

Cringe as a Weapon:

How Political Embarrassment Silences Voters

Original study: "Cringe as an Instrument of Modern Propaganda"

Edlira Gugu • Roksana Gloc

Aleksander Xhuvani University, Elbasan, Albania • Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland

A new kind of propaganda doesn't try to change your mind. It tries to exhaust you into silence — using the discomfort of secondhand embarrassment as its weapon.

WHAT WE STUDIED

- 1,800 political social-media posts
- 127,468 public comments analyzed
- 2,047 voters surveyed
- 4 countries: US, France, UK, Albania (2024–25)
- Each post rated 0–10 for "cringe intensity"

HOW CRINGE SILENCES VOTERS

Norm-breaking political content

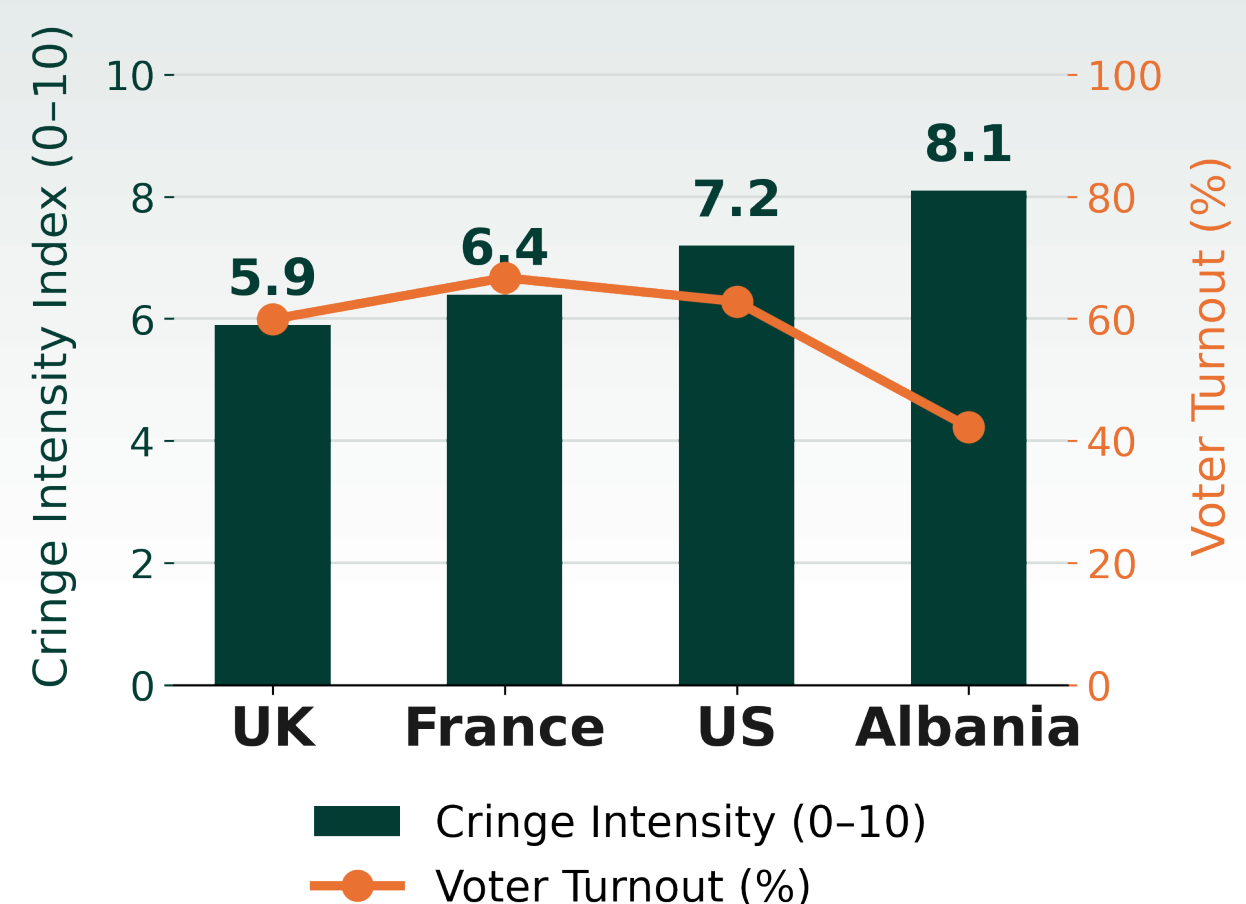
Boosted by bots — up to 3× normal reach

Repeated, everyday exposure

Emotional exhaustion sets in

Citizens withdraw from politics

CRINGE UP, TURNOUT DOWN



Higher cringe tracked lower turnout in all four countries ($p = -.92$) — directional, not causal.

WHO DISENGAGES MOST

68%

of highly empathetic, educated voters disengage

31%

of less-affected voters disengage the same amount

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

FOR VOTERS

Feeling embarrassed for a candidate may be the goal — don't let it silence you.

FOR EDUCATORS

This tactic works even when you see through it — awareness alone won't help.

FOR JOURNALISTS & PLATFORMS

Ask if a cringe clip informs people or just fuels outrage and bot traffic.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

Rules that reward engagement over accuracy make this tactic profitable.