

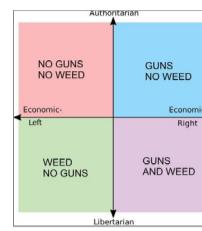
# POLITICAL COMPASS MEMES

Created in 2017, r/PoliticalCompassMemes grew in popularity 2020 as a space to classify political ideologies by locating all manner of phenomena - from the welfare state to Wojak avatars - on the political compass image macro. The memes address political style instead of political substance, treating issues and events as occasions to recalibrate the compass.

How can we compare across “modular ideologies” by focussing on concepts, memes and events?

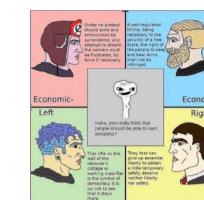
## LEVEL 0

The political compass was developed in 1968 in the pages of the libertarian journal Rampart. It supplemented the traditional left-right political spectrum with a vertical axis running from “STATIST” to “ANARCHY”. It has since become a popular means for cultivating political self-identity. A standard exam is available at [politicalcompass.org](http://politicalcompass.org).



## LEVEL 1

Political compass memes at their most basic level are ways to chart positions on political issues in ways aligned with meme culture: suffused with irony and humor. Participants in r/PoliticalCompassMemes associate their accounts with “flair” derived from positions on the compass (for example, :authleft: or :libright:).

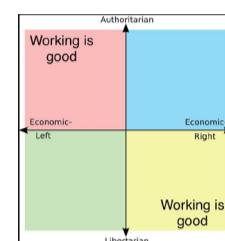


## LEVEL 2

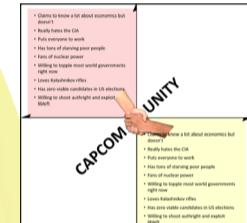
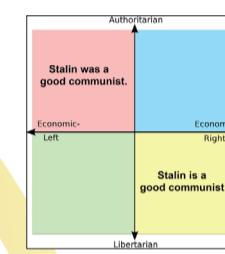
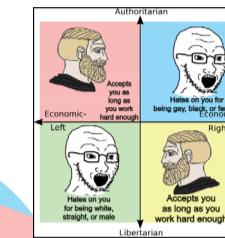
More complex memes incorporate Wojaks and other images to personify positions. Memes increasingly refer to the subreddit’s own internal culture. As users explored the “based” extremities of the compass, the “centrist” begins to emerge as the normie antagonist of all quadrants.

## LEVEL 3

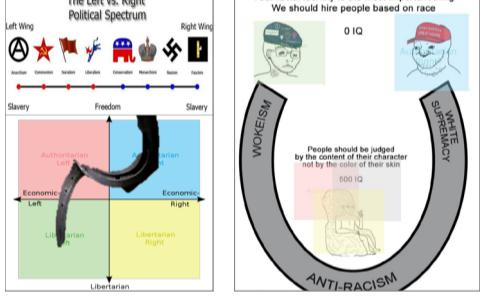
The focus is on everything “meta,” consisting of in/out group commentaries about each of the quadrants and arguments about the “duality” or “unity” between positions—i.e. “horseshoe theory.” Here the political compass becomes a game board, where the objective of the game is to rewrite the rules and blur lines: the most successful posts transcend the compass’s distinctions.



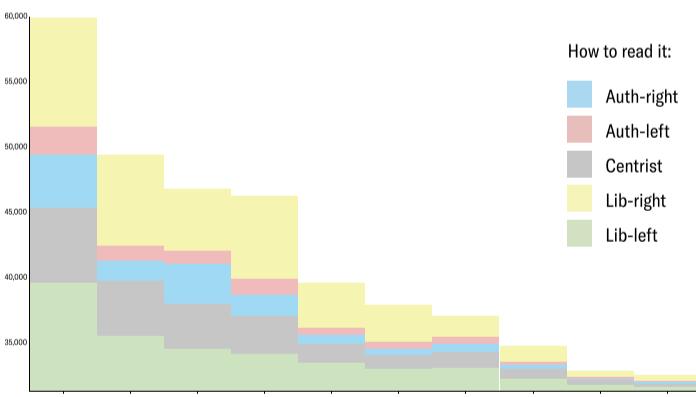
## HIGHEST RATED POST



**Horseshoe theory:**  
A subset of memes focus on horseshoe theory, the idea that fringe positions converge as they move away from the center. These memes tend to identify unexpected and ironic connections, or forms of “opposite unity,” for example authright and libleft both support race-based hiring, and authleft and libright both believe “working is good.”



## ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES ①



### 1

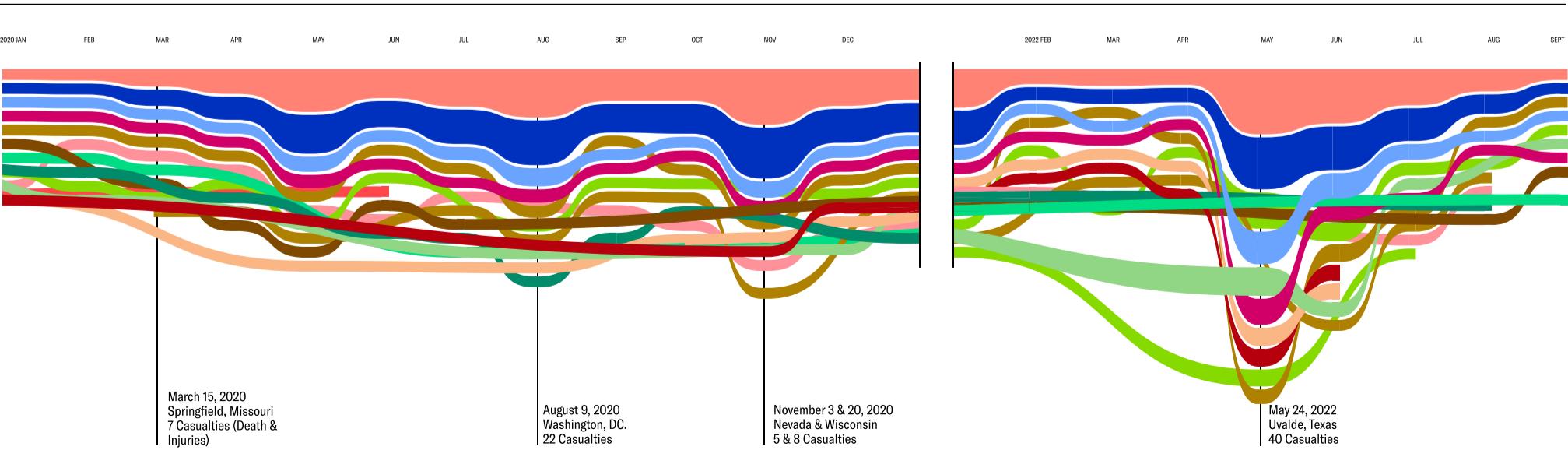
To find out which social and political issues dominated the conversation on the PCM subreddit from 2019-2022, and whether different political ideologies as exemplified by author flairs appeared as particularly prominent voices on certain topics, the dataset of 20 million items was filtered according to issue-related keywords, which was followed by an automated count of author flairs with the help of 4CAT. Using RAWGraphs, a stacked bar chart was created which visualizes a) the number of times keywords were mentioned, and b) the distribution of author flairs per issue. The graph shows that the issue of racial justice and police reform dominated socio-political conversations. Libright contributed most on most issues except for racism, climate, and voting rights, which were dominated by libleft. For all ten issues except for economic inequality, authleft posters were the least engaged ones. Across all issues, the distribution of author flairs remains relatively stable, disproving the hypothesis that different political leanings hijack conversations on issues which they are usually associated with.

### 2

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

## LINGUISTIC EXPRESSION OF SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES: GUN CONTROL AND MASS SHOOTINGS ②

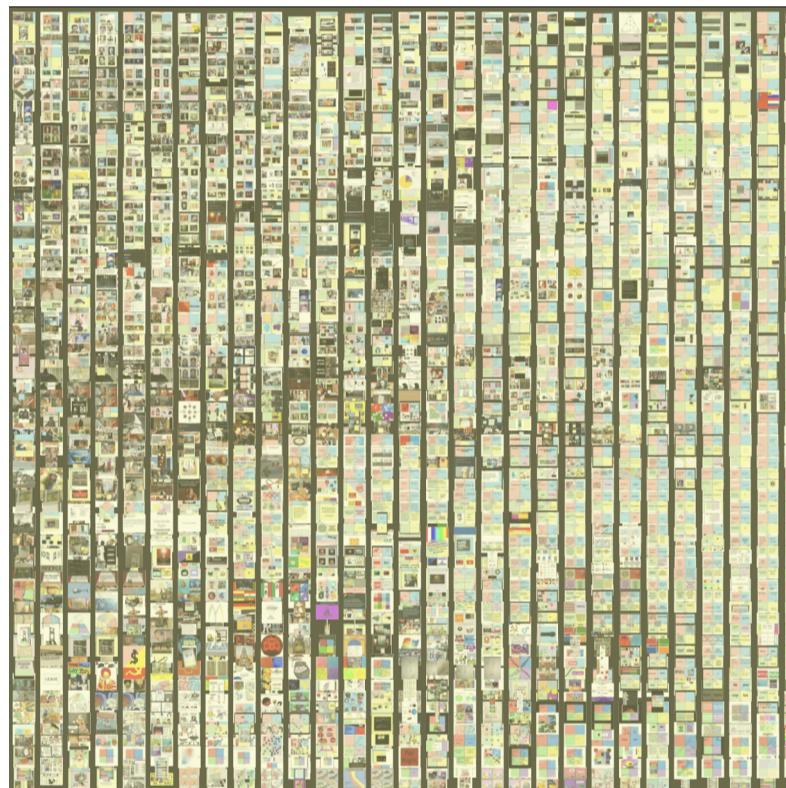
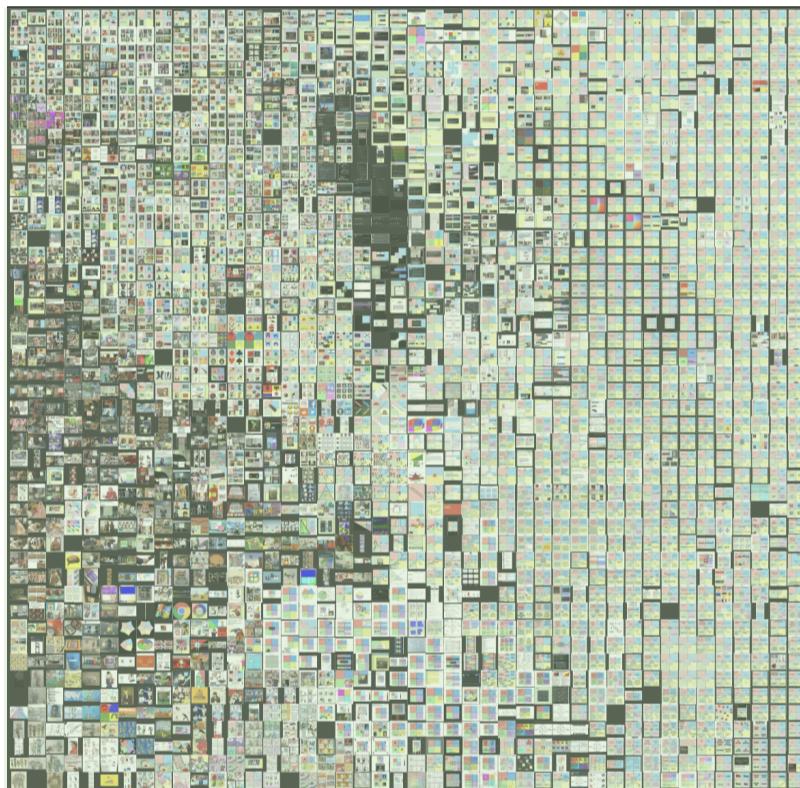
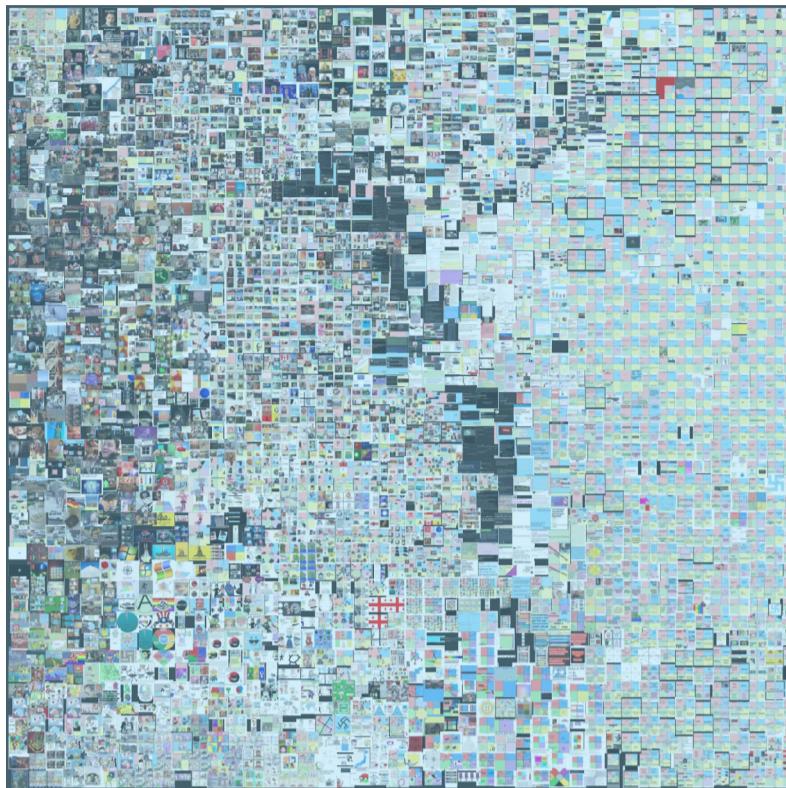
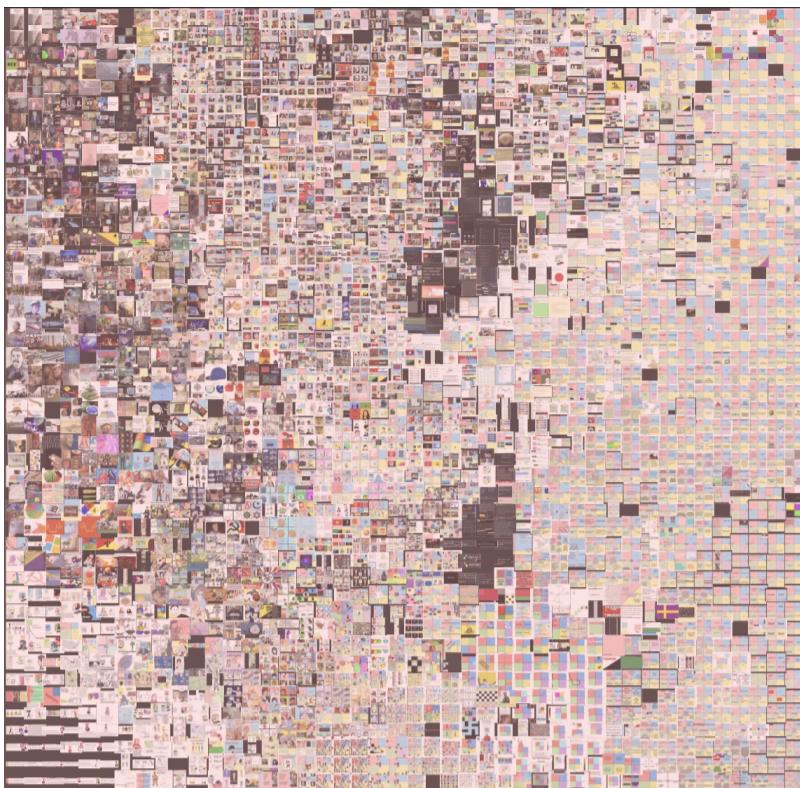
# of keywords used in the posts



# POLITICAL COMPASS MEMES

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

How do each of the quadrants translate “serious” political concepts into “vernacular” semiotic resources?



## Public figures

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



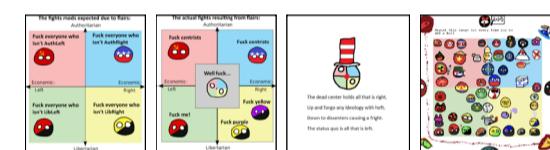
## Flags

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



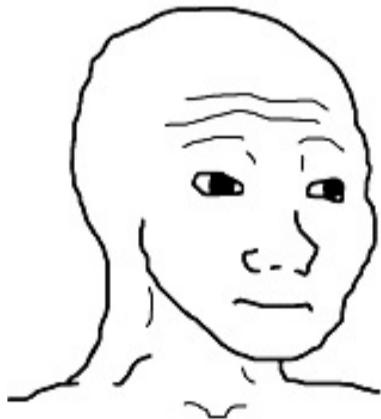
## Symbols

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



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

## WOJAK ANALYSIS



### AUTHRIGHT



### AUTHLEFT



### LIBRIGHT



### LIBLEFT



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