frontiers in Political Science

TYPE Study Protocol
PUBLISHED 27 March 2026
DOI 10.3389/fpos.2026.1720542

OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 10 October 2025
REVISED 29 January 2026
ACCEPTED 23 February 2026
PUBLISHED 27 March 2026

CITATION
De Sio L, Legnante G, Tuorto D, Vezzoni C, Boldrini M, Bordignon M, Colombo A, Angelis AD, Leofreddi A, Maggini N, Mannoni E, Marolla F, Pennucci N, Piacentini A, Piacentini F, Curini L, Di Cocco J and Pagano G (2026) Assessing public sphere influence on political attitudes across generations: a mixed-methods study of generational political structuring in Italy.
Front. Polit. Sci. 8:1720542.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2026.1720542

Assessing public sphere influence on political attitudes across generations: a mixed-methods study of generational political structuring in Italy

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We present a project investigating the impact of social media on ideological structuring of political attitudes in a generational perspective, with Italy (around the 2024 European Parliament elections) as a case study. We introduce an innovative mixed-methods, sequential, quantitative-driven, multi-stage design combining surveys, qualitative interviews, and social media data, which effectively integrates qualitative and quantitative components to analyze the effect of social media influencers on political attitudes across generations. We present project design along with interaction and integration among components (methodological innovations include a "Swipe" module for respondents–influencers linkage and use of AI for classifying social media posts). We describe individual components (including first empirical results), an intermediate convergent assessment stage, and directions for data analysis.

KEYWORDS
generational differences, ideological consistency, influencer, political attitudes, social media

1 Introduction

Studying democratic representation poses methodological challenges due to the complex interactions among citizens, political parties, leaders, institutions, and media within an institutional context (Thomassen, 2005).

Addressing these requires a multi-level, multi-actor approach, even in quantitative designs. Pioneering studies integrated various quantitative components, including mass, candidate, and expert surveys on party positions, media data, and contextual information. Examples include the European Election Study 2009 (PIREDEU project), the True European Voter project (Schmitt et al., 2021), and national election studies like the German Longitudinal Election Study (Schmitt-Beck et al., 2009) and the British Election Study (Fieldhouse et al., 2022). These

multi-level designs link actors across micro, meso, and macro levels, facilitated by computing advances enabling complex multi-level modeling on large datasets.

Still, we argue that these influential multi-component quantitative designs have limitations in uncovering processes and dynamics. First, their reliance on a quantitative, post-positivist framework risks missing crucial mechanisms that qualitative, in-depth research can uncover—particularly amid disruptive changes like communication disintermediation, populist party rise, and shifting alignments. Second, these studies often focus on mainstream media, neglecting the growing influence of social media; at the same time, while an expanding body of research has examined political communication on a variety of digital platforms, these latter approaches are rarely integrated into large-scale, multi-level designs that systematically link media exposure to individual-level attitudinal and behavioral data. Third, their strict quantitative approach favors generalized models based on representative samples, limiting their ability to capture heterogeneous political behaviour. We argue that studying disruptive change requires a more nuanced perspective embracing the notion of *causal heterogeneity*, recognizing that not only political phenomena but even their underlying causal mechanisms might *differ* across social groups with possibly important differences across *generations* (a classic approach when studying change).

To experiment with a possible design addressing these challenges, we then developed the POSTGEN research project that we present in this article. The project aims at studying democratic representation in the 2022–2024 period on the Italian case (a political system characterized by disruptive political innovation, with the first populist government in a large Western European country in 2018, and a lively social media landscape also featuring actors of international relevance). The main aim of the project is to analyze generational differences in the presence of an ideological organization of political attitudes at the individual level, with a specific focus on the role and influence of the media.

From a methodological standpoint, the project features three key characteristics addressing the aforementioned limitations: (1) it adopts a mixed-methods framework, by leveraging results from qualitative components (in-depth qualitative interviews to young adults—aged 26–35—in different Italian cities; observation at the occasion of a high-school quantitative survey) to inform the design (and data analysis) of quantitative components; (2) it is explicitly designed to capture a disintermediated and fragmented (social) media environment, by including a social media data collection component covering content from all most relevant social media actors (from both mainstream—media and political—actors and independent social media influencers), then suitable for (both human and automated) qualitative and quantitative content analysis; (3) it explicitly adopts a generational perspective in its articulation, which features—in addition to the aforementioned qualitative component on young adults—a dedicated (non-representative) survey component administered to high-school students, along with a general mass survey with an especially large N, designed to allow intergenerational comparisons with sufficient group size. Finally, the project retains and enhances a key characteristic of classic multi-level, multi-component quantitative studies, i.e., the development and use of a consistent scheme of linkage keys across all quantitative datasets; this proved particularly challenging and stimulating for linking survey respondents to social media actors (see Section 6).

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the main theoretical framework and research question; Section 3 outlines the research framework and the integration of its components. Subsequent sections detail key tasks and components, occasionally presenting initial findings. A final section outlines the main analytical directions, followed by concluding reflections.

2 Theoretical rationale and generational dimensions

The proposed research question sits in an area of intersection among citizens' ideological alignments, voting behaviour, and party competition, with a specific focus on Western Europe. Past research has essentially documented an evolution from class-based politics to a more complex political landscape influenced by economic, cultural, and generational changes.

Classic 20th-century politics in Western Europe were largely dominated by political conflicts aligned along social cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), with the class divide leading to the dominance of a left–right dimension of competition (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Knutsen, 1995). However, despite this simplification, citizen attitudes retained a complex structure, better represented in a two-dimensional, economic–cultural space (Middendorp, 1978). In such a space, a progressive–conservative antithesis emerged, with a progressive pole combining economic equality and cultural pluralism, and a conservative pole emphasizing economic freedom and cultural uniformity. This opposition can be best understood in spatial terms, as a diagonal-shaped dimension of conflict in the aforementioned two-dimensional space, that best describes political conflict in Western Europe until the 1970s (Middendorp, 1978; Hooghe et al., 2002; Budge, 2015).

A first challenge to these alignments came with post-materialist issues, which, however, were initially mostly successfully absorbed within the left–right conflict (Inglehart, 1977; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990). But a further challenge, possibly leading to deeper de-ideologization, came with mainstream parties in the late 20th century, adopting moderate and neoliberal economic policies (combined with culturally progressive stances) and broadening their appeal toward more catch-all strategies, often with de-politicized, technocratic overtones (Northcutt, 1988; De Sio and Lachat, 2020a). This in fact led to cross-ideological voter availability and an increased relevance of issue voting (Thomassen, 2005).

A partly unexpected effect of this process was, however, the exploitation of such de-ideologized context by new, conflictual *challenger* parties, politicizing specific conflictual issues across ideological lines: a phenomenon mostly emerging after the financial and migration crises of the 2010s (De Sio and Weber 2020; Schadee et al., 2019). Scholarly interpretations either attempted to revive cleavage-based schemes or proposed new, more *ad hoc* explanations relying on original uses of the classic concept of populism (Mény and Surel, 2002; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018); both approaches highlighted the limitations of traditional ideological lenses in understanding these new actors. However, a partly different framework was offered by research within the Issue Competition Comparative Project (ICCP) (De Sio and Lachat, 2020b). The project relied on data from both citizen attitudes and party communication on a wide range of country-specific issues and used an innovative methodological approach that (1) employed Twitter posts to identify the topics discussed by political parties; and (2) linked them to

citizens' positions on these issues. Research from the project revealed a shift toward broader, less structured *issue competition*, with voter availability across ideological boundaries offering opportunities for new party strategies. Strategic parties seized these opportunities by crafting innovative issue packages, often combining classic "conservative" (according to 20th-century ideology) stances on some issues with classically "progressive" stances on other issues, thus producing *post-ideological* party platforms that successfully resonated with post-ideological attitudes among citizens. As a result, a framework emerged, suggesting that citizen de-ideologization contributes to disruptive political change.

However, we argue that ICCP research only scratched the surface of a possible de-ideologization process. It is true that, in line with past quantitative multi-actor, multi-level projects (see the Introduction), ICCP already included functional linkage keys to allow integrated multi-level analysis. The project also shared the same limitations of previous research: (a) it lacked a qualitative dimension allowing to provide deeper and richer understanding of dynamics, mechanisms and meanings of the phenomena under analysis; (b) it did not cover effectively the current disintermediated and fragmented media environment (it only covered social media communication by political parties); (c) it lacked a specific generational perspective. These two latter, intertwined, aspects deserve further attention.

Party competition now occurs in a highly fragmented and polarized media environment (Sunstein, 2007; Edy and Meirick, 2018). The rise of cable and satellite TV and the Internet since the 1980s already created a high-choice media landscape, fostering echo chambers and issue-specific messages. Later on, these characteristics were further enhanced by the explosion of social media platforms, by now central infrastructures of political exposure, which reshape how citizens encounter political information in everyday life. There, political exposure is often incidental yet consequential, with political cues that, rather than being actively sought, increasingly reach citizens through algorithmically curated feeds and peer-driven circulation, a pattern described as "news finds me" dynamics (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), to which younger users appear particularly exposed (Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018). These dynamics unfold within what Wright (2012) conceptualizes as a "third space" of communication: a hybrid environment distinct from both institutional politics and private discussion, where everyday practices, entertainment, and informal interactions intersect with unintended political encounters.

Add to this complexity that specific platforms differ in terms of their affordances and algorithmic architectures, structuring exposure and salience. Instagram's personalized recommendation systems privilege algorithmically curated feeds over user-driven searches and further reinforce this logic by immersive and sequential formats such as Stories and Reels that promote continuous, visually oriented, and highly engaging content flows (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022; Belanche et al., 2021). Facebook, by contrast, tends to embed political content within more network-based and information-oriented interactions, structured around bidirectional ties among known contacts and practices of information exchange (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). As a result, political exposure on Instagram is more likely to take affective and issue-specific forms, whereas Facebook may facilitate more contextualized and discursive encounters with political information.

Seen from the "supply" side, this new and complex environment has also seen the rise of *social media influencers* (SMIs): key figures in shaping public opinion, leveraging perceived credibility, popularity, and a carefully curated sense of authenticity to build parasocial relationships with their audiences (Freberg et al., 2011; Enke and Borchers, 2019; Hudders and Lou, 2022). Through personal storytelling and public sharing of private experiences, SMIs transform everyday life into communicative resources, a process Raun (2018) described as the "celebrification of a private self." This practice fosters parasocial relationships, understood as structurally asymmetrical yet emotionally meaningful bonds that generate perceived closeness and trust (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Su et al., 2021). Unlike traditional celebrities, SMIs may further reinforce this perceived intimacy through episodic interaction with followers, strengthening the illusion of reciprocity and enhancing persuasive potential (Breves and Liebers, 2025). These dynamics extend beyond individual relationships to collective forms of engagement. Within influencers' ecosystems, followers often behave as fans, producing derivative content, participating in digital communities, and mobilizing around the influencer's causes. Such fan-based communities function as affective arenas of political socialization, where belonging, enthusiasm, and shared emotion can substitute for or complement ideological coherence (Gray et al., 2017; Van Zoonen, 2005).

Now, the influence of these new actors in this newly complex environment has been widely examined in marketing and in relation to consumeristic behaviour (e.g., Nafees et al., 2021; Zak and Hasprova, 2020; Ye et al., 2021). However, recent research indicates that SMIs increasingly shape political dynamics—not only by affecting vote outcomes (Shmargad and Sanchez, 2022; Sharma and Jain, 2021) but also by mobilizing and educating young voters, enhancing their political knowledge, engagement, and participation (R Riedl et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2023; Harff and Schmuck, 2024).

Yet their potential political influence in shaping political attitudes and values remains largely underexplored. Episodic, issue-specific exposure might be significantly less conducive to the development of stable ideological frameworks, which typically require repeated and coherent information environments. Specifically, our research is interested in SMIs that are not characterized as "political influencers," but who might only occasionally share political content on specific issues (e.g., celebrities taking stances on specific battles for civil rights). Our working hypothesis in this regard is that, in the fragmented communication ecosystem we just described, they might selectively sensitize citizens only on a relatively small set of political issues. As a result, this may hinder the development of cohesive ideological attitudes among citizens, which require a unified understanding across various topics.

Generational differences are particularly relevant in this context. First and foremost, our project (in fact employing a cross-sectional design) will mostly compare *cohorts*, and only indirectly attempt to corroborate the presence of *generational* effects by empirically assessing intra-cohort differences related to age. Still, we theoretically expect generational effects; yet, their directions and underlying mechanisms remain an open empirical question. De-ideologization may affect generations unevenly, with younger people—who have experienced weaker political socialization (Plutzer, 2002; Garcìa-Albacete, 2014; Tuorto, 2014)—being more susceptible to external influences and exhibiting looser political identities. Additionally, generational replacement is a key driver of long-term political change, as newer cohorts often display lower electoral participation and weaker engagement overall (Franklin and Wessels, 2002). At the same time, in highly personalized and algorithmically curated media environments, early and intensive exposure to social media may foster alternative dynamics, such as processes of re-ideologization and polarization for specific segments of younger cohorts, particularly those embedded in homogeneous digital publics or influencer-centered communities. Finally, substantial variation within generations is to be expected, driven by social-structural positions and, crucially, by heterogeneous patterns of media use and exposure.

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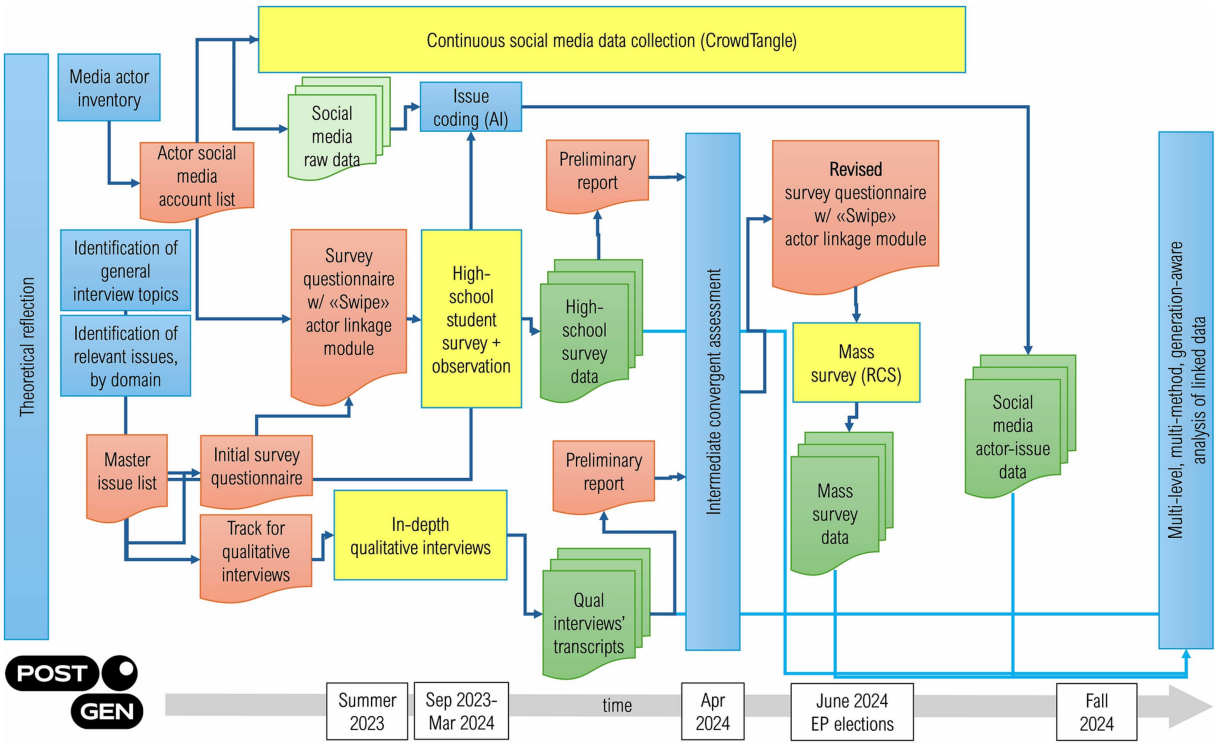

FIGURE 1
Flowchart of various tasks in the project.

Accordingly, the project does not assume homogeneous generational effects, but explicitly treats de-ideologization, re-ideologization, and intra-generational differentiation as rival and potentially coexisting processes to be empirically assessed. Against this backdrop, the project has a dominant focus on three overarching research questions:

1 Exploring the generation-specific connection between political discussion, ideological de-structuring, and disruptive political change. This project conceptualizes public debate as a vehicle for indirect effects by various actors (mass media, political figures, non-political actors, and influencers). It assesses these actors' agenda-setting abilities, along with the breadth of issues and potential ideological structures of their communication (issue emphases and positions).
2 Analyzing patterns of ideological structuring across (and within) age cohorts. The project focuses on relationships of consistency across opinions and meanings (studied at the individual level) in different issue domains.
3 Assessing impact on political behaviour: by linking communication data with citizen-level data, the project examines how (de-)ideologized structuring of political attitudes influences political behaviour.

In short, our focus is on casting light on a possible shift from (mostly) unidimensional ideological alignments to a complex and fragmented political landscape, aiming at exploring whether and under which conditions this transformation is associated with generational dynamics and media fragmentation. Providing a mixed-methods, deeper understanding of these dynamics, starting from an in-depth national case study, will help discover implications of much broader relevance for political behaviour and democratic stability.

3 Project development and methodological innovations (Swipe module and AI classification)

To overcome the limitations of past designs (see the Introduction), the project presents an innovative sequential, quantitative-driven mixed-methods research design, with a prevalence of quantitative data collection (yet strongly informed by qualitative findings), which aims at managing the complexity of the data that needs to be collected. Figure 1 presents a visual summarization of different elements of the project, along with their interactions.[1] Within the project, two different types of data were collected: data related to social media activity by media actors of all kinds (political parties and leaders, mainstream media, influencers) and data about citizens. In turn, these two different types of data led to four data collection tasks (in yellow in Figure 1).

The initial preparation stage involved specific tasks informed by a theoretical reflection:

- A media actor inventory (see Section 4) led to the production of a list of relevant social media actors.
- The identification of general interview topics contributed to the initial survey questionnaire.
- In addition, the identification of relevant political issues allowed to produce a master issue list (along with defined question wordings) that served both for developing items for the initial survey questionnaire, and for (AI) issue coding of social media

1 General tasks are presented in blue; data collection tasks in yellow; produced datasets in green; working documents are in red.

communication (the first key innovation component—see Section 5), leading to a dataset coding actor communication on predefined issues.
- These initial tasks also allowed the production of a track for qualitative interviews.
- The initial survey questionnaire, combined with information from the social media actor list, allowed the finalization of the "Swipe" module (a second key innovation component—see Section 6) to record linkage keys between respondents and social media actors.

After this initial preparation stage, data collection tasks followed.

The social media task ran across the whole timespan covered by the project; after an initial setup stage (involving the design and implementation of collection procedures—see Section 5), data collection was performed continuously throughout the project.

After raw social media data became available, Generative AI procedures were developed and tested to code posts, identify political content, and assign relevant issues from the master issue list, thus creating an actor-issue dataset.

Data collection tasks regarding citizens were instead organized in a mixed-methods, multi-stage design, with two main stages separated by an intermediate convergent assessment, aimed at qualitative-quantitative integration. The first (partly exploratory) stage featured two components:

- a survey (based on structured questionnaires) administered to high school students, aiming at capturing the structuring of their political attitudes, also complemented by qualitative fieldwork observation, aimed at understanding their perception of these challenges and their interaction before, during, and after the administration of the questionnaire (see Section 6);
- in-depth interviews with young adults aged 25–35 (Section 7), aimed at capturing and understanding—among young adults supposed to have mostly completed their political socialization—the meanings attached to key political terms, their general attitudes toward political issues and political actors, and the presence (or lack) of forms of ideological organization of such attitudes.

At the end of the first stage, a convergent assessment was held (see Section 8) to integrate findings from both mixed-methods components and to guide the next data collection and analysis stages. Preliminary results were discussed in a workshop that informed the general mass survey design. The second stage, the general population mass survey (Section 9), used a structured questionnaire administered to a representative sample of the Italian voting-age population through a rolling-cross-section CAWI survey, timed around the June 2024 European Parliament election. The final stage (not yet performed) will involve a multi-method survey-social media data analysis (Section 10), building on insights from the convergent assessment. Linkage references were included in all survey components, with the innovative Swipe module to track followership of SMIs among citizens and high school students for later data linking.

4 Social media actor sampling and inventory

The goal of this task was to identify key actors relevant in the Italian media sphere whose (potentially political) communication could be captured on social media. The main principle, therefore, was to not only include actors deriving their public visibility from social media (e.g., "pure" social media influencers) but also actors with high relevance in the political debate (mainstream media, political parties, and leaders), even if they may have a lesser social media following.

We *thus* built the *media actor* list using a mixed strategy. First, we compiled an initial list of social media accounts by including a theoretically determined selection of political parties (official accounts), their leaders, and the most prominent mainstream media outlets (spanning different political orientations). These actors represent ideal types of politically relevant communication (e.g., addressing multiple political issues), serve as benchmarks for comparing with non-political influencers, and can be assumed to populate the daily debate even with relatively smaller social media followership.

Second, through an inductive, structured quali-quantitative approach, we compiled a list of the most relevant "pure" SMIs of the Italian social media landscape:

- In an initial sampling period—spanning from 1 January 2022 to 31 August 2023,[2]—we collected through the Crowdtangle online research tool—for each day, and separately for Facebook and Instagram—the 10,000 posts that obtained the most reactions over a 3-day period around the reference day, resulting in over 4 million posts per platform.[3] To restrict the focus to the Italian context, the selection only included posts in Italian;[4]
- We then identified, for each of these daily collections, the accounts producing these high-reaction posts, and all accounts were added to a large "influencer population" list.
- From these two large lists, we then selected the 400 most relevant actors (200 for Instagram and 200 for Facebook) based on the total number of reactions (both negative and positive) cumulated over the entire period.[5]

We then used a qualitative strategy to narrow the initial 400 unique pages/users down to the 200 most influential actors:

1. We eliminated accounts extremely unlikely to produce any political communication (e.g., official football clubs' accounts).
2. Among multiple pages with the same scope and subject (e.g., cooking), we selected only the top-ranking one.

By combining (for each platform) the two lists, we finalized the media actor inventory into a final list of 200 actors. Here, two considerations are necessary. First, in terms of representativeness and generalizability, we acknowledge the possible limitations of this approach, which effectively covers actors of broad reach, but might exclude relatively "niche" yet very influential actors that have even marginally smaller reach. Second, the size of the influencer inventory reflects a trade-off between maximizing actor heterogeneity and ensuring survey feasibility. While including a very large number of actors would

2 This period was chosen to cover several months before the 2022 general election that would provide context for the later 2024 European Parliament election.

3 Supplementary Table 1 summarizes data collection on social media posts.

4 Using post geo-location was considered but dismissed due to limitations: many posts lack geo-data, and it risked including non-relevant actors (e.g., global celebrities with little influence on the Italian public).

5 See Supplementary Table 1.

increase coverage, it would also impose a substantial cognitive burden on respondents, potentially increasing fatigue and reducing response quality and completion rates. For this reason, the target final number of 200 actors was defined in close coordination with the survey design, balancing diversity of actors with the practical constraints of large-scale survey administration. Actors from this list would then be included in a dedicated "Swipe" survey module, aimed at measuring linkage between survey respondents and media actors (see Section 6), which could feature a maximum of 100 actors to avoid fatigue, and with a selection composed of 50 fixed, theoretically selected actors, plus 50 randomly selected from the "influencer population" list.[6] Restricting the total pool size to 200 actors was necessary in order to ensure that the random inclusion of actors in the questionnaire of each respondent would still ensure an adequate number of survey respondents receiving each actor. Of these, 168 had a Facebook account, while 188 had an Instagram account.

We offer here two first empirical observations. First, despite the long data collection period, we never reached 'saturation', with new actors added daily, thus indicating dynamism in the social media landscape. Second, we included even posts with minimal interactions (as low as 67 for Facebook, 1,000 for Instagram) and even actors with just one post over 2 years, ensuring our strategy captured even micro actors, and not just the most prominent accounts.[7]

5 Human–AI–human hybrid issue coding protocol

After completing the media actor inventory, we created a second dataset, consisting of all social media posts by these actors during the reference period. While for the earlier sampling period we extracted posts by the selected actors from the high-reactions dataset (see Section 4), for the focal period (September 2023–June 2024), we collected *all* posts by these actors, including those not among the daily top 10,000 reactions. Period delimitation was chosen to (1) provide a realistic content representation, also identifying key actors; (2) cover an extended timeframe to minimize biases from occasional viral posts or contingent events; and (3) include national and European election phases (pre-campaign, campaign, and post-campaign).[8]

We then developed a framework for analysis, in order to (1) detect the presence of political communication in social media posts; (2) assign each politically relevant post to one of the issues identified in the master issue list and included in individual-level surveys (see Section 3), to provide issue content linkage with survey respondents.

The dataset size (approximately 4.5 million posts) clearly requires automated or semi-automated content detection and coding. Since our task requires a deductive classification strategy adhering to the predefined master list of political issues (a first "Human" preliminary stage), we excluded unsupervised clustering approaches (e.g., BERTopic), which are optimal for inductive topic exploration but prone to conceptual drift in our context. We firstly considered ad-hoc training of machine-learning models; but later on, it appeared clear that an AI approach employing the latest-generation, generative pre-trained transformer (GPT)-based large language models (LLMs) could be more efficient, with possible (more) accurate results even without training (Gilardi et al., 2023; Pangakis and Wolken, 2024). This appeared especially relevant for our task, which requires context-aware understanding of complex political issues and positions with high-dimensional classification (our master issue list includes 28 two-sided positional issues, 11 valence issues, and 11 residual categories), thus challenging BERT-like models that cannot handle decision-making based on complex inputs.

Most importantly, we plan to issue coding (still to be performed) to adopt a two-stage, AI/human strategy (based on the preliminary "Human" issue codebook, thus leading to an overall "Human-AI-Human" protocol). In stage 1, we rely on an instruction-based large language model (LLM) approach to identify social media posts with political content and to assign each political post to a predefined issue category from the project's master issue list. In stage 2, all posts coded into one of the political categories by the model are reviewed by trained human coders to confirm and validate, or to correct, the assigned issue label. We also plan to run random-sample human checks on posts coded as non-political to detect potential false negatives. This approach is viable due to the relatively low expected number of political posts in the corpus. With this approach, we aim at leveraging LLM technology to reduce the daunting task of identifying political content among millions of posts, while leveraging human accuracy in validating the relatively low number of coded posts.

To pre-emptively explore the viability of the LLM approach, we pre-tested it on a challenging multi-class classification task using 1,200 tweets from Italian political parties, collected during the 2022 general election campaign, in the framework of a preceding research project. These tweets were categorized by two trained political science PhD students using a master issue list of comparable size and complexity. Comparing the accuracy of LLM-based classifications to human coders in this viability test was considered particularly hard, since (1) tweets are much shorter than Facebook or Instagram posts, providing much less context for models to correctly guess the label; (2) we relied on OpenAI's GPT-4 model, which is outperformed by current frontier models; (3) for each post, we provided the model with the raw text of the tweets, without any other context information.

We employed various prompt-engineering techniques, and the final prompt included instructions to impersonate an expert in Italian politics, a hint to think "step-by-step" to increase accuracy, and the full list of political issues and definitions, making the coding task effectively zero-shot.[9]

In terms of target validation metrics, we focused on precision (true positives/all positive predictions), recall (true negatives/all negative predictions), and the F1-score (harmonic mean of precision and recall, a single balanced metric). Class imbalance (some topics are more frequent) introduced metrics variation across classes, so we calculated class-specific metrics and then macro-averaged them, giving equal weight. Despite the difficulty of setting thresholds for accuracy metrics, with 60 imbalanced classes, it is relatively conservative to assume 0.5 to be a "good" F1 score, and 0.7 to be "quite strong."

Pre-tests showed an overall precision of 0.76, a recall of 0.70, and an F1-score of 0.72, which we considered suggestive of the empirical

6 Of the 200, 168 had a Facebook account, while 188 had an Instagram account.

7 See Supplementary Table 2.

8 Supplementary Table 2 summarizes data collection on social media posts by the selected influencers.

9 Prompts available on request.

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viability of the procedure and sufficient not to reject the approach, particularly in the light of the high imbalance among classes. Figure 2 shows the related confusion matrix (human classification vs. GPT-4 prediction). First, the majority of cases are on the principal diagonal (in line with the good F1-score). Second, human-GPT-4 disagreement seems to arise for reasonable patterns of inherently ambiguous categories. For example, 25 off-diagonal cases correspond to tweets classified by humans as "Protect environment even when this is detrimental to economic growth" (pos_20_left) and by GPT-4 as "Fight global warming" (agree_7). Similarly, 30 times off-diagonal tweets are for posts human-classified as "Fighting inflation" (agree_4) and GPT-4-classified as "Protect environment even when this is detrimental to economic growth" (pos_20_left).

Following the indications regarding the potential viability of the approach, we plan to proceed as follows: first, we implement a rigorous and comprehensive ex-ante benchmarking study on a wide array of architectures, including proprietary models (i.e., all main frontier models from Anthropic, Open AI, and Google), open models (Athene-V2, LLama), and standard embedding classifiers (e.g., e5-mistral-7b-instruct). These models are planned to be evaluated against a "Gold Standard" balanced dataset independently annotated by five trained PhD candidates in political science. Second, we essentially check every sensitive classification via the two-stage human/AI approach described above. Essentially, this hybrid design ensures that the AI does not act as an autonomous arbiter, but rather as a scalable instrument within a strictly supervised, human-led methodological

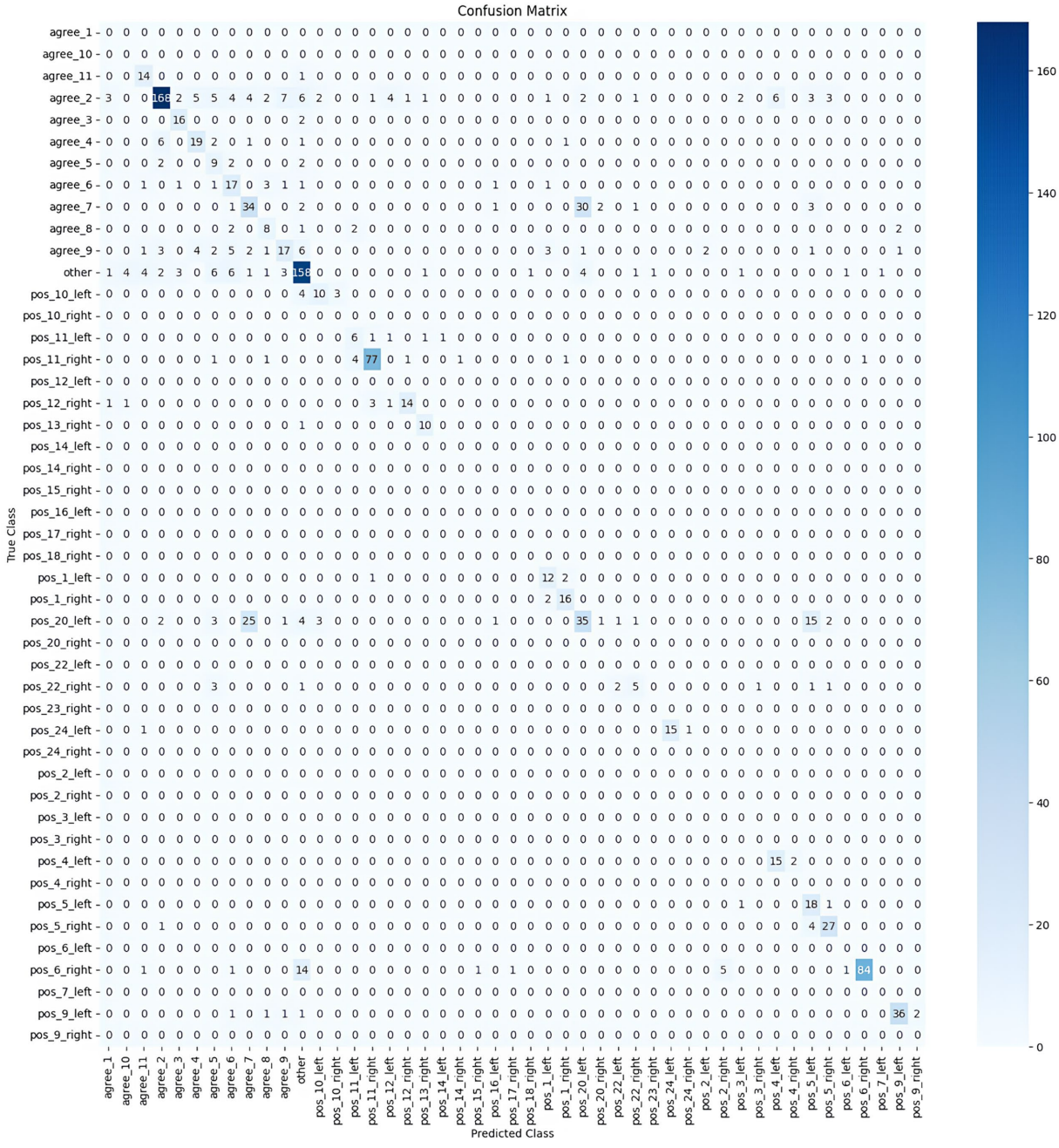

FIGURE 2
Confusion matrix of the tweets coding task.

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framework. Overall, we consider this preliminary validation task promising, and plan to expand this approach to the whole corpus of influencers' posts. In this case, the longer format of Facebook and Instagram posts should also provide more information to facilitate the coding task. Moreover, we deem the mixed AI–human strategy prudent enough to protect us from possible systematic biases in LLM coding.

6 Prototype deployment of the Swipe survey module

To understand the political behaviour and attitudes of Italian youth—key for intergenerational comparison—we conducted a survey across 20 upper secondary schools (selected through purposive sampling) in five major Italian metropolitan cities between November 2023 and May 2024 (the 2023/2024 academic year). Three fourth- or fifth-grade classrooms per school, chosen by school personnel, were selected based on availability.

To address potential biases from focusing on metropolitan areas, we used stratified random sampling within each city to ensure representation across different school types (Lyceum, Technical, Vocational). We also replaced non-responding schools to maintain sample integrity and balance. Sociological literature on the Italian school system underscores the importance of diversifying school tracks due to systematic differences in students' social origins (e.g., Ballarino and Panichella, 2016). Moreover, we ensured that our sample was not biased toward politically engaged youths.

At the same time, we fully acknowledge the inherent limitations of this design in terms of generalizability, as the survey is geographically concentrated in metropolitan settings and thus not meant to be representative of the broader population. Still, (a) it retains an interesting ability to highlight socio-demographic and school-track effects; (b) it served as a key exploratory and formative component within our sequential mixed-methods design that culminates in a national rolling cross-section survey.

The survey was tailored for young students. Recognizing that some concepts might be too difficult to grasp, we adapted the wording of our survey to align with their cognitive and social development (Omrani et al., 2019) and administered the survey through smartphones to improve engagement, using a familiar device.

This setup is crucial for the first deployment of the "Swipe" survey module. This innovative tool, designed by the POSTGEN project research unit, aims to gauge the respondents' attitudes toward both political and non-political media actors (see Section 4) through a gamified swiping dynamic (Figure 3). Swiping, a natural gesture on a smartphone, appears much more familiar than a long battery of items implemented in a traditional questionnaire, thus reducing cognitive load while enhancing user engagement and improving response accuracy. Thus, this approach enables the collection of detailed and nuanced data on students' attitudes toward (social) media actors, providing a clearer picture of their influence. We argue that this Swipe module enhances conventional survey tools, gathering diverse data by minimizing respondent fatigue, thereby enhancing the quality and breadth of information collected.

In practice, at the end of a conventional CAWI survey questionnaire, students were introduced to the Swipe module with

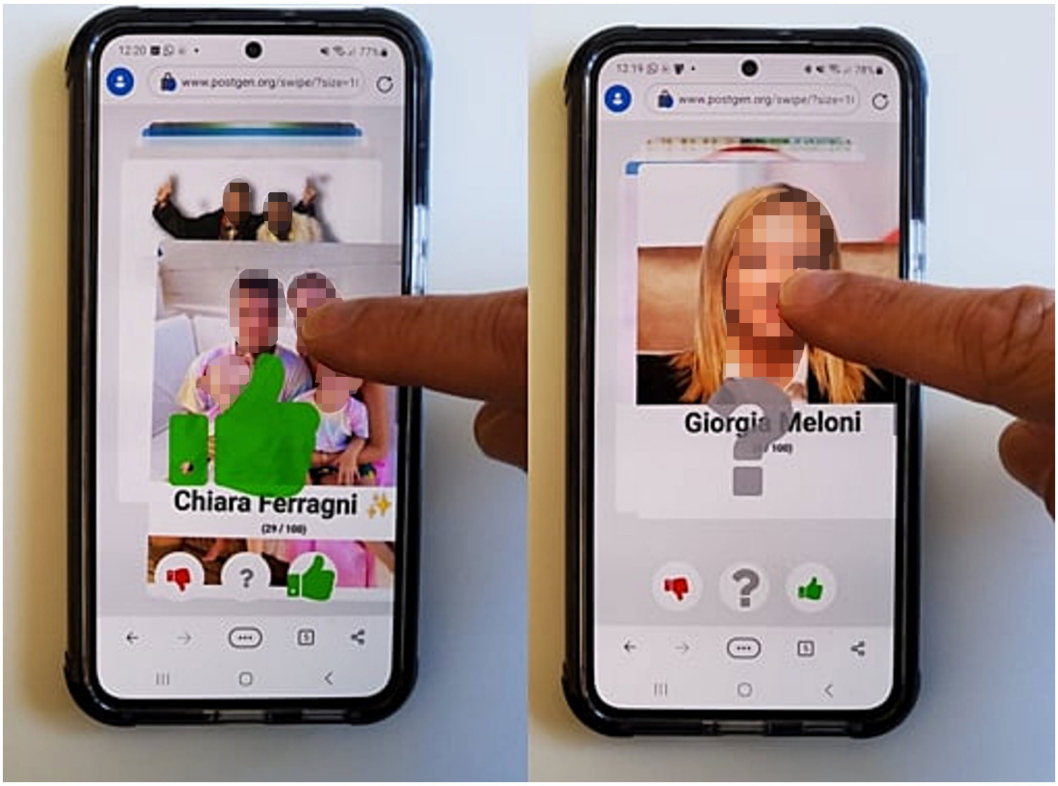

FIGURE 3
Visual example of the Swipe module showing a non-political (left) and a political actor being evaluated by the respondent.

instructions on its purpose and functionality. Students then evaluated a set of 100 actor cards, each including the name and the profile picture of social media accounts from the media actor list (see Section 4), designed to include political actors, mainstream media, and SMIs For each respondent, we used a mixed strategy: 50 cards for key political figures and mainstream media celebrities were shown to all respondents, while 50 cards for "pure" SMIs were randomly selected for each respondent, from a pool of over 100 of them.

Respondents were asked to evaluate each card using three options: 'Dislike' (Thumb down, Swipe-left) if they recognized and disliked the actor; 'Like' (Thumb up, Swipe-right) if they recognized and liked the actor, or 'Do not know' (Question mark, Swipe-up) if they either did not recognize the actor or had no specific opinion, covering typical 'Do not know' and 'No answer' questionnaire responses.

Our data and qualitative observations show that the Swipe module successfully collected rich information in a relatively short time (average completion time was 227 s; SD = 85.46).[10] Qualitatively, students appeared 'refreshed' when engaging with the Swipe module after the cognitively demanding conventional questionnaire. Interestingly, while students were familiar with many of the political figures presented, they also exhibited unfamiliarity with several high-traffic social media personalities. This observation led us to consider, for the subsequent national mass survey, excluding social media actors for respondents who report low or no social media usage. Overall, the school survey gave us positive feedback for the further adoption of the Swipe module in the national population survey.

7 In-depth qualitative interviews with young adults

Survey research is well-established for studying public opinion, but often lacks depth in understanding the meanings individuals attribute to political concepts. To address this, our project included in-depth interviews with young people to explore their attitudes toward politics, aiming to uncover how young people interpret key issues in the public debate and whether their views align or not ideologically (along the left–right spectrum).

Between May 2023 and September 2024 (with most interviews completed by March 2024), approximately 100 individuals were interviewed, using a stratified purposive sampling approach based on gender, family background, occupation, and geography (region and city size). The interviews, conducted mainly online, covered Italy's national territory, including cities like Milano (North-West), Verona/Vicenza (Catholic belt), Bologna (Red belt), Roma (Central), Napoli (South), and Reggio Calabria (deep South), as well as smaller towns in interior and South-Adriatic areas (Abruzzo, Umbria, Marche, Puglia). The primary sample included young adults aged 25–35, with additional smaller samples of youth aged 18–24 and adults over 36, totaling 93 interviews. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling until reaching theoretical saturation, ensuring balance by including both politically active individuals and those with no significant political involvement (Harris et al., 2010).

Once the data collection phase was completed, the entire corpus of interviews was consolidated into a single dataset and coded using a hybrid strategy:

- Deductive coding, based on a grid of macro-themes drawn from the existing literature (e.g., meanings attributed to political participation, experiences of political disillusionment, ideological self-positioning, and the role of socialization agents).
- Inductive coding, allowing space for unexpected patterns and categories emerging from young people's spontaneous narratives.

NVivo was employed to support the management of qualitative materials and the development of codes, items, and analytic memos. Overall, the local unit responsible for the qualitative work package generated more than 1,100 codes and keywords, which were then shared in an internal repository to facilitate subsequent comparisons with the quantitative data that will be collected in the next stages of the project. The average duration of the interviews ranged between 45 and 75 min. For the transcription, we adopted an *intelligent verbatim* approach, preserving participants' phrasing while omitting non-meaningful vocal fillers and long pauses. A second researcher conducted random checks on approximately 20% of the transcripts to ensure consistency and transcription quality. The analysis of the empirical materials enabled the production of an initial synthetic report of emerging results. This report was circulated within the national research team to identify insights to be incorporated as thematic sections or specific items in the national survey conducted in the subsequent phases of the project.

Interview topics ranged from political socialization, participative profiles, and electoral history to attitudes, perceptions of political and social conflict, generational relationships, and young people's roles in the public sphere. To identify generational or cohort effects, the interviews focused on socialization processes rather than aging. This qualitative approach aimed to trace young people's beliefs back to their political biographies, with a special emphasis on political socialization (Zuckerman et al., 2007).

The empirical material collected provided fresh insights that refined the project's conceptual framework and significantly impacted the design of later data collection (via the intermediate convergent assessment; see Section 8). This qualitative phase enriched the subsequent quantitative analysis by identifying "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 2017; Bowen, 2020) to guide thematic categorization and coding for further data gathering. Preliminary findings highlighted key "background ideas" (Bowen, 2020) from interview transcripts, shared with the research team during the intermediate assessment.

One such unexpected insight was the theme of political disillusionment, identified as central in young people's narratives. This disillusionment centers on a perceived gap between what politics should be and what it is, with mainstream politics viewed as "corrupt," "selfish," and "self-interested," and political institutions as filled with career-focused individuals lacking ideals. Notably, the interviews did not show a blanket disillusionment with politics; rather, they referenced an idealized past where politics was seen as a serious collective effort addressing real needs, starkly contrasting with the degraded view of current politics. As one respondent argued:

> *"The things they are doing lately…I really disdain them; they all seem to me to be really antics. In my mother's time… they were much more, let's say, actions for the people, that is, they went from house to house, they went to the squares, they talked to the people.*

10 For these metrics, only students who spent at least 100 s on the questionnaire were considered.

> *Now, they have meetings with wine and pork to talk about nothing, whereas before, there was much more emotion, there was much more emphasis in doing certain things. Now it seems just a chase for the top step" (Interviewee, Amelia [small town in Central Italy])*

Many participants criticized political institutions and parties for being unresponsive to youth and citizens' needs, fostering reluctance to engage in formal politics. Disillusionment then apparently emerges from both system unresponsiveness, adult-centrism, and a perceived disconnect between formal politics and its expected language and values. Interviewees described political language as "vulgar" and "barroom-like," rejecting its lack of ethics and authenticity in a political culture focused on spectacle and power plays rather than citizens' wellbeing.

8 Intermediate convergent assessment and integration

Preliminary findings from interviews with young adults and the high school survey were discussed in an "intermediate convergent assessment" workshop with the whole research team. This session ensured all researchers were aligned on the results, helping integrate them into both future steps and ongoing work. It guided the design of the structured questionnaire for the upcoming mass survey, refining it to focus on key topics identified in earlier data collection. The updated questionnaire aimed to capture a more nuanced understanding of generational issues, balancing both breadth and depth.

The workshop guided the definition of the structured questionnaire for the upcoming mass survey (see Section 9). Starting from topics relevant to the original theoretical framework, the questionnaire was then refined to include new topics identified in earlier data collection. By integrating qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with quantitative data from the high-school survey, it aimed to capture a richer, more nuanced understanding of generational issues. The goal was to create a comprehensive questionnaire addressing both the breadth and depth of the key topics.

The preliminary analysis of in-depth interviews identified several themes. The main ones that emerged are:

- Disillusionment with politics: politics often struggles to produce meaningful results, leading to feelings of detachment and, at times, micro-participation among young people. Their relationship with politics cannot be reduced to mere apathy; rather, it is marked by frustration, a sense of abandonment, and sometimes betrayal. The current political landscape lacks clear, effective, and trustworthy options that resonate with the younger generation, indicating a deficit in external political efficacy. Young people need institutions and actors that clarify priorities and offer effective shortcuts to guide them.
- Aversion to elite conflict: while pluralism (and the related political dissensus) appears relatively accepted, elite conflict produces irritation and is not understood. Politicians are criticized for their inability to compromise and produce solutions, due to a logic of power conflict that appears outdated and unnecessary.
- Vote, Participation, and Change: Traditional voting and political participation are viewed as ineffective for change. Radical activism is often misunderstood, while participation in local issues is preferred.

The preliminary analysis of quantitative data from the high school survey included:

- Descriptive Statistics: Summary of response distribution, central tendencies, and variances, providing information on salient issues to be included in the national mass survey questionnaire.
- Correlation Analysis: Investigation of the relationship between variables to identify key patterns.
- Preliminary exploration of the Swipe module.

These insights were then integrated into the design of the mass survey questionnaire in several steps.

From the main themes in the in-depth interviews, we identified question wordings for quantitative measurement. We declined the theme of *disappointment with politics and its ineffectiveness* into survey questions assessing the two classic dimensions of *internal* vs. *external* perceived *political efficacy* (Craig et al., 1990; Sarieva, 2018), i.e., individuals' confidence in their ability to understand and participate effectively in politics (Campbell et al., 1954; Caprara et al., 2009) vs. belief in the system's responsiveness to citizens' inputs (Madsen, 1987; Niemi et al., 1991). We then included classic related items (e.g., "People like me have no influence on what the government does") along with measures of trust in political institutions. We also included an item assessing the effectiveness of voting through a self-anchoring scale with anchors reading "It does not make any difference who you vote for" and "It makes a big difference who you vote for."

We also developed an original strategy for capturing perceived external political efficacy. Immediately after classic positional items on rival policy goals (e.g., flat tax vs. progressive taxation) on a 1–6 scale, we added two follow-up items (on the same scale): (1) what R believes the majority wants; (2) what R expects to happen in Italy. Selected issues closely aligned with the original master issue list used in high school surveys, with adjustments for new topics (e.g., the Gaza conflict) and the exclusion, based on preliminary analyses, of less relevant or student-specific issues.

Regarding the aversion to elite conflict identified in the in-depth interviews, we also included items commonly used in mass surveys to measure populist attitudes or the conception of *stealth democracy* (Akkerman et al., 2014), such as "To solve society's problems, politicians should act like managers or entrepreneurs," "Our political system would work better if decisions were made by expert technicians rather than politicians," and "It is easier to reach an agreement among ordinary people than among politicians," among others.

Finally, we incorporated into the mass survey the Swipe module that was successfully tested in the high school survey, adjusting it with a pre-filter question on social media use. Active users received the full actor list, while non-users received a reduced list of well-known public figures. Additionally, we included interactions with political efficacy as a key research theme for future analysis.

9 National rolling-cross-section survey

The general population mass survey was conducted around the 2024 European Parliament elections, providing an

opportunity to examine both voting intention and actual voting behaviour.

We chose a CAWI (self-administered) mode to maximize comparability with data collected in high schools. The study employed a two-wave panel design (pre-election and post-election), a common strategy in electoral studies to capture the impact of the electoral event on attitudes and behaviour. The pre-election wave used a rolling cross-section (RCS) design, where survey data is collected from subsamples each day during the campaign (Brady and Johnston, 2006; Johnston and Brady, 2006). Participants could respond any time until data collection ended, making time a random variable.

The RCS allows detecting public opinion variability during highly volatile situations such as elections or a pandemic (Vezzoni et al., 2020). It is particularly useful for studying the interplay between social media and public opinion, especially among younger respondents, linking opinions to events in real life and media, and exploring the effects of social media (Sinnreich et al., 2008).

The post-election survey strengthens the RCS by re-interviewing respondents, reducing measurement errors and allowing the analysis of voting behaviour using pre-electoral variables (Bartels, 2006, p. 136). The post-election survey included a module on party issue responsiveness, based on results from the intermediate convergent assessment, and building on previous modules from other projects.

The European Parliament election in Italy occurred on 9 June 2024. The pre-election RCS survey was conducted from May 8 to June 8, and the post-election survey from June 10 to 19 (with 83% of responses collected in the first 3 days). The urgency to collect post-election interviews aimed to minimize rationalization effects after election results (Festinger, 1957).

The survey was conducted by a commercial agency using an opt-in community of respondents. The sample was adjusted for the Italian population by age, gender, and geographical location, with adjustments made for education, to reduce biases common in opt-in online communities.

The original sample comprised 8,324 individuals, with 4,195 completing the pre-election survey (response rate: 50.4%). All pre-election respondents were invited to the post-election survey, with 3,449 completing it, yielding an 82.2% redemption rate. Initial findings that illustrate the dialogue between different surveys and tools are available in the Supplementary materials.

10 Linking strategies and analytical framework

The final data analysis effort will rely on different and diverse quantitative datasets. In broad terms, we argue that a productive categorization (rather than simply distinguishing between survey and social media data) can distinguish the following three categories:

1 Datasets on *citizens'* attitudes and behaviour (both from the mass survey and from the high-school student survey);
2 Datasets on communication by *political parties*;
3 Datasets on communication by other influencing or contextual actors (SMIs, mainstream media).

The reason for this distinction lies in the causal structure of the process we aim to unfold. In particular, despite being *meso* actors like influencers and mainstream media, political parties play a special role in the translation of political attitudes into political behaviour (especially vote choice), as they represent the *choice options* that citizens are offered at election time. As a result, in our framework, party communication has a quite different role: the issue signals transmitted by parties usually come earlier, as they are a tool to place themselves on the electoral market, by signaling their positions and emphasis (and are decoded as such by citizens). This is quite a different role from that of mass media and influencers, whose issue attention and stances can be instead modeled as (perceived) independent positions contributing to a public debate, which only later (and through a more complex process) may lead to some political behaviour.

This impacts data linking significantly. While party issue stances from social media can be linked to citizen survey data via vote intention or party affinity, an additional possibility emerges from the purpose-built Swipe module (Section 5), which captures respondent followership of specific actors, enabling direct respondent linkage to actors' communication activities.

The two linking strategies will produce survey datasets connecting respondents with political parties and other public actors. Social media issue coding will quantitatively characterize actors' communication, allowing metrics like issue frequency, breadth (multi-domain coverage), and stance (dominance of specific positions).

This linked dataset will enable various analyses, including a time-aware perspective leveraging the rolling-cross-section design from the last pre-electoral month. The analyses aim to assess attitude consistency and ideological structuring across generations, as well as the effects of mainstream and social media actors, along with the expected influence of political parties and leaders.

11 Discussion

This study lays a foundation for investigating how generational dynamics, media influence, and political attitudes shape ideological structuring and political behaviour. The next phase of data analysis will fully explore several future research paths.

12 Challenges and future directions

The upcoming data analysis phase will focus on developing and testing several working hypotheses spanning across multiple linked datasets, and informed by qualitative insights:

1 *Guiding effect of non-political influencers*: In today's fragmented media environment, non-political influencers—though engaged in non-political topics—may still exert indirect influence on political discourse. Their potential "agenda-setting" role may lead political actors to incorporate these topics into their own communication strategies. This will be tested through interactions and content flows among various types of actors in our newly collected social media data.

2 *Issue domain breadth*: We anticipate political parties and mainstream media to address a broader spectrum of issue domains, while non-political influencers are likely to focus only on a few specific issues. This narrower scope may lead to issue-specific political discussions, potentially resulting in fragmented or unstructured political attitudes.
3 *Timing and context effects*: Events in the public sphere (elections, scandals, policy changes) may influence the salience of certain issues. Non-political influencers may amplify or accelerate these topics in public discourse. Time-sensitive analyses of social media and survey data—particularly leveraging the RCS design—will investigate the impact of specific events on issue emphasis and political attitudes.
4 *Issue congruence between followers and influencers*: We expect some degree of opinion congruence between individuals and the influencers they follow, at least on specific issues.
5 *Influencers as drivers of ideological inconsistency*: Building on hypotheses 2 and 4, as well as the presence of multiple influencer followership, we anticipate individuals will experience cross-pressure across different actors and issues. This may deepen ideological inconsistency, particularly when individuals follow broader-focus actors like mainstream media or political parties.
6 *Coexisting processes of de-ideologization and re-ideologization*: While several hypotheses above emphasize the potential for fragmented, issue-specific exposure to weaken ideological consistency, alternative dynamics deserve explicit consideration. In highly personalized and fragmented social media environments, early and intensive exposure may foster processes of re-ideologization and polarization for specific audience segments. Rather than producing uniformly weaker ideological orientations, such environments may generate sharply differentiated publics characterized by strong affective identities, selective issue alignment, and high within-group consistency. The project therefore treats de-ideologization and re-ideologization as rival and potentially coexisting processes, whose prevalence varies across different media-use profiles within the same cohort.
7 Importantly, generational effects are treated as hypotheses to be empirically tested rather than as *a priori* assumptions. In line with established approaches in the study of generational and life-cycle dynamics (e.g., Maggini, 2016), empirical analyses will jointly model generational membership—operationalized through birth cohorts—and age as a continuous life-cycle variable within multivariate regression frameworks. This strategy allows us to assess whether observed differences across generations persist net of age-related effects, and to distinguish cohort-based patterns from life-cycle dynamics.
8 *SMIs as new political socialization agents*: Similar to how television transformed political attitudes in earlier decades, SMIs may now shape the values and political preferences of their followers, especially among younger generations. A preliminary empirical assessment (possibly by using AI to trace *values* in social media posts) will analyze the deeper value content conveyed by SMIs.
9 *Interaction with political efficacy*: Political (particularly external) efficacy emerged as a critical factor in the convergent assessment of our qualitative findings. We hypothesize that it may moderate the relationship between media exposure and ideological structuring, encouraging engagement with outlets (e.g., mainstream media and parties) that have a broader issue scope.

In a nutshell, this project contributes to the literature on political orientation and media use by proposing a novel, empirically grounded model of political structuring among young people. By integrating AI-assisted classification, social media data, and qualitative insights, our research aims to demonstrate how platform-specific dynamics can influence the emergence of politically and ideologically inconsistent attitudes. If our results confirm our initial working hypotheses, we suggest this could be a major contribution to the understanding of the complex causal chain relating changes in the media ecosystem and disruptive political change.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Milan (Comitato Etico dell'Università degli Studi di Milano). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

LD: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. GL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DT: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CV: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MBol: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. MBor: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AC: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. NM: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. EM: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. FM: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. NP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. FP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LC: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. JD: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. GP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. The project is funded by the Italian Government under the competitive PRIN (Projects of Relevant National Interest) scheme (project ID: 2020TZJP52); duration: June 2022–June 2025.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The authors AA and NM declared that they were an editorial board member of Frontiers, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2026.1720542/full#supplementary-material

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