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# Image management on TikTok: Visual communication strategies of radical left populist political leaders across six countries

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# Abstract

This study examines the visual communication strategies of radical left populist political leaders on TikTok across six countries: France, Germany, Greece, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States. Drawing on image management theory, a discursive–performative approach to populism, and visual political communication, the study employs a quantitative (visual) content analysis of 825 TikTok posts published by six prominent radical left populist leaders. The findings reveal substantial cross-national variation rather than a common left populist communication style. While political content predominates across all cases, leaders differ markedly in their use of TikTok-specific affordances, symbolic representation, leader image, visual proximity, and anti-elite communication. The study concludes that radical left populism on TikTok is characterised by multiple visual repertoires shaped by ideological priorities, national contexts, and differing degrees of platform adaptation, rather than by a unified model of digital populist communication.


# Introduction

The growing political relevance of TikTok needs to be understood in relation to broader transformations in digital political communication. A growing body of scholarship suggests that populist communication is particularly well adapted to online environments (Flew and Iosifidis, 2020; Yilmaz et al., 2026). At the same time, increasing attention has been paid to the role of visuals and aesthetics in constructing populist appeals to “the people” against “the elite” (Moffitt, 2024). In this context, platforms such as TikTok, which facilitate the rapid creation and circulation of short-form visual content, are especially significant.

Although there is now a substantial body of work on visual political communication (Farkas et al., 2022; Larsson, 2022), most existing studies focus on Facebook and Instagram (Bast 2024; Moffitt 2024), with only more recent research turning to TikTok (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2021; Moir, 2023). As a result, it remains unclear how populist actors use TikTok’s visual affordances for political image construction, whether their visual strategies reflect ideological orientation and communicative style, and how these strategies vary across national contexts. As Strand and Schill (2019: 172) argue, “understanding the purpose and use of digital media by politicians is critical as it has become an entrenched form of communication that will remain relevant for the study of messaging in both presidential campaigns and administrations”.

This article examines similarities and differences in the visual communication of radical left populist political leaders on TikTok. It contributes to research on visual political communication by focusing on an area that remains comparatively underexplored: the image management strategies of left populist actors on a platform whose political relevance is growing but whose visual grammar differs from older social media environments. Although much of the literature on populism has concentrated on far-right actors, populism is not synonymous with far-right or extremist politics (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018). Left-wing parties such as Syriza and Podemos have also articulated anti-elitist appeals, albeit through

different ideological vocabularies and political projects. Following Moffitt's (2016) understanding of populism as a political style, the question is not only what populist actors communicate, but how they perform populism through visual constructions of leadership, "the people", antagonism and political authenticity.

The study adopts a comparative international perspective by analysing radical left populist political leaders across six countries: France, Germany, Spain, the UK, the USA and Greece. Employing an exploratory approach informed by image management theory, scholarship on left-wing populism, and research on visual political communication, the article contributes to the study of visual left populist communication and to the broader understanding of political communication on TikTok. Our findings show that radical left populists do not share a single visual style on TikTok. Rather, their communication is organised around distinct repertoires of platform adaptation, symbolic representation, leader image, antagonism, and performed proximity to "the people".

## Image management on social media

Politics has long been a visual practice, but the role of images has become especially important in contemporary, information-saturated media environments (Lilleker et al., 2019). In conditions of information overload, political images may operate as cognitive heuristics that shape voters' perceptions, particularly among weak partisans (Barrett and Barrington, 2005). Since direct interaction between citizens and political actors is relatively uncommon, mediated visual representations play a central role in political image formation, offering cues about personality, competence, authenticity and social background (Strand and Schill, 2019). Within this context, a substantial body of research has examined politicians' visual image management on social media, especially on Facebook and Instagram.

This literature shows that politicians often seek to construct a professional and credible image aligned with the "ideal candidate" frame (Grabe and Bucy, 2009), a strategy documented on both Facebook (Goodnow, 2013) and Instagram (Bast, 2024; Steffan, 2023). Such performances of statesmanship may be combined with affective and relational imagery, including compassionate gestures, physical proximity, endorsements, and depictions of public support (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019; Muñoz and Towner, 2017). These visual strategies allow politicians to present themselves simultaneously as authoritative political figures and as socially embedded actors with broad popular appeal.

Symbols also form an important part of political image management. National symbols, for example, can create associative links between political actors and patriotic sentiment, particularly in the communication of right-wing politicians (Schill, 2012). Party symbols similarly help to signal ideological affiliation, political continuity and collective identity, as illustrated by Cheles's (2023) analysis of the visual legacy embedded in Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia logo. Although such examples come from different ideological contexts, they demonstrate how condensed visual signifiers can anchor political messages within broader narratives of identity, legitimacy and belonging.

A further strategy, especially visible on Instagram, involves presenting politicians as ordinary and relatable individuals. By showing politicians in everyday settings, informal interactions, sporting activities or casual attire, visual communication can foster perceptions of proximity, authenticity and personal accessibility (Bast, 2024; Mazzoni and Mincigrucci, 2023; Muñoz and Towner, 2017; Author; Russmann et al., 2019). These insights are directly relevant to the analysis that follows, which examines how radical left populist leaders on TikTok visually manage authority, ordinariness, symbolic affiliation and proximity to “the people”.

# Left-wing digital populist communication

In this paper, we adopt a discursive–performative approach to populism (Ostiguy et al., 2021). From a discourse-theoretical perspective, populism is best understood not as a fixed ideology, social base or pathology of democracy, but as a political logic through which heterogeneous demands are articulated into a common project and organised around an antagonistic frontier between “the people” and “the elite”. Crucially, both sides of this opposition are constructed through populist articulation itself: different populisms produce different understandings of who “the people” are, who threatens them and what kind of political project can represent them. For left-wing populism, the central question is therefore how egalitarian, democratic and anti-oligarchic demands are articulated into a popular camp opposed to neoliberalism, austerity, technocracy or oligarchic power (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018; Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2021).

This discursive perspective has increasingly been brought into dialogue with stylistic, sociocultural and performative approaches, especially those associated with Moffitt and Ostiguy. Although they begin from different analytical emphases, these approaches need not be treated as competing or hierarchically ordered. Discourse theory clarifies how “the people”, “the elite” and the antagonistic frontier are politically constituted, while stylistic, sociocultural and performative approaches illuminate how these constructions are enacted, embodied, mediated and made affectively resonant. They therefore direct attention to performances of proximity to “the people”, the staging of crisis, the use of transgression or “bad manners”, and the mobilisation of culturally resonant oppositions between the “high” and the “low” (Aiolfi, 2022; Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy and Moffitt, 2021). Recent work has increasingly brought these insights together within an explicitly discursive–performative approach to populism (Ostiguy et al., 2021; Petrović Lotina and Aiolfi, 2023).

This synthesis is particularly useful for analysing radical left populism in visual and digital contexts. Research on the populist radical left has shown that left-populist projects tend to construct “the people” in relatively inclusive, democratic and anti-oligarchic terms, in contrast to the nativist exclusions more commonly associated with the populist radical right (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019; Mouffe, 2018; Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2021). The articulation of these projects is inseparable from performances of ordinariness, indignation, authenticity and democratic rupture, as well as from visual and embodied representations of who “the people” are. Moffitt’s (2024) comparison of Trump’s and Sanders’s visual communication, for example, shows that images are not secondary to populist politics but central to the

construction of popular identities, and that left- and right-wing populists visually compose “the people” in different ways. For this study, then, a discursive–performative approach allows us to examine left populism both as an articulation of popular demands against elite power and as a mediated, affective and visual construction of political identities, antagonisms and democratic legitimacy (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019; Petrović Lotina and Aiolfi, 2023).

Most existing studies of populist communication continue to focus primarily on right-wing politicians and parties (Bast, 2024; Sorensen, 2018), while fewer offer systematic comparisons between right- and left-wing populism (Bracciale and Martella, 2017) or between populist and non-populist actors (Farkas et al., 2022). Given the focus of this article, the discussion below concentrates on studies most directly relevant to the analysis of radical left populist visual communication, rather than attempting a comprehensive review of the wider populism literature.

Empirical studies of populist politicians and parties have produced valuable, though sometimes divergent, findings. Comparing UKIP and the EFF, Sorensen (2018) shows that both cultivate identification with “the people” through performative strategies: the EFF through symbolic alignment with ordinary South Africans and differentiation from parliamentary elites, and Nigel Farage through staged displays of ordinariness. Both parties also disrupt political norms in ways that generate media attention. Focusing more explicitly on representational differences, García Agustín and Cossarini (2023) identify significant divergences between left- and right-wing populists. They argue that Unidas Podemos constructs “the people” visually as the working class from marginalised neighbourhoods, thereby reinforcing an antagonistic divide with elites associated with affluent areas of Madrid.

Other studies are useful for understanding the communicative construction of the leader’s persona. In their analysis of the Twitter accounts of Vendola, president of Left Ecology Freedom, and Renzi, of the Democratic Party, Bracciale and Martella (2017) find that both politicians personalise political narratives, although Renzi places greater emphasis on personalization and intimization. His communication frequently blends political content with personal matters and current affairs, reinforcing a leader-centred mode of representation. Casullo and Colalongo (2022: 4), drawing on their analysis of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s embodied performances in Argentina, similarly argue that populist enactments do not simply mirror “the people”. Rather, they simultaneously project proximity and singularity, positioning the leader both as an expression of popular will and as an exceptional political figure.

## Left-wing populist politicians on TikTok

Launched in 2016, TikTok has become one of the most widely used social media platforms, with just under one billion global users by 2025 (Statista, 2026). Its short-form video format, shaped by mobile media affordances, enables creative expression through music integration, lip-syncing, duets, filters and other platform-specific features (Moir, 2023). Despite TikTok’s growing importance for political communication, however, relatively few studies have examined left-wing or left-populist political actors

on the platform. Existing research suggests that, with some notable exceptions, political actors often use TikTok in ways that only partially exploit its affordances.

Cervi and Marín-Lladó's (2021) analysis of Spanish parties' TikTok communication, including PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos, Podemos and Vox, found that parties generally underused the platform's affordances and relied heavily on conventional political content. Podemos stood out as more active and more willing to experiment with features such as duets and challenges, while also showing some deliberative messaging. Nevertheless, the communication of all parties remained largely promotional and leader-centred, offering little insight into politicians' personal lives. A study of Greek politicians similarly found that political content predominated, although personal and political content were more balanced than in some other contexts (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2025). The inclusion of Alexis Tsipras in that sample is especially relevant here, as the study confirms that TikTok remained less widely used by Greek politicians than other social media platforms and was primarily employed for public appearances and campaign-related communication.

Other comparative studies point to similar patterns of partial platform adaptation. In their analysis of right- and left-wing political parties and politicians in Spain and Poland, Zamora-Medina et al. (2023) found that most videos lacked key audiovisual elements, particularly special effects and music. However, because their analysis prioritises comparisons between parties and leaders rather than ideological differences between left and right, it offers only limited guidance for the present study.

The few studies that focus more directly on left-wing political actors suggest that their TikTok content remains predominantly political (Moir, 2023; Umansky and Pipal, 2023). Umansky and Pipal's (2023) analysis of U.S. Democratic politicians shows that TikTok is used primarily for political communication, especially through explanatory and documentary styles. Although comedic content is relatively rare, it generates substantially higher engagement, especially for women, highlighting the tension between platform-driven visibility and expectations of political seriousness.

Moir's (2023) analysis of Jagmeet Singh, former leader of Canada's New Democratic Party, offers an important contrast. Singh used TikTok more strategically to cultivate a left-wing populist brand grounded in performed authenticity, social justice advocacy and platform-specific memetic practices. By drawing on viral audio, humour and visual informality, Singh deemphasised institutional politics in favour of a more influencer-style mode of communication.

Taken together, these limited and sometimes divergent findings point to the need for further research on how radical left populist actors use TikTok for visual political communication. Drawing on this literature, this study addresses the following research question:

RQ: What are the commonalities and differences in the visual communication of radical left-wing populist political leaders on TikTok?

## Research design

To address our research question, we conducted a quantitative visual content analysis of posts from the official TikTok accounts of six radical left populist political leaders: Jean-Luc Mélenchon (France), Sokratis Famellos (Greece), Bernie Sanders (USA), Heidi Reichinnek (Germany), Jeremy Corbyn (UK) and Ione Belarra (Spain). The sample was designed to capture radical left populist actors from Western and Southern Europe and the United States, while allowing for variation across national and socio-political contexts.

The focus on political leaders is grounded in research showing that candidates and leaders are central to political campaigns and political image formation (De Landtsheer et al., 2008). Their visual presentation is therefore important for establishing a recognisable political profile. This is especially relevant in the visual politics of populism, where leaders often function as "central performers" and primary "embodiments" of the populist appeal (Melito and Zulianello, 2025; Moffitt, 2016: 44). Sanders is included despite not being a party leader in the same sense as the other cases. This decision is justified, first, by his fit with our conceptualisation of radical left populism and, second, by his status as one of the most prominent left populist figures in U.S. politics. As Moffitt (2024) similarly argues, Sanders's role as a leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination, and as President Biden's main competitor in the primaries in terms of national polling and primary contests won, makes him a relevant case for comparative analysis.

Only politicians whose primary language was understood by the coders were included, in order to avoid reliance on TikTok's automated translation, which may compromise the interpretation of verbal, visual and contextual cues. The final dataset comprises 825 TikTok posts (Table 1).

Table 1
Sample – political leaders

| **Name of politician** | **Political party** | **Country** | **Sample size of posts** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Jean-Luc Mélenchon | La France Insoumise | France | 150 |
| Sokratis Famellos | SYRIZA | Greece | 106 |
| Bernie Sanders | independent | USA | 150 |
| Jeremy Corbyn | Your Party | UK | 119 |
| Ione Belarra | Podemos | Spain | 150 |
| Heidi Reichinnek | Die Linke | Germany | 150 |
| **Total number of posts** | | | **825** |

**[Insert** Table 1 **here]**

Using the end of 2024 (31st December 2024) as the temporal reference point, we collected content by moving backwards through each account's timeline. Drawing on established standards in content analysis methodology (Krippendorff, 2019), we adopted a purposive sampling approach in which each

politician's 150 most recent[1] TikTok posts were analysed where available. This sampling strategy follows arguments in favour of "small data" approaches in social media political communication research (Pal and Gonawela, 2017) and reflects common comparative content-analytic practice, where a fixed number of posts per actor is used to standardise unequal content archives. Variation in sample size is attributable to differences in politicians' levels and patterns of platform use.

The unit of analysis was the TikTok post, including both videos and still images. Each TikTok post was coded holistically, integrating visual, textual, and auditory elements. The post's primary communicative function was determined by its dominant message rather than by any single mode. The data were analysed using SPSS, version 31. Quantitative content analysis and statistical testing were conducted in SPSS, using chi-square tests and Cramer's V, with statistical significance assessed at the 0.05 level. Three trained coders conducted the coding following calibration sessions to ensure a shared understanding of the coding scheme. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's Alpha (.706),[2] with disagreements resolved through consensus.

## Coding scheme

Building on our analytical framework, we developed a coding scheme informed by scholarship on left-wing populist communication, visual political communication and political communication on TikTok. Consistent with the exploratory nature of the study, the codebook was intentionally broad in scope, allowing us to identify the visual and discursive characteristics most relevant to radical left populist communication on TikTok.

For the purposes of this study, the coding scheme comprised 26 variables capturing visual and discursive elements, drawn from a broader research project (Coding book available). Platform-specific characteristics were coded, with humour, music, stickers and special effects recorded as binary variables (yes/no) (Moir, 2023; Schellewald, 2021). Posts were also categorised by communicative function: information diffusion, self-promotion, deliberation, opposition-focused communication, mobilisation or other (Moir, 2023). Following populism research, we coded references to elites as enemies (Bast, 2024; Ostiguy and Moffitt, 2021), the tone of the post, and representations of "the people" by race, gender and age (Moffitt, 2024). To capture how left-wing populist actors visually perform proximity to the public, we also coded interaction with crowds and with small groups or individuals (Grabe and Bucy, 2009; Bast, 2024).

To assess the perceived distance between the viewer and the politician, we coded whether the politician established eye contact with the viewer (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Ostiguy and Moffitt, 2020; Bast, 2024). In social semiotics, a direct gaze can create a sense of contact between the represented figure and the audience (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). We also coded the politician's attire, the scene or setting in which the politician appeared, and the presence of national, EU, party and popular culture symbols, which may contribute to populist meaning-making (Cheles, 2023; Dan and Arendt, 2021).

Finally, we coded formal variables, including the date of the post and the account holder, as well as engagement indicators: views, likes, comments, shares and favourites.

# Findings

The findings show considerable variation in how the six radical left populist political leaders use TikTok for visual and audiovisual communication. The analysis first considers platform-specific features, before turning to symbols, eye contact, tone, setting, references to elites, attire, interactions with the public, representations of "the people", and communicative function.

The results presented in Table 2 show significant differences in the use of platform-specific audiovisual features, especially humour, music and special effects. The use of stickers is minimal across the sample and does not vary significantly between politicians.

Table 2
Use of humor, music, stickers and special effects per politician.

| **Jeremy Corbyn** | **Humor (Yes)** | **Music (Yes)** | **Stickers (Yes)** | **Special effects (Yes)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **0,0%** | **15,1%** | **0,0%** | **8,4%** |
| **Jean-Luc Mélenchon** | 5,3% | 14,0% | **2,0%** | 1,3% |
| **Bernie Sanders** | 11,3% | 25,8% | 0,0% | 0,0% |
| **Sokratis Famellos** | 7,5% | 42,5% | 0,0% | 0,0% |
| **Ione Belarra** | 0,0% | 12,0% | 0,0% | 0,0% |
| **Heidi Reichinnek** | **62,7%** | **41,3%** | 0,7% | **76,0%** |
| **Chi square p value** | < .001 | < .001 | .081 | < .001 |
| **Cramer's V** | .628 | .288 | non-significant | .800 |

Humour varies substantially across cases ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .628$). Reichinnek is the clearest outlier, with humour present in 62.7% of her posts. The remaining politicians use humour much less frequently: Sanders in 11.3% of posts, Famellos in 7.5%, and Mélenchon in 5.3%. Corbyn and Belarra do not use humour in the sample. Music also varies significantly ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .288$), although the association is weaker than for humour. It is most common in the posts of Famellos (42.5%) and Reichinnek (41.3%), followed by Sanders (25.8%), Corbyn (15.1%), Mélenchon (14.0%) and Belarra (12.0%).

By contrast, stickers are almost entirely absent. Only Mélenchon (2.0%) and Reichinnek (0.7%) use stickers, and the difference across cases is not statistically significant ($\chi^2$ $p = .081$). Special effects show the strongest variation among the platform-specific variables ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .800$).

Reichinnek uses special effects in 76.0% of her posts, whereas Corbyn (8.4%) and Mélenchon (1.3%) use them only rarely. Sanders, Famellos and Belarra do not use special effects in the sample.

**[Insert** Table 2 **here]**

Table 3 presents the use of national, party or personal political, pop culture and EU symbols. The strongest differences concern national and party/personal political symbols, while pop culture and EU symbols are rare across the sample.

Table 3
Symbols per politician.

| Politician | Country symbol(s) | Party/personal political symbol(s) | Pop culture symbol(s) | EU symbols |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jeremy Corbyn | 0.0% | **21.8%** | 3.4% | 1.7% |
| Jean-Luc Mélenchon | **16.7%** | 12.7% | 2.0% | 0.0% |
| Bernie Sanders | 77.5% | **98.7%** | 0% | 0.0% |
| Sokratis Famellos | 27.4% | **66.0%** | 5.7% | 2.8% |
| Ione Belarra | 0.0% | 0.7% | 0% | 0.7% |
| Heidi Reichinnek | 18.0% | **45.3%** | 0% | 0.7% |
| **Chi-square p-value** | < 0.001 | < 0.001 | not valid | not valid |
| **Cramer's V** | .632 | .702 | not valid | not valid |

National symbols vary significantly by politician ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .632). Sanders uses national symbols most frequently, appearing in 77.5% of his posts. Famellos (27.4%), Reichinnek (18.0%) and Mélenchon (16.7%) make more moderate use of national symbols, while Corbyn and Belarra do not use them. In Reichinnek's case, the presence of national symbols appears to be partly linked to parliamentary settings, particularly the Bundestag podium and the Federal Eagle, rather than necessarily to the deliberate foregrounding of national imagery.

Party or personal political symbols also vary significantly ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .702). Sanders records the highest use, with such symbols present in 98.7% of his posts. Famellos (66.0%) and Reichinnek (45.3%) also use party or political symbols frequently. Corbyn (21.8%) and Mélenchon (12.7%) use them more selectively, while Belarra's use is minimal (0.7%). Pop culture symbols and EU symbols appear only rarely, and statistical testing was not valid for these categories.

**[Insert** Table 3 **here]**

Eye contact also varies significantly across the sample ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .449). Reichinnek again records the highest value, with direct gaze present in 83.3% of her posts. Famellos (55.7%) and Sanders (45.7%) also use eye contact relatively frequently, followed by Belarra (36.7%). Corbyn (26.1%) and Mélenchon (16.0%) record lower levels of direct gaze (see Fig. 1).

**[Insert Fig. 1 here]**

**Figure 1: Eye contact per politician (Chi-square p-value < .001, Cramer's V= .449).**

Tone (Fig. 2) differs significantly across politicians, although the association is moderate ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .278). Negative tone is especially prominent in Belarra's posts (78.0%), followed by Sanders (57.6%), Mélenchon (55.2%) and Reichinnek (53.4%). Corbyn and Famellos show a more mixed distribution. Corbyn has the highest proportion of positive posts (45.7%), followed by Famellos (36.2%) and Reichinnek (29.5%). Mixed tone is most common in Sanders's posts (37.1%), followed by Famellos (28.6%) and Mélenchon (23.8%).

**[Insert Fig. 2 here]**

**Figure 2: Overall tone of the post per politician (chi square p value < .001, Cramer's V= .278).**

The setting of the post (Fig. 3) also varies significantly ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .325). Sanders appears most frequently in media spaces (43.0%) and private spaces (46.3%), with very limited use of institutional or political spaces (0.7%). Mélenchon similarly appears most often in private spaces (47.7%), followed by public spaces (25.5%) and media spaces (16.1%). Corbyn and Belarra use public spaces most frequently, at 43.6% and 49.2% respectively, while also appearing in institutional or political spaces relatively often: 36.8% for Corbyn and 30.3% for Belarra. Reichinnek records the highest use of media spaces (35.6%), followed by public spaces (27.5%) and private spaces (26.2%). Famellos shows a relatively even distribution between public spaces (38.1%) and private spaces (37.1%), with lower use of institutional or political spaces (14.3%) and media spaces (10.5%).

**[Insert Fig. 3 here]**

**Figure 3: Scene of the post per politician (chi square p value < .001, Cramer's V= .325).**

References to elites as enemies (Fig. 4) also vary significantly across the sample ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .505). Mélenchon records the highest proportion of elite references (67.3%), followed by Sanders (47.0%), Belarra (38.7%) and Famellos (29.2%). By contrast, such references are rare in Corbyn's posts (1.7%) and Reichinnek's posts (3.3%).

**[Insert Fig. 4 here]**

**Figure 4: Reference to the elite (state, media, political system) as enemy per politician (chi square p value < .001, Cramer's V .505).**

Attire (Fig. 5) shows one of the strongest associations in the findings ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .731). Sanders appears in official clothing in all posts in the sample (100.0%), while Mélenchon also appears predominantly in official clothing (89.7%). Famellos likewise appears more often in official than casual clothing (71.4%). By contrast, Reichinnek appears overwhelmingly in casual clothing (96.0%), followed by Corbyn (73.5%) and Belarra (66.4%).

**[Insert Fig. 5 here]**

**Figure 5: Outfit per politician (chi square p value < .001, Cramer's V= .731).**

Patterns of interaction with the public are presented in Table 4. Both interaction with crowds and interaction with small groups or individuals vary significantly across politicians. Interaction with crowds shows a moderate association ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .434), while interaction with small groups or individuals shows a stronger association ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .586).

Table 4
Projected interactions per politician.

| **Politician** | **Interaction with crowds** | **Interaction with small group of people or one to one** |
|---|---|---|
| Jeremy Corbyn | 15.1% | **19.3%** |
| Jean-Luc Mélenchon | **50,0%** | 6,0% |
| Bernie Sanders | 30.5% | **61.6%** |
| Sokratis Famellos | 31.1% | **56.6%** |
| Ione Belarra | **3.3%** | 1.3% |
| Heidi Reichinnek | 0.7% | **4.7%** |
| **Chi-square p-value** | < 0.001 | < 0.001 |
| **Cramer's V** | .434 | .586 |

Mélenchon records the highest level of interaction with crowds (50.0%), followed by Famellos (31.1%) and Sanders (30.5%). Corbyn appears with crowds in 15.1% of posts, while Belarra (3.3%) and Reichinnek (0.7%) do so rarely. For interaction with small groups or individuals, Sanders (61.6%) and Famellos (56.6%) record the highest values. Corbyn appears with small groups or individuals in 19.3% of posts, while Mélenchon (6.0%), Reichinnek (4.7%) and Belarra (1.3%) record lower levels.

**[Insert** Table 4 **here]**

Figures 6, 7 and 8 present the race, gender and age of the people appearing in posts where such coding was applicable. Because chi-square testing was not valid for these variables, the results should be read descriptively.

In terms of racial representation (Fig. 6), Corbyn's posts show the most varied distribution: 37.9% of relevant posts feature majority-white groups, 17.2% majority non-white groups, and 44.8% a balance of racial groups. Mélenchon and Sanders also include some balanced racial representation, at 22.0% and 21.2% respectively, although both more often feature majority-white groups. Famellos, Belarra and Reichinnek record only majority-white groups in the relevant posts, though the number of applicable cases is limited for some actors.

**[Insert Fig. 6 here]**

**Figure 6: Race of the people in the post per politician** [3].

Gender representation (Fig. 7) also varies descriptively. Mélenchon records the highest proportion of gender-balanced groups (70.4%), followed by Belarra (66.7%), Reichinnek (60.0%), Corbyn (50.0%) and Sanders (40.4%). Famellos has the highest proportion of majority-masculine groups (72.6%), followed by Sanders (57.0%). Majority-feminine groups are most visible in Belarra's posts (33.3%), followed by Corbyn (30.0%) and Reichinnek (20.0%).

**[Insert Fig. 7 here]**

**Figure 7: Gender of the people in the post per politician** [4].

Age representation (Fig. 8) also differs across the sample. Corbyn and Mélenchon most frequently feature majority-young groups, at 62.1% and 63.0% respectively. Belarra also shows a relatively high proportion of majority-young groups (44.4%), though with a large share of balanced age groups (50.0%). Famellos records the highest proportion of majority-mature groups (87.7%), while Sanders shows a more mixed age profile, with 45.7% majority-mature groups, 27.2% majority-senior groups and 24.5% balanced age groups. Reichinnek's relevant posts are split mainly between majority-young (44.4%) and majority-mature (44.4%) groups.

**[Insert Fig. 8 here]**

**Figure 8: "Age group" of the people in the post per politician** [5].

Finally, Fig. 9 shows the communicative function of posts. The association between politician and post type is statistically significant ($\chi^2$ $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .375$). Opposition-focused communication is the dominant category for several actors, especially Belarra (70.3%) and Reichinnek (56.8%), followed by Corbyn (47.9%) and Famellos (35.0%). Mélenchon records a lower but still substantial proportion of opposition-focused posts (30.5%), while Sanders records the lowest proportion (8.6%).

Self-promotion is most prominent in Mélenchon's posts (44.7%) and Famellos's posts (39.0%), followed by Corbyn (31.1%) and Reichinnek (20.3%). It is much less common in Belarra's posts (6.8%) and Sanders's posts (4.0%). Deliberation or discussion is most frequent in Sanders's posts (45.7%), while all other politicians record much lower levels: Famellos at 7.0%, Mélenchon at 2.1%, Corbyn at 0.8%, Belarra

at 0.7%, and Reichinnek at 0.0%. Mobilisation is also highest for Sanders (21.2%), followed by Famellos (15.0%), Mélenchon (11.3%), Corbyn (10.1%), Belarra (8.8%) and Reichinnek (1.4%). Information diffusion varies from 4.0% for Famellos to 21.6% for Reichinnek.

**[Insert Fig. 9 here]**

**Figure 9: Type of the post per politician (chi square p value < .001, Cramer's V=.375).**

Taken together, the findings indicate that the visual communication of radical left populist political leaders on TikTok varies across several dimensions, including platform-specific affordances, symbolic repertoires, setting, tone, attire, elite references, interaction with the public and post function. The following section discusses how these differences can be interpreted as distinct repertoires of radical left populist visual communication.

# Discussion

To address our research question, the findings suggest that the commonalities among radical left populist leaders on TikTok are more limited than the differences between them. Rather than converging around a single visual style, these leaders enact distinct forms of populist performance, shaped by different combinations of platform adaptation, ideological emphasis, leader image and symbolic representation. In line with previous research, the majority of posts remain predominantly political rather than personal (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2021; Moir, 2023). However, this shared orientation towards political content does not produce a unified mode of left populist communication. Instead, the analysis points to several differentiated repertoires through which radical left populism is visually and performatively constructed on TikTok.

The first and most distinctive repertoire is represented by Reichinnek, whose communication is most strongly embedded in the platform's native logic. Her high use of humour, music and especially special effects distinguishes her from all other leaders in the sample. In this respect, her style appears closest to the platform-specific performance identified by Moir (2023) in the case of Jagmeet Singh. Reichinnek's use of humour is particularly significant because it aligns with TikTok's memetic and affective culture. Rather than simply lightening political communication, humour here contributes to the construction of relatability, ordinariness and affective proximity, all of which are central to performative populism. Her extensive use of special effects similarly indicates a highly mediated and visually stylised form of communication, one that embraces TikTok's aesthetic and technical affordances more fully than the other cases. This does not mean that her communication is apolitical. Rather, it suggests that oppositional and informational content can be translated into a more platform-adapted visual form, where seriousness and playfulness are not necessarily opposed.

Reichinnek's style is also distinctive because platform adaptation is combined with direct address and sartorial ordinariness. Her exceptionally high level of eye contact creates a strong sense of mediated intimacy, while her overwhelming use of casual clothing presents her as accessible and unpretentious. In

the terms of the discursive–performative framework, this points to a form of left populist communication that does not primarily rely on crowds, party symbolism or explicit elite-referencing. Instead, it produces proximity through direct visual address, informality and platform fluency. This is a more individualised and media-native version of populist performance, where “the people” are not always visibly staged as a collective body, but are addressed through the conventions of TikTok itself.

Sanders represents a different repertoire: an institutional and deliberative form of left populist communication. Unlike Reichinnek, Sanders makes relatively limited use of platform-specific affordances, relying mainly on music rather than humour, stickers or special effects. His communication is closer to the explanatory and documentary styles identified by Umansky and Pipal (2023) in their study of U.S. Democratic politicians. At the same time, Sanders is far from visually neutral. His extensive use of national symbols is particularly striking, given that national symbolism is more commonly associated with right-wing populism and patriotic visual repertoires (Cheles, 2023; Farkas et al., 2022). In Sanders’s case, however, national imagery appears to be rearticulated within a left populist framework. It does not operate primarily as an exclusionary or nativist marker, but as part of an inclusive civic construction of “the people” grounded in national belonging, economic justice and democratic renewal.

Sanders also makes extensive use of personal political symbols. This is important because, as an independent politician without a conventional party affiliation, his visual branding cannot rely on a stable party logo in the same way as some of the other leaders. The personal logo therefore functions as a substitute for party symbolism: it gives visual coherence to his political identity and helps mark his project as recognisable, consistent and institutionally serious. This connects to another central tension in his populist performance. Sanders frequently attacks political and economic elites, and his communication is strongly shaped by systemic critique, especially around inequality and the “rigged system”. Yet visually he presents himself through official attire, direct address and institutional seriousness. His challenge to elites is therefore not performed through anti-institutional aesthetics, but through the authority of the “ideal candidate” frame (Grabe and Bucy, 2009). He appears as a challenger to the system who nevertheless claims legitimacy through competence, seriousness and public responsibility.

This institutional seriousness is combined with a strongly deliberative and interpersonal style. Sanders records the highest frequency of one-to-one or small-group interaction, and he also stands out for deliberative communication and mobilisation. His performance of proximity is therefore not centred primarily on mass rallies or platform entertainment, but on dialogue, responsiveness and direct engagement with citizens. In this sense, he performs the role of a “listening statesman”: formally dressed, visually authoritative, but repeatedly shown in contact with ordinary people. This complicates any simple opposition between populism and institutionalism. Sanders’s TikTok communication suggests that left populist antagonism can be combined with institutional authority, deliberative address and civic nationalism.

Corbyn and Famellos form a third, more restrained repertoire of left populist communication. Both make limited use of TikTok-specific affordances and visual spectacle, prioritising political substance, ideological messaging and relational communication over entertainment-oriented adaptation. Their communication therefore aligns more closely with informational and movement-oriented dissemination than with the more highly aestheticised logic often associated with TikTok. Yet they do not use this restraint in identical ways. Corbyn's communication is more activist and movement-based, while Famellos's is more institutional and party-anchored.

Corbyn's visual style is built around solidarity, accessibility and public activism. He records the most positive affective profile in the sample, and his posts foreground hope, collective struggle and grassroots politics more than explicit elite confrontation. His frequent presence in public spaces, casual attire and interaction with both crowds and smaller groups construct him as physically immersed in collective struggles rather than positioned above them. This corresponds to an activist form of ordinariness: Corbyn's authority is not primarily produced through official symbols or professionalised visual branding, but through proximity to movements, causes and public forms of political participation. In this sense, his communication performs left populism as solidarity rather than as spectacle or personalised antagonism.

Famellos, by contrast, occupies a more institutionalised position within this solidaristic repertoire. Like Corbyn, he avoids a strongly confrontational or platform-spectacular style, and his tone is relatively balanced. However, he makes more systematic use of party symbols, official attire and direct eye contact. This anchors his communication more firmly within party structures and governing legitimacy. His visual performance therefore combines proximity with responsibility: he appears as a representative of popular demands, but also as an established political figure capable of institutional leadership. In this respect, his communication resonates with Casullo and Colalongo's (2022) argument that populist leaders do not simply mirror "the people", but also mobilise symbolic markers of authority that position them as exceptional or legitimate representatives of popular will.

Mélenchon and Belarra constitute the most overtly antagonistic repertoire in the sample, although they enact antagonism in different ways. In both cases, TikTok is used less as a space for personalisation or entertainment-driven engagement and more as a platform for ideological confrontation and political denunciation. Their relatively restrained use of platform-specific affordances reinforces this orientation. Political content and opposition-focused messaging are prioritised over platform playfulness or visual spectacle, which is consistent with wider findings that many political actors only partially adapt to TikTok's audiovisual grammar (Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). Both leaders also make limited use of national and party symbols, suggesting that their populist performances rely less on visual branding and more on the direct articulation of antagonism.

Belarra stands out as the clearest case of negativity-driven populist performance. Her TikTok communication appears as a continuation of Podemos's anti-"casta" tradition, with indignation functioning as the dominant emotional register. Her high levels of eye contact strengthen the sense of

direct address, but this is not matched by frequent visual interaction with crowds or groups. This produces a relatively solitary form of antagonism: Belarra speaks directly to viewers on behalf of a "people" that is discursively invoked but only rarely visually staged. Her performance is therefore confrontational and intimate at the same time. It does not present the leader as the centre of a mass movement in the visual sense; instead, it constructs her as an uncompromising voice of denunciation.

Mélenchon's antagonism is more traditionally leader-centred and mass-oriented. He records the highest level of elite-referencing and makes frequent use of crowds, while also favouring official attire and relatively limited direct eye contact. These elements project a more mediated and authoritative persona, emphasising leadership, scale and symbolic authority rather than interpersonal intimacy. His frequent crowd interaction visually stages the antagonistic frontier between "the people" and "the elite", positioning him at the centre of a collective movement. In this sense, Mélenchon's TikTok communication comes closest to a "frontier populist" style: the leader appears as the embodiment of popular will, mobilising collective opposition to neoliberal or oligarchic power. Compared with Belarra's more individualised denunciation, Mélenchon's antagonism is visually organised around mass politics and leader-centred mobilisation.

The demographic representation of "the people" further complicates the assumption that radical left populism necessarily produces inclusive or demographically diverse visual repertoires. Corbyn's posts offer the clearest example of a visually diverse popular subject, especially in terms of racial balance, youth and gender representation. Mélenchon also foregrounds a younger popular subject, although with a more majority-white racial profile. By contrast, Sanders and Famellos present a more traditional and mature visual construction of "the people". Sanders's case is particularly interesting because it differs from the image of Sanders as a youth-oriented political figure. On TikTok, his visual representation of "the people" appears more mature, more masculine and more majority-white than might be expected. This does not necessarily contradict Moffitt's (2024) findings, since Moffitt's comparison with Trump may make Sanders's visual diversity more visible in relative terms. In a sample composed only of left populist actors, however, Sanders's imagery appears comparatively more homogeneous.

Famellos presents an even more institutionalised demographic profile, with "the people" appearing as overwhelmingly white, masculine and mature. The findings for Reichinnek and Belarra are more difficult to interpret because the number of relevant interaction cases is smaller, but both appear less masculine-heavy than Sanders and Famellos. These patterns are important because they show that the inclusive rhetoric of radical left populism is not automatically mirrored in visual representation. Left populist communication may construct "the people" in egalitarian and anti-oligarchic terms, but the visible people who appear in posts can still be demographically narrow, selective or shaped by institutional context.

Overall, the discussion points to a central finding: radical left populist leaders on TikTok do not simply reproduce a shared left populist visual style. Instead, they translate left populism into different repertoires of visual performance. Reichinnek represents a platform-native and informal repertoire; Sanders an institutional-deliberative one; Corbyn an activist-solidaristic one; Famellos an institutional-

solidaristic one; Mélenchon a leader-centred antagonistic one; and Belarra an individualised denunciatory one. These repertoires show that TikTok does not impose a single communicative logic on radical left populist actors. Rather, it provides a visual and affective environment in which different political traditions, leadership styles and national contexts are selectively adapted, resisted or reworked. This supports the broader argument that left populism should be understood not only as a discursive articulation of “the people” against “the elite”, but also as a mediated and visual performance in which leadership, proximity, antagonism and popular identity are made visible in different ways.

# Conclusion

This article examined the visual communication strategies of radical left populist political leaders on TikTok across six countries. Building on image management theory, visual political communication, and a discursive–performative approach to populism, it asked how these actors visually construct leadership, “the people”, antagonism, authenticity and proximity on a platform increasingly central to contemporary political communication. In doing so, the article contributes to a literature that has focused more extensively on right-wing populism, Facebook and Instagram, while left populist communication on TikTok remains comparatively underexplored.

The findings show that radical left populist leaders on TikTok do not converge around a single visual style. Instead, they develop distinct repertoires of visual and performative communication. Reichinnek appears as the most platform-native case, making extensive use of humour, special effects, direct gaze and casual attire. Sanders combines institutional seriousness with deliberative address, national symbolism and interpersonal engagement. Corbyn’s communication foregrounds activist proximity, public spaces, casual presentation and solidaristic affect, while Famellos combines proximity with a more institutionalised and party-anchored style. Mélenchon and Belarra are the most overtly antagonistic cases, although Mélenchon performs antagonism through leader-centred mobilisation and crowd interaction, while Belarra’s style is more solitary, denunciatory and directly addressed to the viewer.

These differences complicate any assumption that radical left populist communication on TikTok simply follows either a generic populist style or a platform-determined logic. Some patterns identified in earlier studies of visual political communication and populist image management are also present here, including the importance of leader presentation, symbolic repertoires, ordinariness, professionalisation and proximity to “the people” (Bast, 2024; Farkas et al., 2022). However, these features are not used uniformly. Rather, they are recombined in ways that reflect different political traditions, national contexts, organisational positions and leadership styles. TikTok therefore does not simply push radical left populists towards informality, humour or personalisation. It provides a visual and affective environment in which some actors adapt strongly to platform conventions, while others retain more conventional, institutional or movement-based forms of political communication.

The article also shows that left populism's inclusive and egalitarian claims are not automatically mirrored in visual representation. Although radical left populism often constructs "the people" in democratic, anti-oligarchic and non-nativist terms (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019; Mouffe, 2018; Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2021), the visible "people" appearing in TikTok posts vary considerably across cases. Some leaders foreground more diverse, youthful or gender-balanced representations, while others present a more mature, masculine or demographically narrow popular subject. This finding underlines the value of studying populism not only as discourse, ideology or strategy, but also as a visual and embodied performance. Who is shown, how the leader appears, where politics is staged, and what kinds of symbols are mobilised all matter for understanding how "the people" is made visible.

The study has several limitations. The analysis is based on six political leaders and leading figures, and the posts are confined to a specific period, with variation in sample size reflecting differences in each actor's use of TikTok. The study is also exploratory and focuses on selected visual and discursive variables rather than on audience reception or engagement effects. Future research could expand the sample to include more left-wing and radical left actors, compare left populists more directly with radical right populists or mainstream parties, and examine how audiences interpret and respond to different visual repertoires. Further qualitative work could also analyse specific videos in greater depth, especially where humour, affect, sound, editing and embodiment interact in ways that are difficult to capture fully through content analysis.

Overall, the article demonstrates that radical left populist communication on TikTok is best understood as plural rather than uniform. Left populism on the platform is enacted through different combinations of platform adaptation, symbolic representation, institutional authority, activist proximity, antagonism and visual constructions of "the people". This supports the broader argument that populism is not only a discursive articulation of popular demands against elite power, but also a mediated and visual performance through which political identities, leadership styles and democratic claims are made visible.

## Declarations

# Ethical Approval:

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

**Informed Consent:**

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

# Author Contribution

A.V and S.V. wrote the theoretical background and conclusions, S.P. is responsible for the research and results. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

# Data Availability

Research data can be found here: https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/rnrkr8ynvb/1

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## Footnotes

1. Recent by means of the data collection date. Posts were sampled retrospectively in reverse chronological order, resulting in a dataset spanning 2024 and 2023, with the exact time frame varying across politicians according to their posting frequency.
2. Conducted through k-alpha.org.
3. Chi square test not valid due to high percentage of expected values below 5.
4. Chi square test not valid due to high percentage of expected values below 5.
5. Chi square test not valid due to high percentage of expected values below 5.

## Figures

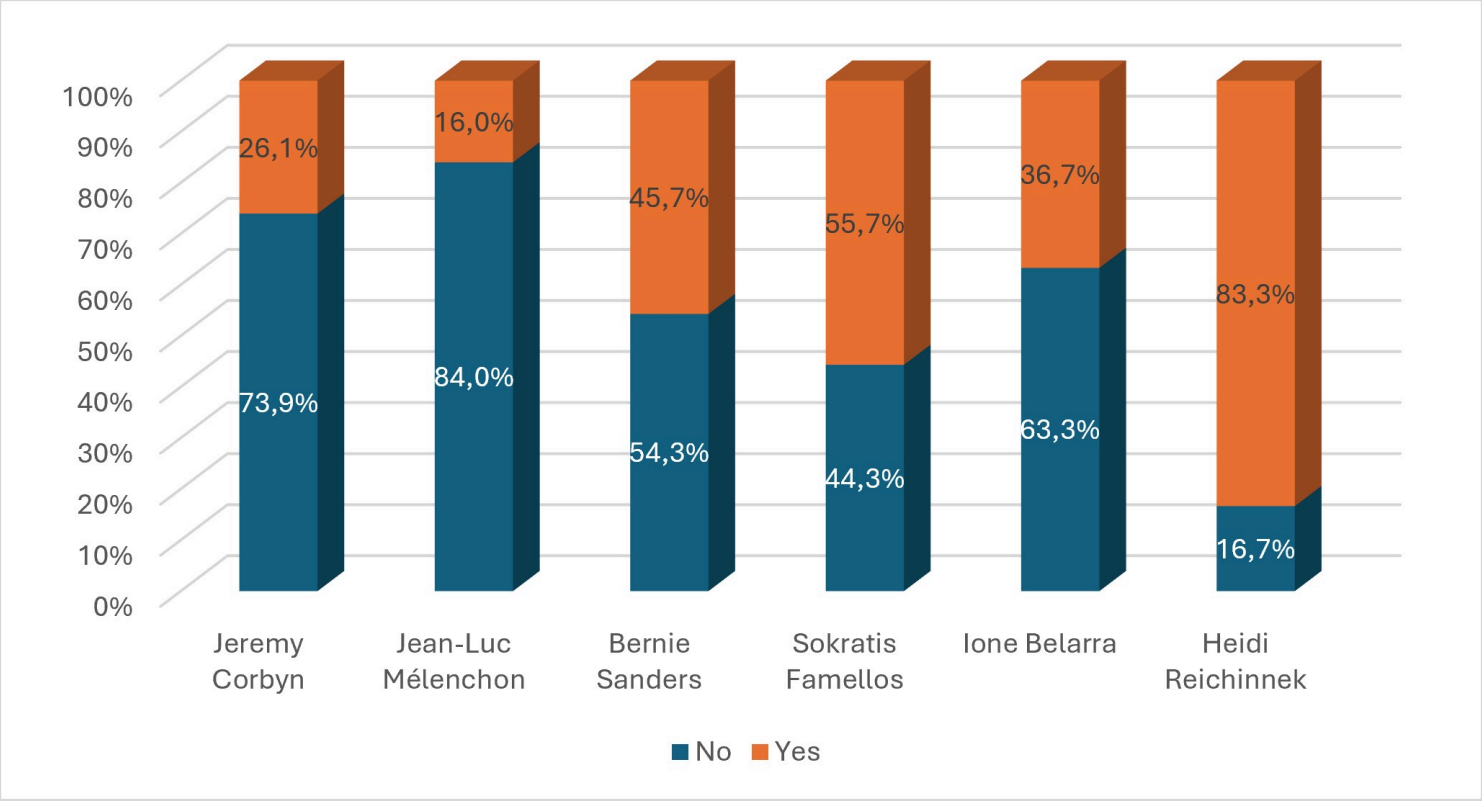
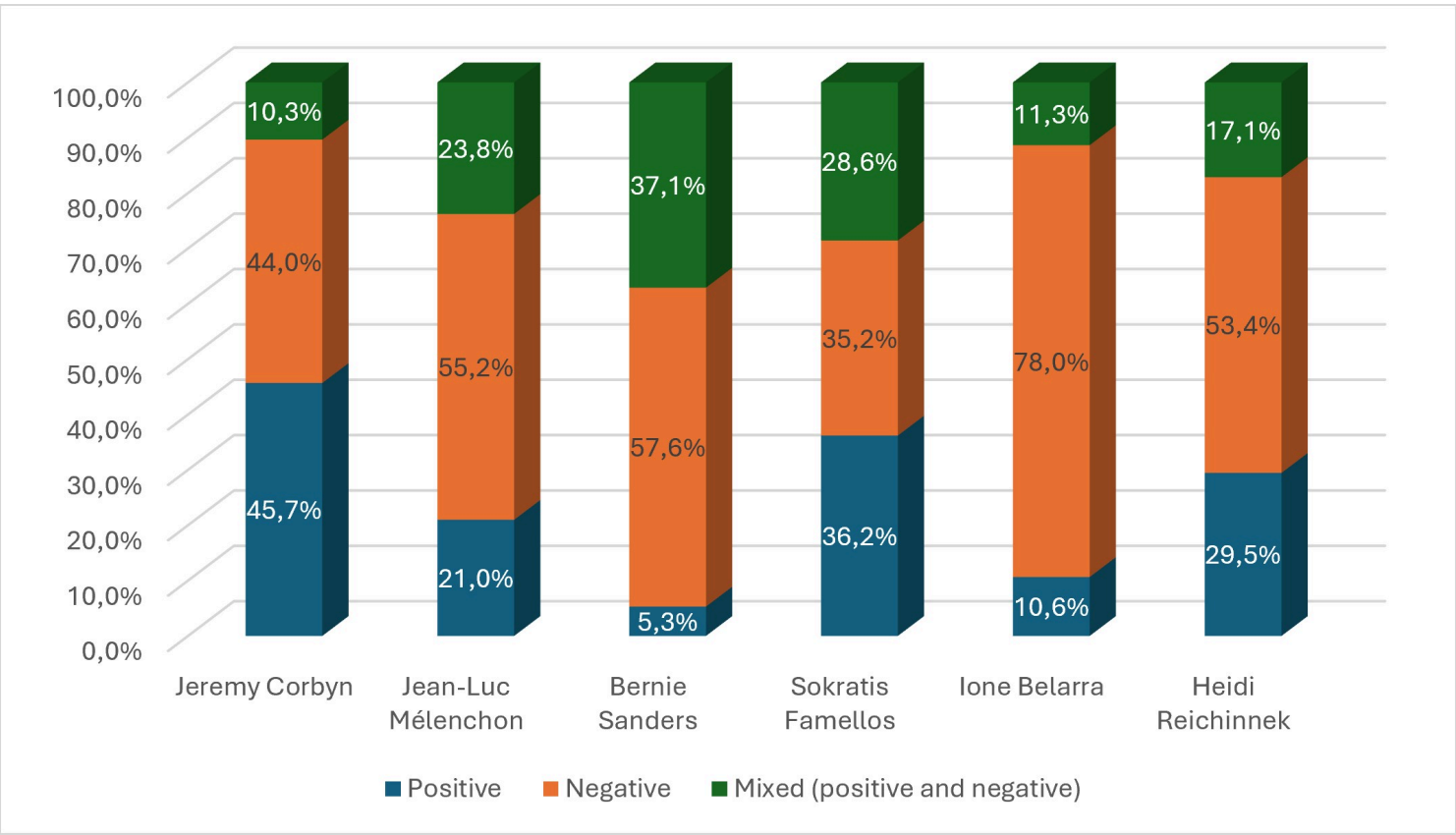


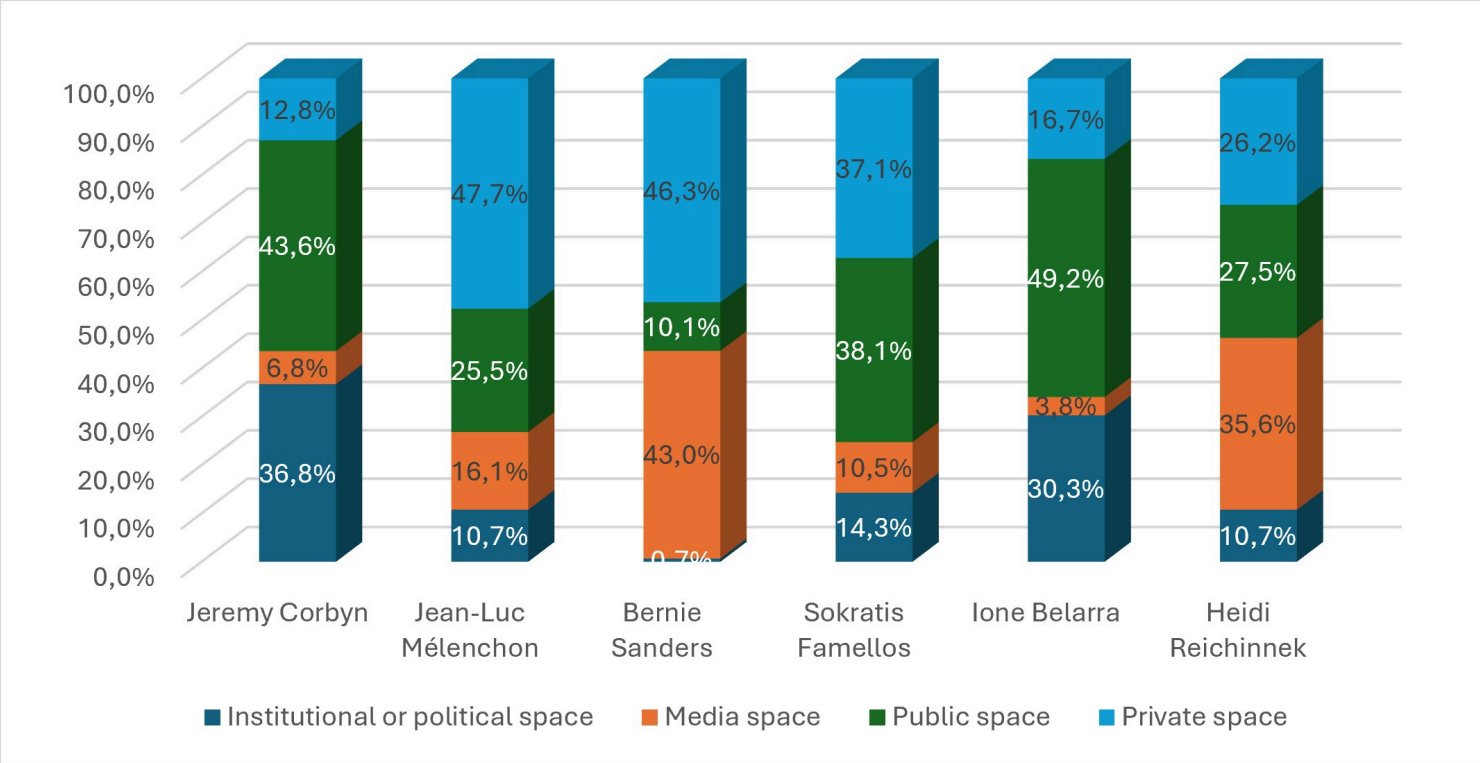

**Figure 1**

**Eye contact per politician (Chi-square p-value <.001, Cramer's V= .449).**



## Figure 2

**Overall tone of the post per politician (chi square p value <.001, Cramer's V= .278).**




## Figure 3

**Scene of the post per politician (chi square p value <.001, Cramer's V= .325).**

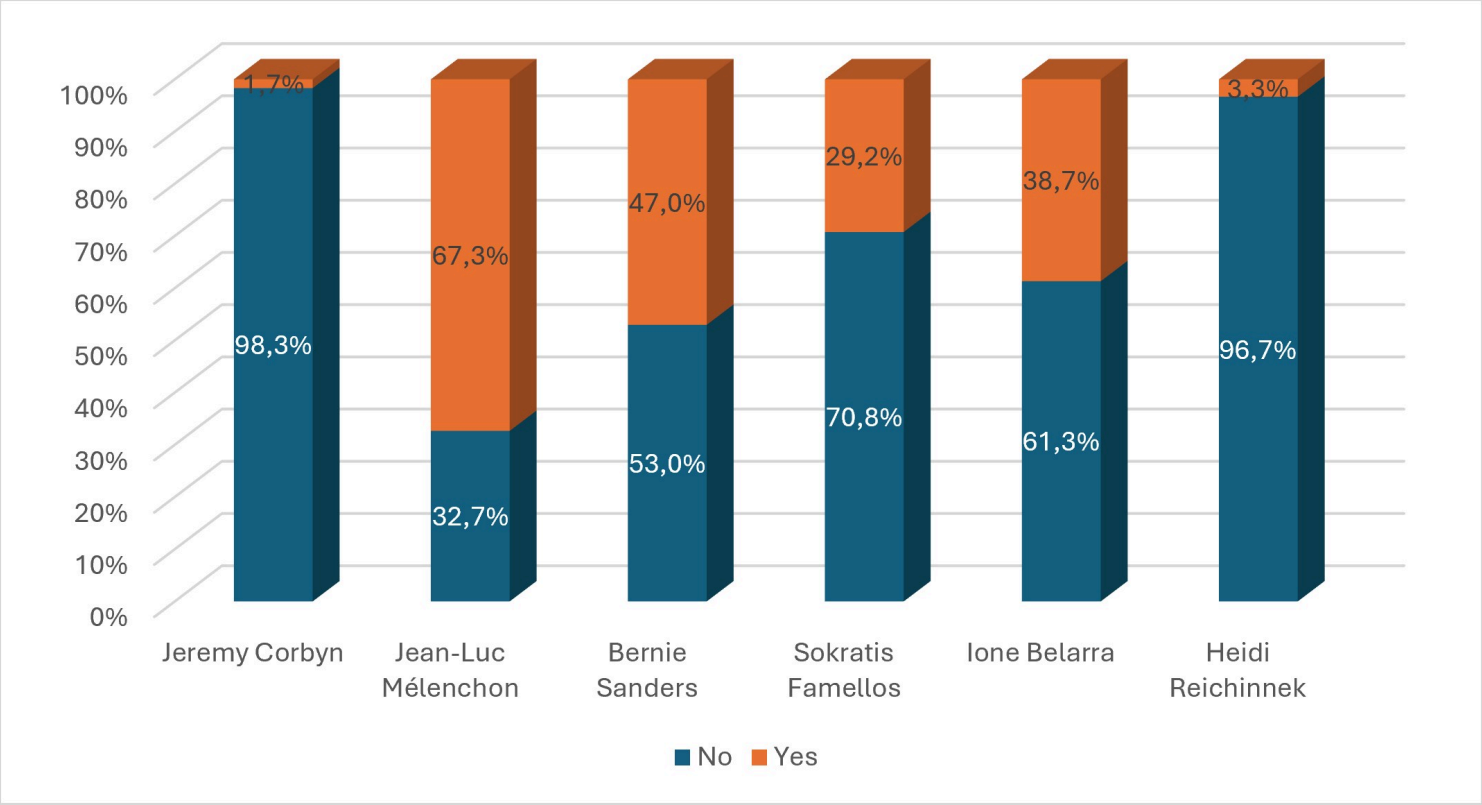



**Figure 4**

**Reference to the elite (state, media, political system) as enemy per politician (chi square p value <.001, Cramer's V .505).**

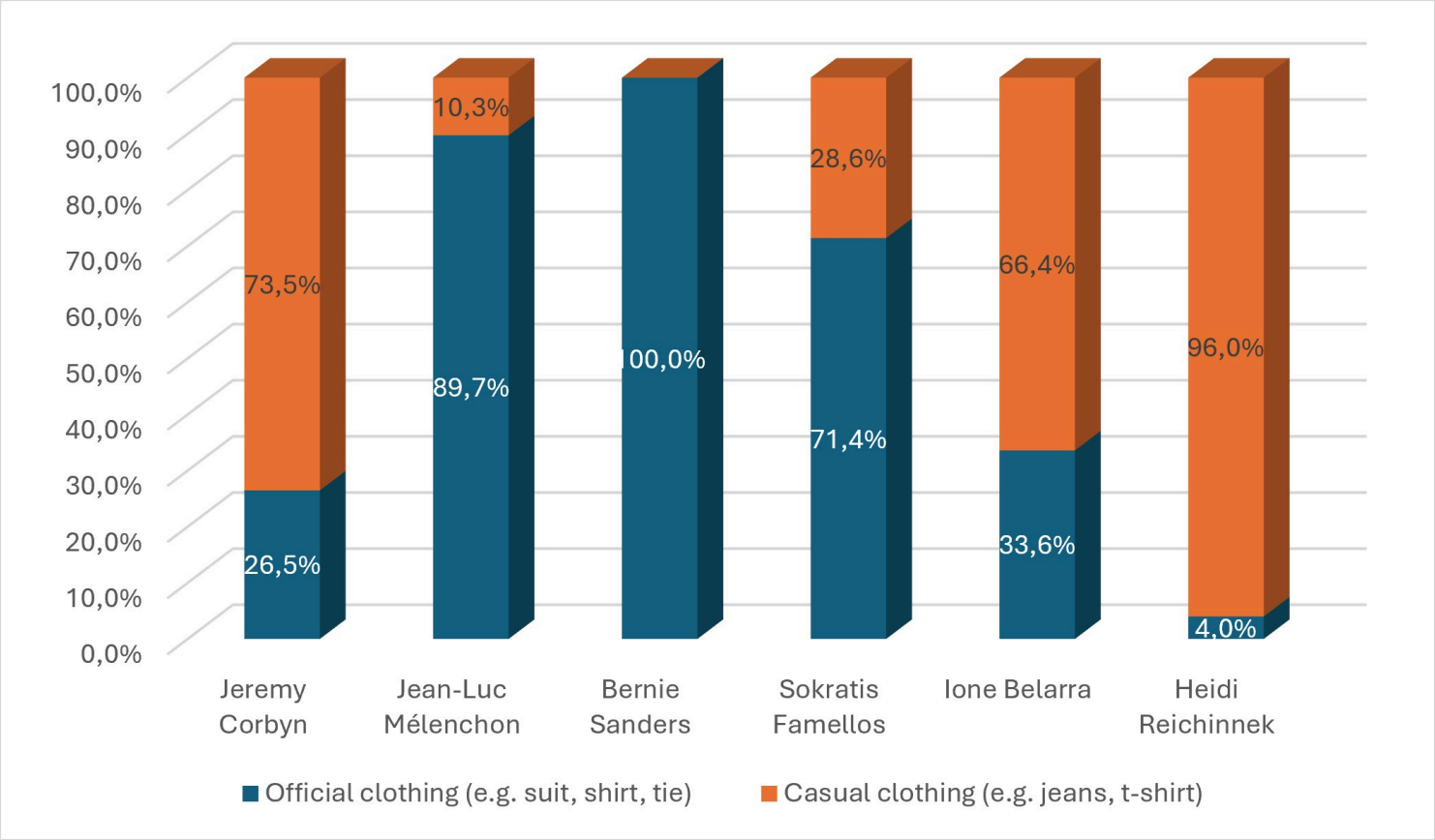



**Figure 5**

**Outfit per politician (chi square p value <.001, Cramer's V= .731).**

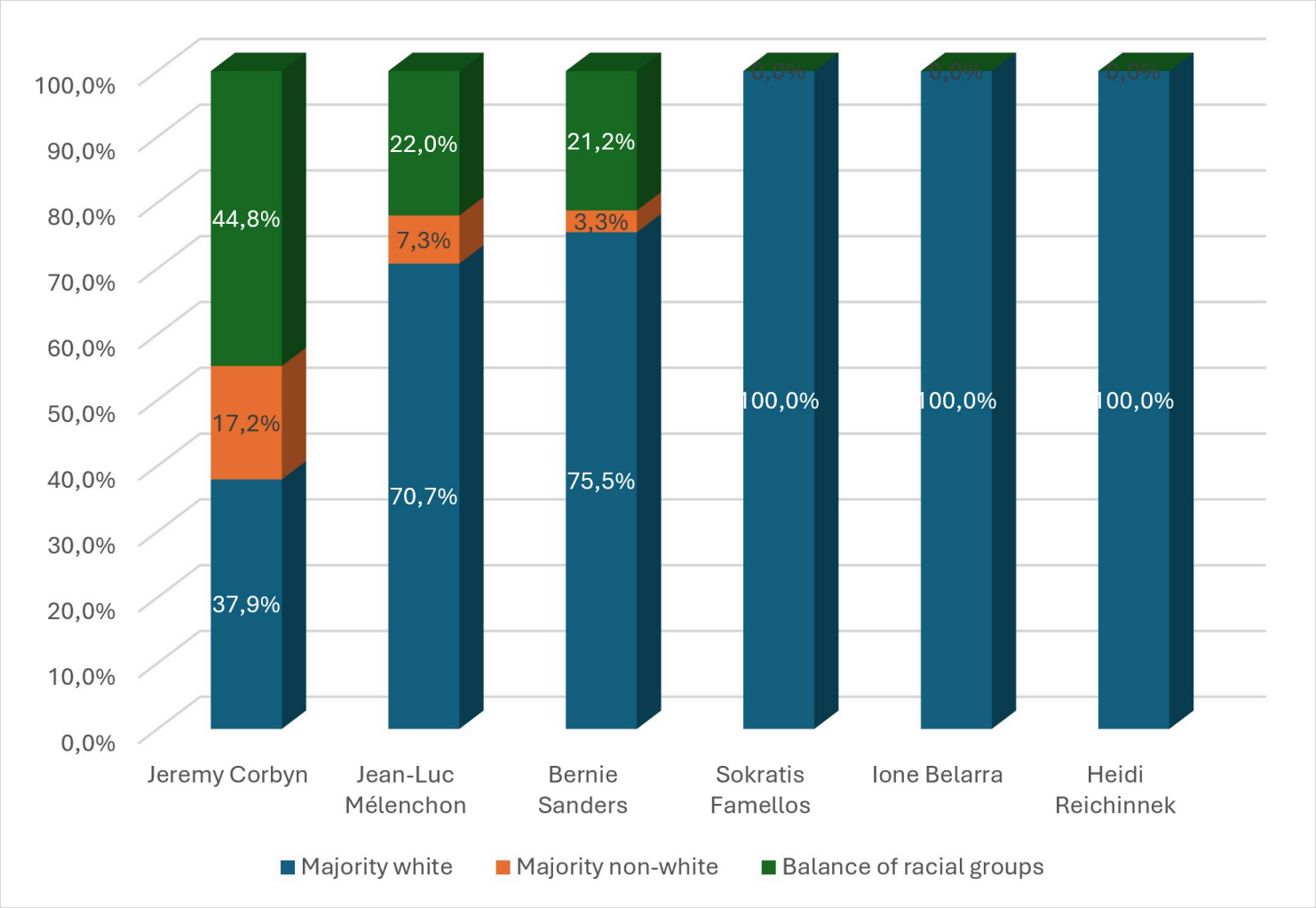



**Figure 6**

**Race of the people in the post per politician[3].**

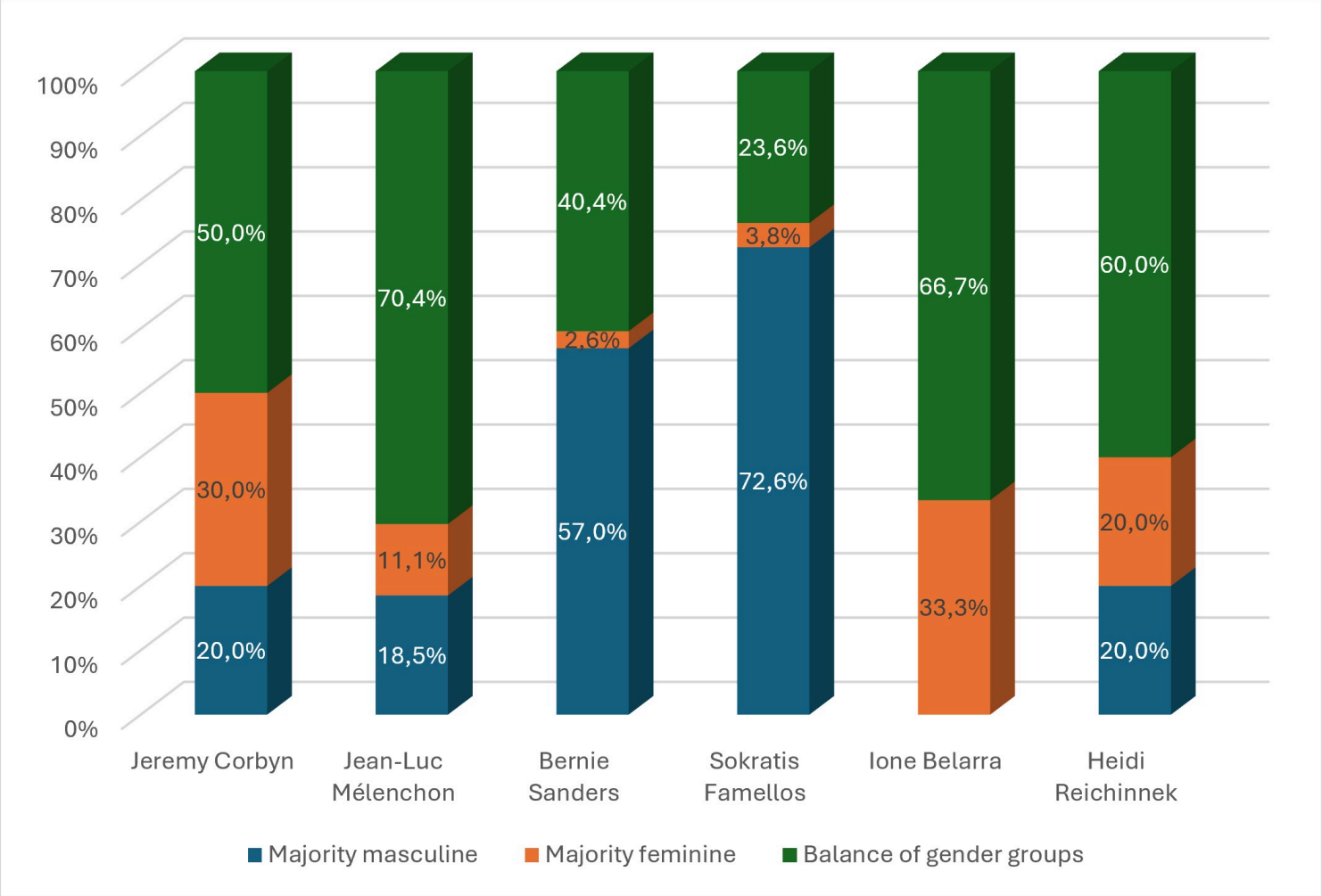



**Figure 7**

**Gender of the people in the post per politician[4].**

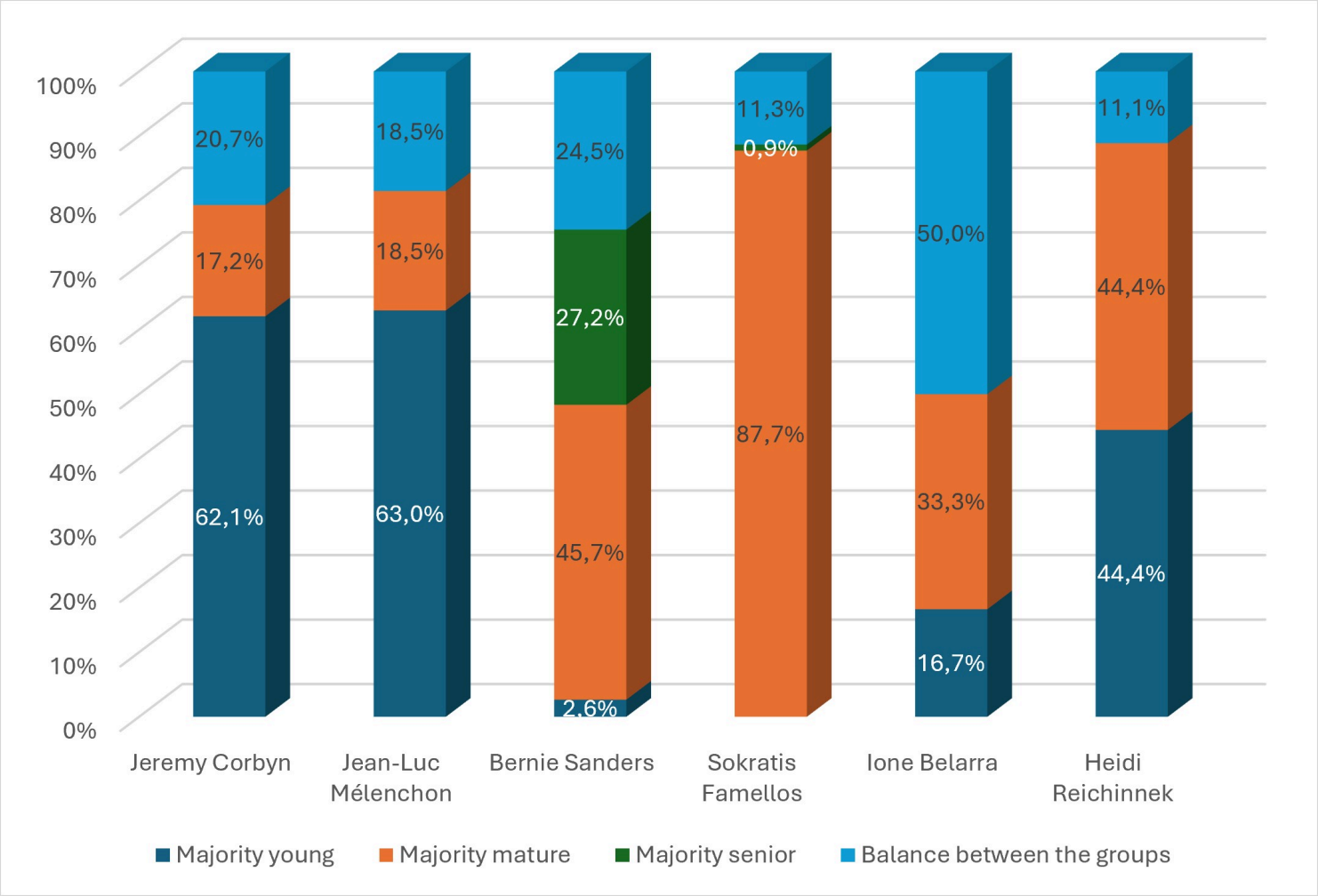



**Figure 8**

**“Age group” of the people in the post per politician[5].**

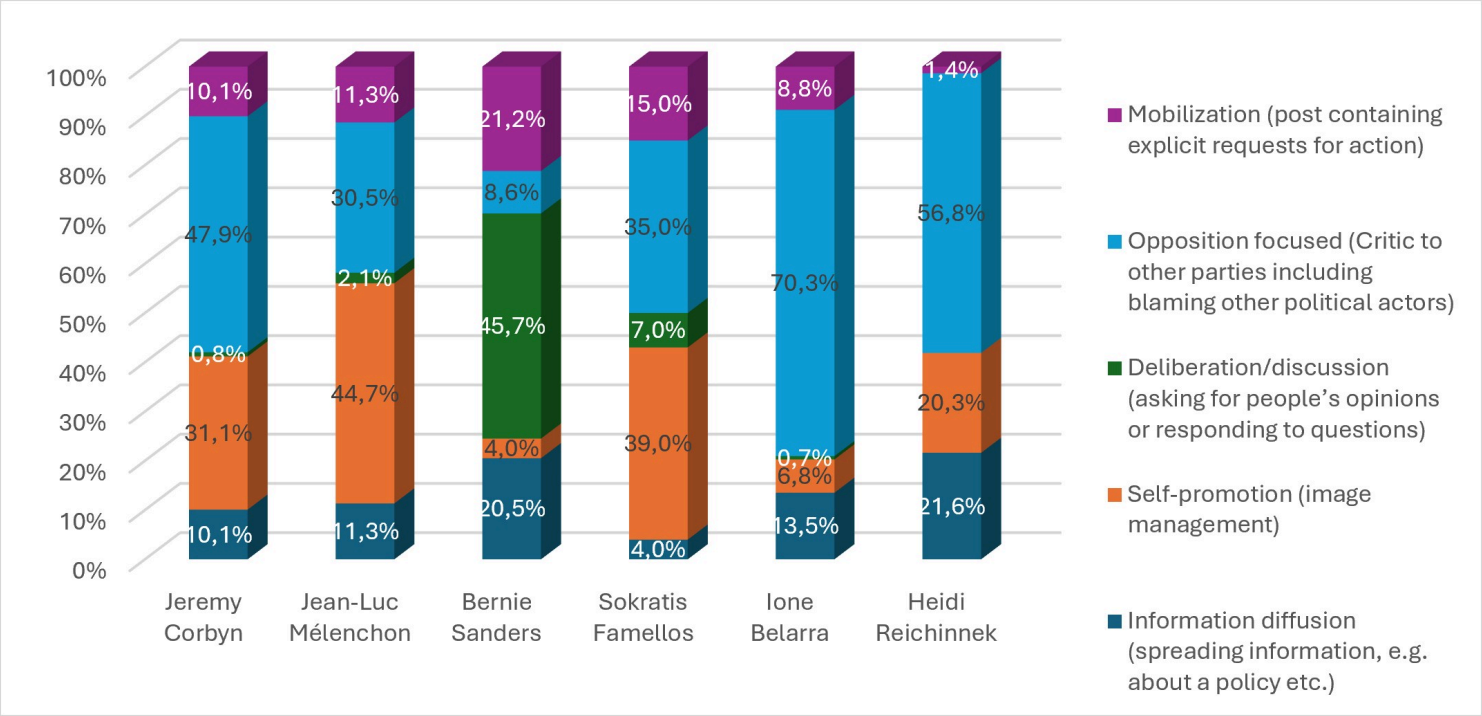



**Figure 9**

**Type of the post per politician (chi square p value <.001, Cramer's V=.375).**

# Supplementary Files

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- leftwingpopulismtables.docx