DOI : 10.14746/pp.2025.30.3.17

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Centrist Voices Online: Political Engagement and Polarization in the European Digital Sphere

Abstract: The choice of topic was dictated by the specificity of contemporary communication and political realities. In an era of significant and continuously growing presence of social media in social life, political debate is increasingly taking place via the Internet. At the same time, we are witnessing intensified phenomena of polarization, the brutalization of political discourse, and the spread of politically motivated hate speech. In such a context, the question of who actually sets the tone of today's political debate becomes particularly important: are these voices of reason, or rather radical, emotional messages that more easily break through in an algorithmically determined information environment?

The aim of this article is to identify which group within the political spectrum is most active in political debate conducted online, especially on social media. An additional point of interest is how engagement in the digital dimension of political debate correlates with electoral participation. Selected variables from the ESS 11 study, completed in November 2024, are used to answer these questions. This article is also motivated by a desire to identify the segment of moderate voters and their role in the digital sphere of public debate. In a sense, it represents an attempt to locate the centrist voter – one who declares moderate political views – in an era dominated by narratives of the prevalence of extreme positions.

Key words: political participation, online political engagement, centrist voters, social media, political polarization, European Social Survey (ESS)

Introduction

Europe and the world entered the 2020s under pandemic conditions, escalating political conflicts, and growing disinformation from Russia, China, and Belarus. Both EU institutions and individual states sought to harmonize the media order. The urgency increased after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which accelerated legislative work. Another catalyst was the wave of elections in Europe and the United States in 2023/24. This new order began to crystallize in mid-2024 (Pawlak, 2024, p. 146), bringing the first visible effects on digital media. Yet the European vision of media governance soon faced a crisis due to decisions by major U.S. platforms-especially META and X-linked to the election of Donald Trump as the 47th U.S. President (Buras, 2025).

In this context, the analysis is situated within broader theoretical debates on digital media and political communication. Theories of deliberation emphasize rational argument in the public sphere (Habermas, 1996), while empirical studies suggest that the digital environment fosters polarization. The concepts of the "filter bubble" (Pariser, 2011) and "echo chambers" (Sunstein, 2001) show how users confine themselves to reinforcing environments. Research on algorithmic amplification adds that recommen-

dation systems prioritize emotional and extreme content (Phillips, 2018; Tufekci, 2015). Against this backdrop, the activity of centrist voices becomes salient. Classical theories argue that the center is often marginalized or invisible (Boxell, Gentzkow, Shapiro, 2024). Data from ESS 11 thus test whether centrist engagement challenges or confirms the assumption of extreme dominance in the digital sphere.

Online political discourse often occurs within “filter bubbles,” where radicalization and the formation of homogeneous communities intensify. Dialogue between orientations becomes difficult and confrontational. This process deepens polarization and sometimes leads to selective use – or rejection – of platforms. A clear case is X (formerly Twitter), long one of the most politically charged platforms (Piwnik, 2025). Yet the massive user exodus from X in 2024–2025 did not signal withdrawal from digital politics. Instead, users migrated to competing platforms, most notably BlueSky (Chudy, 2024).

Today, any social media platform can be studied in the context of how its users engage in political debate. At the same time, we observe clear differences in the style of discourse, the nature of the user base, and their political orientation. For instance, while X attracts individuals clearly interested in politics – with relatively little demographic variation – Instagram functions primarily as a platform dominated by celebrities and so-called trendsetters. Facebook, about a decade ago, was largely dominated by users with liberal and left-leaning views (Pawlak, 2016, pp. 201–205). Today, that dominance is more debatable. This shift is due in large part to the declarations and actions of META Platforms CEO Mark Zuckerberg, implemented shortly after Donald Trump’s election as the 47th U.S. president. Among the relevant phenomena are the outflow of left-leaning users (although to a lesser extent than on X) and changes to the algorithms that govern how content is filtered and promoted on the platform (Booth, 2025). Nevertheless, Facebook remains a space in which a liberal viewpoint still seems to dominate among users regarded as so-called influencers.[1]

The conditions described above constitute the main – though not exclusive – determinants of political debate (or conflict) currently taking place in the European digital sphere and beyond. Among the many other factors shaping the debate are the problem of Russian disinformation (a charge that is now frequently used as a rhetorical tool in political disputes), unethical political advertising, and increasingly professional and intensive political marketing campaigns. These issues, while significant, are only briefly mentioned here so as not to overload the scope of this analysis.

Despite its often conflict-laden and even pathological character, political debate in the digital sphere continues to grow. This growth is driven by the steadily increasing number of users of various platforms and their growing interest in political issues – as reflected, for example, in rising voter turnout rates both in Poland and in many other European countries (European Parliament, 2024b). Thus, it is more accurate to speak of fluctuating growth dynamics in user engagement with particular platforms,[2] rather than of absolute declines. Under such conditions, one may hypothesize that success in the digital political debate depends on which side’s voice is more numerously represented.

[1] According to Facebook’s still-applicable policy, a micro-influencer is defined as a user with between 1,000 and 100,000 followers. The status of an influencer is granted to individuals with more than 100,000 followers on the platform (Regulski, 2025).

[2] For example, an increased outflow of users identifying with a specific political orientation.

The primary aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine which group of politically engaged Internet users constitutes the greater force. This aim is based on the assumption that the numerically dominant group of politically engaged users significantly (though not exclusively) influences the balance of power in the digital political debate. The term “balance of power” is used here deliberately instead of “victory,” since political debate is a continuous phenomenon, evolving in parallel with electoral wins and losses. Such a numerical advantage in discourse may well contribute to a specific electoral victory – but that victory does not mark the end of the debate.

Methodology

The analytical framework for this study is based on the European Social Survey (ESS). This is one of the most important international social surveys in Europe, conducted biennially since 2002 at the initiative of the European Science Foundation’s Expert Committee. The primary objective of the ESS is to monitor social change, including attitudes toward key issues, value systems, and citizen behavior. Surveys are carried out every two years using representative samples of residents in several dozen countries. Poland has participated in the ESS since its inception, consistently achieving high sample realization rates in each round, exceeding 70% (Sztabiński, 2016).

The most recent, eleventh round of the ESS was completed in 2024, with the next round scheduled for 2027. Out of more than 640 variables available in ESS 11, the present analysis focused on those related to place of residence, frequency of Internet use, interest in politics, electoral participation, placement on the left–right ideological scale, and active engagement in digital political discussion. The study relies on both the data and methodological standards of ESS 11, with the dataset finalized in November 2024. The following variables were selected for the purposes of this article: country, Internet use – how often, Internet use – how much time on a typical day (in minutes), how interested in politics, voted last national election, signed petition in the last 12 months, posted or shared anything about politics online in the last 12 months, placement on left–right scale. The variable placement on left–right scale was used both as a categorical variable (for contingency table analysis and regression residual analysis) and as a continuous variable (for mean comparison and correlation testing). In the latter case, the variable was designated as placement on left–right scale quant. For the purposes of this study, the ‘center’ is understood broadly as positions 4–6 on the left–right scale, although in many countries position 5 was the most frequently chosen.

The study sample included 40,156 respondents from 24 European countries that are either EU member states or official candidates for membership. The data were compiled on November 20, 2024. Due to the research objective and the nature of the variables (quantitative variable analyses were preceded by normality tests), the following methods were applied: contingency table analysis, regression residual analysis, mean comparison, correlation analysis. The strength of relationships between variables was assessed using the chi-square test and contingency coefficient. Correlations were calculated using Spearman’s rho, and differences between group means were tested using the Kruskal–Wallis H test. Statistical significance was calculated for all results.

To address the study’s objectives, the following research questions and corresponding hypotheses were formulated. In accordance with the classical rules of statistical inference, each research hypothesis was accompanied by a corresponding null hypothesis, which assumed the absence of a statistically significant relationship or difference. In cases where significance tests yielded $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the research hypothesis was accepted as valid. In contrast, when $p \geq 0.05$, the null hypothesis was retained, indicating no statistically significant association – and the research hypothesis was rejected.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions and corresponding hypotheses were formulated:

Q.1: Is there a relationship between the frequency of Internet use and interest in politics?

H.1: The frequency of Internet use is related to interest in politics.

Q.2: Is there a relationship between the frequency of Internet use and participation in political elections?

H.2: The frequency of Internet use is related to participation in political elections.

Q.3: Is daily intensity of online activity related to interest in politics?

H.3: Daily intensity of online activity is related to interest in politics.

Q.4: Is the frequency of Internet use related to placement on the left–right scale?

H.4: The frequency of Internet use is related to placement on the left–right scale.

Q.5: Is daily intensity of online activity related to placement on the left–right scale?

H.5: Daily intensity of online activity is related to placement on the left–right scale.

Q.6: Is placement on the left–right scale dependent on the respondent’s country of residence?

H.6: Placement on the left–right scale is dependent on the respondent’s country of residence.

Q.7: Is active participation in digital political discussion related to placement on the left–right scale?

H.7: Active participation in digital political discussion is related to placement on the left–right scale.

For clarity, the distribution of selected variables from the research sample is presented in tabular form. The tables below present the frequency distributions of all variables used in the analysis.

Table 1

Frequencies of the variable “Posted or shared anything about politics online last 12 months”

	N	%
Yes	5,922	14.8
No	34,055	85.2
Total	**39,977**	**100.0**

Source: Own study based on ESS 11.

Table 2

Frequencies of the variable “Placement on left right scale”

	N	%
Left	1,398	4.0
1	857	2.4
2	2,223	6.3
3	3,824	10.9
4	3,577	10.2
5	11,217	31.8
6	3,446	9.8
7	3,721	10.6
8	2,783	7.9
9	885	2.5
Right	1,299	3.7
Total	**35,230**	**100.0**

Source: Own study based on ESS 11.

Testing the Research Hypotheses

H.1: The frequency of Internet use is related to interest in politics.

Table 3

Cross-tabulation of variables: “Internet use, how often” * “How interested in politics” (in %)

		How interested in politics				Total
		Very interested	Quite interested	Hardly interested	Not at all interested	
Internet use, how often	Never	6.7	9.1	11.7	20.8	12.1
	Only occasionally	2.8	4.2	5.4	4.7	4.5
	A few times a week	2.8	4.7	4.9	3.8	4.3
	Most days	6.5	7.7	8.7	6.4	7.6
	Every day	81.3	74.3	69.4	64.2	71.4
Total		**100.0%**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Source: Own study based on ESS 11.

The value of the contingency coefficient (C = 0.158) confirms the presence of a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.001$), thereby positively verifying research hypothesis H.1. The most intensive use of the Internet (“every day”) was observed among respondents who reported being very interested in politics (81.3%) and quite interested (74%). The lower the level of political interest, the less frequently respondents reported using the Internet. An analysis of the adjusted standardized regression residuals reveals that the contingency table cells contributing most significantly to the observed statistical differences are those containing the responses “every day” (Internet use, how often) and “very interested” (interest in politics). The value of the coefficient (C = 0.158) may be interpreted as indicating a moderate association (Górniak, Wachnicki, 2013, pp. 139–160).

H.2: The frequency of Internet use is related to participation in political elections.

Table 4

Cross-tabulation of variables: „Internet use, how often” * „Voted last national election” (in %)

		Voted last national election		Total
		Yes	No	
Internet use, how often	Never	12.0	16.0	12.8
	Only occasionally	4.5	5.5	4.7
	A few times a week	4.5	4.1	4.5
	Most days	7.6	8.2	7.7
	Every day	71.4	66.1	70.3
Total		**100,0%**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Source: Own study based on ESS 11.

The value of the contingency coefficient (C = 0.056) confirms the existence of a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.001$), thereby positively verifying research hypothesis H.2. The most frequent Internet use (“every day”) was observed among respondents who reported having participated in the most recent national election held in their country of residence (71.4%). The proportion of individuals who did not vote in the most recent election but use the Internet daily is also relatively high (66.1%).

An analysis of the adjusted standardized regression residuals shows that these responses, along with those of users declaring either no Internet use or only occasional use, contribute most significantly to the presence of statistically significant differences. The proportion of respondents who neither use the Internet nor vote is higher (16%) than that of respondents who do not use the Internet but did vote (12%). Although the contingency coefficient value (C = 0.056) is relatively low, it still demonstrates the existence of a relationship.

H.3: Daily intensity of online activity is related to interest in politics.

Table 5

Mean analysis of variables: „Internet use: how much time on typical day, in minutes”, by categories of variable: „How interested in politics”

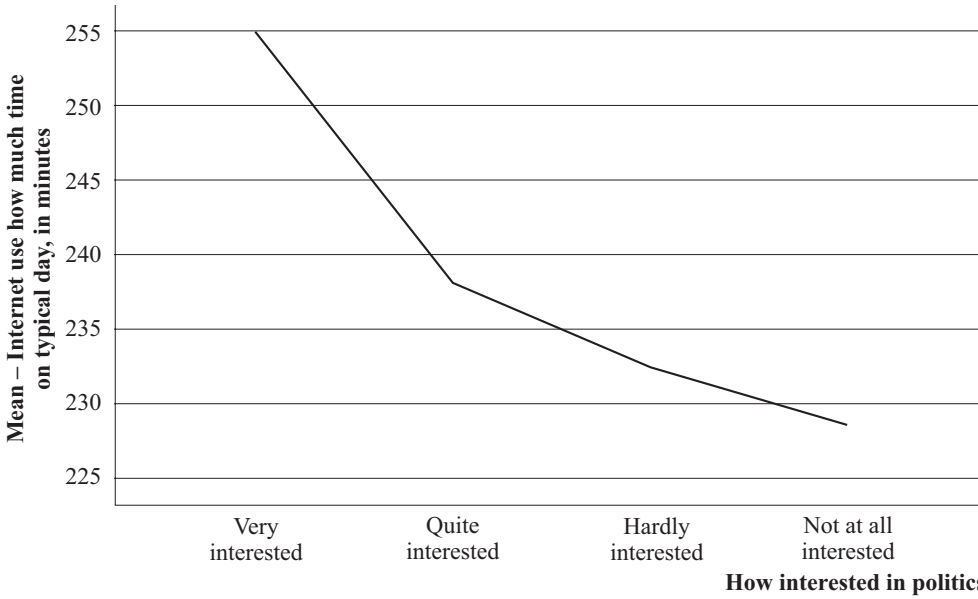
Internet use, how much time on typical day, in minutes					
How interested in politics	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**Min**	**Max**
Very interested	4,307	254.72	200,816	0	1440
Quite interested	10,791	238.18	187,651	0	1440
Hardly interested	10,610	232.45	185,393	0	1440
Not at all interested	5,656	228.68	180,999	0	1440
Total	**31,364**	**236.80**	**187,744**	**0**	**1440**

Source: Own study based on ESS 11.

The Kruskal–Wallis test reveals the presence of statistically significant differences in the mean values of the dependent variable “Internet use – how much time on a typical day (in minutes)” across the categories of the independent variable “how interested in

politics” ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, research hypothesis H.3 can be considered positively verified. The following chart presents the mean values observed:

Figure 1. Graph of means of the variable “Internet use, how much time on a typical day, in minutes”



Source: Own study based on ESS 11.

H.4: The frequency of Internet use is related to placement on the left–right scale.

Table 6

Cross-tabulation of variables: „Internet use, how often” * „Placement on left right scale” (in %)

		Internet use, how often					Total
		Never	Only occasionally	A few times a week	Most days	Every day	
Placement on left right scale	Left	14.6	5.8	3.8	7.5	68.3	100.0
	1	11.8	4.9	3.5	7.0	72.8	100.0
	2	8.8	3.7	3.3	6.1	78.1	100.0
	3	8.0	3.6	3.7	7.2	77.6	100.0
	4	9.1	4.1	4.3	7.5	74.9	100.0
	5	11.1	4.5	4.3	8.2	71.8	100.0
	6	9.5	4.2	4.8	7.3	74.2	100.0
	7	11.1	4.2	4.5	7.7	72.5	100.0
	8	13.4	4.5	4.4	7.2	70.5	100.0
	9	16.3	4.5	3.7	8.7	66.8	100.0
	Right	20.8	6.0	5.2	6.9	61.0	100.0
Total		**11.1**	**4.4**	**4.2**	**7.6**	**72.7**	**100.0**

Source: Own study based on ESS 11.

The contingency coefficient value (C = 0.098) confirms the existence of a statistically significant relationship (p < 0.001), thereby positively verifying research hypothesis H.4. The majority of respondents use the Internet daily (72.7%); however, the most intensive Internet use (“every day”) was observed among respondents who positioned themselves at levels 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 on the left–right placement scale. The highest percentage of “every day” responses (for the variable Internet use, how often) was recorded among respondents who placed themselves at position 2 on the scale. This group represents a relatively broad ideological center, with a noticeable inclination toward more frequent Internet use among respondents leaning toward the left end of the political spectrum. An analysis of adjusted standardized regression residuals shows that, within the “every day” response category, the cells corresponding to respondents who selected positions 2 and 5 on the left–right scale contributed most significantly to the observed statistical differences. Although the contingency coefficient value (C = 0.098) is low, it still indicates the presence of a relationship.

H.5: Daily intensity of online activity is related to placement on the left–right scale.

Table 7

Variable correlation analysis: „Internet use, how much time on typical day, in minutes” * „Placement on left right scale”

			Internet use, how much time on typical day, in minutes	**Placement on left right scale quan**
rho Spearmana	Internet use, how much time on typical day, in minutes	Correlation coefficient	1,000	–,046**
		Significance (two-tailed)	.	<,001
		N	31398	28035
	Placement on left right scale	Correlation coefficient	–,046**	1,000
		Significance (two-tailed)	<,001	.
		N	28035	35230
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)				

Source: Own study based on ESS 11.

The Spearman’s rho correlation analysis reveals the presence of a linear relationship between the analyzed variables. This provides the basis for positive verification of research hypothesis H.5. The correlation coefficient has a negative value, indicating that as the value of one variable increases, the value of the other decreases. The variable “placement on left–right scale quan” is defined on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 represents a left-wing orientation and 10 a right-wing one. Therefore, as the value of “placement on left–right scale quan” increases (i.e., as respondents’ views become more right-leaning), their daily engagement decreases. This result is statistically significant.

H.6: Placement on the left–right scale is dependent on the respondent’s country of residence.

Table 8

Cross-tabulation of variables: “Country” * “Placement on left right scale” (in %)

% z Country	Placement on left right scale											Total
	Left	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Right	
Austria	1.9	2.2	5.1	8.9	13.4	43.7	11.6	6.9	4.5	1.2	0.6	100.0
Belgium	2.8	1.4	6.5	10.4	9.3	33.5	11.1	14.8	7.4	1.3	1.6	100.0
Switzerland	2.3	1.9	7.6	13.6	8.4	27.6	13.1	13.2	8.5	1.6	2.1	100.0
Cyprus	9.1	1.8	3.8	8.1	5.1	35.4	7.6	7.3	8.1	1.8	11.8	100.0
Germany	2.9	2.2	6.8	14.1	12.9	39.9	9.5	7.3	2.9	0.7	0.8	100.0
Spain	6.6	3.0	8.0	13.9	10.0	29.2	8.7	7.7	7.1	2.4	3.4	100.0
Finland	2.2	2.1	5.3	9.2	10.2	23.0	10.3	15.5	13.9	5.1	3.2	100.0
France	4.4	2.5	5.9	13.0	10.1	27.4	9.8	11.1	9.2	2.9	3.6	100.0
United Kingdom	3.6	3.8	8.4	11.8	10.1	36.6	9.5	8.4	4.3	1.5	2.1	100.0
Greece	1.0	1.7	5.4	11.5	10.1	30.4	9.7	13.5	12.0	3.4	1.3	100.0
Croatia	4.5	2.3	4.1	9.2	6.9	40.6	7.2	8.9	7.3	2.8	6.3	100.0
Hungary	6.8	2.3	4.3	5.5	6.8	26.6	10.0	11.2	10.0	5.2	11.3	100.0
Ireland	3.3	2.1	4.7	9.0	11.2	42.2	9.7	8.4	5.2	1.6	2.6	100.0
Iceland	3.3	3.6	7.9	14.0	10.1	25.4	11.5	12.3	7.9	1.5	2.5	100.0
Italy	3.0	1.4	7.1	11.4	11.8	24.8	11.7	13.1	9.9	3.3	2.5	100.0
Lithuania	5.0	3.1	4.4	7.1	7.3	39.9	6.7	8.8	8.2	3.3	6.3	100.0
Netherlands	2.0	1.9	6.4	12.4	12.4	25.7	14.0	15.1	7.5	1.4	1.2	100.0
Norway	2.2	3.0	8.6	13.2	11.0	19.0	11.3	14.6	11.6	2.9	2.5	100.0
Poland	4.9	2.4	6.4	8.3	7.9	28.1	7.8	7.9	8.9	4.7	12.6	100.0
Portugal	3.2	2.8	5.7	10.6	12.9	36.2	6.8	8.0	8.0	3.3	2.5	100.0
Serbia	9.9	3.5	7.0	7.9	6.6	38.9	6.4	6.7	5.0	1.6	6.3	100.0
Sweden	4.1	3.1	8.6	14.3	12.1	18.5	12.4	13.1	9.7	1.4	2.7	100.0
Slovenia	5.6	2.2	6.0	9.5	8.9	41.7	5.9	6.8	6.2	1.7	5.4	100.0
Slovakia	9.2	4.4	8.2	11.3	9.6	28.3	6.5	9.6	7.0	2.6	3.4	100.0
Total	**4.0**	**2.4**	**6.3**	**10.9**	**10.2**	**31.8**	**9.8**	**10.6**	**7.9**	**2.5**	**3.7**	**100.0**

Source: Own study based on ESS 11.

The contingency coefficient value (C = 0.304) confirms the presence of a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.001$), thereby positively verifying research hypothesis H.6. In all of the countries included in the study, the majority of respondents identified their placement on the left–right scale at position 5, with a clearly dominant proportion in that category. An analysis of adjusted standardized regression residuals shows that the cells containing response “5” on the left–right scale, within each national sample, contributed most significantly to the observed statistical differences. The value of the contingency coefficient (C = 0.304) can be interpreted as indicating a moderately strong relationship.

H.7: Active participation in digital political discussion is related to placement on the left–right scale.

Table 9

Cross-tabulation of variables: „Posted or shared anything about politics online last 12 months” * „Placement on left right scale” (in %)

		Posted or shared anything about politics online last 12 months		Total
		Yes	No	
Placement on left right scale	Left	6,6	3,5	4,0
	1	4,4	2,1	2,4
	2	9.8	5.6	6.3
	3	13.9	10.3	10.9
	4	10.3	10.1	10.1
	5	22.5	33.6	31.9
	6	8.1	10.1	9.8
	7	10.0	10.7	10.6
	8	8.0	7.9	7.9
	9	2.8	2.5	2.5
	Right	3.5	3.7	3.7
Total		**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Source: Own study based on ESS 11.

The contingency coefficient value (C = 0.131) confirms the existence of a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.001$), thereby positively verifying research hypothesis H.7. Among those who posted about political topics during the year preceding the survey, the most active groups were respondents who placed themselves at level 5 (22.5%), level 3 (13.9%), and level 4 (10.3%) on the left–right scale.

Similarly, among those who did not post about political topics in the year prior to the study, the largest proportion also identified with position 5 (33.6%). An analysis of adjusted standardized regression residuals indicates that cells containing response “5” on the left–right scale – both for those who posted and those who did not – contributed most significantly to the observed statistical differences. The contingency coefficient value (C = 0.131) can be interpreted as reflecting a moderate association.

Conclusions

An analysis of the frequency distribution for the variable “placement on left–right scale” reveals that most responses cluster around the middle of the scale (positions 4, 5, and 6). This suggests that those most active in online political debate are voters who self-identify as centrists. However, the level of measurement for this variable (as well as other ESS 11 variables) does not allow us to determine further, potentially revealing parameters – for example, whether these are voters with liberal views in economic matters, worldview, or other dimensions. Based on the conducted analyses and the results presented, we can conclude only that the group broadly identifying as the political center is the most active in the digital sphere.

This finding may appear surprising, as issues such as the radicalization of political discourse, the rise of politically motivated hate speech, and hostility toward political opponents are often considered defining features of the contemporary political landscape (Skotnicka, 2019, pp. 79–86). There are various ways to interpret these findings, though doing so is beyond the scope of this paper. One interpretation proposed by the author is

that the more aggressive character of political discourse may be particularly evident at the extreme margins of the political center. This tendency has already been observed in previous research (Leszczuk-Fiedziukiewicz, 2019). This would imply that radical content – although frequently engaged with and commented on by debate participants – is not the dominant form of discourse. This interpretation aligns with the logic and general dynamics of the media, which are often focused on negativity and confrontation (Soroka, Daku, Hiaeshutter-Rice, Guggenheim, Pasek, 2018).

Another explanation, which may operate in parallel with the one described above, is the possibility that political discourse has also become more intense within the group of respondents who identify as centrists. In other words, the use of aggressive language in online discussions may also apply to the political center. It is important to note that the ESS 11 data were collected during, shortly before, or just after electoral processes in the countries surveyed. This is relevant because electoral competition tends to intensify the brutalization of political discourse (Gerstlé, Nai, 2019). Finally, one must also mention the ongoing influence of Russian propaganda, one of whose key and persistent objectives is the destabilization of the political order in democratic states – including by fueling and exacerbating conflicts in political discourse wherever possible. The topic of Russian propaganda is only briefly mentioned here, as it is a vast issue extensively covered in the literature.

The testing of hypothesis H.4 revealed the existence of a strong and highly active political center, with a noticeable lean to the left of the ideological spectrum. It is reasonable to assume that this refers to voters with liberal and moderately left-wing views, although the data available here do not allow for a more detailed characterization of their ideological structure (e.g., whether their views are liberal/leftist with respect to economic, social, or cultural issues). In any case, the findings clearly indicate that the most extreme ends of the left–right scale (i.e., responses 0–1 on the left and 9–10 on the right) are characterized by lower levels of online activity. This raises the question: why, despite the fact that centrists and moderate left-wing voters are the most active groups online, do radical viewpoints still appear so prominent, media-amplified, and frequently discussed? (Boxell, Gentzkow, Shapiro, 2024). This question, however, lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Research hypothesis H.6 was formulated as a secondary or supporting hypothesis. Its premise was based on the assumption that H.4 would be positively verified – that is, that different segments of the political spectrum would differ in their levels of online activity. If so, it would be worthwhile to determine in which of the surveyed countries the most politically active groups of Internet users are concentrated. The conclusions may be surprising in light of the widely discussed crisis of democracy (Przeworski, 2019). In fact, in all countries surveyed, the majority of respondents identified their placement on the left–right scale at position 5, representing the ideological center. This suggests a clear dominance of the political center (loosely associated with liberalism) in every country analyzed. This dominance ranged from 18.5% (observed – surprisingly – in Sweden) to 43.7% (in Austria), and was the most common response in each country.

The verification of hypothesis H.7, in addition to confirming the high level of political activity among centrists, also revealed another interesting finding: the political center appears to have the greatest untapped potential for digital mobilization (Hansen, 2016). This refers to individuals who declare centrist political views but do not actively participate in online political discussion. This is evidenced by the relatively high percentage

(33.6%) of respondents who do not post about politics online yet identify as centrists. Paradoxically, then, while the political center is the most active online, it also holds the greatest reserve of potential engagement.

Another notable observation – particularly in the context of hypotheses H.1, H.2, and H.3 – is the confirmation of the fact that politics is a phenomenon generating massive online activity. While this might appear self-evident, the large sample size, the wide scope of the analysis, and the high proportion of respondents reporting daily activity and interest in politics (especially evident in H.1) all support the conclusion that the politicization of the Internet as a medium is increasing. Alongside being a vehicle for popular culture and information, the Internet is now used most intensively by politically interested individuals. While this observation lies beyond the immediate scope of the paper, it may serve as a valuable contribution to future research – particularly in relation to the popularization of politics as entertainment (Woźniak, 2023). It must be remembered that the Internet, like any medium, is a powerful factor in shaping political views. From this perspective, one might reasonably assume that the more individuals rely on the Internet – especially within ideologically closed information bubbles – the stronger their attachment to a particular political stance becomes.

Also of interest is the comparison of results between hypotheses H.5 and H.6. The verification of H.6 revealed the highest level of Internet activity among respondents who identified themselves at the midpoint of the political spectrum. At the same time, respondents with left-leaning views demonstrated slightly greater online activity than those on the right. This was supported by correlation analysis of daily time spent online, which showed greater average engagement among left-wing respondents. This leads to the conclusion that online political activity among left-leaning individuals is both more frequent and more prolonged on a daily basis.

This study sheds new light on the role of moderate voters in the digital public sphere, challenging the common view of the dominance of extreme voices online. It also points to the need for further research on phenomena such as the popularization of politics and the impact of election campaigns on public discourse. Although the analysis centers on ESS 11 (2024), earlier rounds (ESS 9 in 2018 and ESS 10 in 2020) likewise showed clustering around the middle of the left–right scale. What distinguishes the 2024 data is the higher intensity of online political engagement, reflecting the growing centrality of digital platforms in political life.

Several limitations should be noted. The data are self-reported, which may introduce bias. The ESS design does not allow for platform-specific analysis (e.g., Facebook, X, Instagram), limiting detail. The quantitative approach captures correlations but not the qualitative dimensions of discourse, such as tone or rhetoric. Finally, treating positions 4–6 as the ‘center’ may blur internal diversity among centrist voters, such as differences between economic liberalism and cultural progressivism.

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Centrowe głosy w sferze cyfrowej: zaangażowanie polityczne i polaryzacja w europejskiej cyfrowej przestrzeni publicznej

Streszczenie

Wybór tematu został podyktowany specyfiką współczesnych realiów komunikacyjnych i politycznych. W dobie znaczącej i wciąż rosnącej obecności mediów społecznościowych w życiu społecznym, debata polityczna w coraz większym stopniu odbywa się za pośrednictwem Internetu. Jednocześnie obserwujemy nasilające się zjawiska polaryzacji, brutalizacji języka debaty oraz szerzenia hejtu motywowanego politycznie. W takim kontekście szczególnie istotne staje się pytanie o to, kto dziś rzeczywiście nadaje ton tej debacie – czy są to głosy rozsądku, czy raczej radykalne, emocjonalne przekazy, które łatwiej przebijają się w algorytmicznie determinowanym świecie informacji.

Celem tekstu jest odpowiedź na pytanie, jaka grupa politycznego spektrum jest najbardziej aktywna w debacie politycznej toczonej za pośrednictwem Internetu, w tym przede wszystkim mediów społecznościowych. Interesujące jest też to, w jaki sposób zaangażowanie w cyfrowy wymiar debaty politycznej koreluje z udziałem w wyborach. Odpowiedzi na te pytania dostarczają wybrane zmienne pochodzące z badania ESS 11, zakończonego w listopadzie 2024 roku. Asumptem dla tego tekstu jest również chęć zidentyfikowania segmentu wyborców umiarkowanych oraz ich roli w cyfrowej przestrzeni debaty publicznej. W pewnym sensie jest to wręcz próba odnalezienia wyborcy centrowego (deklarującego swoje poglądy jako umiarkowane) w czasach powszechnej narracji o dominacji poglądów skrajnych.

Słowa kluczowe: uczestnictwo polityczne, zaangażowanie polityczne w Internecie, wyborcy centrowi, media społecznościowe, polaryzacja polityczna, Europejski Sondaż Społeczny (ESS)

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Competing interests: The author have declared that no competing interests exist

(Sprzeczne interesy: Autor oświadczył, że nie istnieją żadne sprzeczne interesy)

Article submitted: 07.05.2025; article accepted: 30.09.2025.
Data przekazania tekstu: 07.05.2025; data zaakceptowania tekstu: 30.09.2025.