facebook – also provide opportunities for political actors to promote genuine participation. For example, politicians may initiate online referenda or issue-based polls to gather constituents' opinions on policy proposals. Some organise live video discussions or Q & A sessions with their constituency, creating a more direct and interactive form of political dialogue. Others use chat-box features to allow real-time conversations with users, offering feedback or clarifying positions. Such efforts can encourage citizen involvement, increase transparency and strengthen the perceived responsiveness of political elites. While the present paper focuses

primarily on user comments, it is important to recognise that such engagement cannot be fully understood without considering the content and communicative strategies of political actors themselves. Therefore, the influence of the ‘source’ – what users are responding to – is a critical factor and is acknowledged here as a limitation, meriting further exploration in future research.

Conceptualisation of participatory political behaviour

The term ‘political participation’ encompasses a wide array of citizen activities aimed at influencing political processes. While early definitions, such as that by Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995: 9), focus on ‘activity intended to or having the consequence of affecting government action’, contemporary scholarship broadens this scope to include both institutional and non-institutional acts. Sairambay (2020: 124), for instance, defines political participation as ‘any action by citizens that is intended to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures’, integrating both online and offline modes, and emphasising *intention* as the distinguishing factor.

Under this definition, not only is formal electoral participation (voting, working for political party) recognised as political participation but also a variety of activities with intention to influence political structures (e.g. working for trade unions, political protests, participating in specific social movements² or contacting people in power regarding a public matter).

This intention-based framework is crucial for distinguishing political participation from closely related concepts such as *civic engagement* and *expressive engagement*. Civic engagement refers to activities that may be socially meaningful or publicly oriented, yet lack a clear political objective (Adler & Goggin 2005; Ekman & Amnå 2012). It is a ‘latent’ form of participation (Sairambay 2020) – potentially political in consequence, but not necessarily in intent. This concept is not limited to political issues but encompasses a broad range of societal concerns. Ekman and Amnå (2012) characterise civic engagement as ‘latent participation’, emphasising that it is ‘potentially political’ in nature. This distinction acknowledges that individuals may ‘engage socially in a number of ways, formally outside of the political domain but nevertheless in ways that may have political consequences’ (2012: 288). Examples of such activities include consuming political news, engaging in political discussions or participating in boycotts or buycotts for environmental or human rights reasons. While these actions are linked to political outcomes, they do not directly aim to change political institutions or structures and therefore fall under the category of civic engagement rather than political participation.

2 It is important that a social movement has a clear goal of influencing political structures.

Expressive engagement, particularly on social media, adds another layer: It involves articulating views on political or societal matters, but does not always include the structured argumentation or mobilisation-oriented purpose typically associated with civic or political acts (Keating & Melis 2017; Shola 2021). Social media platforms, defined as tools for mass personal communication that enable user interactions (van Bavel et al. 2024), are predominantly characterised by expressive forms of participation (Ruess et al. 2023). Expressive participation involves the public articulation of political thoughts (Boyle et al. 2006). For political communication to qualify as participatory behaviour, its public nature is a crucial factor. For instance, private discussions about politics among friends or family, while critical for fostering political identity and internal efficacy, are more appropriately categorised as civic engagement unless explicitly aimed at influencing political actors or institutions (Puig-i-Abril & Rojas 2007).

This study applies these distinctions to social media, especially Facebook, where engagement often blurs the lines between personal expression and political action. For example, expressing discontent in a comment about a government policy may qualify as *expressive engagement*, *civic engagement* or *political participation* depending on how the message is framed and what intent is inferred.

Why Facebook comments matter for studying political participation

The activities of social media users in political contexts can be broadly categorised into three types: consuming political information, reacting to and sharing political content, and creating one's own original political content.

Activities requiring minimal effort – such as passively consuming political information – can be categorised as **online political involvement**, indicative of basic attentiveness to politics. This includes behaviours such as consuming political news or visiting political websites. On social media, this translates into passive use, where individuals simply view political content without engaging with it. Gainous et al. (2021) label such individuals as 'lurkers', who follow updates and posts but refrain from participating in discussions or debates.

Expressive activities on social media, which involve active engagement, include posting political content, commenting on posts or participating in debates. These activities require more effort and are interactive in nature, reflecting what Verduyn et al. (2017) describe as 'activities that facilitate direct exchange with others'.

Further, we distinguish between expressive and civic engagement on social media. We base the distinction upon the literature pointing out that *civic engagement* uses argumentation constructively to achieve shared goals, while *expressive engagement* often prioritises personal perspective, which may result in less argumentatively structured, but more emotionally charged statements

(Keating & Melis 2017; Shola 2021). So, in effect, both types of engagement may involve using social media to express personal opinions, or identities related to societal and political issues, without necessarily aiming for direct action or societal change. However, civic engagement would include argument-like structure (premises) to support the respondent's statement, while expressive engagement may involve posting a personal opinion about a political event or venting frustrations about a policy, but will lack a structure of a logical argument.

The empirical focus of this study – Facebook comments – is motivated by the platform's dual role as both a *public sphere* and a site of *low-barrier participation*. Unlike private conversations, Facebook comments are inherently public and often aimed at broader audiences. This makes them valuable artifacts for analysing *expressive participation*, especially when users articulate political positions, critique policies or advocate specific outcomes.

To determine whether a Facebook comment constitutes political participation, civic engagement or mere expressive behaviour, we focus not on the form of the activity (i.e. 'commenting') but on its content and intent. For example, a comment saying 'This social policy is unfair; I'm not voting for this party anymore!' reflects a clear political intention – it seeks to influence institutional outcomes and would be coded as political participation. A comment such as 'I feel really hopeless about everything going on...' may reflect personal frustration with political conditions but lacks a directive or mobilising purpose; it fits best under expressive engagement. A comment sharing a news article on environmental issues with the caption 'We need to be more aware!' might reflect civic engagement, as it aims to raise awareness but does not propose or advocate a direct political action. What makes the difference is if FB activity aims to influence political outcomes of political institutions or political structures (political participation) or such intention for influence would be missing and, in such case, expression of political thoughts would rather contribute to raise the awareness than to political change. Therefore, for expressive social media activity to be considered *political participation*, it has to advocate in favour or against some policy or concrete political action.

While some may question whether Facebook comments can constitute political participation, we argue that *public digital expression* – when aimed at influencing political processes – meets the definitional criteria outlined by both classical and contemporary theorists. Given the public nature of the platform, the performative aspect of participation (Papacharissi 2010) and the increasing relevance of digital discourse in shaping policy debates (Theocharis et al. 2022), Facebook comments represent a meaningful site of analysis.

However, the boundaries are not always rigid. As Table 1 illustrates, certain online behaviours may straddle categories depending on context and content. Therefore, a *content-based interpretive approach*, rather than a form-based one, is critical for understanding the evolving character of digital political behaviour.

Table 1: Citizen's online civic engagement and political participation vs. klikivism

<i>Political Behaviour (activities)</i>		
<i>Online political participation</i>	<i>Online civic engagement</i>	<i>Clicktivism (non-participation)</i>
voting (in e-elections)	–	–
party/campaign online activities including fundraising	social movements online activities including fundraising	
organising online political petitions	organising online societal petitions	signing online petitions
online organising ³ protest/support activities (against/for policy or politician or pushing for/against political change including topics like environmental problems, sexual violence, racism etc.)	online organising protest/support activities, including boycotting & buycotting & digitally native activism ⁴ (raising awareness of problems like environmental issues/ sexual violence/ racism etc.)	liking information about protest/support activities on social media
Expressive participation - pushing for/against political change : - engaging in discussions regarding a public matter (via social media), articulating preferred outcome either supporting change or maintaining status quo - producing own written (blogs/post) or video content articulating preferred outcome either supporting change or maintaining status quo - contacting people in power regarding a public matter (via email, social media) articulating preferred outcome either supporting change or maintaining status quo	Expressive engagement – not pushing for/against political change (potential for raising awareness): - engaging in discussions regarding a public matter (via social media) - producing own written (blogs/post) or video content - sharing political content on social media_a	Minimalist expressive engagement - liking political content on social media - commenting political statuses with minimum effort via emoticons, hashtagging or a few words/no opinions on substance - uploading pictures with no comments as reaction to political statuses
	joining a political group on social media	

Source: Authors

3 Referring to activity of organisation taking place online even if the protest itself might take place physically in offline mode.

4 For instance, online movements could aim to counter online disinformation and hate speech by campaigning to withdraw advertising from certain websites.

Methodology

Selected empirical case

Facebook provides a valuable platform for analysing political behaviour on social media due to its popularity, flexibility and relevance to political communication. Politicians frequently use Facebook to engage directly with constituents, who are more active on this platform compared to X (formerly Twitter), Instagram or others (Pedersen 2022). Facebook's lack of restrictions on the length or type of post content further enhances its utility for actors, allowing them to tailor their messages freely.

This study focuses on public Facebook pages of high-profile political actors across the twelve TRUEDEM⁵ countries: Austria, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden and Ukraine. Our analysis included posts and publicly accessible comments on these posts throughout the period of July to December 2023. As the study utilised publicly available data, ethical approval was not required.

Dataset

The empirical analysis draws on a unique dataset comprising Facebook posts and comments from 36 politicians across the TRUEDEM countries. For each country, we selected the Facebook pages of three political figures: (1) the head of state (e.g. president or monarch); (2) the leader of the primary governing party (incumbent); and (3) the leader of the main opposition party. Ultimately, 34 profiles were included in the analysis (see Annex 1), as some politicians did not maintain a public Facebook profile (e.g. the Swedish head of state, King Carl XVI Gustaf). The data collection period spanned six months, from July to December 2023. This period included parliamentary elections in two countries (Poland and Slovakia), which resulted in changes to the positions of incumbent and opposition leaders.

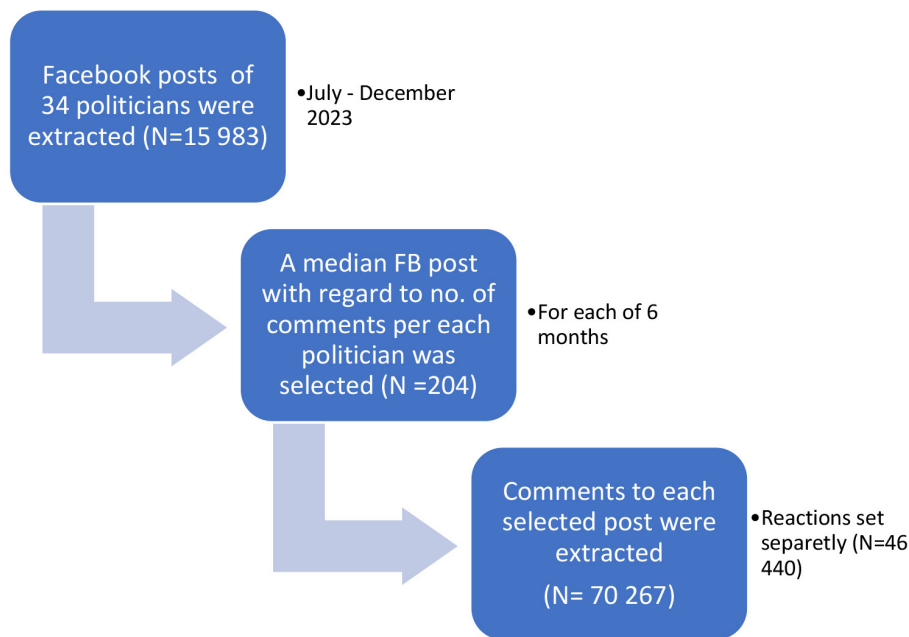
For detailed analysis, a median Facebook post based on the number of comments was selected, and a content analysis of the comments on these posts was conducted. In total, the dataset comprises 15,983 Facebook posts and 70,267 comments. For the analysis of politicians' use of Facebook to increase citizen engagement, we used a random sample of 1,001 posts generated by software. These posts were manually coded by four human coders to determine whether they included calls for citizens to participate in any of the following types of activities: expressive online participation, non-expressive online participation or offline participation.

5 TRUEDEM is the research project funded by European Union's Horizon programme.

Data were collected using the *ExportComments*⁶ tool, which extracted text and embedded video links from posts, as well as associated comments and reactions. Posts, comments and reactions were initially collected in their respective national languages and subsequently translated into English using DeepL software.⁷ Importantly, we distinguished between **comments** (direct replies to a post) and **reactions** (likes, emojis or responses to other user comments). This distinction is critical for our coding: Comments are more likely to contain substantive content and deliberate expression, while reactions typically reflect low-effort engagement.

The dataset includes 119,643 entries of comments and reactions. To ensure data validity, we excluded 2,936 suspected automated entries (e.g. where users made more than 100 comments on a single post). We also excluded duplicate entries in terms of identical comment left under the same post by the same user. This ensured a focus on authentic and meaningful user interactions. The resulting dataset contains 70,267 unique comments without reactions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Flow diagram of included FB content



Source: Authors

6 <https://exportcomments.com/>

7 www.deepl.com

Research questions and coding framework

This study investigates the following questions:

- To what extent does user interaction on Facebook – such as comments and reactions – reflect different levels of political engagement, ranging from clicktivism to substantive civic or political participation?
- How frequently do Facebook users employ reasoned argumentation to support their political opinions in response to posts by political leaders?
- To what extent do politicians use Facebook for dyadic (two-way) communication with citizens, and how might this influence the perceived trustworthiness of democratic processes?

We conducted a content analysis of comments to critically assess the characteristics of political usage on Facebook. Content analysis is defined as ‘a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifested content of communication’ (Berelson 1952: 18). Communication in this context can be text-based (e.g. news articles, website commentaries, social media posts), visual (e.g. photos, videos) or aural (e.g. radio broadcasts, speeches). In this study, we focused exclusively on text-based content, excluding videos and images, as content analysis is most suited to textual data that explicitly describe content and elucidate latent meanings (Krippendorff 2018).

Our analysis was guided by a conceptual framework distinguishing between **clicktivism**, **civic engagement** and **political participation**. As outlined in the theoretical section, these categories are not always exclusive based on *form* (e.g. commenting vs. liking), but instead are determined by *content and intent*. Therefore, a central methodological task involved content coding to classify comments according to these criteria.

We used **quantitative content analysis** to evaluate the **explicit content** of user comments – excluding latent interpretations. The procedure included three core coding dimensions:

1. **Level of Effort:** Low-effort expressions (e.g. emojis, hashtags, short interjections like ‘Go!’ or ‘Shame!’) were categorised as **clicktivism**.
2. **Expressive Purpose:** Substantive comments expressing political opinions without advocating for specific change were coded as **expressive civic engagement**. These comments often reflect personal attitudes or raise awareness without targeting political actors or demanding action.
3. **Advocacy for Political Change:** Comments that explicitly supported or opposed concrete political outcomes (e.g. policies, institutional decisions) and were directed at political actors were coded as **political participation**. These comments often contain calls to action, proposed solutions or direct appeals to politicians.

The coding phase included several steps. (1) **Exclusion of irrelevant content:** comments that lacked verbal responses to the politician's post or contained non-political content (e.g. unrelated information, shared videos or pictures) were excluded. Approximately 40% of all comments were removed at this stage. (2) **Distinction between political opinions and clicktivism:** comments were classified as expressing political opinions if they engaged substantively with the issue at hand. In contrast, 'clicktivism' was identified in comments consisting solely of emoticons, hashtags or brief expressions of agreement or dissent (e.g. 'OK!' or 'Go to hell!'). (3) **Coding for political participation and civic engagement:** expressive comments were categorised using deductive criteria. Comments were coded as **political participation** if they were directed at the politician and explicitly argued for or against a specific political outcome, such as a policy change or political action. For example, a comment from Sweden calls for action:

Dear Social Democrats, I turn to you today with a humble appeal... We must take the parliamentary chaos seriously and act with determination. We have to go out and get involved, talk to our fellow man and show them why we believe in a different path. Because if we fail, we risk: reduced freedom of expression, continued dismantling of democracy, further lagging behind in climate change, more sell-offs of state and municipal companies, poorer health and elderly care, continued profit taking in schools, continued tax cuts for the wealthy and increased taxes on work, worsened conditions for the unemployed and the long-term ill – with the probability of higher crime and crime as a result... We must convince, inform and inspire. We must be voices that are lifted, voices that reach out and that change. So I urge you all to go out and work. Work for the good of society, work for our future... Together for a sustainable and safe Sweden, vote red!

Expressive comments that discussed political outcomes or expressed opinions on specific political issues, without articulating a preferred outcome (i.e. support for change or maintenance of the status quo), were categorised as **expressive engagement**. These comments are characterised by their potential to raise awareness rather than to directly influence political outcomes. For example, a comment from France reads: *'France lives under the joke of the capitalist specter of debt and submission to the infernal trio that are the USA, EU, and NATO. The people are nothing but a colony of media-hyped troubadours.'* While this statement clearly expresses an opinion on politics in France, it does not advocate for or against any specific action or policy outcome.

To further distinguish civic engagement, we coded whether comments included structured **argumentation** – reasons, evidence or justifications for the stated opinion. We argue that such reasoning contributes to the deliberative quality of public discourse and may raise awareness, even if no political demand is made.

We also recorded the ratio of comments to reactions (as an indicator of expressive vs. passive engagement), the frequency of responses from political actors, and their appeals to participatory behaviour. These measures were used to assess reciprocity, as well as contextual variation across countries and political roles.

To ensure reliability, four trained coders⁸ participated in a multi-stage calibration process consisting of development of **detailed coding instructions**, **joint training sessions** using sample data and iterative coding rounds with **cross-checks for consistency**. Discrepancies were reviewed collectively to reach consensus and refine coding rules where necessary.

Findings

Facebook as a participatory tool for users

This section presents the findings from the analysis of Facebook interactions on posts made by politicians. A significant portion of the responses can be classified as expressive engagement, with an average of 37% of comments meeting this criterion. In contrast, approximately 63% of the comments were categorised as a form of clicktivism, even though they were text-based rather than relying solely on emoji reactions.

The distribution of these behaviours varied significantly across the twelve countries included in the study (Table 2). In eight of these countries, clicktivism predominated. Greece had the highest proportion of contributions classified as clicktivism (over 84%), followed by Ukraine (76%) and Slovakia (72%). Conversely, Germany exhibited the highest share of expressive engagement (76%), followed by Poland (70%), and Sweden and Austria (both 58%). These geographical disparities in engagement types underline the importance of contextual factors in shaping digital political behaviour. Such variation may be attributed to differences in political culture, media literacy or trust in traditional political institutions.

Regarding the political roles of the individuals posting, Facebook contributions from coalition leaders showed, on average, a 10-percentage-point higher share of clicktivism compared to posts by heads of state or opposition leaders. Additionally, posts by populist politicians attracted 13 percentage points more clicktivism than those by non-populist politicians.

8 At this point, we would like to thank our research assistants, namely Timea Szabó and Lea Daňková, for their help in coding the empirical data.

Table 2: Share of expressive participation and clicktivism

COUNTRY	EXPRESSIVE COMMENTS (SHARE IN %)	CLICKTIVISM (SHARE IN %)	TOTAL NUMBER OF COMMENTS
ITA	28.52	71.48	20,224
SLO	30.35	69.65	1,281
POL	69.51	30.49	13,833
UA	23.84	76.16	3,349
FRA	40.52	59.48	6,996
ROM	40.44	59.56	6,060
DE	75.67	24.33	2,149
GRE	15.66	84.34	2,501
CZ	38.04	61.96	4,708
AT	57.72	42.28	674
SWE	57.98	42.02	2,184
SVK	27.55	72.45	7,552
Head of State	40.74	59.26	17,970
Leader of Coalition	32.49	67.51	36,815
Opposition Leader	43.22	56.78	16,726
NON-POPULIST	42.33	57.67	27,259
POPULIST	29.59	70.41	25,176
TOTAL	37.02	62.98	71,511

Source: Authors

The findings highlight the subtle role of political position and populism in shaping engagement patterns. Coalition leaders and populist politicians generate higher levels of clicktivism, suggesting that their communication strategies may resonate more with passive forms of engagement. Conversely, opposition leaders appear to foster slightly higher levels of expressive engagement, potentially due to their focus on critique and mobilisation.

The study also examined the extent to which Facebook activities could be classified as either civic engagement or political participation (Table 3). The results reveal that only a small proportion of comments met these criteria: 2.7% were categorised as civic engagement and 1.7% as political participation. These findings suggest that, while users often express opinions or statements about political issues, only a marginal proportion provide substantiated arguments to support their positions. Even fewer comments explicitly advocate for changes in political outcomes or defend the political status quo.

A closer examination of individual countries reveals notable variation in the intensity of civic engagement. Sweden demonstrated the highest share, with

nearly 8% of comments involving discussions of public matters and expressing the commenter’s views, even when not advocating for or against specific political outcomes. In contrast, civic engagement rates were below 3% in half of the countries studied, with Poland displaying the lowest rate at under 0.5%. This indicates a gap between users’ willingness to express opinions and their readiness to advocate for change or engage in structured, deliberative discussions. Sweden stands out as an outlier, highlighting the potential influence of a robust civic culture in fostering meaningful digital participation.

Interestingly, neither the political position of the individuals posting nor their classification as populists appeared to significantly influence the rate of civic engagement or political participation elicited by their posts.

Table 3: Rate of Expressive Engagement, Civic Engagement and Political Participation

COUNTRY	EXPRESSIVE ENGAGEMENT (SHARE IN %)	CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (SHARE IN %)	POLITICAL PARTICIPATION (SHARE IN %)
ITA	28.52	2.45	2.04
SLO	30.35	5.86	3.08
POL	69.51	0.3	0.08
UA	23.84	3.22	2.5
FRA	40.52	3.94	1.9
ROM	40.44	2.94	1.28
DE	75.67	2.37	2.19
GRE	15.66	4.88	2.74
CZ	38.04	3.9	0.55
AT	57.72	1.78	2.07
SWE	57.98	7.96	3.48
SVK	27.55	1.97	2.83
Head of State	40.74	3.02	1.4
Leader of Coalition	32.49	2.33	1.72
Opposition Leader	43.22	2.8	1.92
TOTAL	36.99	2.65	1.69

Source: Authors

The findings demonstrate that Facebook serves as a significant medium for expressive behaviour, yet this behaviour is primarily characterised by **low-intensity engagement forms**, such as clicktivism, rather than substantive civic or political participation. This distinction is essential to understanding how users engage with political discourse in digital spaces. While Facebook provides a platform for public articulation of political sentiments, its potential

as a medium for substantive political engagement remains underutilised. The predominance of clicktivism over deeper forms of engagement reflects the ease of performing low-commitment activities and possibly a lack of digital literacy or trust in social media as a political space.

Facebook as a dyadic communication tool for politicians

Like citizens, politicians also have ample opportunity to use Facebook (or other social media platforms) as a tool to engage with the public and thus increase both the platform’s attractiveness and its use among citizens. We examined the extent to which politicians use Facebook for these specific purposes. Whether through direct dialogue or appeals for citizen participation, the potential for Facebook to serve as a platform for two-way communication between politicians and citizens appears to be underutilised.

Table 4 indicates that politicians seldom engage in discussions within the comment sections of their posts. Of the 34 politicians analysed, only 12 responded to audience comments during the six-month period. Among these, only three – Marcel Ciolacu (prime minister of Romania), Giorgia Meloni (prime minister of Italy) and Andrzej Duda (president of Poland) – responded more than six times. This finding suggests that while Facebook facilitates public engagement, political communication on the platform remains largely one-sided, with minimal reciprocal interaction.

Table 4: List of politicians engaged in a dyadic discussion on Facebook

Politician	Replies	Politician	Replies
Marcel Ciolacu	89	Magdalena Andersson	2
Giorgia Meloni	16	Cătălin Drula	2
Andrzej Duda	11	Frank-Walter Steinmeier	2
Friedrich Merz	5	Alexander Van der Bellen	1
Saskia Esken	3	Robert Fico	1
Petro Poroshenko	3	Olena Shulyak	1

Source: Authors

We also analysed how politicians use Facebook to motivate citizens to participate in various activities, both online and offline. Table 5 presents the share of politicians’ posts (aggregated at the country level) that included a call to action. In five of the twelve countries, there were no calls for any form of participation whatsoever. Politicians used Facebook to encourage expressive online political participation primarily in Austria and Germany, but even there, only 2.6% and 1.5% of posts, respectively, contained such appeals. The highest share of posts

inviting citizens to take action was observed in Poland, at nearly 10%. This can be attributed to numerous calls urging citizens to join protests against the government or to vote, as the parliamentary elections took place during the data collection period. However, the overall figures present a clear picture: Politicians rarely use Facebook as a tool to promote citizens' political or civic engagement.

Table 5: Share of politicians' posts including various calls for citizens actions (in %)

Country	No calls for action	Call for expressive online engagement	Call for non-expressive online engagement	Call for offline engagement
AST	96.1	2.6	1.3	0
CZE	98.6	0.7	0	0.7
FRA	95.8	0	4.2	0
GER	95.6	1.5	0	2.9
GRE	100	0	0	0
ITA	100	0	0	0
POL	90.3	0	0	9.7
ROM	99.2	0	0	0.8
SLO	100	0	0	0
SVK	96.8	0	0	3.2
SWE	100	0	0	0
UKR	100	0	0	0
Total	97.1	0.4	0.4	2.1

Source: Authors

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored how Facebook is used as a space for political communication and citizen engagement across twelve European democracies. Drawing on content analysis of over 70,000 user comments on political leaders' Facebook posts, we examined how digital expressions vary in intensity and purpose – ranging from clicktivism to more substantive forms of civic engagement and political participation.

Our findings show that the majority of Facebook interactions reflect low-effort, expressive engagement rather than deliberative participation. Only a small share of comments met the criteria for civic engagement (2.7%) or political participation (1.7%), with wide variation across countries. While countries like Sweden exhibited comparatively higher levels of engaged discourse, most interactions across the sample lacked structured argumentation or clear calls for political change.

Moreover, the disparity in engagement patterns across countries suggests that contextual factors, such as economic development, political culture (includ-

ing institutional trust) and media literacy, significantly influence how citizens interact with political content online. Countries with robust civic cultures, such as Sweden, demonstrated higher levels of meaningful engagement, pointing to the role of offline democratic traditions in shaping online behaviour. Our findings are in line with research that points to the role of political trust in online expressive engagement. Trustful environment contributes to the motivation of citizens to engage expressively online (Demetriou 2012). Another contributing factor is the level of socio-economic resources. As argued by Vicente and Suenaga (2020), a certain level of socio-economic resources is necessary for people to politically participate in an expressive way.

The study also revealed that politicians seldom leverage Facebook for two-way communication or to promote participatory behaviour. This underutilisation of the platform's interactive affordances limits its potential to foster deeper democratic engagement. These patterns underscore the need to recalibrate expectations about social media's democratising potential: While Facebook increases visibility and provides a space for public expression, it does not automatically translate into meaningful political action.

This research contributes to broader debates on digital participation by offering a framework for distinguishing types of online engagement. Rather than assuming a normative progression from expression to action, future studies should explore the conditions under which expressive online behaviour may – or may not – translate into civic or political outcomes. Additionally, more research is needed to understand how platform design, algorithmic curation and political communication strategies shape user engagement across different socio-political contexts.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The reliance on public Facebook comments excludes private interactions that may reveal different patterns of political engagement. Additionally, the study's focus on textual content omits visual and multimedia elements that could contribute to political discourse. Future studies could adopt mixed-method approaches to capture the multidimensional nature of online political participation.

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Appendix

Annex 1: The list of analysed political actors

Country	Politician/ a leader of political party	Political Party	Incumbent/ Opposition	Populist/ Non-populist	Source
Austria	Alexander Van der Bellen	independent	president	-	-
	Karl Nehammer	Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)	incumbent	Non-populist 4.1 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
	Andreas Babler	Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ)	opposition	Non-populist 3.3 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
Czechia	Petr Pavel	independent	president	-	-
	Petr Fiala	Civic Democratic Party (ODS)	incumbent	Non- populist 1.4 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
	Andrej Babiš	Political movement ANO (ANO)	opposition	Non- populist 3.8 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
France	Emmanuel Macron ⁹	En Marche (currently Renaissance)	president	-	-
	Stéphane Séjourné	Renaissance	incumbent	Non-populist	PEW
	Marine Le Pen	National Rally (NR, previously the National Front)	opposition	Populist 7.8 Populist	CHES PEW

⁹ In this table we do not identify populism in the case of Head of states as in most cases, the run as independent or have only limited political power. However, Emmanuel Macron is not only President of France but also a chief of executive with significant political powers. In case of Macron, he is not a part of databases on populism and the political party established by Macron after he came into power (En March) is detected as non-populist (PEW). However, there are some scholars arguing Macron to be a specific case of populist (see e.g. Fougère & Barthold 2020).

Country	Politician/ a leader of political party	Political Party	Incumbent/ Opposition	Populist/ Non-populist	Source
Germany	Frank-Walter Steinmeier	Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)	president	Non-populist	PPDB
	Saskia Esken	Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) (co-chairwoman)	incumbent	Non-populist 2.5 Non-populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
	Lars Klingbeil	Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) (co-chairman)	incumbent	Non-populist 2.5 Non-populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
	Friedrich Merz	Christian Democratic Union (CDU)	opposition	Non-populist 1.7 Non-populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
Greece	Katerina Sakellaropoulou	independent	president	-	-
	Kyriakos Mitsotakis	New Democracy (ND)	incumbent	Non-populist 1.6	CHES
	Stefanos Kasselakis (no public FB profile)	SYRIZA	opposition	Populist 7.4 Populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
Italy	Sergio Mattarella (no public FB profile)	independent	president	-	-
	Giorgia Meloni	Brothers of Italy (FdI)	incumbent	Populist 6.6 Populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
	Elly Schlein	Democratic Party (PD)	opposition	Non-populist 2.1 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
Poland	Andrzej Duda	Law and Justice (PiS)	president	-	-
	Jarosław Kaczyński	Law and Justice (PiS)	incumbent ¹⁰	Non-populist 4.5 Populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
	Donald Tusk	Civic Platform (PO)	opposition	Non-populist 4.3 Non-populist	CHES PPDB

¹⁰ The position of Jarosław Kaczyński and PiS has changed during the monitored period as in October 2023 parliamentary election he did not defend the position of incumbent and Donald Tusk became leader of the governing coalition.

Country	Politician/ a leader of political party	Political Party	Incumbent/ Opposition	Populist/ Non-populist	Source
Romania	Klaus Iohannis	independent	president	-	-
	Ion-Marcel Ciolacu	Social Democratic Party (PSD)	incumbent	Non-populist 3.4 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
	Cătălin Drulă ¹¹	Save Romania Union (USR)	opposition	Populist 6.0 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
Slovakia	Zuzana Čaputová	independent	president	-	-
	Igor Matovič	Ordinary people (OĽaNO, currently Slovakia)	incumbent ¹²	Populist 8.5 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
	Robert Fico	SMER – social democracy (SMER-SD)	opposition	Non-populist 2.9 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
Slovenia	Nataša Pirc Musar	independent	president	-	-
	Robert Golob	Freedom Movement (GS)	incumbent	See footnote ¹³	
	Janez Janša	Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS)	opposition	Populist 5.3	CHES
Sweden	Ulf Kristersson	Moderate Party (M)	incumbent	Non-populist 2.5 Non-populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
	Magdalena Andersson	Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP)	opposition	Non-populist 2.7 Non-populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
Ukraine¹⁴	Volodymyr Zelenskyi	independent	president		
	Olena Shulyak	Servant of the People Party (SN)	incumbent		
	Petro Poroshenko	European Solidarity (YeS)	opposition		

Source: Authors based on CHES, PEW, PPDB database

- 11 In this case, the databases on populism are contradictory in assessment of USR. However, as there are academic articles considering USR as populist political party (Dragoman 2021), we consider them to be populists as well.
- 12 The position of Igor Matovič and OĽaNO changed during the monitored period, as he did not defend the position of incumbent in the September 2023 parliamentary election, and Robert Fico became the leader of the governing coalition.
- 13 The Freedom Movement as a new political party is not included in either database of populism used in this deliverable. However, various experts refer to GS as to centre-left political party, a most important counterpart to the populist right-wing SDS (see e.g. Krašovac 2023).
- 14 The Ukrainian political parties are not a part of databases on populism included in this deliverable. Based on academic sources, we can assume, that president Zelenskyi use populist rhetoric (Kulyk 2023), Servant of the People Party is an example of valence populist party (Yanchenko & Zulianello 2024). In case of YeS party, some scholars consider them national democrats (Kasianov 2024), while others point at their populist strategies without embodying the full essence of populism (Kulyk 2019).