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**Making America Great, Again Through Memes: A Qualitative Content Analysis of a
Trump-Based Populism in User-Generated Memes**

MA thesis

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I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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Abstract

Although populism is much-discussed, global trend, attempts to define it have been contentious, unsatisfactory, and often accomplished without the input of the populists themselves. The latest emergence of this political phenomenon has often been linked to “online opportunities” (Engesser et. al, 2017) which help to facilitate and spread such populist ideologies. One strand, a Trump based populism, has even been blamed on the supporters’ use of internet memes leading up to the election, and cited in Trump’s ultimate victory. This research examines the use of such memes to define the content of this ideology from the *populi*, themselves. Using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), it will attempt to discover how the people who make and use memes in support of Donald Trump, define their own ideology by looking at indicators of the “others,” the “general will,” “the people,” and the “elites.” Memes were taken and analyzed from The_Donald subreddit, from which a definition is composed and several insights pertaining to memes are highlighted. This ideological construction is useful when trying to understand elements of populism in the digital age, and works as a record of an emerging and misunderstood political phenomenon.

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List of Abbreviations

1a -First amendment
2a – Second amendment
ADL – American Defamation League
AFD - Alternative für Deutschland
Antifa –anti-fascist movement
AOC - Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
BLM – Black Lives Matter
DNC - Democratic National Committee
EU – European Union
GOP – Grand Old Party (the Republican party)
ICE - U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IRA - Internet Research Agency
LGBTQ+ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, plus
MAGA -Make America Great Again
MSM – mainstream media
NHS – National Health Service
NPC – non-playable character
NSF – Not safe for...
OWS – Occupy Wall Street
PiS - Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice party)
POTUS – President of the United States
QCA - qualitative content analysis
SJW – social justice warrior
SNS – social networking site
TD – The_Donald
TDS - Trump derangement syndrome
UGC – user generated content
WWC – white working class

Introduction

“What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. January 20th, 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again.”

-Donald Trump

With these words, the 45th president of the United States took office. Donald J. Trump’s inauguration speech depicted a once mighty nation that had been torn apart by foreign companies, inept politicians, drugs and poverty. With the transference of power completed, Trump equated his upcoming reign to one in which the people will take control. His heavy reliance on populist motifs, right-wing conservative values, and his personal embodiment of the American Dream has created a unique, Trump-based populism. His election was a “bold infusion of the popular will” which would help to “Make America Great Again” and allow the true voice of the people be heard.

On social media, the actual people were speaking. And although many spaces were buzzing about the “alternative facts” offered by Trump’s camp on the size of the crowds attending the inauguration, right-wing outlets were cheering. One particularly loud space, r/The_Donald was making an organized push to get Trump’s presidential portrait uploaded to the front page of Reddit. Reddit is a “social news aggregation” and discussion website, where users submit content to be “upvoted” (liked) or “downvoted” (disliked). Split into sections called subreddits, The_Donald was dedicated to Trump and boasting over 500,000 members, credited themselves with helping to secure Trump’s victory through its rampant use of user-generated political memes.

As an emerging form of political participation, “memeing” political events has become a recent way to engage the public into the political conversation. Trump’s antics, slurs, and slogans were seized upon by his fans, who created, modified, and posted them as viral content. As these creations spread and change, they become memes, based on a concept proposed by Richard Dawkins (2006). The_Donald in particular, made a concentrated effort during the campaign to create memes to delegitimize Hillary Clinton and other opponents of Trump. Many of the memes that they made had a broader influence, finding their way to other forums, Facebook groups, Twitter, and even the news. The_Donald’s influence has spread to a number of other areas on the internet, (Zannettou et al., 2018) and reports on the origins of memes

during the elections (Emerging Technology from the arXiv, 2018) concluded that most of the pro-Trump, anti-Hillary memes originated on the The_Donald and 4chan (an online forum with close relations and an overlap of members with The_Donald).

Many members of The_Donald credited Trump's victory to an effect they dubbed, "meme magic." This is the idea that by creating a memetic image, which repeatedly spreads and gets shared, this image will eventually become reality. Although, "meme magic" is a silly name for unsubstantiated science, one cannot discount the number of political memes in recent years. The prevalence of political memes on Social Networking Sites (SNS) and the internet has increased since the beginning of 2016 to the beginning of 2017. In 2016, 60% of the top 25 memes' keywords were political in nature (me.me, 2017). Perhaps even more worrisome, is the fact that political memes are enjoying an explosion in popularity at the same time that Americans' trust in the mass media reached a record low, 32% according to a 2016 Gallup poll (Swift, 2016). SNS such as Twitter and Facebook are used by billions of users monthly, and consequently, Americans report that 62% of their news comes from these kinds of sites (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Memes are being spread and viewed in uncountable numbers, and whatever their effect, their existence and prevalence in a time of mass communication with little regulation or verification is one more reason to study this trend.

The content of memes often toes the line between humor and jokes, news and information, and recently, political communication. Websites such as memegenerator.com allow any internet user the ability to create and share memetic images for free and with little technological knowledge required. From there, memes can be spread on any SNS and discussion websites such as Reddit with little-to-no barriers or fact-checking. This relative ease and speed of meme creation means that any individual can take part in democratic processes once reserved for campaign officials and volunteers. In 2016, the same year that Trump and Brexit were utilizing Cambridge Analytica's microtargeting to spread "fake news," Trump and Clinton's proponents were engaged in their own online "meme warfare." The Trump campaign was especially quick to utilize memes and an early image posted on Trump's Twitter in 2015 shows this melding of politics and memes into the iconic Trump as Pepe the frog mash-up. Shown below, this image has become an important symbol and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.2.5.



Figure 1. Trump as Pepe the Frog. “Trump as Pepe” (realDonaldTrump, 2015) this image has come to define Trump’s campaign and he and his supporters’ use of political memes during the election.

The democratizing potential for memes and their use by political campaigns is yet another reason for such research within political science, especially when their content can offer insight into another recent political phenomenon: populism. Coincidentally, 2016 was also dubbed as “the year of the populist” by Time magazine (Shuster, 2016) for the unprecedented victories seen by the Brexit campaign and Trump’s ascendancy to president. Since then, the world has witnessed populist parties entering into government coalitions across European nations; authoritarian populist leaders have consolidated their governments in Poland and Hungary; and there has been a rise in support for emerging populist parties in Estonia, Germany, and Italy; while across the Atlantic, populism has surged in Brazil and Venezuela. These occurrences demonstrate that Trump is not solely an American phenomenon, and his brand of populism, Trumpism, and the way in which it was campaigned, has been, and will continue to be used as a blueprint for future elections (Finchelstein, 2018). As democracies all over the world are faced with issue of populism, it is becoming more and more pertinent to study this trend and investigate different avenues of research.

Moreover, the year 2020 will see the next American election cycle for the office of the President. Barring any unforeseen complications or scandals, Trump will run again. During his 2016 campaign, Donald Trump’s Digital Director, Brad Parscale, relied heavily on crafting Trump’s image and persona on social media. He tweeted that he used The_Donald in his campaign’s digital strategy, reporting that he visited the site “daily” (parscale, 2016). As he will be campaign manager for Trump’s 2020, run, it’s likely that The_Donald will receive more press in the years to come. With now more than 700,000 members, (as of September 2019) The_Donald has used its “meme magic” for international campaigns, trying to help elect

Marine Le Pen in France, and spreading digital propaganda for the 2018 midterm election to other corners of the web.

The user-generated memes created by members of The_Donald are the topic of this paper's research. Even though memes are changing the way that American politics are being run, relatively little has been written about them in the political sciences. Memes are a perfect communication device for populists. They are a direct connection to a broad audience that removes the traditional barriers, giving voice to non-elite actors. If used effectively, memes can offer a façade of legitimacy, especially if they look to be user-generated and spread through organic channels. Through this research, the author hopes to elucidate on how those who claimed to “meme Trump to Presidency” are preparing as the 2020 election approaches and what we can learn about the ideology of Trumpism in the lead-up to the next campaign.

The aim of this research is to endogenously construct the ideology of a Trump-based populism inductively, through user-generated memes posted and shared in The_Donald. By allowing for the specific indicators of populism to be defined by the *populi*, this research seeks to add new insights to not only existing definitions of populism, but to also new avenues of political participation, in this case through memes. This has been done through ascribing meaning to the content to 931 memes that were posted from the period of early 2018- 31, August 2019, and collected over the time period of 1 June 2019 – 31 August 2019. The memes were categorized and coded according to methods of Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) both rooted in literature and developed by the researcher to solve this specific research puzzle. By analyzing what the content of these memes are saying, a narrative of this ideology began to develop. The research questions that will ultimately be answered are as follows:

RQ1: How are the perceived 'others' depicted and excluded through memes?

RQ2: How is the 'general will' of the 'people' depicted in memes?

RQ3: How are the 'people' depicted in memes?

RQ4: How are the 'elites' portrayed through memes

To aid in this research were resources both academic and practical. All the memes were taken from The_Donald, and additional memetic background was supplied by online sources such as knowyourmeme.com and reputable news sources (The Guardian, The New York Times, The Washington Post) as well as first hand Tweets and posts. Academic sources were used in the theoretical background on populism, using Mudde's (2007) definition combined with Albertazzi and McDonnell's (2008) keywords, with the ultimate framework being developed by Engesser et. al (2017). The definition of meme was taken from Limor Shifman (2014). These

were then reinforced through works from Taggart (2002, 2004), Dawkins (2006), Canovan (1981,1995, 2001), Norris & Inglehart (2019), and Moffitt (2016).

The structure of this research is as follows: chapter 1 will give theoretical background into populism, defining not only the indicators, as well as the different schools of thought and history of the phenomenon in America, finishing with an overview of right-wing populism, and then more specifically a Trump-based populism. Chapter 2 will give a history of memes, starting with the first definition developed by Dawkins and proceeding to its use on the internet as well as developing a meme literacy, it will then go more in depth into political memes and how these have been specifically used as political participation, and the functions they present. Chapter 3 is concerned with the presentation of the research statement as well as the methodology used. Chapter 4 will be the presentation of the results and analysis of the memes. Chapter 5 will discuss the analysis in relation to the literature, comment on limitations, and make suggestions regarding future research directions; and chapter 6 will give the author's concluding remarks.

Chapter 1: Populism

1.1: Populism: An Introduction

With its origins in Ancient Rome's term *populis*, the concept of populism and putting democracy back into the hands of "the people" has been around since the 1890's (Canovan, 2005, p.72). Numerous manifestations have since appeared, from diverse settings such as the American frontier and rural Russia in the 19th century (Canovan, 1981), to mid-20th century Latin America, and to its current resurgence that has encompassed countries throughout Europe, The United States, and Latin America at the end of the 20th century.

Blurring the lines between parties, social and economic cleavages, and ideologies (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012) populism has undergone a "conceptual stretching," which is compounded by the "disjointed" (Moffit, 2016, p.25) way that scholars have undertaken populist research. Due to this, Wiles noted, "to each his own definition of populism, according to the academic axe he grinds" (Wiles, 1969, p.166). The result of this has been competing definitions which range from too vague and broad, allowing for "conceptual slippage" (Moffit, 2016, p.34) to "unwieldy lists" of populist features (ibid., p.22).

In practical terms, populist has been applied to a world-wide array of politicians, from France's Marine Le Pen, to Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, from Nigel Farage in the UK, to Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the US. This overuse has led Bale et al. to observe that "any political actor who is in the news frequently for a substantial amount of time probably runs the risk of being labeled 'populist' sooner or later," (2011, p.121). Albertazzi and McDonnell see a similar trend in using the epithet "to denigrate statements and measures by parties and politicians which commentators or other politicians oppose," (2008, p.2). Though both statements are hyperbole, the sentiments are intact, and it is indeed difficult to find common denominators amongst such ideological diversity.

This section will focus on what scholarly literature has had to add to the definition and debate on populism. It will briefly explore the different approaches before zeroing in on this paper's focus: populism as an ideology. Following this, the different attributes of populism will be elaborated on by literature and contemporary populist movements and figures. Modern populism in America and how it relates to Donald Trump will also be discussed. Finally, a brief description of what social media has done to help populist parties will be touched on.

1.2: Populism Defined

From the 1950's and on, the term populism has been applied to wide-array of political phenomenon and movements. Its ability to transcend geographical borders, time periods, and

cross-party platform has led to numerous debates from scholars as to how to classify this concept. While often times the core-components (the ‘people,’ ‘popular sovereignty’) stay consistent, difficulty lies in identifying a coherent approach to categorize populism. While there are a number of ways to examine this phenomenon, this section will go into more detail into what is generally regarded to be the three main approaches: *discourse*, *style*, and *ideology*. With the advent of emerging communication platforms, some authors have reconceptualized populism into a communication logic which incorporates all of these approaches. This will be tackled in chapter 1.2.4.

1.2.1. *Populism as Discourse*

Many authors view populism as a form of discourse looking at a dichotomous relationship of “us” versus “them” (Kazin, 1995). Margaret Canovan has been hugely influential in her writings on the subject, and she offers a definition of populism as “discourses of the ‘people,’” (2005, p.79) where anti-establishment mobilization against power structures are coupled with direct appeals to the people. Norris and Inglehart offer a similar definition, where populism can be explained as a discursive style “about who should rule” and which claims “that legitimate power rests with ‘the people’ not the elites” (2018, p.3).

This approach has been important because it allows politicians to be “more or less populist” (Moffit, 2016, p.31) with a gradational measurement scale in operationalizing the concept (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013, p.8). The fluidity of this approach also means that politicians can take on populist attributes, without adopting a brand-new party platform. This can lend itself to a more nuanced understanding of populism, as opposed to a “populist/non-populist dichotomy” (ibid.).

1.2.2. *Populism as a Style*

Much of the debate about populism has been linked to how authors understand what the concept is said to represent. It may also happen that when setting out to define populism, different approaches may be used synonymously. This has been commonly seen amongst authors who see populism as a style. For example, Taguieff, defines it as a “type of social and political *mobilization*, which means that the term can only designate a *dimension* of political action or discourse,” (1995, p.9, emphasis in original). Moffit (2016, p.38) argues that this conflates *style*, with populism as a *discourse* and a *strategy*. Other authors such as Canovan (1999) and Jagers and Walgrave (2007) see style as primarily a communication device which takes into consideration the *way* populist appeals to the people are delivered.

Moffitt and Tormey (2013) have made great strides towards developing this approach and taking it beyond a rhetoric or discourse and conveying *how* (Engesser et al., 2017) populism is delivered. They argue that populism amounts to “the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations,” (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013, p.387). Populism as a style means that a diverse range of political entities can easily exist under the umbrella term, as the content of this style can be enacted when needed. Thus, the specific performative features of populist styled politics can serve as its indicators, these include *appealing to the “people,” emphasis on crisis, breakdown, or threat, and “bad” manners* (idib.). This approach is closely related to populism as a discourse, but it goes one step beyond by also taking into account the ways in which the motifs are delivered.

1.2.3. Populism as Ideology

When considering populism as an ideology, early conceptualization dates back to 1956, when Shils (p.100-101) argued that it could be understood as an ideological phenomenon which occurs when there exists “popular resentment against the order imposed on society by a long-established differentiated ruling class which is believed to have a monopoly on power, property, breeding, and culture.” Building on that, the most influential definition has come from Cas Mudde, who wrote that the concept is “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2007, p.23). As a dynamic battle of populist elements, “the pure people” are set up against the “corrupt elite” in their quest for popular sovereignty, a “crude version of Rousseau’s General Will” (Hawkins, 2009, p. 1043). Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008, p.3) offer a similar definition with:

“an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice.”

The authors argue that these minimal definitions allow for a broader application in comparative research (Mudde) by viewing populism “beyond” the background of party programs, economic schemes, and issues (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p.3). The concept can also be supplemented with various “add-on ideologies” (Engesser et al., 2017) such as nationalism, authoritarianism, and socialism. Depending on what side of the political spectrum

populism manifests, the core motifs may be recontextualized: in the case of “the people,” right-wing populism may generally define this as nation (ibid, p.1283), while left-wing populism sees it as class (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Mény & Surel, 2000). This is also true when conceiving of the main antagonist, “the elites,” who populists on the right-side of the spectrum view as the mass media and institutions, and those on the left define as “economic or religious elites” (Engesser et al., 2017).

A main problem with calling it an ideology lies in the fact that the (oftentimes) pejorative “populist” and its meanings are usually coming from someone other than its adherents (Canovan, 1981, p.5). Whereas other ideologies have proponents who vocally identify with their systems of belief, such as feminists or socialists, populists rarely claim that they are populists. Canovan, however, goes on to point out that the first populists in the People’s Party of the United States and the Russian *narodniki* did in fact call themselves populists. Furthermore, Albertazzi and McDonnell contend that “if this were a good enough reason to stop researchers from using a category they found useful, then the same treatment should be extended to ‘far’, ‘radical’ and ‘extreme’ – all labels that are rarely, if ever, willingly embraced by parties of the Right or Left,” (2008, p.3).

1.2.4. *Populist Communication Logic*

As it stands, Wiles’ take that populism differs for each scholar’s axe is still relevant. Gidron and Bonikowski argue that each of these axes may ultimately sharpen and reinforce each other (2013, p.1), meaning competing definitions are actually working towards clarifying what exactly the concept represents. Engesser et. al (2017) have a similar view, wherein each approach represents different aspects of populism (the *what*, *how*, *why*, and *who* of the phenomenon). The authors put this combination of components into the idea of *populist communication logic*, which can be defined as “the sum of norms, routines, and procedures shaping populist communication” (ibid, p.1280). Following this logic, no one approach towards populism is wrong, and one’s chosen approach is dependent upon what question they want answered. As the research in this paper is concerned with the *what*, or content of the message of Trump supporters, it will utilize Mudde’s definition of populism as a thin ideology, reinforced with Albertazzi and McDonnell’s keywords for the concept, and thickened through the framework and indicators conceived by Engesser et. al (2017) (see Table 1).

1.3: Features of Populism

This section will elaborate more on the specific features of populism. These will ultimately serve as the indicators in the research and are the foundations for the research questions. The features of populism are: *the people, others, anti-elites, and popular sovereignty*. However, since this research is mostly concerned with manifestations of populism coming from the political right, a review of right-wing and authoritarian populism will also be offered.

1.3.1. “The People” and “Others”

Populists claim that “true” democracy is one that is by “the people” and their legitimacy comes from their election by the majority (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p.3). To define “the people,” Taggart (2000, p. 95) views this homogenous and exclusionary group as at one time belonging to an imagined “heartland,” which has since been corrupted by enemies of the “virtuous” people. Others such as Brubaker (2017) characterizes this relationship as a polemic “us” vs. “them” that exists in the horizontal and vertical dimensions. Vertically, we see the relationship between the “ordinary people” and the “elites.” Both right and left-wing populism utilize this vertical dichotomy. These are in Trump’s words, the “forgotten men and women of our country” up against the corrupt elite: politicians such as “Crooked Hillary” and “Lyin’ Ted,” or big corporations, big donors, and big banks (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Bernie Sanders, speaking on the current campaign trail, often rallies against the “billionaire class” and greedy corporate America, while stressing his lower-middle class immigrant background.

Horizontally, the poles represent the “insiders” and “outsiders,” the “people like us” and their enemies, whose existence and values threaten their way of life (Brubaker, 2017, p.2). The outsiders may be internal or external, depending on the populist’s purposes. Left-wing populism tends to be more inclusive and intersectional, for example, Sanders’ current slogan is “Not me. Us,” and he continually references LGBTQ+ rights and anti-bigotry. Right-wing populism, on the other hand, engages more in “othering,” (Roth, 2018, p.498). Internally, these enemies might represent urban liberals, coastal snobs, and ivory tower academics who sneer at those in the “flyover states” and the “deplorables,” and who “speak for the minority, not the majority” (Brubaker, 2017). Externally, these enemies are the hordes of migrants coming to take American jobs, ISIS terrorists, and the caravans of “rapists and drug dealers,¹” (Gabbatt, 2015).

¹ How Trump referred to Mexicans in a 2015 speech.

1.3.2. Anti-Elites

Populists set themselves apart from the political establishment, by tearing down the existing power structures, as well as the elite actors within these structures. The elites are those who “betray the people and deprive it of its sovereignty” (Engesser et al., 2017, p.1283) and can be divided into the economic (billionaires, big banks, Wall Street) and political (Washington, the system, special interests, lobbyists) camps (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p.192-193). With this overarching dichotomy (populist and “the people” versus the “elites”), populists portray themselves as outsiders who seek to rectify the disillusionment that the people have in the existing power structures. As political “radicals” they can upset the status quo and restore “true” democracy to the corrupt institutions. By undermining the legitimacy of the mainstream media, science, elected officials, greedy corporations, and governmental institutions, populists set themselves up as a counterweight who can repair the system. By railing against many of the issues that the populace experiences, populists tap into the sentiment of dissatisfaction and exploit it for political gain. By vocally being on the side of “the people,” common enemies can be located and eradicated, and populists gain more legitimacy for being this voice.

Current examples of this populist element can be found in cross-party platforms, though the target changes depending on geography and ideology. Trump famously vowed to “drain the swamp” of the corrupt elite, while Bernie Sanders is currently trying to start a “political revolution” against the “establishment Democrats” whose power will influence the democratic candidacy. Across the pond, Brexit campaigners sought to “Take Back Control” of their country from the grip of Brussels, while Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) and Poland’s Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) parties both show conspicuous contempt for mainstream journalists and the media, as well as both being highly critical of the EU.

1.3.3. Popular Sovereignty

The concept of popular sovereignty is linked to “the people,” who through their “general will,” make up the true and ultimate political sovereign, with the populist leader merely being the (oftentimes “reluctant”) mouthpiece of this will. Moreover, the checks and balances put in place by the system, may be regarded as a deterrent to sovereignty, and is something that can only be corrected by the election of the populist, who can then tear down these barriers. Though some argue this might be a challenge to (liberal) democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 16). It is clear that populism and democracy are deeply linked (Canovan, 1981 and 2005; Mudde, 2004), and populism might even be useful in pin-pointing some of the shortcomings of the political system (Taggart, 2002, p. 75).

For Taggert (2002) sovereignty means restoring the “heartland” with the “natural order.” This is a mythical, apolitical vision of where ‘the people’ used to reside, and what the populists hope to resurrect (Taggert, 2004) through open hostility towards that which hinders this “heartland” e.g. immigration, globalism, and supranational institutions. The “the heartland” is an empty signifier that appears time and again in populist discourse; it is Trump’s “Make America Great, Again,” and the Euroscepticism flourishing in Europe’s right-wing parties, as well as the “control” of borders and national interests touted by Brexiters. This “control” is also linked to what Kallis (2018) argues is an emerging, contemporary component of populist discourse, territorial sovereignty, with an emphasis on “border sovereignty.” This may manifest as a “reinvention” of a “symbolic and physical” border for European countries, as well as Trump’s vow to “never surrender America’s sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable global bureaucracy,” (Washington Examiner, 2018). To ensure the safety of the “heartland” precautions must be taken against immigration and integration, and nationalist rhetoric must be evoked (“America First,” “Build the wall,” and Brexit’s “We Want Our Country Back”).

1.3.4. Indicators of Right-Wing and Authoritarian Populism

Although the general indicators for populism are used to carry out this research, the subject matter of a Trump-based populism requires a theoretical basis and indicators to root it within the literature. As such, an overview of right-wing and authoritarian populism will be offered.

Cas Mudde’s examination of radical right-wing populism in Europe (2007), was based upon a QCA of official party literature. This helped develop a maximum definition which revolved around three ideological features: *nativism*, *authoritarianism*, and *populism*. Firstly, nativism can be understood as xenophobic attitudes that extend beyond race to include cultural values and religion. It is the idea that to protect “the people” then outsiders should be excluded and helps to create a “true” version of a nation’s people. Nativist rhetoric includes favoring “mono-culturalism over multiculturalism, national self-interest over international cooperation and international aid, closed borders over the free flow of peoples, ideas, labor and capital, and traditionalism over progressive and liberal social values,” (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p.7). Secondly, authoritarianism comes through with a populist’s strong leadership and manifestations of their personal power. Traditional checks and balances are forsaken so that the majoritarian “will of the people” may be expressed through the populist leader and legitimacy is established by direct means, such opinion polls or referenda. Thirdly, populism here refers to the belief in the sovereignty of ‘the people’ and its ability to manifest to combat the corrupt elite.

Norris & Inglehart (2019, p.7) divide populism according to its values as opposed to a left-right continuum, and is comprised of three components: *conformity*, *security*, and *obedience*. Conformity is related to social conservatism and can be defined as adherence and obedience to traditional norms and values. This includes the preference of traditional gender norms, conservative moral values, and religion to that of gender fluid identities and roles, multiculturalism, and secular beliefs. This also helps to create an “us” versus “them” dichotomy defined by one’s adherence to the group. Here, what is good for the group is valued over individuals and personal freedom. Security reinforces the idea of the group and insists that it requires protection against enemies. This concept is strongly linked to nativism, and in protecting ‘the people’ from the threat of outsiders. Security can also reflect perceived changes in socio-economic opportunities as well as changes in cultural values. Lastly, obedience is one’s commitment to the group and its norms, values, and roles. It is also the group’s loyalty to the populist’s authority and the institutions that share the ideals of and serve the leader. This obedience is often extended only to the populist leader, not the country, and legitimacy can be gained by claims of carrying out certain actions so that “the voice of the people” can be heard, even if this means dismantling checks and balances on power.

It is important to understand these concepts to recognize what kind of populism is currently taking hold in America; a short history of which is explored next.

1.4: A Short History of Populism in America: From the People’s Party to Trump and Social Media

Populism had its beginning in a grass-roots movement of farmers in the 1880s. Farmers’ alliances in the American South and West sprang up to campaign for agricultural issues and combat East-coast bankers and the monopoly the railroad companies had over the transport costs. Successful boycotts against jute and extending lines of credit to members added momentum to the movements, and by 1892 The People’s Party grew from these alliances. James Weaver was nominated the party’s presidential candidate, and in his preamble in Omaha he vowed: “[w]e seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of ‘the plain people’ with whose class it originated,” (Hicks, 1961, p.441). The platform called for nationalization of the railroad, graduated income tax, direct elections of Senators, reduced working hours, and restriction of immigrant labor, among other issues. (Canovan, 1981, p.37-38). Although the third-party candidate received more than a million votes, it was not successful in taking the

White House and by 1896, with the People's Party's backing of the Democrat's candidate, William Jennings Bryan², support declined.

By the mid-twentieth century, manifestations of populism arose in the form of Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist witch hunts and in third-party candidates like Governor George Wallace's multiple campaigns. Wallace's platform of "welfare, law and order, racism, and antielitism" (Canovan, 1981, p. 227) did well with blue-collar workers and Southern states and was enough to earn him 13.5% of the total votes that election. In the 1990's another third-party candidate, Ross Perot, saw success with a moderate conservative populism, garnering him 18.9% of the vote. His platform emphasized the hypocrisy of bipartisan politics, sought to keep large corporations and their jobs in the USA, championed for veterans' rights, as well as abortion access, and rallied against bad trade agreements. Perot became one of the most successful third-party presidential candidates in recent years, yet by future elections, in what seems analogous to other populists, his support had waned.

In addition to party politics, populism appeared in the form of social movements in the naughts and teens, with the Tea Party in 2009 and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in 2011. Even though both the Tea Party and OWS were grass-roots activist movements aimed at the establishment, they focused their ire on different targets. OWS consisted of decentralized groups of protesters who rallied against economic inequality in the wake of the recent financial crisis and who objected to the greed, corruption, and influence of large corporations. Although a lack of cohesiveness and clear demands prevented policy changes, OWS attracted a large amount of support from its online activities and protests. The movement managed to occupy New York's Zuccotti park for more than a month, as well as contribute a plethora of memes and slogans to pop culture.

The Tea Party, on the other hand, hoped to reduce government spending and involvement through protests and by promoting anti-Obama conspiracy theories. By the 2010 midterms, several candidates were endorsed by the Tea Party and some managed to defeat "establishment" Republicans in the races. Paul Ryan's placement in the 2012 election GOP ticket for vice president led the New York Times to declare that the once fringe movement was now "indisputably at the core of the modern Republican Party," (Shear, 2012). Trump's praise of the movement during his campaign has solidified this linkage even more, saying "[t]he tea party people are incredible people. These are people who work hard and love the country and they get beat up all the time by the media," (Lee, 2015).

² Himself a populist, but on the democrats' ticket, it appeared as if they "had stolen the Populists' clothes" (Canovan, 1981, p.44).

By tapping into the anger of the Tea Party, Trump was able to lead in support amongst self-reporting “teabaggers” in the 2016 presidential election, which by that time, Trump himself had entered on a populist platform. However, Trump was far from the only politician who engaged in populist rhetoric. There were a number of Republican candidates who employed the use of “populist syntax,” based on a measurement scale conceived by Oliver & Rahn (2016). Donald Trump and Ben Carson led in the use of populist language with Ted Cruz dabbling in aspects such as mistrust of experts.

On the other side of the political spectrum, Congressman Bernie Sanders had also entered the race with a program not dissimilar to The People’s Party. While Trump resembled a modern-day plutocrat and East-coast elite, against whom the original populists were fighting, Sanders campaigned for more transparent government, a progressive income tax, government regulation for industries, and better working conditions, all issues that were central to the first populists and which directly followed many demands raised by OWS years earlier. Though Sanders had significant support, mostly from an online following called “Bernie Bros,” he failed to earn the democratic nomination. The GOP opponent and ultimate winner of the presidency, Donald Trump, took his populism from another source. Following in the tradition of Wallace, Trump was able to ride a wave of populism that occurs “in the context of a political culture committed to democratic principles but riven by cleavages between the progressive culture of the elite and the reactionary instincts of the populace,” (Canovan. 1981, p.15).

Populism has a long and varied history in American politics. With its humble beginnings in aiding farmers in the American frontier, populism’s ability to morph to match the resentment of the zeitgeist, has made it a continual presence and occasional nuisance. The 2016 election’s multitude of populist candidates has led some to question the reason for the recent flare-ups of this phenomenon. Literature has pointed the finger towards economic factors and disproportionality (Bornschiefer, 2010; Inglehart, 2018), country specific events such as “Obama backlash” (Jindal, 2016; Milbank, 2016), and social media fragmentation (Engesser, et al., 2016). Pippa Norris & Robert Inglehart (2018) offer the “cultural backlash” theory, where populism is a response to modern liberal values, while Oliver & Rahn (2016) cite a “representation gap” in the electorate. Whatever the source, Donald Trump’s presidency and style of populism has become the dominate variant in contemporary American politics.

1.4.1. A Trump-based Populism

Since taking office, Donald Trump’s brand of politics, which some have dubbed Trumpism, has taken on a number of meanings. For some it is, “secure borders, economic nationalism, and

America-first foreign policy,” (Anton, 2016) while others contend it is a “celebrity-driven cult of personality,” (Douthat & Salam, 2016). Some authors see Trumpism as synonymous with “conservative nationalism” (Nwanevu, 2019) or as a “populist blend of nationalism and protectionism,” (Jacobs, 2016). Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s six-part lecture series exploring the phenomenon, boils the concept down to Trumpian anecdotes and defining the man as “the grizzly bear in *The Revenant*” (Understanding Trump and Trumpism, 2019) with Trumpism vaguely representing “a set of values, attitudes and practices that Trump has brought to American government and politics,” (Schwartz, 2016).

Because of the confusing nature of this word, this paper will instead utilize a “Trump-based populism.” This has its roots in what Margaret Canovan calls “reactionary populism,” which is “an appeal to the people which deliberately opens up the embarrassing gap between ‘the people’ and their supposedly democratic and representative elite by stressing popular values that conflict with those of the elite,” (1981, p.229). Usually it consists of “a clash between reactionary, authoritarian, racist, or chauvinist views at the grass roots, and the progressive, liberal, tolerant cosmopolitanism characteristic of the elite,” (ibid.).

Though it might have seemed unprecedented at the time, the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump had been years in the making. Political realignments that stem back to the Civil Rights movement, saw white voters, specifically the white working-class (WWC), migrating to the Republican party. The Tea Party moved the Republican party further right and became the perfect catalyst for the real-estate-tycoon-cum-reality-TV-star-cum-Washington neophyte to enter the political stage. Although Trump’s billions may separate him from the 99%, his brusque New York accent³, politically incorrect “locker room talk,” and his “America First” platform endeared him to millions of voters who were turned off by Obama’s calm (read: “weak”) restraint and Clinton’s stiffness. As an over-the-top Washington outsider, he fed on and incited the “cultural backlash” (Inglehart & Norris, 2016) that had been brewing since the Obama administration. This backlash was rooted in anger against the cosmopolitan, progressive values that were “shoved down the throat of those left behind, without ever asking for their opinion, and at their expense,” (Enoch, 2017, p.4). Cultural issues had become omnipresent in party manifestos, and not only was Trump able to capitalize on polarizing matters, he tapped into the root of many of these cleavages.

Donald Trump was the embodiment of the American Dream, and his appeals to the “forgotten men and women” were built upon nostalgic promises and included plans to rebuild

³ Some actually attribute Trump’s accent to his success, (Kristian, 2016).

the heartland by bringing back blue-collar jobs. His pledge to “build the wall” and ban Muslim immigration resonated with those who felt like “strangers in their own land,” (Hochschild, 2016). He rallied against mainstream media and its “fake news”, science (global warming), progressive movements (transgender bathrooms), big liberal donors (Soros) and the “rigged” American system and its “fraudulent” elections. He would become the strong charismatic leader, “the god emperor” in the words of his Reddit followers, who bridged the gaps in ideological differences to “Make America Great, Again.” Melding the theatrics of the Tea Party with the conservative values of the Republican party, and white nationalistic attitudes of the newly coined “alt-right,” Trump vowed to “drain the swamp” of interest groups and corrupt politicians whom he dubbed with school-yard epithets, (“Crooked Hillary,” “Little Marco,” “Low Energy Jeb”). As Trump said:

“The only antidote to decades of ruinous rule by a small handful of elites is a bold infusion of the popular will. On every major issue affecting this country, the people are right and the governing elite are wrong,” (Trump, 2016).

Holding the office of the President of the United States has also done little in quieting this xenophobic and nativist rhetoric. As recently as July of 2019, Trump fired off several angry Tweets directed towards female congresswomen (known collectively as the “squad”) to “go back” to where they came from, even when three out of four were born in the United States. Similar sentiments were echoed in a September 24th, 2019 speech to UN, where Trump rallied against a world controlled by the elite “globalists” who strive for open borders, while asserting that “true good” national pursuits can only be done by those “citizens who are rooted in its history,” (President Trump Calls for Global Trade Reform in U.N. Speech, 2019) which would exclude any newly arrived migrant.

Trump was a political outsider who made countless appeals and mentions of “real Americans.” His campaign established the “insiders” and “outsiders” and electing him was a promise to restore America’s greatness to a long forgotten “heartland,” and allow the will of the people to rule, although his nativist rhetoric limits who these actual people are. Even as POTUS, with tax cuts aimed towards the 1%, his anti-elite and anti-globalist stance has been able to strike a chord with “working families” and “the American people.” President Trump has become the voice of “the people” and he did so through “othering,” exclusion, and bullying anyone who did not agree with him.

1.4.2. Populism and Social Media

Although there are a variety of reasons why populism has endured, the recent outpouring of manifestations has led scholars to look for explanations; one area that is routinely blamed is the landscape of the social media environment. The past decade has seen social media and SNS playing a more prominent role in the communication strategies for political parties (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), both as a tool for self-promotion and as a more direct approach to connect to the electorate (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017). Sites such as Facebook and Twitter, who report a respective 1.2 billion and 126 million daily users (Shaban, 2019), have a reach and influence rivalling traditional MSM (Fisher et al., 2018). For young people in the US, social media is the dominate source of news (Shearer, 2018), while print and television news consumption is on the decline. While social media threatens to change the way that all future politics will be run, it is populism that is currently benefitting from this technological revolution.

Ernst et al. (2017, p.11) have identified four ways in which social media is compatible with populism: as direct access to the people bypassing journalist gate-keepers, by offering the opportunity of a close connection to the audience, through the establishment of a community by targeting specific groups, and the potential for personalization. The authors were also able to establish that opposition parties across six different countries use a higher amount of populist communication on social media than more centrist governmental parties. In a separate study, the same authors (Ernst et al., 2019) also found that not only are opposition parties more likely to utilize populist communication, but they are also more inclined to use it on social media as opposed to talk shows.

Digging deeper into more country specific populism, Serrano et al. (2019) found that with Germany's AfD party, not only did they use social media as their primary communication tool, but they did so at a much higher rate than other German parties. Similar results were found in the way that the populist Sweden Democrats interacted on their social media channels (Larsson, 2016). There is also evidence that this use of new media is directional on the part of the electorate in support of populism. In their analysis of social media's role on the 2016 election, Groshek and Koc-Michalska (2017) observed a positive relationship between an individual's social media use and support for populist candidates.

To sum up, it is clear that social media is a dominant force in modern political campaigns, and the literature has shown that there is a direct relation between populists and an increase in social media interaction. The next section will explore an offshoot of social media, memes, and how they help to disseminate political and populist communication.

Chapter 2: A Short History of Memes: From Dawkins to LOLCats

2.1: Meme Defined

2.1.1. Original Definition

The term meme was originally coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976/2006) as a self-replicating “unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.” The name is derived from the Greek word, *mimema*, which means “something imitated,” but shortened to rhyme with gene (Shifman, 2014, p.10). This was done to highlight the fact that these bits of information, culture and beliefs, undergo similar types of natural selection to that of genes. In this original understanding, memes are a general term for anything that gets passed from “brain to brain,” (Dawkins, 1976/2006) much like a virus, and at any one time, many memes are constantly competing for a host’s attention (Shifman, 2014, p. 9). Some early examples of memes include fashion, musical tunes, and religious practices and beliefs. Dawkins also proposed the idea of “coadapted meme complexes,” which was subsequently shortened to memplexes, wherein groups of coadaptive memes replicate together. Concepts such as democracy are one such example of a memplex (ibid.), where ideas such as civil rights, free speech, and fair elections are rooted in separate memes, but together all reinforce and strengthen the notion of democracy.

2.1.2. Memes Vs. Virals

In a 1994 article for Wired magazine, Attorney Mike Godwin is credited with re-appropriating the term, meme, for the digital realm. His definition plays upon the viral component and states that a meme is an “idea that functions in a mind the same way a gene or virus functions in the body,” (Godwin, 1994).⁴ Following Godwin, other definitions of internet memes began to appear. Some were based solely on their appearance, such as American sociologist Chris Julien’s narrow definition as, “a recent internet phenomenon in which users create and share images that have text superimposed on the image” (2014, p.362). In a 2011 paper, Bauckhage describes memes as, “inside jokes or pieces of hip underground knowledge, that many people are in on.” (p.42). Ultimately, this lack of consensus and contestability in memes’ meaning has

⁴ Godwin’s op-ed piece focused on fighting the meme of comparing any event to the Holocaust (which in turn trivialized the actual horrors of the Holocaust), with the creation of a counter-meme, calling someone Hitler, which would effectively stop the conversation (ibid.). This experiment would later become a meme itself in the form of Godwin’s Law, an internet adage which states that, “[a]s an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Hitler approaches 1,” (Godwin, 1994).

led not only to their ambiguity, (Shifman, 2013) but a conceptual conflation with that of viral content.

While the co-emergence of these terms has led many to use them interchangeably, there are important distinctions between viral content and memes. An image, video or song that is repeatedly shared is said to have gone viral. Though most memes start out as such, not all viral content can be a meme. Shifman argues that virals are made of “a single cultural unit” while, memes are a “collection of texts,” (2014, p.55). She instead proposes for the distinction to lie on a “dynamic spectrum” of “different modes of engagement,” (ibid., p.59) from less engagement for virals, to more for memes. Most current scholars tend to agree that for something to be considered a meme, it must contain remnants of participation that extends further than sharing.

2.1.3. Internet Memes: Conceptual Hijacking in Participatory Culture

In the wake of our current understanding of the internet, user-generated content (UGC) has exploded and memes in particular, can be likened to time-stamped relics of this “participatory digital culture” (Wiggins and Bowers, 2015, p. 1886). Ryan Milner elaborates on this by characterizing memes as “multimodal artifacts remixed by countless participants, employing popular culture for public commentary.... Image memes, in their very form, house potential for populist expression and conversation,” (Milner, 2013). Dawkins himself has weighed in on the internet’s re-appropriation of the concept saying, “[a]n internet meme is a hijacking of the original idea... In the hijacked version, mutations are designed—not random—with the full knowledge of the person doing the mutating,” (Dawkins & Marshmallow Laser Feast, 2013).

In a seminal book dedicated to the phenomenon, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman defines memes as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users,” (2014, p.41). This view not only stresses the participatory nature of memes, but also the importance of “awareness” and how intertextuality is necessary for the creation and understanding of memes. As this is the most comprehensive definition of internet memes, it will be the formal definition this paper will employ.

2.1.4. Memes as Political Participation

The literature agrees that participation is an integral part of meme conceptualization. This, however, has led to a debate amongst some scholars whether *political memes*, can also function

as a form of political participation. Using the foundation of Shifman's *meme*, a *political meme* is defined as one that a) pushes a political message, agenda, or ideology b) which references a politician or political event.

Although traditional political participation has been limited to collective activities, campaigning, voting, and communicating with officials (Verba & Nie, 1972), the internet and social media has led to an "explosion of grassroots participation," (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneaux & Zheng, 2014, p. 613). Because memes represent a "viral communication of one's own political beliefs, attitudes and orientations," Ross & Rivers (2017) have argued for them to be added as new tools of political participation. They go on to add that memes act as "organic means through which citizens can respond in almost real time to contemporary political events with no fear of delay or censorship by mainstream media," (ibid., p.6). Their ability to circumvent traditional media gatekeepers makes political memes well suited for both democratic and illiberal societies, especially as their lack of authorship helps to, "facilitate and encourage anonymous participation" Vickery (2014, p.302). The use of memes in China as subversive messages (Mina, 2014; Chen, 2014), or as a means for mobilization on SNS during the Arab Spring (Smidi & Shahin, 2017; Zidjaly, 2017; Harlow 2013; Esposti, n.d) are well documented.

Many scholars have found that online participatory behavior leads to further pathways of further civil engagement online (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Cohen & Kahne, 2012), and sometimes offline (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). For some, online participatory activities have been criticized as *clicktivism* or *slacktivism* with "zero political or social impact" Morozov (2009). Utilizing a limited understanding of memes, Halubka derides sharing political memes as an "impulsive and disposable political gesture" (2014, p.129). However, since the American election and Brexit referendum of 2016, political memes in particular have been the subject of much debate, and while most scholars see memes as vehicles for online participatory behavior, the how, why, and extent that they are effective, remains to be established.

2.1.5. *Populist Memes*

Milner contends that because memes are in general a participatory medium, they are a "populist way to engage in public discourse" (2013, p.2360). In this way, populist memes exist as an extension of political memes and can be responsible for not only spreading populist messages, but for opening the discussion to diverse and nuanced opinions. Ross and Rivers have shown how political memes (specifically Trump memes during the election) act as a tool of *delegitimization*, a concept defined as "discursively creating and transmitting a negative image

of the Other” (Screti, 2013, p.212). As othering is an important aspect of populism, it stands to reason that memes would be an important medium in the creation of a populist narrative.

Opposite to that is the legitimization that comes from memes. As populists often undermine established institutions in their bids for election, legitimacy must be generated from sources other than the mainstream media, science, or the ballot box. The homespun quality of memes offers a source of legitimacy that looks as if it is coming from “the people,” even if they are made by ad agencies or tech-savvy campaign managers. Moreover, memes that are shared by the politicians themselves help to position them as being “distinct from the elite” through the use of language, gestures, slang, or fashion in order to appeal to a certain group of “the people” (Moffit & Tormey, 2013, p.391). Trump has demonstrated this numerous times both during his campaign and presidency; and with images such as Figure 1.’s Trump as Pepe meme, a crudely drawn image that appealed to the internet’s sensibilities, he has been able to not only frame his exteriority from career politicians, but appear more genuine in the process.

Memes are able to tap into other aspects of populism as well. They help remove the “gatekeepers,” and as such are imbued with an anti-elite and anti-establishment glow, as well as being reminiscent of a more direct type of democracy. Davison (2012) and Vickery (2014) have both found that the anonymity of memes allows them to be more offensive or inappropriate; this is a feature closely connected to what Moffit and Tormey call the “bad manners” of populists. This can be defined broadly as a disregard for ‘appropriate’ political behavior, to more “tabloid style” theatrics, and can include swearing, using slang, political incorrectness, and being overly “colorful” (2013, p. 392). These “bad manners” also act to set populists apart from the establishment, while connecting them to an audience eager to see such disruptive antics to the status quo.

Krämer (2017) argues, that especially for right-wing populists, short, ambiguous SNS’ posts and slogans are preferable, as they help to avoid criticism, as well as increase acceptability of extreme messaging by being strategically vague. This makes the “simple packaging” of memes the perfect cover for more extremist views, as well as a simple, direct way in which to espouse such views, also consistent with populist communication (Oliver & Rahn, 2016). Moreover, the oftentimes emotional language associated with populism pairs well with the imagery in memes, and pictures can add additional elements or even commentary to a message.

In conclusion, although social media and new mediums like memes did not create populism, this kind of technology has assuredly helped to “foster populist communication” (Engesser et al., 2017, p.1280) and created new opportunities for both populists and their supporters. The attention economy of the internet and many of the stylistic features of memes

sync-up with populist rhetoric and the direct communication of this medium helps to bypass gatekeepers. Moreover, populists can establish both legitimacy for themselves and help to delegitimize their opponents and enemies in a succinct, simple package. Despite all the overlap, populist memes are still an understudied area of political science, and it is the intention of this research to help bring more attention to this phenomenon.

2.2: Establishing “Meme Literacy”

2.2.1. Overview of internet memes⁵

Before moving to the analysis of specific memes, it is important to establish what Ryan Milner called, “meme literacy.” This section will serve as a brief overview to memetic styles, rules, and formats as well as some preliminary inferences highlighted through examples and empirical research. Because the human component is necessary to the creation and distribution of internet memes, some of the most popular memes are not only ones that are easy to copy, but are easy to manipulate as well. Typical internet memes are comprised of a picture background with text overlaid (image macros), though they can also take the form of videos, songs, phrases, viral Tweets or gifs.

2.2.2. Image Macros and Memetic Functions

Image macros include a wide-variety of memes that include user-manipulated text over a photo background. This meme format proliferated on the imageboard 4chan in the mid-2000s, but their wide-spread use was facilitated by meme-making websites such as memegenerator.net, quickmeme, and memebase. One genre that entered the mainstream was the popular LOLcats, which portrays funny photos of cats with text overlaid in bold, white, “**impact**” font. The text itself is a form of English slang called, “internet speak,” and often includes phonetic misspellings and contractions intermixed with intentionally incorrect grammar. Though these memes may seem silly and trivial, researcher Kate Miltner uncovered some surprisingly complex functions the images may serve. In a focus group study as to why users share and create LOLcats, the memes acted as conduits for group demarcation, bonding, and socializing (Miltner, 2011).

An outgrowth of image macros is called Object Labeling. Here memes take on a comic book-like effect with particular components labeled and relabeled in each iteration. Below, in Figure 2 is one format called “distracted boyfriend,” where a stock photo is labeled to depict

⁵ This section utilizes “internet memes” for the sake of clarity. Henceforth all memes mentioned fall under the umbrella term “internet memes” unless otherwise stated.

someone forsaking original intention for something new. Object Labeling not only adds a dynamic dimension to static images, but it highlights how meme formats can succinctly convey messages. This “simple packaging,” Shifman (2014, p.95) helps memetic content be understood quickly, and as such, encourages sharing.



Figure 2. Early meme formats. “I can has cheezburger” (I can has cheezburger, n.d.) and “distracted Dawkins.” (Haynes, 2019). Examples of the first LOLcats meme, and one of the first major internet virals that spawned countless more memes. LOLcats format uses its own syntax and grammar and has been used in bonding like-minded individuals. The second image is an example of a “distracted boyfriend” meme and was created by the author using memegenerator.com in a matter of minutes. It depicts how Richard Dawkins has come to view memes since he first developed the concept to now.

2.2.3. *Advice Animals and Memetic Rules*

An early format of image macros includes a broad genre called advice animals which typically consist of images of specific animals or people. The different accompanying text displays the character trait of each image, which can vary from “bad advice” to “sarcasm” to a “bait and switch” of racial stereotypes. Although, these templates are used with less frequency nowadays, components of advice animals often show up in current memes. For example, the character Scumbag Steve is an advice animal of a man wearing a brown, backwards hat, with text that implies his engagement in unethical or “scumbag-like” behavior. It may happen that this brown, backwards hat shows up in other images as a commentary on hypocrisy or wrong behavior. This was the case with the meme in Figure 3, which surfaced in The_Donald last spring. Here we can observe the “Scumbag Steve” hat photo-shopped onto the crowd of Hillary Clinton supporters⁶. By incorporating the hat onto the crowd of democrats, the maker of this meme is portraying the hypocrisy and flippancy of liberal support for gun control.

⁶ The Fast and the Furious program was a program initiated by Obama where the government sold guns to Mexican Drug lords in order to track where the weapons ended up.



Figure 3. Examples of Scumbag Steve. Scumbag Steve's "Grandpa gets surgery" (Grandpa gets surgery, 2011) and "Scumbag Clinton Supporters," (Scumbag Clinton supporters, 2018) are examples of how memetic elements, here the brown backwards cap, can be used in other meme formats to deepen meaning and add layers of jokes.

These callbacks to past memes showcase the way that users can manipulate the different memetic elements to add depth to a joke and emphasis to text. This leads to several observations. Firstly, there are rules that accompany memes, in design, format, text, and imagery. One must comprehend these rules and follow the standardized norms in order to create, share, and fully understand memes. Shifman argues that memes act as "building blocks of complex culture," (2014, p.32); not only does one need to understand culturally specific tropes, language, and references in order to "get" certain memes, but memes themselves add to the repertoire of modern pop culture. Secondly, memes do not exist in a vacuum, and intertextuality is vital to properly interpret memes and the elements contained therein.

2.2.4. Poe's Law: Irony and Intent in Memes

Memes are further complicated by the way that humor, sarcasm, and irony work in online spaces, and the difficulty to detect these elements over the internet. Some meme styles are intentionally confusing in this respect, and often their jokes lie in the subversion of a known meme format or their sweet, corny platitudes which seem ironic, but are not. This genre includes "wholesome memes" and Respect Women memes. Wholesome memes are wide variety of image macros that offer encouraging sentiments that would not look out of place on a motivational poster or greeting card. They are an outgrowth of advice animals, but instead of offering "bad" advice, they appear to be genuine and helpful. These cheery statements appear to be satire or a parody of an older relative's Facebook post, but the actual content is applied sincerely, which for online communities that are often steeped in toxicity, misogyny, and hatred, *is* the joke.

Respect Women was a short-lived genre that poked fun of the perpetual and “aggressive” wokeness⁷ of liberal spaces on the internet, with memes that demonstrated how much the creators respected women, which was often to an extreme degree. As Brian Feldman wrote for New York Magazine, “[t]rying to figure out where the earnestness ends and the referent irony begins is nearly impossible to suss out... At some point, this whole thing folds in on itself amid an internet culture where being genuine is a vulnerability and disrespecting women is enabled by large online platforms. It’s not wrong, but if you spend too much time patting yourself on the back (or setting bait for others to do so), readers’ bullshit sensors go off,” (Feldman, 2017). There is a difference between criticizing the sentiment and criticizing the actions of someone who holds that sentiment. Respect Women does the latter, but on the internet, it can be difficult to discern such intentions.

This problem of intent is summed up in an internet adage called Poe’s Law, which states that “[w]ithout a winking smiley or other blatant display of humour, it is impossible to create a parody of fundamentalism that someone won’t mistake for the real thing,” (Chivers, 2008). In 2017, Wired magazine proclaimed that Poe’s law was one of the most important current phenomena on the internet (Ellis, 2017), as the digitalization of mass media and news coverage has mingled with the hashtags, viral photos, and memes that dominate cyberspace. Twitter is used as politicians’ soapboxes, and the news is no longer filtered through a trusted editor and delivered by a journalist, but from person to person on Facebook. Image macros especially are a low-cost, malleable vehicle for advertising, news agencies, and propaganda, and this may lead to confusion and conflation as to memes’ actual purpose and origin. Take for example the meme in Figure 4 from the subreddit r/poeslawinaction, where users post examples of this concept. The absurdity of this meme’s messaging, that white people are an endangered species, is coupled with outdated slurs, “Oriental,” padded statistics “Arab + Other,” and shoddy science. It begs the question of whether or not this meme is meant in earnest or is satire of white supremacist ideology. This inability to discern parody from genuine sentiment is as Emma Grey Ellis (2017) concludes in the Wired article, the crux of Poe’s Law. The concept gives an “out” to extremist ideas, because those behind the memes can claim something is meant as a joke, even when spreading hate speech.

⁷ “To be woke” means to have an awareness of social issues and injustices.



Figure 4. Different examples of irony in memes. From left, “Kermit sharing his thoughts” is an example of a “wholesome meme” (Kermit sharing his thoughts, n.d.) which often subverts known meme formats with a positive message. “Respect women” (Respect women, 2017) pokes fun of woke culture though not at the concept. “Whites are endangered” (Whites are endangered, 2017) is an example of not being able to discern whether or not someone is being ironic on the internet, and as such showcases the idea of Poe’s Law.

2.2.5. *Pepe the Frog: Memes as Hate Speech*

This difficulty in understanding intent escalated in 2016 with Pepe the Frog, which went from beloved cartoon meme, to a symbol of hate speech recognized by the American Defamation League (ADL). The anthropomorphic frog was first featured in a comic in 2005 (Pepe the Frog, 2017) and was quickly adopted by underground internet culture. The imageboard, 4chan, often utilized Pepe’s image and catchphrase, “feels good man,” to garnish posts and show reaction. As the meme evolved, Pepe took on new emotions, including “Smug Pepe” “Angry Pepe” and the “sad frog meme.”

By 2015, the amphibian’s likeness went mainstream; it was one of the biggest memes on Tumblr. Because of this trend, some users on 4chan began to transform the meme in the hopes of reclaiming it from the “normies⁸.” Kate Miltner (2011) observed a similar sentiment amongst LOLcat sharers, who often felt anger or disappointment when “their” memes reached a certain level of popularity, akin to one’s favorite, underground band selling-out.

In the message board /r9k/ the concept of Rare Pepes was created, where new and unique Pepe memes were traded, bought and sold like collector cards⁹. As it so often happens with 4chan, some of these iterations were dark and purposively towed the line between irony and seriousness. Images began appearing on boards of Pepe dressed as an SS officer standing outside of a gas chamber or embellished with swastikas. Eventually these images made their way to other, darker corners on the internet, where instead of being seen as a “joke to trigger

⁸ Chan speak for normal, unthinking, offline masses.

⁹ Message board /r9k/ was a conceptually unique board on 4chan where an algorithm prohibited the use of repeat messages. As such, each post, comment, and picture, had to be completely new, hence how Rare Pepes got their start. 4chan also does not archive posts, so the rareness of each Pepe depended on individuals cataloguing the meme. This is actually quite a lucrative business as well, as the most expensive rare Pepe sold for \$38,500 (Klein, 2018).

the normies” they became propaganda for white nationalism and the newly emerging “alt-right” movement. Although this appropriation of Pepe was being used by a relatively small section of the web, they were rather vocal, and by the time the 2016 election was ramping up, the association between Pepe and the “alt-right” had been established¹⁰.

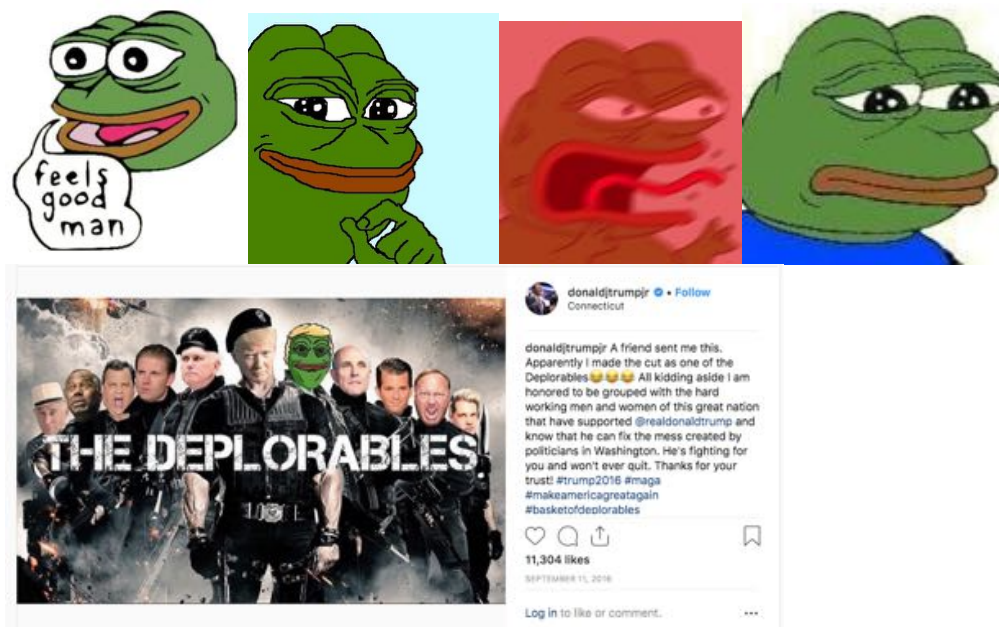


Figure 5. Different variations of Pepe, from left: Original Pepe (Feels good man, 2011), Smug Pepe (Smug frog, 2014) Angry Pepe (Angry frog, 2015), Sad Pepe (Sad frog, 2010). These images show the diversity of Pepe the frog, who was a very popular meme in many corners of the internet prior to the 2016 controversy. The bottom image, “The Deplorables.” (Trump [@donaldjtrumpjr], 2016) was posted by Donald Trump Jr.’s Instagram. Here Pepe is transformed into a Trump/Pepe hybrid and his association with the “alt-right” began to grow as he is shown alongside prominent “alt-right” figures such as Alex Jones and Milo Yiannopoulos.

In September of 2016 Donald Trump Jr. posted the above image on Instagram. A play on Hillary Clinton’s statement that Donald Trump and his supporters were a “basketful of deplorables,” those featured in the picture are notable members of the “alt-right,” Trump, and Trump as Pepe. Within days, Clinton offered an explainer on her website as to the meaning of

¹⁰ This association was strengthened by a May 2016 piece for the Daily Beast, where reporter Olivia Nuzzi interviewed two Twitter users who claimed that Pepe’s transformation from stoned frog to Nazi was carried out in a concentrated effort (Nuzzi, 2016). Described as a “prominent white supremacist” by the journalist, the interviewee reported that they were using Pepe as a vehicle for the “alt-right” to spread white nationalist rhetoric. Over the next few months, this is the story that was believed by mainstream media, and both NPR and Hillary Clinton’s campaign cited this article as a main source of Pepe’s involvement in these political movements. On Clinton’s campaign website she directly quoted Jared Taylor Swift, the “prominent white supremacist” in an explainer on Pepe which stated, “in recent months, Pepe’s been almost entirely co-opted by the white supremacists who call themselves the ‘alt-right.’ They’ve decided to take back Pepe by adding swastikas and other symbols of anti-Semitism and white supremacy,” (Neidig, 2016). In September 2016, The Daily Caller News Foundation published a response to Nuzzi’s piece, where we find out that Jared Taylor Swift is actually a 19-year-old who was trolling the journalist. He told that DCNF that he, “interspersed various nuggets of truth and exaggerated a lot of things, and sometimes outright lied — in the interest of making a journalist believe that online Trump supporters are largely a group of meme-jihadis who use a cartoon frog to push Nazi propaganda. Because this was funny to me,” (Bennett, 2016). Even if this was all a prank, the damage was done, and Pepe ended up on the ADL Hate Symbol database.

the cartoon frog, calling him a surrogate for the “alt-right.” Although Pepe’s association with this movement was tenuous, such a high-profile denouncement caused The American Defamation League (ADL) to jump in, and on September 27, 2016 labeled Pepe a hate symbol, alongside the swastika and the Confederate flag (Pepe the Frog, 2017).

Clinton’s implication that the Trump camp’s use of Pepe was a dog-whistle for racism was widely mocked, and perhaps because of this, Pepe and Trump’s association continued to grow, especially amongst Trump supporters. This connection further reinforced Pepe’s ties to the alt-right (Milner & Phillips, 2016), and the surrounding publicity of the whole affair has so tainted the frog’s image, that in 2017, the original artist officially killed Pepe in a web comic.

2.2.6. Conclusion

This section attempted to briefly describe some examples and trends in memetic styles from the early days of the internet until present. It is by no means definitive, but there are several conclusions that this preliminary overview seeks to highlight. Firstly, though memes may function as funny pictures with jokes, they represent pieces of culture. Memes contain their own language and rules; these norms are combined and shaped by intertextuality. As Miltner (2011) found in her study on LOLCats, they can also perform group functions and help to establish a sense of community. Secondly, the meme package helps to clearly and succinctly summarize a viewpoint, add commentary to an issue, and impart one’s opinion on a topic. Different memetic elements may be added to other formats however, and intertextuality is again an important element in “meme literacy.” The format of memes also lends itself for quick comprehension, sharing, and remixing. Thirdly, understanding the intent of memes and how people are using them is just as important as understanding the content within. Moreover, unless clearly stated or using a specific meme format, it is often-times difficult to know the intent of the meme’s message. This is especially true for Pepe the frog, who went from meme, to hate symbol, to political mascot. These diverse iterations demonstrate how memes can fulfill a number of functions, this section’s fourth point. The following section will further elaborate on the specific functions of political memes.

2.3: Political Memes

Memos exist as entertainment in a world where culture and politics are often intertwined and as the preceding section emphasized, many offer commentaries on the environment and climate in which they were created. This is important, because as Shifman points out, “humor can serve as a unique key for the understanding of social and cultural processes” (2007, p.187). Though

some see this mingling as a degradation of politics, others¹¹ see the potential for memes as digital activism (Zuckerman, 2008). Shifman goes on to identify three functions of political memes: a form of persuasion or political advocacy; a mode of grassroots action; or an expression and public discussion (2014, p.122-123). However, the recentness of Shifman's book is no match for the lightning speed in which the internet incorporates and modifies trends, and in addition to these functions, memes also serve as vehicles for propaganda, (including misinformation and disinformation), and as meme magic, a hybrid of multiple functions. These functions will be highlighted by recent examples and empirical research.

2.3.1. *Memes as Grassroots Action*

When considering the role of memes in grassroots activities, authors have explored how this medium has given way to new forms of *citizen empowerment* (Shifman, 2014). This is made possible by the speed and ease in which memetic slogans can spread through the coordinated actions of the citizenry. Looking at the Facebook memes during the 2016 election, Ramierz and Church (2019) found that social media allows users to assume the role of gatekeeper, and the UGC that emerged, was a way to join in a conversation usually regulated by traditional media gatekeepers. This has been especially useful when memes are used in conjunction with recent organizations, protests, and demonstrations.

Social media and new channels of communication have been instrumental in helping to expand citizens' participation in environmental and political organizations. Although most organizations still have more traditional offline networks, there are a number of instances of decentralized movements originating online that then make their way to the real world. Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) are two examples where coordinated demonstrations have been held even without a formal hierarchy within the organizations. These movements show that viral tweets or memes can be responsible for bringing together activists and raising awareness of certain issues. They do this by not only quickly spreading easily digestible slogans such as "we are the 99%," but as memes, these messages can become personalized in the process¹². The OWS movement especially, and the memes that were created in its wake have received considerable attention from scholars (Milner, 2013; Huntington, 2015; Shifman, 2013).

Of particular note is the Pepper Spray cop meme that came from an image at an OWS protest at the University of California. The original image shows a cop casually walking by a

¹¹ Namely, Zuckerman's Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism (Zuckerman, 2008).

¹² The "we are the 99%" meme is comprised of individuals relating their own stories of economic hardships.

group of sitting protesters and spraying them with pepper spray. This image was remixed in not only humorous ways, but in ways that showcases the brutality of such an action and its impingement on the American right free speech and protest. In this way, the meme takes on certain activist rhetoric (Huntington, 2015) and functions as protest art.



Figure 8. Pepper Spray Cop. From left, the original viral photo (Pepper spray cop, 2011), Pepper Spray cop spraying Mt. Rushmore (Pepper spraying Mt. Rushmore, 2011) and the US Constitution (Pepper spraying the Constitution, 2011). This is an example of a viral photo that became a political meme that functioned as a kind of protest art during OWS.

A lesser discussed example, the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests refer to the controversy and subsequent demonstrations against a natural gas pipeline in North Dakota. The construction of this would run across the Standing Rock Sioux tribe's reservation, threatening environmental destruction and drinking water access. In the autumn of 2016 protests erupted at Standing Rock with photos and memes making the front page of Reddit and disseminating over other social media platforms. On Twitter, users began tweeting the hashtag #NoDAPL in support of the Sioux tribe. When viral rumors arose that the local police were using Facebook statuses and locations to monitor protestors, over 130,000 people "checked in" at Standing Rock in order to confuse officials. These viral images and hashtags helped to call national attention to a localized event. Checking-in one's status on Facebook functioned not only as a sign of solidarity, but as some people believed, it was a way to protect the demonstrators from law enforcement, serving an additional layer of protest. In this way, writing "I stand with Standing Rock" and changing one's status is a different take on memetic ideas, where a viral slogan ropes also becomes a form of participation. It brought the individual into the event, even if they weren't anywhere near North Dakota. Not only does this personalize the meme, but it may help to reinforce the movement.

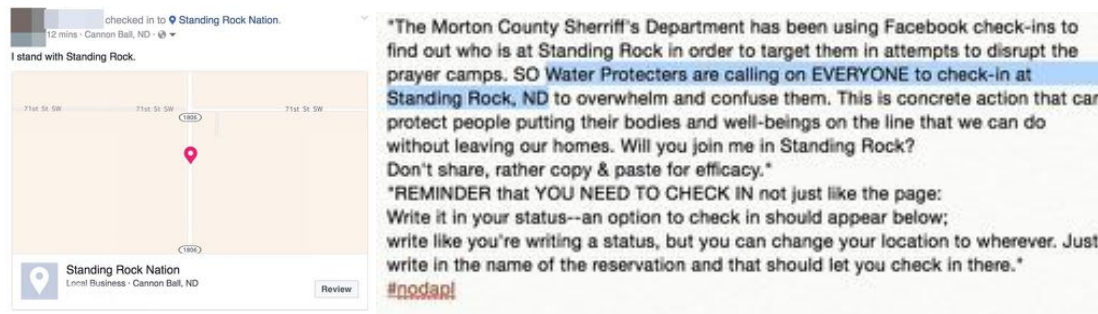


Figure 7. Viral Standing Rock memes. The first image is the viral “I stand with Standing Rock” Facebook location map (Standing Rock map location, 2016) and the second is the copy-pasted status (Standing Rock copy-paste, 2016). Social Media users used these to communicate that they were in South Dakota and as explained by the copy-pasted status, this would supposedly confuse authorities and help protesters.

In this context, memes can function as a vehicle for grassroots participation. Memes help to quickly disseminate messages and raise awareness for uprisings, movements, and different political actions. Campaigns that started on social media such as OWS, BLM, or the Dakota Pipeline protests have real world effects when protesters take to the street or help to change different policies. Sharing a meme helps to spread messages, while the act of making or participating in a political meme can also be seen as an act of protest itself.

2.3.2. *Memes as expression*

Heiskanen (2017), in examining the memes of the 2016 election, found that meme-ing enabled users’ agency in the political process and as such served as a way to critique the behavior and statements of the various candidates. She concludes that memes can thus provide a parallel discourse to the traditional narrative delivered by more mainstream sources. Milner argues that memes can be seen as a “populist way to engage with public discourse” (2013, p.2360) and as “polyvocal public conversation,” expands such discourse by opening up new channels for citizen engagement. Several authors (Davison, 2012; Vickery, 2014) contend that anonymity may actually encourage such engagement, as it is a shield for controversial or unpopular opinions (Rivers & Ross, 2017). Moreover, because memes often utilize humor within their messaging, this feature can help “soften” controversial or offensive opinions. Humorous political memes were a popular vehicle for expression in the 2016 presidential election. Particularly because of the unfavourability amongst both top candidates, many memes were created to delegitimize or call into question personal and political behaviors, platforms, and policies.

Memes can be used not only to broadcast the views of the common man, but they can further extend the voice of people already in power. Twitter and other types of social media have become extremely popular amongst politicians and celebrities in the past decade, and one

especially prevalent example of both, is Donald J. Trump's Twitter account. This platform has allowed for POTUS to dispense information directly to the people avoiding the MSM, and during the campaign it was a way reach people through memes. Although Trump has dabbled in name-calling and open feuds on Twitter, memes have been a provocation tool with less direct involvement. This medium is a way to criticize a political opponent without saying so point-blank. Moreover, because memes were not until very recently subjected to fact-checking, one had the freedom to create or post memes and not be held accountable for the message, or if a meme was questioned, Poe's Law and ignorance could also aid in avoiding any fallout.

This was the case with a Clinton meme tweeted by Trump in the summer of 2016. The first image below shows the politician over a background of money and a six-pointed star, proclaiming she's the most corrupt candidate ever. Shortly after Trump posted this, people took offence at the anti-Semitic implications that the star represented, especially in conjunction with the background of money. Trump retweeted the second meme shortly afterward, changing the star to a circle. Although he has denied that the star was in reference to Jewish people, calling it instead a "sheriff's" badge, it is not hard to see how one could interpret this meme as an attempt to link Clinton to corruption and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.



Figure 8. "Crooked Hillary – Makes History!" Trump's Tweet before and after. The original meme (Mikkelson, 2016) contained what appears to be a Star of David, while the second image changes it to a circle (realdonaldtrump, 2016). These images show how memes can be used as expression, even by politicians.

Memes can be used to express opinions about politics from people in and out of the political arena. The medium is often used by the populace as a means of expression not limited by traditional gatekeepers and their anonymous nature can allow them to express unpopular and even blatantly false opinions. Furthermore, memes are not usually subjected to the same amount of fact-checking as other media, while also benefitting from the internet's difficulty in discerning jokes from slander. As demonstrated by the Tweet from Trump, a memetic image can work as a buffer in protecting the poster, in this case a presidential candidate, while accusing

his opponent of corruption (and possibly anti-Semitic stereotyping). In allowing the memes to “do the talking” the risk of negative repercussions is lowered, and the sphere of plausible deniability is widened.

2.3.3. Memes as Political Advocacy

The 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama is considered to be one of the first examples of extensive digital campaigning with its use of memetic and viral marketing techniques. Obama’s famous “Hope” poster was created by artist Shepard Fairey, and quickly went viral before spawning different variations. Moreover, many videos and clips of the young senator posted on Youtube helped to connect him to a broader, underexplored audience as did a strong social media campaign. Since that time, memes have been used in most recent elections, both by the public and politicians. And although Obama has been labeled a “memecrat” (Rodríguez, 2013) for his use of memes, 2016’s elections and their “meme warfare” have forever changed how future elections will be run. This has been the case not only in the US, but the UK’s Brexit campaign, as well as alt-right mobilization in Sweden (Davey, 2018) and Germany has been exacerbated recently by memes and social media.

In the leadup to 2016’s Brexit vote, UK’s official Leave campaign paid more than £2.7 million (Lomas, 2018) to advertising companies, to create images for their cause, and to utilize micro-targeting techniques so that they would show up to specific demographics on Facebook. The images were not only made to appear as memes, but they were programmed to show up in a person’s newsfeed, mimicking organic content. Some only had a small indication that they were for Brexit, with a “Vote Leave” marker in the corner, others had none at all.

The resulting images used the “simple packaging” of memes while often exhibiting blatantly xenophobic and untruthful messaging. One ad features an image of Turkey with a sweeping arrow towards the UK. It seems to indicate that the entire population will move to the UK once Turkey joins the EU. Another ad shows an exasperated NHS worker with text about several South Eastern European countries joining the EU, playing off the idea that migrants are overwhelming NHS and more EU countries will contribute to more pressure on the system. These ads are only a sample of other adverts that were viewed millions of times in the lead-up to the vote (Griffin, 2018) and many have linked the ads to the success of Leave’s campaign. These ads show the advertisers see the importance of the meme format as well as the effectiveness of using social media to spread specific messages.

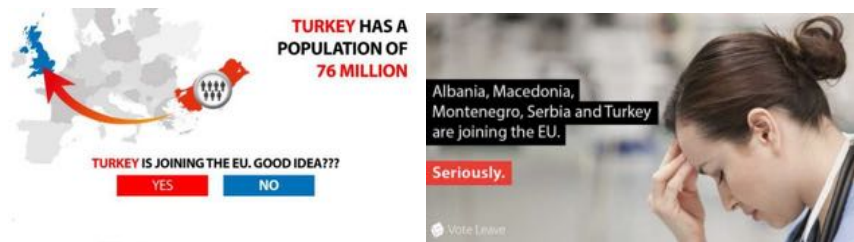


Figure 9. Brexit memetic ads. “Turkey is joining the EU” (Turkey is joining the EU, 2018) and “Balkan countries are joining the EU,” (Balkan countries are joining the EU, 2018). Memetic ads that were used on social media mimicking actual memes for Brexit’s Vote Leave campaign.

Social media campaigns and memes have prominently gone hand-in-hand with politics since the 2008 election. Not only are memes a fast and (Brexit campaign aside) low-cost way to disseminate information, studies have shown that they are also uniquely persuasive, especially when they appear to be organically shared through networks. Several scholars, dating back to the 1950s have written of how influential friends, relatives, and neighbors can be compared to mass media (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955; McClain, 2017). What the Brexit campaign shows is that advertisers see the “meme package” as a profitable design worthy of copying, especially in light of the campaign’s success. And although Facebook and SNS have gone to great lengths in limiting these micro-targeting techniques, the pervasiveness of memes in most recent political campaigns points to their effectiveness and staying-power for future elections.

2.3.4. *Memes as Propaganda*

Propaganda can be conceived of as a deliberate attempt to persuade or change another’s actions or thinking, which often utilizes negative or dishonest tactics (Jowett and O’Donnell, 2006, p.7). Though this concept is not necessarily new, it has been receiving more press recently with an abundance of certain “meme magnets” (Wiggins, 2014) or events that have generated a lot of memes. One such event was the 2016 presidential election, which has resulted in accusations of Russian meddling in American politics with the use of “troll factories” and one in particular, the Internet Research Agency (IRA). The IRA was a St. Petersburg based company that ran round-the-clock operations of “information warfare” that mostly concentrated on memes, Tweets, YouTube videos, and Instagram posts to American audiences.

In a 2018 report published by New Knowledge, it found that in the 3 years the IRA was operating (they begin posting memes as early as 2014) there were more than 61,000 posts on Facebook and 81 pages, 10 million Tweets, and 116,000 Instagram posts on 133 accounts (Lapowsky, 2018). The topics ranged from African American issues and BLM, to the LGBTQ community, gun rights, Pro-Trump/anti-Clinton support, and Christian and Muslim culture. The report suggests that the memes were chosen to “reinforce tribalism within each targeted

community,” (DiResta et al., 2018, p.12). Furthermore, these memes were able to spread misinformation and disinformation while eroding institutional and media trust, dispensing conspiracy theories, and piggy backing on divisive issues. Other actions included organizing political rallies (where apparently people actually showed up) as well as devising different approaches to voter suppression, particularly in Black voters (ibid.). These tactics ranged from promoting third party candidates, to reinforcing “your vote doesn’t matter,” to misinformative Tweets about voting via text or voting rules.

Misinformation about voting was not limited to Russians during the 2016 election, however. This kind of meme propaganda began circulating on 4chan and the_Donald both before the 2016 election and the 2018 midterms. It focused on creating memes which look like official democratic campaign posters and infusing them with messages meant to inhibit voting. These include memes which promoted voting for Hillary Clinton via text or hashtags. When some of these were reposted on Twitter, some users were called out for purposively misleading voters in an attempt at disenfranchisement. Though, some were deleted by the platforms, many users defended the meme as simply a joke. Whatever the case, other versions of this format resurfaced again on The_Donald during the 2018 midterms, demonstrating the success of this format and continual use. Examples are shown in Figure 10.



Figure 10. “Vote from Home” propaganda. Post “Hillary” (Post “Hillary”, 2016), Save time avoid the line (Save time avoid the line, 2016), and Vote online (Vote online, 2016) are examples of memes claiming democrats could vote for Clinton at home, via text or online. These memes were purposively made to look official and can be considered propaganda.

When considering memes as propaganda many terrifying implications arise. Foreign agents spent a lot of time and resources in preparing material and engaging with SNS’ audiences in an attempt to dissuade, stoke resentment, and propagate specific agendas to Americans. It is unclear how much of an impact the memes of the IRA had on the presidential election; whether or not these images were able to sway voters cannot be assessed. However, it is clear that these memes reinforce certain narratives and the amount of engagement they accrued shows that they

knew their targets as well as how to use memetic formats. Additionally, some of the tactics of voter disenfranchisement were used by other outlets as well, meaning that memes as propaganda are a spreading trend and one that internet users must be mindful of.

2.3.5. *“Meme Magic”*

Meme magic is an idea whereby memes have the ability to transcend beyond the internet to transpire in the real world. As a function of political memes, the concept first rose to prominence in connection to Donald Trump’s candidacy, whose attention-grabbing theatrics and “troll” like behavior towards the other candidates, did not go unnoticed by certain segments of cyberspace. Moreover, his anti-establishment stance helped win over followers in what had previously been more left-leaning spaces; Trump became the unofficial candidate of message boards like 4chan, alternative “news” sources, and a growing subreddit began to gain ground.

Since then and on those spaces, meme magic has been seen as a concentrated way to use memetic ideas and themes enough that they are able to manifest offline. The term gained more attention as Trump began incorporating memetic sayings from the internet, such as “Trump Train” in his political rallies, or when he himself posted memes others made of him, including the Trump as Pepe image in Figure 1. At the same time, different alt-right figures began speaking out about how influential their “shitposting” (Collins & Resnick, 2016) machines were or how “meme magic is real” (Yiannopoulos, 2016). Meme researchers Ryan Milner and Whitney Phillips (2016) speculated that it wasn’t so much the memes that helped Trump’s campaign, but the memetic messages behind the images. Trump’s catchphrases - “build the wall,” “lock her up,” and “drain the swamp,” and his unconcealed stance on different races – Mexicans are “bad hombres,” religions – Muslim entry poses a security threat, and women – “grab them by the pussy,” were able to resonate with voters better than a list of policy demands. These ideas, which are themselves memes, coupled with visceral images and oftentimes (politically incorrect) humor, are the real source of Trump’s meme magic.

Though not “meme magic” in the strictest sense, there has been limited scientific research into real-world effects of memes, as well as meme-originating events which seeped into the news headlines: the most well-known of which was a late 2017 trend of teenagers ingesting Tide Pods. What started as a meme likening the laundry detergent tablets to candy, and photoshopped images of people pretending to eat them, became a viral trend by the end of the year, with videos of individuals actually biting into Tide Pods. This trend became so popular that schools and health organizations had to issue what should have been obvious warnings to not eat plastic tablets made of soap. In February of 2018, law makers in New York even

proposed a bill to make the pods less colorful and individually wrapped, so as to slow down consumption¹³ (Ducharme, 2018). The Tide Pod challenge demonstrates the ability for memes to manifest offline, and even going so far as to affect public policy.



Figure 11. Tide Pod Memes. Breakfast for champions meme (Breakfast for champions, 2017) depicting Tide Pods as food and “Don’t eat laundry pods” warning meme from the USCPSC (USCPSC, 2018). The Tweet shows the concept of “meme magic” whereby a meme occurs outside of the digital realm.

Similarly, in a 2018 preliminary study on the effects of health memes on teenagers in the UK, researchers from Loughborough University concluded that due to the frequency and lack of emotional response whilst sharing memes, the messages contained within have the ability to “normalize undesirable behaviors,” (Casey et al., 2018, p.4). Furthermore, these provisional findings suggested that the participants may be internalizing negative health practices. Although more research needs to be done to definitively link memes with offline behaviors, this is a solid base for similar studies.

By promoting and “normalizing undesirable behaviors” the impact of memes extends further than the online space it is shared and viewed. It is not in the purview of this paper to conclude whether the meme warfare of 2016 was responsible for Donald Trump’s victory, nor is it able to measure the impact of “meme magic.” These examples, however, paint a picture of the influence that memes have, and how this concept may actually transpire. Meme magic is important in understanding how those who create and share memes, would see this idea as a way to legitimize their behavior.

2.3.6. Conclusion

Political memes have been found to perform various functions. They can quickly and succinctly dispense information and help to broaden the political conversation. This medium has been responsible for spreading protest movements, while also celebrating or critiquing the actions of

¹³ In reality only a handful of the 10,000 reported poisonings by Tide Pod were individuals over the age of 5, though the number of intentional misuse (86 in 2018) was higher than in previous years (39 in 2016, 53 in 2017), (Ducharme, 2018).

those involved. Memes are used by both politicians and the populace alike in the distribution of information, both true and verifiably false. However, because they are not subjected to the same routes of fact-checking as traditional media, their anonymity, and the existence of Poe's Law, memes not only offer a buffer for the maker, but for the poster as well. Meme-ing events into existence is another recent phenomenon which may prove more viable in the years to come, especially as a means to legitimize or justify certain meme behavior. With the advent of "troll farms" and "meme warfare" memes have become a fixture in political movements and for the moment are undeniably tied to politics.

Chapter 3: Research Statement, Design, and Methodology

3.1: Research Statement

The research presented herein is interested in ascribing meaning to the content of user-generated populist political memes in relation to the ideology of the supporters of Donald Trump. More specifically, how does the content of the memes express the ideology of a Trump-based populism? What themes can be derived from the memes, that allow for an endogenous definition of this kind of populism? By analyzing the memes which users create, post and share in The_Donald we can begin to piece together not only how proponents of a Trump-based populism see themselves and the general will, but how they view “others,” their enemies and the elites. This ideological construction is useful when trying to understand elements of populism in the digital age, as well as a record of an emerging and misunderstood political phenomenon. This is a bottom-up approach to analyzing how features of populism are depicted and promoted by the *populi*.

The framework for this research comes from Engesser et al. who argue that SNS create more online opportunity structures which in turn tends to “foster populist communication” (2017, p.1280). The indicators around which the research questions are based, come from how, the same authors, categorized manifestations of populism. Table 1 is based on the research of Engesser et al. (ibid., p.1282) and shows the specific indicators for each approach to populism as well as what each is concerned with.

Table 1. Populist communication logic. Source: Engesser et al. 2017., p.1282, table by author.

| Populist communication logic | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Content | <i>Ideology</i> | Popular sovereignty People-centrism Anti-elitism Exclusion of ‘others’ |
| Messenger | <i>Actors</i> | (Charismatic) leaders |
| Form | <i>Style</i> | Simplification Emotionalization Negativity |
| Motives and Aims | <i>Strategy</i> | Power Legitimacy mobilization |

As this paper is interested in the content of Trump based populism, the research questions are based off the indicators of ideology listed in the above table; these *include popular sovereignty, people-centrism, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of ‘others.’* The aim is to find out *what* are the components of this specific populist ideology *through how* they are depicted within the memes.

Research questions:

RQ1: How are the perceived ‘others’ depicted and excluded through memes?

RQ2: How is the 'general will' of the 'people' depicted in memes?

RQ3: How are the 'people' depicted in memes?

RQ4: How are the 'elites' portrayed through memes?

3.2: Methodology

This research offers an endogenous approach towards defining a Trump based populism, through user-generated memes. It can be classified as a case study of populist communication logic achieved through a large-n sample of memes. Previous research into political memes has relied heavily on quantitative analysis (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019) for a visual medium that requires intertextuality. This research seeks to offer an alternative to former meme research by utilizing qualitative methods to take into consideration the images, text, and the memes' relationship to other memes.

This paper will operate through qualitative content analysis (QCA) in its examination and analysis of memes containing features of populist communication logic. Such research allows for richer, more in-depth results and better tools for tackling complex arrays of data. QCA is a systemic approach to organizing data through categorization and coding and is suitable for a wide range of written and visual materials (Schreier, 2012). Through description and "subjective interpretation" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), meaning can be ascribed to the data in relation to the original research questions. Moreover, it is especially useful when considering latent and context-specific data (ibid.). Utilizing an inductive approach, the raw data (memes) will be analyzed based upon categories that emerge during the investigation. In this way, the user-generated memes will define specific attributes of a Trump-based populism, directly from the *populi* in a naturalistic and unobtrusive way (Cho & Lee, 2014).

3.2.1. Overview of the case

The memes used in this research all come from the online community, The_Donald, a subreddit on the website Reddit, which is an online news aggregate and discussion board of different communities. The_Donald, was born shortly after Trump's announcement to run for president in 2015 and steadily grew in followers since then. A self-described, "never-ending [Trump] rally," (The_Donald, 2019) the subreddit was especially vocal during the campaign and election in creating Trump content and promoting it by "up-voting" so it would appear on the front page of Reddit. In doing so, Trump-based memes and news overtook the homepage of one of the most heavily trafficked websites in the world, helping to spread its message. A qualitative study by Zannettou et al. (2018) has helped prove its influence on news content on other SNS and another report by Emerging Technology from the arXiv, (2018) has shown that The_Donald

“is the most efficient community in pushing memes to both fringe and mainstream Web communities.”

The_Donald boasts a community of more than 775,000 users (as of September 2019) and is active in posting memes and content on a daily basis. Moreover, during the campaign, Brad Parscale, Trump’s Digital Director reportedly visited the site “daily” (parscale, 2016) while an additional war room was set up in Trump Towers to monitor the subreddit (Schreckinger, 2017) for news. The community has been and continues to be an integral part in both the creation and dissemination of pro-Trump memes, and as such will be focal point of this research.

3.2.2. *Time Period*

Memes were collected from The_Donald from June 1, 2019 – August 31, 2019, but the search was widened to include memes that were posted up to one year prior. However, due to search limitations on Reddit, this one-year prior may extend to anytime in 2018. An additional period of immersion that totaled one year preceded the actual research term. This was to give the researcher ample time to become acquainted with the style, semantics, trends, and memetic rules. The time period of the study was selected for three reasons: *longer news cycle*, *non-campaigning window*, and *researcher constraints*. Firstly, posts on The_Donald are very reliant on the news cycle and a longer time span would allow for more meme diversity. For example, June is International Pride Month, which celebrates the LGBTQ+ community. This was a controversial topic on the subreddit, and if the time of meme culling was shorter, it would be overly represented. Secondly, the early half of 2019 is a time before the 2020 campaign is in full force. Although there have been some announcements for opposing candidates, this is still a window of politics as-is, and not all-out campaigning. Thirdly, researcher constraints prohibit a longer, more comprehensive analysis of more memes. Large amounts of qualitative data have been aptly described as an “attractive nuisance” (Miles, 1979), for the amount of material it produces. A limited time period ensures that the sole researcher and author of this paper was not bogged down by an overabundance of data, and that the results could be fully analyzed and in-depth.

3.2.3. *Corpus Construction*

Because this research is based on the thematic content of memes, a randomly selected amount would not be appropriate for analysis, nor could the sampled number of memes be decided *a priori*. Instead, a mixed-methods approach was utilized; this consisted of *cyclical corpus*

building, *purposive sampling*, and *snowball sampling*. Cyclical corpus building gives qualitative research a systematic approach, as well as a standardized framework that alleviates some of the arbitrariness in the selection process (Bauer & Aarts, 2000, p.29).

The memes were collected, categorized, and evaluated until saturation, that is until the addition of new data failed to produce new results (*ibid.*, p.34). Additionally, the process was careful in adhering to a framework set out by Barthes (1967, p.95) wherein the corpus design reflects elements of *relevance*, *homogeneity*, and *synchronicity*. Relevance here means that materials are relevant and from *one point of view*, (Bauer & Aarts, 2000, p.31). All the memes in this analysis represent a pro-Trump standpoint and come from the same location. Homogeneity reflects that the corpus is comprised of the same kind of material, this was achieved by limiting the data set to specific meme styles that will be outlined further below. Finally, synchronicity calls for the corpus to be taken from the same time period; this has already been addressed.

Purposive sampling was utilized with certain keywords related to the memes, until doing so found additional keywords, wherein snowball sampling was used. Although non-probability sampling techniques are criticized for not being representative of the population, statistically generalizable memes are not the aim of this study. Moreover, this sampling strategy is one of the most-widely used in qualitative research (Elo et al., 2014) and because the focus of this study are specific kinds of memes, purposive sampling is preferred to random sampling. Purposive sampling of this kind also helps replicability of the research, as memes were limited to those that were found only through direct searching.

The initial keywords are related to each research question and were determined after a prolonged engagement (one year) with the site. As more themes began to emerge, other categories of search terms developed, to what is akin to a snowball sample. Moreover, the top posts from each week during the study were analyzed, for additional themes and subsequent keywords. The keywords were compiled into a list from February-June 2019, and from June-July, the first cycle of memes was collected according to the keywords. After these initial memes were coded, new keywords began to emerge, which were compiled during July-August 2019, leading to a second period of collection and subsequent coding in August 2019. At this time, the research had reached saturation and the process of collection stopped. In August and September 2019, the codes were entered into matrices and the abstraction process began.

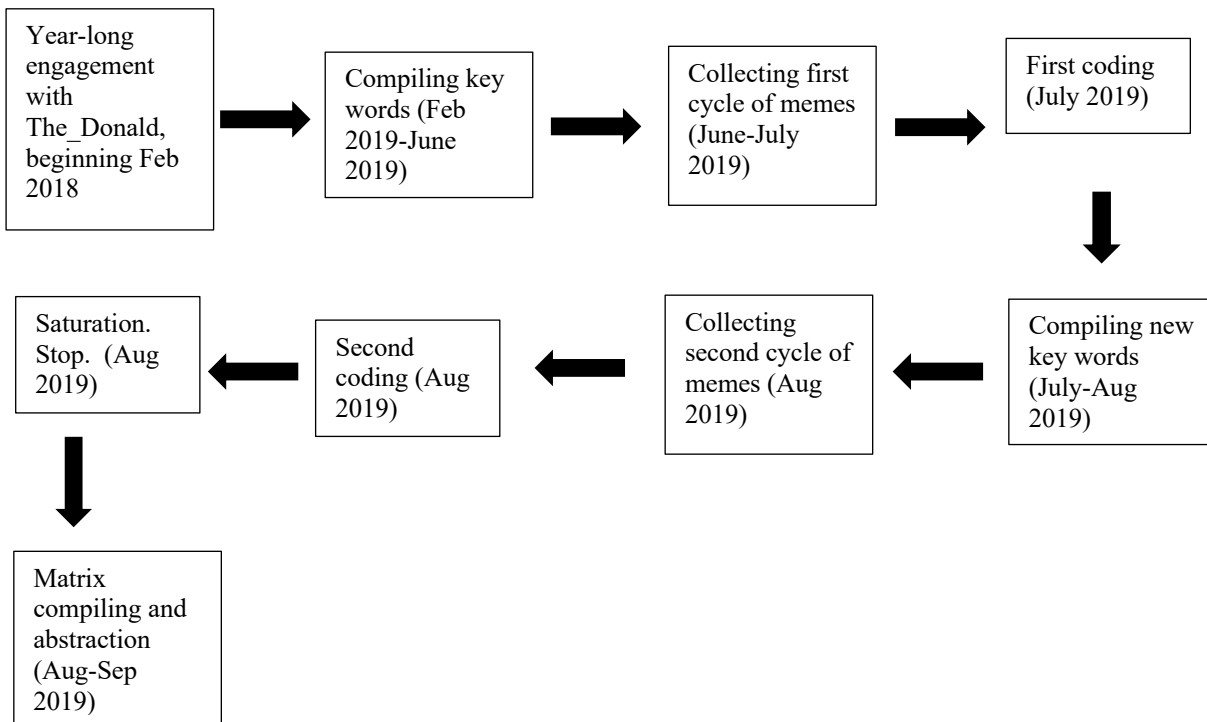


Figure 12. Research design process. By author.

3.2.4. Meme parameters

The data corpus for this study consists of 150-200+ different memes for each research question, coming to a total of 931 memes. These can be accessed from a shared Google Folder, here: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1GTfBmsQ7xDn7w72BiCKRNJ9xjVr9febM>. To ensure validity, those chosen for analysis were done so based on the thematic relevance of the research questions, an approach rooted empirically in Sparkes-Vian's (2018) research of British political memes.

The memes were chosen based on Shifman's definition of, "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users," (2014, p.41). The images that were selected all contained text and adhered to meme formats, wherein features of participation or specific memetic ideas were utilized. Original photographs, comics, and screenshot news headlines were included, but only if the image had become part of the meme universe or added text in the headline provided commentary. The headline text has become a common method on Reddit for inserting commentary without changing the image, and it is securely within the realm of memes. The

occasional gif meme was chosen if the screenshot version replicated the author's intent. Otherwise, only image memes were collected, no videos. Stand-alone photos, comics, and Tweets with no additional commentary text were not considered, nor were memes that appeared in the comments.

3.2.5. Keywords

The keywords were chosen for each of the two rounds of searches. The first round of keywords was chosen after a year-long engagement with the subtleties of the subreddit and after various trials to see what would yield the most results. After the first round coding was completed, new keywords began to emerge, which were then compiled and used for the second round of searches. All the keywords have been compiled into four tables (Tables 4-7) and are located in Appendix I.

In addition to the keywords that were searched for, is an aspect specific to Reddit, called flair. It is a label that can be applied to posts giving further context to the nature of the post's content. This can be searched for on Reddit the same way that keywords are searched for, and because The_Donald makes much use of this, it was utilized and included in the keyword chart.



Figure 13. Examples of different flairs used on The_Donald (The_Donald, 2019).

Due to the nature of the site and an overlap in concepts, it may have happened that the same keywords were used in two or more of the main groups, this was especially true for the flair, as they are often used broadly. In this case, the meme was coded into its appropriate main group, based on the researcher's judgement and the keywords were recorded into both groups' tables. There was significant overlap between the enemies and the elite at times, so it was ultimately decided to put "democrats" in general in RQ1's group, and "the democratic party" for RQ4. Also, those who have become stand-ins for the democratic party (the Obamas, the Clintons, Joe Biden) were coded into RQ4. Although the media is also derided as "the enemy of the people" this was kept to RQ4, except for two memes which outwardly portray the MSM as an enemy.

3.2.6. Coding

As the collection of memes began to grow, they were organized into categories and subsequent codes and sub-codes around their thematic content. This thematic content was dependent upon both the image and text, and in contrast to previous studies which merely took note of surface

measurements such as expressions and negativity/positivity (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019) this research also utilized the latent content into the codes.

It may have happened that certain memes could fit equally amongst two main groups. Such was the case with the meme in Figure 14, which juxtaposes representations of Trump supporters with that of Bernie Sanders supporters, allowing this meme to be coded into either the “enemies” group or “the people.” In this case, the researcher’s subjectivity came into play and this meme was coded into the “hard working” code in RQ3’s main group, “the people.” This was due to an already developing code within this group dedicated to the “hard working” feature of “the people.” This helped flesh out a developing code and prevented an under-developed code to appear. Moreover, care was taken to ensure that all categories were mutually exclusive per RQ, so no overlap occurred in themes (one category per one overarching theme, which sometimes contained several subthemes). The coding matrices are found in Appendix II (Tables 8-11).



Figure 14. “Trump’s base vs. Bernie’s base” (Trump’s base vs. Bernie’s base, 2019) is an example of a meme that could be coded into two groups. This one was coded under RQ3

3.2.7. *Meme poster’s data*

Most of the memes were saved as screenshots with the name of the individual who posted the meme in The_Donald, though because of the way some of the memes were hosted on outside websites, this could not always be done, and some memes were saved without the user’s information. Located in Appendix III are four tables (Tables 12-15) that contain the names of all the users whose memes are used in this research. From the 931 memes, user information is missing on 35 (attempts to track them down failed and they may have been deleted) and five are purposively obscured by the subreddit (propaganda memes that were deleted by Reddit). Taking away these numbers and those who posted more than one meme, there is a total of 656 users who posted memes, 28 of whom posted more than one meme used in this research. No attempts were made to vary the users and memes were chosen strictly upon thematic content. These posters are cited as the “author” of the meme within the “Meme Research Reference” section.

3.2.8. Analysis

The goal of QCA is to “systematically describe the meaning” (Schreier, 2012, p.3) of material in relation to specific research aims. As such, this approach was selected for this analysis because of the complex array of research questions and the interpretive nature of the results which were in line with the goals of QCA. The research focus intends to classify and give meaning to the thematic elements in the memes, while making connections to the content portion of Engesser et al.’s (2017) populist communication logic. Not only is this approach useful in limiting data to that which is relevant to the research question (ibid., p.7), it is flexible in allowing for either inductive or deductive processes.

Inductive content analysis is preferred when there is not enough pre-existing knowledge about a phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p.109). As this was the first study of its kind, memes were grouped together from a bottom-up approach, but through pre-selected keywords. After initial observation of the subreddit, keywords (search terms) were chosen for each main group. These main groups were related to the content of each research question, and could be considered the indicators (others, elites, the people, popular sovereignty). The coding was carried out by organizing the memes into different mutually exclusive categories, based on similarities in content, (the “how” i.e. how are the keywords portrayed?) and subsequent codes and sub-codes (the “through this” i.e. through this idea the keywords are expressed). Lastly, the categories and codes were abstracted into overarching themes and smaller subthemes (the “what,” i.e. what is the underlying idea?) through which the results were delivered. It is imperative to note that although the analysis may comment on what the memes are doing, this is for contextual purposes only, and the “how” or “why” of the memes were not specifically coded, only the “what.” It is often necessary to understand why a meme shows specific images to also understand what it is trying to convey. Figure 15 shows some partial results of RQ1 using the coding system. This coding scheme comes from Elo and Kyngäs (2008) and is rooted in a number of other works (McCain, 1988; Burnard, 1991; Cavanagh, 1997; Dey, 1993). Reliability and validity were established by activities proposed by (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) such as prolonged immersion and engagement, persistent observation, and revision to initial coding and categorization. Transparency for the research is achieved by the online collection of memes hosted here: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1GTfBmsQ7xDn7w72BiCKRNJ9xjVr9febM>.

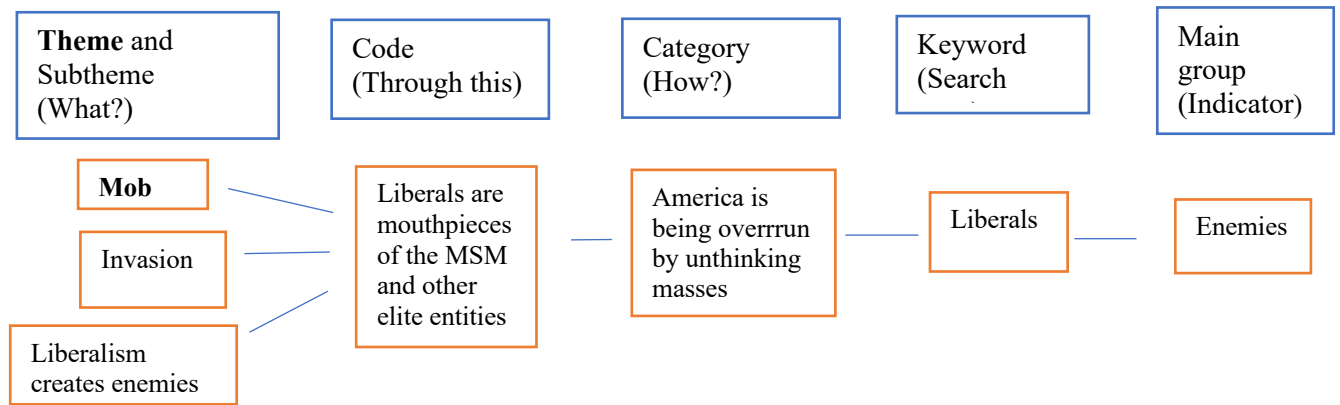


Figure 15. Coding system and their meanings. By author.

3.2.9. Limitations

Though care was taken to approach this research as methodically as possible, there are of course several key objections that may be raised that may potentially limit the validity of this paper's findings. This section will attempt to counter and quell potential objections. Firstly, it must be noted that this is not a representation of all pro-Trump memes, and there are undoubtedly other contexts and avenues through which the memes may disseminate. However, The_Donald represents the largest, most transparently diverse, and most consistent community of meme makers. Over 700,000 people create, comment, and post memes on a daily basis, and unlike 4chan, the users are not completely anonymous. This means it is possible to see if the memes are posted by the same username, or multiple ones, adding an additional dimension of accountability.

Secondly, there is a risk that these memes are not coming from actual Trump supporters, but from bots or troll farms. As recently as September 2018, there were reports of the subreddit being infiltrated and Reddit administrators have in the past frozen more than 900 accounts linked to Russia's IRA, a notorious troll farm that operated during the election (Brandom, 2018). This problem is the current reality and an unavoidable trend that is not limited to The_Donald, or even to Reddit. In what is perhaps a hopeful outlook, Reddit administrators do not seem to take this issue lightly, especially as The_Donald is rather notorious. Not only do

news reports help keep check, other users on Reddit frequently report troll farm behavior, as evidenced by multiple discussions of the topic.

Another limitation comes from the fact that the memes were found only through keywords. This means many memes could have been overlooked had users not utilized said keywords into either the heading or within the comments. This was done for the sake of replicability, as another researcher should get similar search results when entering these keywords. This trade-off was hopefully countered by not only the vast number of keywords, but also the sheer number of memes, resulting in a rich data set.

Lastly a major limitation occurred in the middle of the research cycle. This was the “quarantining” of The_Donald from the rest of Reddit. This quarantine sets certain restrictions upon the subreddit, specifically limiting its posts from reaching the front page of Reddit (which is the self-described “front page of the internet”) and displaying a pop-up warning dissuading individuals from entering. Resulting from a number of posts which threatened violence towards authorities in Oregon in June 2019, (Reddit places pro-Donald-Trump forum in quarantine, 2019) the quarantine is a step towards a ban, and as such there are certain precautions that now must be upheld on the subreddit so as to not secure a heftier punishment. Anecdotally, language is more guarded and more violent comments and posts are deleted more quickly, though this is impossible to prove, nor is this within the purview of this research to showcase. What should be noted however, is how this quarantine affected these results, if at all. The quarantine has not limited the number of memes or users (as of August 2019, there were over 750,000 members, 50,000 more than in February 2019). Moreover, different aspects of the memes may now have been highlighted thanks to the quarantine, especially in the board’s use of more subliminal headlines and posts.

It is the objective that by addressing limitations, making the data and results readily available and transparent, and by outlining methodological processes rooted in empirical research, this paper can be viewed as a systematic and reliable resource on political memes related to this phenomenon.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

4.1: Introduction

For the analysis, a total of 931 different memes were compiled and coded which was able to bring out 75 different themes. The complete set of coding matrices are presented in Appendix II and will be referred to periodically during the analysis. The keywords that were used to search for the memes are found in Appendix I. More than 150 keywords were used in to search for the memes. All the memes used in the research can be found hosted online in a shared Google Folder, though in their raw data set state. The folder may be accessed here: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1GTfBmsQ7xDn7w72BiCKRNJ9xjVr9febM>

4.2: Shit-posting the “Others”

4.2.1 Analysis for RQ1

RQ1 was concerned with a memetic depiction of the main group “enemies.” A number of the memes focused on ridiculing and making fun of the appearance, characteristics, attitudes and beliefs of the enemy. The targets for this scorn ranged from illegal immigrants, Muslims, liberals, and democratic politicians. Memes that fell into the category of “shit-posting enemies” sought to *delegitimize* and *dehumanize* the enemies through comical and oftentimes offensive memes. This practice has been a staple on internet forums and SNS for the past decade as a way to derail conversations and deter new posters, but it found notoriety during the 2016 election when shit-posting politicians became a component of political memes (Griffin, 2016).

On the surface this category of memes presents as a playful jab or roast of those who it is making fun of; however, taken all together a narrative develops where those depicted in the memes began to become delegitimized *a priori* to any potential future engagement. Take for example, the code in Table 8 (Appendix II) “you can’t argue with liberals” this developed from a memetic idea on The_Donald where liberals have their own form of logic that cannot be countered by any rational or normal means. This is often depicted by the “triggered feminist” meme, wherein a “typical” liberal woman with short hair and glasses gets angry while aggressively arguing her point and disregarding the other person’s view (Triggered feminist, 2019).

Similarly, the subcode “The left overreact and are led by emotion” and subsubcode “liberals are snowflakes” shown respectively below, reinforces this idea by presenting liberals as overly emotional, irrational and easily triggered. Not only does this make it impossible for one to have a disagreement with a liberal, but because they are “snowflakes,” delicate, individuals who get excessively offended by anything and everything, this also lessens their argument in the first place. Liberals are characterized as overgrown children, who cry until they

get their way devaluing both them as individuals and their liberal ideas. This depiction of liberals is brought out in the first three memes of Figure 16 and includes multiple depictions of the “triggered feminist” meme.

These ideas are developed further in the code that “liberalism is a disease” or that “liberal people are merely mentally ill.” The code “making fun of the left’s appearance” further hammers down this point with a number of memes which poke fun at the way that those on the left look. The fourth meme in Figure 16 below shows Democratic Rep. from Minnesota, Ilhan Omar, side-by-side with ET, wearing a towel and lipstick, a juvenile jab at her hijab and subsequent Muslim heritage. The point could also be made her immigrant background makes her not unlike ET, an alien, and as such an outsider, not fit to represent the American people.

Other memes in this code denigrate liberals on their appearance or sexual orientation, and not only *dehumanize* the people in the memes, (the subtheme) but also the groups they represent, as well as make value judgements on these groups. For example the fifth meme in Figure 16 shows a man incorrectly eating an ear of corn, by swallowing the whole cob. The caption reads “How men who want to ban guns eat corn” and implies that men who insist on gun control are “gay.” This not only reduces these men to a school yard epithet, but condemns homosexuality as a negative trait, and one where they aren’t “real men” for wanting guns. Similar ideas are present in memes with liberal women; and many memes outwardly chastise liberal women for their bodies and appearance, dehumanizing them to the sum of their parts, while also making value judgements as to whether or not they are “real” women. These memes along with others in this code help to *dehumanize* the individuals and groups of individuals depicted in the images, as well as associate negative connotations to their sexuality and bodies. They also help reinforce the subtheme of more *traditional masculine* and *feminine qualities*, by portraying non-traditional qualities as negative.

Delegitimization is not utilized only for those on the left, but for other enemies such as immigrants as well. The sixth and seventh memes in Figure 16 reduce Mexican immigrants to cartoons and makes fun of their attempts to get into the US. On the left the family is seen running from border guards alongside cartoons of Speedy Gonzales and Dora the Explorer, a Mexican immigrant from a children’s show; while the meme on the right shows Nintendo character Mario wearing a sombrero and attempting to scale the wall onto the side with an American flag. This meme also reinforces the idea of Trump’s planned border wall. Both of these memes help to reduce immigrants that are attempting to get into the US to cartoons and caricatures and not only *delegitimizes* their efforts into coming to the US, (portraying it as some sort of game) but *dehumanizes* them in the process.

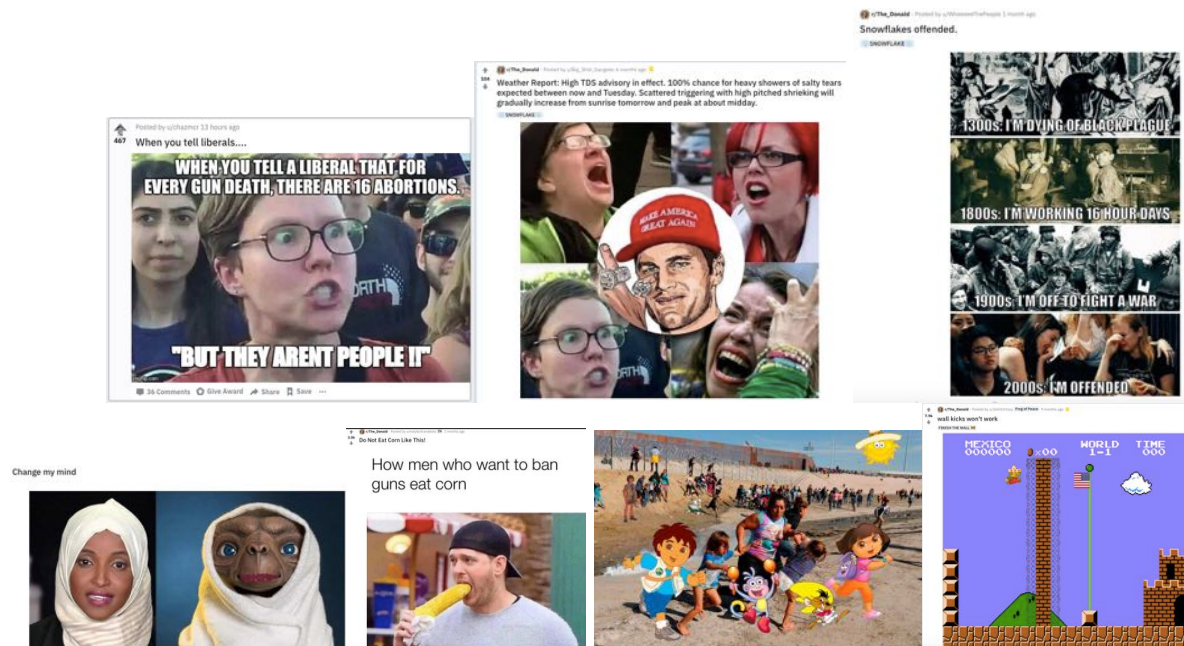


Figure 16. Memes that delegitimize and dehumanize enemies. From top left “When you tell liberals,” (chazmc, 2019) “High TDS advisory,” (Big_Shot_Gangster, 2019) and “Snowflakes offended” (WheeeeeThePeople, 2019) are all examples used to *delegitimize* liberals by showing how illogical and overreactive they are. “Change my mind,” (eh_flat, 2019) and “How men who want to ban guns eat corn,” (Indyfactsanddata, 2019) are memes which *dehumanize* the left as well as reinforce *traditional masculine* and *feminine qualities*. “Delicious Border Memes” (-Howitzer-, 2018) and “Wall kicks won’t work” (JohnChrissy, 2018) both *delegitimizes* and *dehumanizes* immigrants by portraying them as cartoons.

Another theme that was brought out was the idea demonstrated through the code that “America was becoming overrun by unthinking masses,” which come in the form of the themes *mob rule*, with a subtheme of *invasion*. This was showcased in a number of memes depicting literal mobs of foreigners and equating them to invading forces. This is shown clearly in the first meme of Figure 17 which contrasts the (calm, peaceful) legal processes of immigration with that of depictions of (chaotic, violent) illegal immigration, which the author classified as foreign invasion. One can also see the difference in the depiction of the clean, respectable immigrants to that of the dirty, unthinking literal mobs, who care only to get over the wall and not the process and procedures.

Similarly, these ideas are explored in a series of memes featuring NPCs, which stands for non-playable characters and comes from video games which feature characters one can interact with, but not play. These grey NPCs are characterized as not having an inner voice, and not being able to think for themselves, instead merely spouting catchphrases picked up from MSM or other NPCs. In the autumn of 2018, this meme took off in right-wing spaces when the idea that liberals are NPCs began to spread. In the second meme of Figure 17, there is a depiction of two NPCs touting left-wing publications as the gospel. The underlying idea being that liberals are unthinking vessels who religiously spread their ideology in order to propagate

themselves. Instead of invading, these NPCs are already here and looking for fellow converts and as such we see the subtheme of *liberalism creates enemies*. This also reinforces the idea of that America is being overrun by unthinking masses and eventual *mob rule*.



Figure 17 Invasion of enemies. “Immigration vs invasion” (AutoriiNovici, 2018) and “NPC's Going Door To Door” (zambonibill21, 2019) help illustrate the idea of *mob rule*, how America is undergoing an *invasion*, and how *liberalism creates enemies*.

The next theme brought out from the matrix (Table 8, Appendix II) was the notion that enemies use *manipulation* and dishonest means to achieve their goals. This is brought out in memes such as the first image in Figure 18 which depicts democratic congresswoman Elizabeth Warren, black rights activist Rachel Dolezal, and congressman Beto O’Rourke, who have all assumed aspects of different races and ethnicities to gain power (to differing extents). By lumping all three together, it reinforces the subtheme that all liberals are *dishonest*. While the second meme in Figure 18 shows that the famous photos of House of Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recent visit to a detention facility was in fact a media ploy, and her look of distress was actually brought on by an empty parking lot. This meme comes from a conspiracy theory that began circulating from Alex Jones’ Infowars and was later pushed by RT (AOC was actually facing an empty parking..., 2019) and Fox news (Mikelionis, 2019). Though other sources have disputed this claim, the meme does a clear job in expressing Ocasio-Cortez’s *dishonesty* and the supposed *manipulation* that is taking place.

In contrast, but also in response to the last theme, is the need to set the record straight by the next theme, *changing the narrative*. Here memes hurl common insults often used by the left to attack the right, back to the left. This appears in codes such as “liberals are violent” “democrats have hateful rhetoric” and “the left is racist,” all accusations that have been aimed at Trump and his supporters. These memes change that narrative by demonstrating how in fact it is democrats who are the racist ones. The third meme in Figure 18 demonstrates this by juxtaposing several Trump Tweets about crime-infested (“democrat”) cities with that of a photo of democratic Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam wearing Blackface in 1984. By *changing the narrative* from who is labelled racist, those who post memes in The_Donald are able to assert

a kind of control over their enemies. This is also notable, because it demonstrates Trump's use of racist dog-whistling disguised as facts, which is illustrated in the next theme and showing how similar POTUS and The_Donald are in the way they present their ideas.

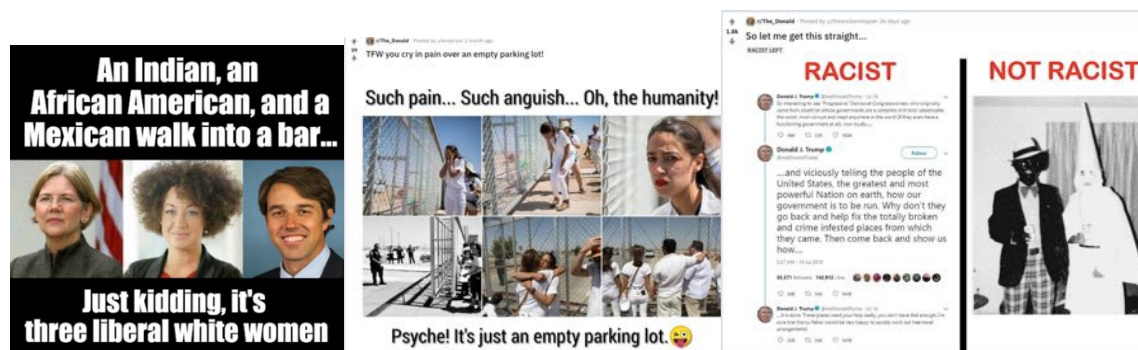


Figure 18. Dishonest enemies. “An Indian African American and a Mexican walk into a bar...” (J-holdd, 2019) and “TFW you cry in pain over an empty parking lot” (Endprisim, 2019) demonstrate how enemies *manipulate* to achieve their goals. “Racist and not racist” (Thewickersnipper, 2019) showcases how memes can *change the narrative* and take control of the enemies.

Many memes helped to form of narrative of how supporters of Trump see democratic leaders and relaying that into fearful memes about their *destruction of America*. The first image in Figure 19 contrasts three democratic cities making sure to display the homeless problems present within each. This code that “democratic leaders are ruining America” is supported by the subcode, that “they create new problems at the expense of real problems” and demonstrated by the second meme in Figure 19; this shows Colin Kaepernick kneeling in front of the literal elephant in the room, a message reading, “Blacks killing Blacks is a much larger problem” and beside a Nike swoosh with the slogan reading, “Just ignore it.” The meme comments on Kaepernick’s activism regarding police brutality in the Black community, and how it is less of a problem than Black-on-Black crime. Not only do these memes show that liberals and democrats don’t have their priorities straight for Americans, leading to American’s eventual demise, both contain subtlety racist overtones, that are able to hide amongst the “facts” presented, democrat cities are poor and violent and Black-on-Black crime is the real problem in America. This also helps to create the theme, *racism disguised as facts*.

Because The_Donald must adhere to the rules of Reddit, racism is not tolerated, and this has been especially enforced since the board’s recent quarantine. However, to circumnavigate this, “democrats” is often used as a cover for African Americans, due to the group’s historical support for the party. This assertion is backed up by examples of memes on the site that use the word “democrat” instead of African American in their message, such as the bottom left meme in Figure 19, which contends that “if democrats stop shooting each other, gun violence would fall by 90%.” This meme works to take the burden of racism away from the meme maker, and places it onto the reader, as the meme merely uses the more neutral word

“democrat.” However, demographically, it is implied that such crimes were committed by people of color, but because this is never explicitly said, it then becomes the reader who is racist for jumping to that conclusion. Either way, the meme achieves its goal in spreading racist rhetoric but hidden behind facts. The fourth meme in Figure 19 is comprised of a list of cities with the highest crime rate, coincidentally all are democratically led, and the facts are highlighted by a photo of an African American, helps to hammer home this point. Here again, the meme is able to *disguise racism as facts*, while also proving that democrats are *destroying America*.

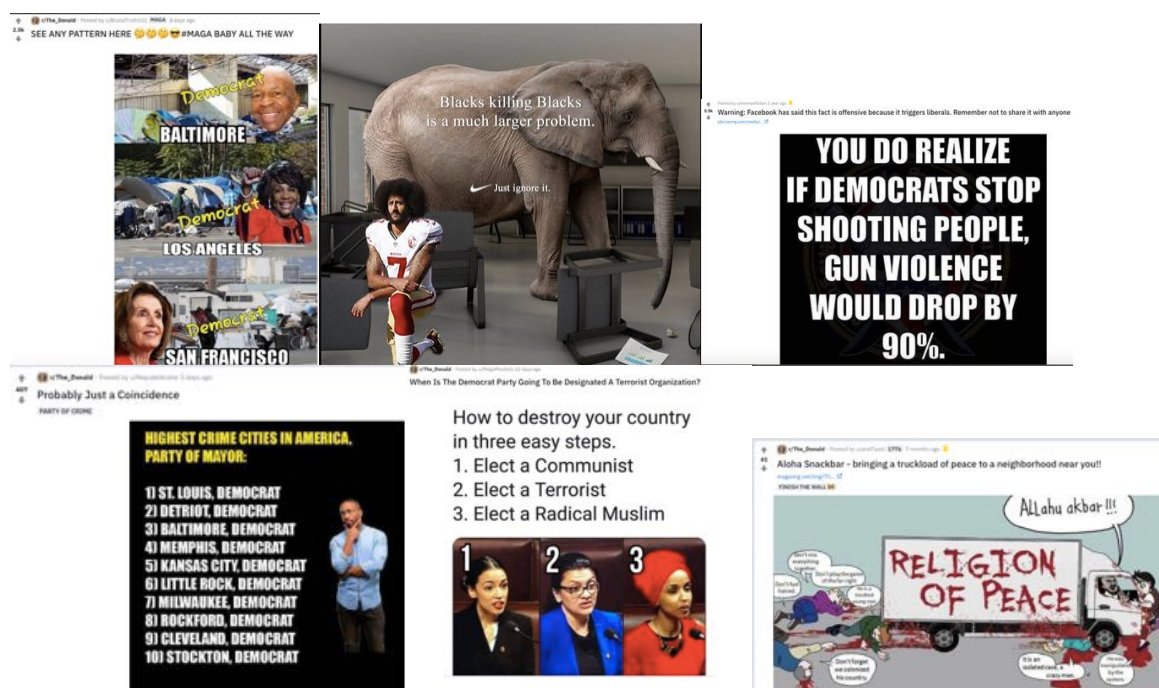


Figure 19. Enemies are destroying America. “See any pattern here” (BrutalTruth101, 2019b) and “Pay no attention” (FatherXnos, 2019) help to demonstrate how democrat leaders are helping to *destroy America*. “Gun violence would drop by 90%” (enemyofIslam, 2018) and “Highest crime cities” (republokrater, 2019) do the same but also show how *racism can be disguised as facts*. “Democrats are terrorists” (MegaMindXXx, 2019) shows how treasonous democrats are, wishing to implement socialism and destroy American values. While “Aloha Snackbar” (and7weil, 2019) shows this destruction coming from outside forces that are helped along by liberals.

The subtheme that enemies are *treasonous* is present in a number of memes in this category as well. The fourth meme in Figure 19 clearly implies this with a depiction of “the squad” and the steps in which they are taking to *destroy America* by conflating Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s calls for socialist reform “communism” and failing to disentangle Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar’s religious backgrounds from their politics. Other memes strengthen this with depictions of the memetically catchy “Jihad Squad,” which help to associate the women within this group as terrorists out to destroy American values. Memes such as the last one in Figure 19 reinforce this code by showing how the policies liberals advocated for result in not only an influx of Muslims, but how this influx directly hurts Americans, in the case of this

image, by running them over whilst shouting “Allahu akbar.” Here, the depictions of liberals are shown violently dying while they repeat liberal “excuses” for this behavior, such as “It’s an isolated case” or “Don’t forget we colonized his country.” This implies that it is liberals to blame for allowing such people into the country, and even when presented with evidence to the contrary, they can’t bring themselves to see the truth. Not only are liberals helping *destroy America*, but they are in a sense *treasonous* because their behavior and ideology allows for such destruction. This meme also brings out a similar point to “racism disguised as facts,” wherein to “hide” such content from outside moderators, or at least keep it under the radar, “*Allahu akbar*” is changed in the title to “Aloha Snackbar,” a similar sounding, but benign phrase. However, on The_Donald it is a dog whistle for its target of scorn.

The final theme that this group brought out from the matrix (Table 8, Appendix II) was the idea of *perverting American values*. This was demonstrated with a wide variety of memes particularly depicting the impact gay pride and the LGBTQ+ community has on American values. A prominent code here is the idea that “gay pride is grooming children for pedophilia” and that all groups of enemies from liberals to Muslims are pedophiles. Many of these memes seem obsessed with directly tying LGBTQ+ and liberals to harming children in this way. The first meme of Figure 20 shows this with a liberal mother in a Scumbag Steve hat taking her (frightened) daughter to a Drag Queen Story Time (an event where drag queens read stories to children and teach inclusivity). This meme implies that such events are not meant for children and will end up ultimately hurting them. This is reinforced by the second meme in Figure 20 which plainly says that the community is a cover for pedophiles. While previous memes have merely reinforced the idea of traditional gender roles and sexuality, this meme and others in the code, go a step further and accuse people they don’t agree with of horrendous criminal acts, as well as orchestrating well-thought out and well-executed tactics (Pride month) in promotion of these acts. Moreover, the final meme in Figure 20 helps to demonstrate what is thought of a “nasty woman” through a meme of Serena Williams yelling at a referee ironically juxtaposed with the Nike slogan. Here the meme is playing with the idea that women who do not portray traditional feminine qualities, who are outspoken, strong, and powerful are “nasty.” This helps illustrate the theme that enemies are *perverting American values* and the subtheme that *feminism creates bad women*.



Figure 20. Enemies are perverting American values. “Scumbag mom” (ENVYNITAZ, 2019) and “LGBT+ are pedophiles” (Optimistik32, 2019) show how enemies are perverting traditional American values, while “Serena yelling at ref” (redpilled_brit, 2018) demonstrates that these values are also ruined by feminism which creates “nasty” women.

4.2.2 Concluding remarks

The memes from the main group of enemies brought out a number of themes which work together to delegitimize their enemies. Many of these images appear as funny and often-times offensive jokes, and work together to create a narrative that not only should their enemies be ignored for their ridiculous behavior, but they can be treated as even less-than-human. *Delegitimization* and *dehumanization* are themes that cooperate in these respects. The fact that these themes are brought out by memes is even more dangerous, as their messaging can be countered as frivolous jokes, as science still has yet to understand the potential psychological impact memes may produce. Other themes such as *mob rule* and *invasion* give us insight into how these meme-makers feel under attack, by both inside and outside forces. It also demonstrates a cognitive dissonance in how they understand ideology, because here the spread of liberalism is marked as a danger, but their own ideology, which they happily propagate by repeating catchphrases and circulating like-minded publications is not. The next theme of *manipulation* shows that enemies cannot be trusted, as they will go to extreme means to get their way and push their agenda. It also works in countering any arguments with the enemy, because their message is “fake,” much the same way Trump does with the MSM. The theme *destruction of America* pushes the narrative that democrats and liberals are helping to wreck American cities, and a vote for them means another coffin nail for the US. This category also helps to bring out the underlying *racism* present in these memes, which can be *disguised as facts*. To that note, it also seems important for these meme-makers to set the record straight by *changing the narrative*, and for them to counter the leftist narrative that Trump supporters are violent and racist, by hurling it back to those on the left. This is a notable category, because some memes, Figure 18, show Trump’s use of racist dog-whistling is not far removed from what The_Donald is using with their own “facts.” The theme of treason is explored in the next

category of memes, and here the idea of the *destruction of America* is taken one step beyond by also implying that the enemies are *treasonous* to America. This reinforces the above notions of dishonesty and *manipulation* that enemies cannot be trusted. Finally, the last theme of *perverting American values* strengthens previous themes of *traditional masculine and feminine values*, *delegitimization*, and *the destruction of America* by showing that values enemies hold dear (sexual and gender inclusivity) is in fact a means to harm children and along with feminist ideas ruin traditional American values.

4.3: Majority over the Minority: Protecting Popular Sovereignty

4.3.1. Analysis for RQ2: Popular Sovereignty

The memes in the main group “popular sovereignty” expressed ways in which “the people” wield their power. This was expressed through the first theme uncovered in the matrix (Table 9, Appendix II) is called *people over government*. the memes demonstrate that it is the American citizen, whose rights are given to him by god and protected by the constitution, who is actually the one keeping the government in check. The first meme in Figure 21 reinforces this with a cartoon demonstrating the rights Americans have that come with citizenship. These rights are not issued with contingencies, but automatically granted by virtue of birth or citizenship. With these inalienable rights comes an inherent subtheme of *distrust of the government* as any action by the government could be conveyed as a violation of said rights. The second meme in Figure 21 conveys these ideas by labelling a bear as “Big government,” attacking a man labelled as “bitchy liberal scumbag.” Two dogs, labelled “NRA” and “armed patriot,” come to the aid of the attacked man, showing the power that (armed) people have over the government. The title expresses that the 2nd amendment (2A) protects the 1st amendment (1A) by “keeping the bear in check,” showing a lack of governmental trust as well as the people’s sovereignty.

The next theme dealt with America’s founding fathers and their establishment of “the people’s” *constitutional rights*. This is an extension of the first theme, which goes into specifics about the document and people protecting these rights. Memes like the third in Figure 21 portray the founding fathers as faithful stewards of “the people’s” sovereignty, as their Constitution articulates these rights. Moreover, the image shows the constitutional process as not only democratic and coming directly from ordinary citizens who designed the government, but one in which “the people’s” interests and rights are considered and protected, hearkening back to Taggart’s idea of the “heartland.” The fourth meme of Figure 21 portrays these founding fathers in MAGA hats, implying that Trump is actively following in their footsteps and is the

modern-day embodiment of *American rights and the values of the founding fathers*. Following this logic, Trump has now become the steward of “the people’s” sovereignty who can bring back this “heartland.”

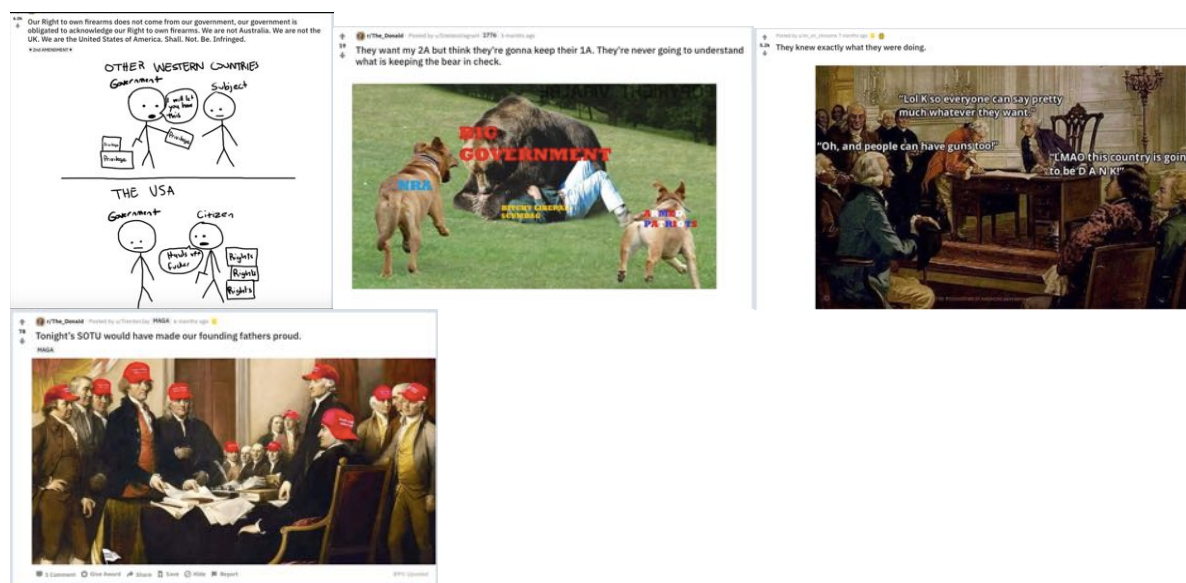


Figure 21. Citizens’ rights over the government. “Rights are not privileges” (Turdinthepunch, 2019) and “Keeping the bear in check” (SitelessVagrant, 2019) demonstrate the power “the people” have over the government as well as governmental distrust. “They knew exactly what they were doing” (On_shrooms, 2018) shows how the Founding Fathers helped to ensure the protection of the rights of “the people” as well as hearkening back to an American “heartland” where citizens created and dictated the government’s limits. “Founding Fathers are MAGAing” (TrentonJay, 2019) represents how Trump is following in the footsteps of the Founding Fathers, and as such can help resurrect this “heartland.”

The next theme, the *will of the people*, can be found in the first two memes of Figure 22. In the first we see a packed arena of Trump supporters with text that reads, “We the People!” and below that “Voters.” The heading for the post reads “Russia didn’t do this. We the people did!” This implies that Russia had no say or sway in the election of Trump, whose victory was due to the strong support of ‘the people.’ The image shows a wide angle shot of the arena and places emphasis on the large amount of people present. This helps in making the connection that the majority of voters elected Trump, and to denigrate his presidency would mean the *will of the people* is wrong. It also demonstrates a subtheme that this *will is fulfilled through Trump*. The second meme makes this point in much more obvious by claiming that the Democrats’ refusal to fund Trump’s wall, is in direct violation of the *will of the people*, as such this *will is under threat by enemies*.

The theme of *protection* can be found in the next category of memes, “tools to protect America’s sovereignty,” seen in Table 9 (Appendix II). Here the concept of national sovereignty is highlighted, with emphasis on America’s *territorial sovereignty* (Kalliis, 2018). Nothing has been a larger marker of this then Trump’s pitch for a border wall, so it is not

surprising that many of these memes focus on the wall. The third meme of Figure 22 uses a meme format called “Flex Tape,” (Flex Tape, 2019) to demonstrate how Trump solves the “leak,” in this case labelled “illegal immigrants” with a patch of tape labelled “the wall.” Others, such as the fourth in Figure 22, illustrate how Trump protects America against the “false rain of globalism, China, the MSM, and socialism.” Ideas of globalism and globalists are widely used by Trump and his supporters (Hattem, 2016; Borger, 2018) and may reflect an underlying theme.

It is vital to note that the term “globalist” has a history of anti-Semitic connotations that date back to the 1930s, and is still used in some corners of the internet like 4chan and the Daily Stormer (a white nationalist publication) in the phrase “Jewish globalist.”¹⁴ While this isn’t to say Trump, who employs his Jewish son-in-law Jared Kushner in a trusted role, is anti-Semitic and is using “globalist” as a stand-in for someone of the Jewish faith, it is possible that this phrase is dog-whistling to certain demographics of people who might feel that way. Further evidence of this tactic is found in a speech Trump delivered in Florida in 2016, which his campaign team then tweeted out, that linked Hillary Clinton to “international bankers,” (TeamTrump, 2016) another anti-Semitic dog-whistle,¹⁵ and his Tweet in Figure 8 of Hillary Clinton with a star of David. Moreover, this coded language is important on Reddit’s boards; on The_Donald’s guidelines, there are clear policies on “no racism or anti-Semitism” (it deliberately leaves out islamophobia). While on the surface memes like Figure 22 show Trump’s reassurance of the *protection* of America’s *territorial sovereignty*, there is another possibility that it is indicative of another theme of *dog-whistling*.



Figure 22. Trump is the will of the people. “We the people” (XxSaltyMermaidX, 2019) and “Democrats are ignoring the will of the people” (ImpressiveShare8, 2018) help to demonstrate how the *will of the people is being fulfilled by Trump* and also how it’s *under threat by enemies*. “Fixed it” (Jomamasophat, 2019) and “Pepe protects” (Dickslikeyeezus, 2019) reflect the importance of *territorial sovereignty* and the need for *protection* but may also reflect a darker theme of anti-Semitic *dog-whistling*.

¹⁴For more on the history of this term, see: Sales (2017) and Kampeas (2016a)

¹⁵To see how Trump has used this term, see: Kampeas (2016b)

Another idea that is present within the theme of *protection*, is the subtheme of *preserving the will of the people*. This is represented by various “tools which help to protect this will.” The tool in the first image in Figure 23 is the electoral college, and the meme shows what the US voting system would look like without this system - a distorted map where the power lies with the coastal states over the “flyover” states, the bulk of which voted for Trump. Support for the electoral college has had an interesting history and its existence complicates the common populist approach towards direct democracy. On the campaign trail, Trump called the American voting system “rigged” (Graham, 2019) and in a 2012 Tweet, the then reality TV star wrote, “[t]he electoral college is a disaster for a democracy,” (realDonaldTrump, 2012). By November of 2016, just weeks after the electoral college brought him victory, Trump’s Tweets reflected a newfound respect for the voting system, calling it “genius” (third image in Figure 23). This sentiment has apparently also rubbed off on his constituents, as illustrated by their memes and backed up by a recent Pew poll which found 32% support amongst GOP voters for a national popular vote, down from 54% in 2011 (Vasilogambros, 2019). The first meme in Figure 23 seemingly reflects this current attitude, and in light of this about-face on the issue, brings out an underlying theme of *issue flip-flopping* and shows that this ideology is not necessarily static. Institutions can be derided or embraced depending on how they affect Trump’s success.



Figure 23. Electoral college protects “the people’s” rights. “Electoral College” (MarvelousMisanthrope, 2019) is a meme which shows the importance of *preserving the will of the people*. However, evident from Trump’s Tweets in 2012 (realDonaldTrump, 2012) and 2016 (realDonaldTrump, 2016), we can see how this issue has changed and demonstrating an *issue flip-flopping*.

The memes in Figure 24 are representative of the theme found in Table 9 (Appendix II) of *threats to their rights* and the subtheme of *enemy infringement*. Under the category of “internal enemies are a threat to our rights” we can see how the first image demonstrates the code of “progressive values are a threat to our rights” with a depiction of a child in a hat labelled “z” denoting she is of generation-z, holding onto the Bill of Rights. Next to that is writing saying “Dear Liberals, Could you please leave me some of these, Sincerely Gen Z.” This meme is saying that liberal values overstep the basic rights afforded to Americans through the

constitution's amendments. Some of these values include gun control laws and reforms on hate speech and can be observed through other memes in this category, which in the eyes of Trump's supporters violate the first and second amendments.

Similar to this, is an idea that is explored in the second meme of Figure 24 about the importance of the majority. This image shows an outline of one person saying, "We demand that you stop being racist" with a person from the nearby crowd questioning who the "we" are. This implies the demand is meant to satisfy one individual, as opposed to the group or majority. As such, this can be said to represent a subtheme of *minority over majority*, wherein progressive ideals and values do more to satisfy the whims of one person than in doing what's best for the majority. The heading of the meme says "The Tyranny of the Minority" adding the commentary that such progressive demands are in line with a single authoritarian voice, rather than what's best for the majority. The third meme in Figure 24 explores this theme further with the specific example of LGBT rights, which escalates from wanting tolerance and equality, to punishing those who don't agree with their lifestyle and even to imagining hypothetical scenarios where such acceptance turns into an excuse for pedophiles to take advantage of children. The last meme in Figure 24 sees more enemy infringement over the rights of those who have yet to be born. In the subsubcode "reproductive rights and abortion take away the rights of pre-born citizens" a number of memes depict how abortion is a choice for the woman, but not the fetuses, and the act violates the rights of the fetuses. In a selective understanding of how people can exercise their rights, abortion is treated as a *threat to the rights of pre-born citizens*.



Figure 24. Enemy Infringement. "Sincerely, gen-z" (Greatgrandmapede, 2019) helps to illustrate *threats to their rights* through *enemy infringement*, while "Tyranny of the minority" (BasedBoyScout, 2019) and "We only want" (BanHammerDrunk, 2019) shows this through *minority over majority*. "My body. Her choice" (LosPepesContra, 2019) demonstrates the *threat to the rights of pre-born citizens*.

The last category of memes in this group helps to illustrate the theme of *distortion of the "will of the people,"* and is brought out in the category, "enemies want to change US demographics to distort the 'will of the people.'" This is done through memes such as the first in Figure 25 which represents the code of "enemies want open borders." The image is made to resemble a Democratic ad and includes symbols and slogans from the democratic party. However, the text has been modified and reads, "National borders are racist" and "Let them

ALL in.” This parodies the actual stance of the DNC by turning the party’s lack of funding for a border wall and calls for immigration reform, into hyperbolic scare tactics about wanting open borders. It is presumed that such a policy would help the Democratic party win votes and power, through drowning out the voices of true Americans.

This idea is made more explicit in the second meme of Figure 25, Steven Crowder's "Change My Mind" Campus Sign meme, which uses a format of conservative podcaster Steven Crowder sitting in front of purposively inflammatory messages, then the words, “Change my mind.” In this example, the campus sign reads “Hordes of illegals is a concocted strategy to tip red states blue” and more clearly conveys how open borders would not only work in the *distortion of the ‘will of the people’* but it would help benefit the DNC. This meme format is also interesting due to the fact that it and the person it is based on, Steven Crowder, seem to want to engage in a discussion relating to sign, but put in no effort in forming their argument. Instead, the audience must come up with a counterargument supported by facts if they disagree, removing the burden of proof from the one originally making the argument.

While the Steven Crowder meme gains legitimacy through its presumption of truth, “The National Borders are racist” meme uses the voice of the Democrats, but distorts it, lending this image to be seen as a kind of propaganda. The final two memes of Figure 25 also represent this, through memes made to resemble official DNC ads, but on the theme of voter ID. Here the main villain is Vladimir Putin, who is looking to steal the 2020 election. Both images use the hashtag #demandvoterid and are meant to trick unsuspecting democrats into sharing the image and perhaps adopting the platform of voter ID. These memes not only make the point that enemies use tactics such as foreign interference to *distort the “will of the people,”* but the memes themselves are attempting to distort this will through propaganda and manipulation¹⁶.

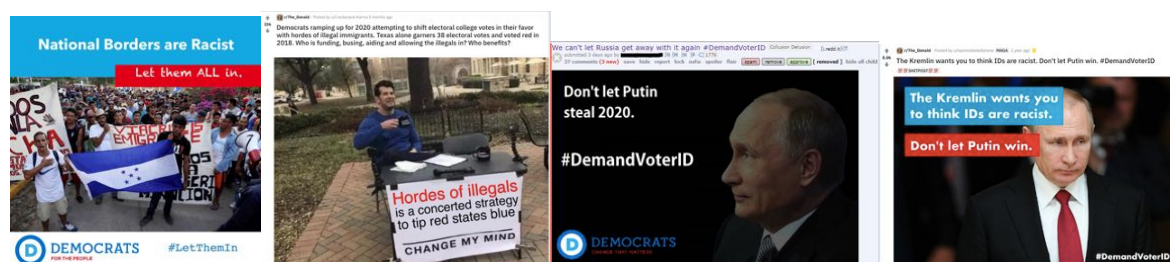


Figure 25. Distorting the “will of the people.” “National Borders are Racist” (KaliforniaX, 2018) and “Steven Crowder’s change my mind on hordes of illegals” (Crackerjack-Karma, 2019) illustrate how enemies are *distorting the will of the people*. The first meme and the last two “Don’t let Putin steal 2020” (Don’t let Putin Steal 2020, n.d.) and “the Kremlin wants you to think IDs are racist” (Topmostkekofpraise, 2018) show not only *foreign interference* but are examples of propaganda as well as they are meant to parody memes made by the DNC.

¹⁶ Apparently Reddit agreed with this, and number of these memes got deleted August 02, 2019 by violating Reddit’s policies of impersonation.

4.3.2. Concluding Remarks

The memes from the main group about popular sovereignty helped to highlight a number of themes, the first of which showed how those from The_Donald feel people have *power over the government*. These memes reminded people that not only are they the ultimate sovereign, but there is also subtheme of *governmental distrust*. Because of this, any action the government takes to redefine or reform the rights of the people, should be treated with suspicion. These memes also illustrate that the people do not need the government to tell them their rights, because rights are God-given; this makes it unnecessary for the government to extend rights to minorities, as they are not for the government to give out. Similarly, the next theme dealt with the constitution and how it is merely a tool to protect the rights of the people. These *constitutional rights* help to protect the people's sovereignty, and President Trump is the embodiment of *American rights and the values of the founding fathers*, bringing the country back to Taggart's "heartland," and stopping enemies from any *infringement* on these rights. The next theme reinforces this idea by demonstrating how *Trump fulfils the will of the people*, and any *enemy* who goes against Trump is in essence also going against this will.

The next theme of protection is brought out by memes that show the importance of *territorial sovereignty* as well as *personal sovereignty*. Within territorial sovereignty, there is a subtheme of potential dog-whistling in Trump's fear of globalists. Also within this theme, is the subtheme of *issue flip-flopping* and this demonstrates that this ideology can change based on the whims of the man on whom it is based.

The theme of *threats to their rights* and the subtheme of *enemy infringement* highlight that The_Donald again fear the loss of these rights, but this time due to enemies, both internal and external. The subtheme of *minority over majority* seeks to showcase the dangers of extending rights, for fear that not only will they take these rights too far leading to memes like Figure 24's assertion that gay rights lead to rampant pedophilia, but also because minority rights end up becoming a tyranny of one, not benefitting the majority. Also within this theme is the idea that more rights actually take away from the people, even if this means the *rights of pre-born citizens*. The final theme brought out how the will of the people was being *distorted* by the enemy. This theme helped showcase however, how these memes are used in arguments, placing the burden of proof on the audience as opposed to the author. It also showcased how in fact these memes are helping to distort this will, by using manipulation and propaganda embedded in the memes.

4.4: Controlling the Narrative with “Meme Magic” and Pizzagate: Defining “The People”

4.4.1 Analysis of RQ3: The people

The first theme that is brought out by “the people” is the idea that Trump supporters are *true Americans*. The memes bring out representations of people who embody traditional values, strong work ethics, and patriotism. All the themes, subthemes and categories are found in Table 10, (Appendix II). The first meme of Figure 26 was coded into the category “hard working Americans” and depicts modern day cowboys, “‘based’ cattle merchants” on the way to Trump’s 4th of July rally. The term “based” means doing as one pleases, without caring what others think; on The_Donald it is often used in the context of their community, as it shows that they are going against what the MSM and the naysayers say about Trump (although concurrently they tend to portray themselves as the “majority” kept down by the tyranny of the minority).¹⁷ In this meme these cattle merchants represent the hard-working, rural people, while also hearkening back to a nostalgic time in America’s history of westward expansion and salt of the earth values. The men in this photo are the modern depiction of Taggart’s “heartland,” this category’s subtheme, and as Trump supporters, convey that Trump is working towards bringing the country back to this time and space.

The second meme in Figure 26 brings out similar themes, but in regard to immigrants. Here the meme makes the argument that although America is founded by migrants, we should not compare modern immigrants to those who came before saying, “Settling in an undeveloped land and building a civilization is not comparable to moving to a post-industrial nation and signing up for welfare.” The picture again is eliciting this “heartland” with an illustration of a European family hard at work with the men building log cabins and women cooking, and helps to set up a dichotomy of a “good” and a “bad” immigrant; with the ones in the meme representing “good” migrants, and the *true Americans* who make up “the people.”

The next theme of *traditional values and gender roles* is brought out in a number of memes that focus on how The_Donald views the family unit. The third meme in Figure 26 contains what appears to be a husband, wife, and child with the text “Right-wing extremism.” As the family look to be “normal,” this meme is making the point that what the MSM and democrats say about the right-wing, that their values and rhetoric are contributing to a rise in violence and extremism, is wrong. And in fact, it is these traditional values which are deemed dangerous, that are under attack by enemies intent on destroying traditional family units. As

¹⁷ See RQ2 analysis, page 62.

such this meme helps to bring out the subthemes of *traditional family is under attack*, as well as a *nostalgia* for a past where “men were men and women were women.”

The fourth meme of Figure 26 elaborates on all three of these ideas with a meme from the straight pride campaign. Straight pride is a movement that was meant to coincide with June’s pride month and culminated in a parade in Boston in August 2019. The meme uses a controversial idea, the need for such an event, to highlight how pride month and the LGBTQ+ community in general are destroying straight families. The text reads “Please don’t hate me I was born this way,” and implies that there is a prejudice against straight people. Not only does it reinforce the notion that the *traditional family is under attack* it helps to define what these *traditional values and gender roles* are.

The fifth meme of Figure 26 looks at *traditional values and gender roles* through the context of *nostalgia*. This meme, which was published one day after Trump’s tweets calling the city of Baltimore “rodent infested” (realDonaldTrump, 2019b) contains a series of photos from the 1950s of the German American residents scrubbing the steps in front of their houses, with one panel an image of sad Pepe. The meme represents the idea that those in the past had a sense of pride and responsibility for their city and taken in the context of Trump’s Tweet reinforces the idea that those in the past, cared more for the cities they inhabit. It also contains the racist subtext that Baltimore as a city was better off under the (white) German American residents then it is under a Black leader and majority black population. As such, the subtheme of *nostalgia* helps to reinforce a racist interpretation of the past.

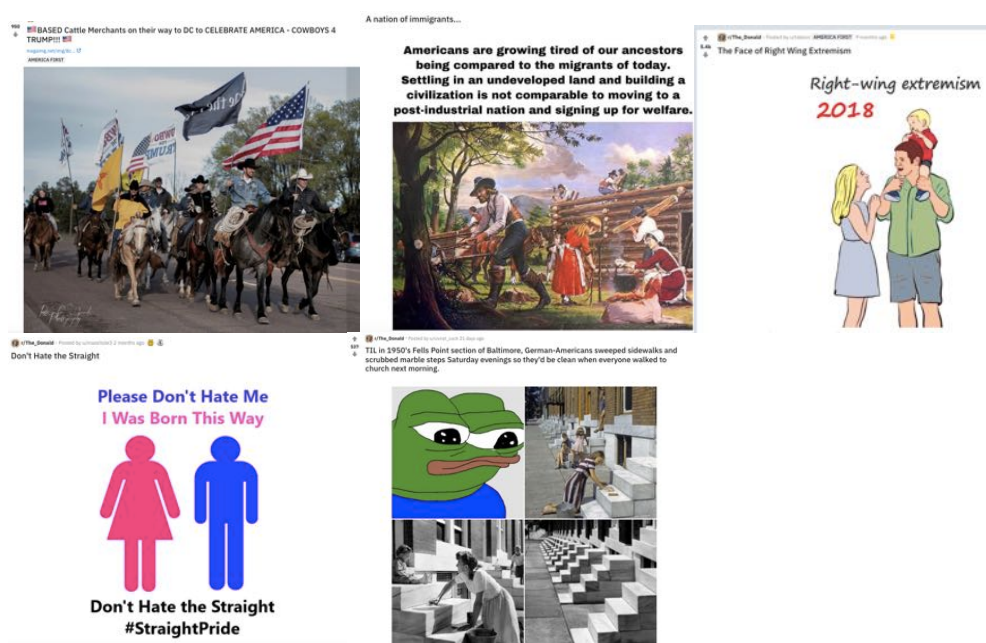


Figure 26. Nostalgia and the “heartland.” “Based cattle merchants” (Igolfolio, 2019) and “American immigrants” (CeremonialDickCheese, 2019) both hearken back to America’s “heartland” in defining who the true Americans

are. While “Right-wing extremism,” (Talesin, 2018), “Straight Pride” (masshole3, 2019) and “1950’s Baltimore” (civnat_cuck, 2019) reinforce *traditional values and gender roles* rooted in *nostalgia* for the past.

The theme of belief that *knowledge is power* is brought out in the next category of memes, “Trump Supporters fight enemies with knowledge.” The first meme in Figure 27 is representative of how The_Donald does this through the subcode of “vigilantism,” with an image of Ghislaine Maxwell, an alleged accomplice of Jefferey Epstein; the heading reads, “This is Ghislaine Maxwell. And in the comments is a list of U.S. states where citizen’s arrest is legal.” This meme is educating “the people” on who this person is, while also calling for vigilantism against her. Not only does it show how knowledge can be powerful and used against enemies, it demonstrates the subtheme, an inherent *distrust in institutions*, as it is the institutions who should be making the arrest, but are not. The second meme in Figure 27 reinforces both themes in a different way, with an interpretation of memes as that which is real in Plato’s allegory of the cave. Here the dark shadows are the MSM and institutions that keep the cave dwellers entertained and ignorant, while memes are the light and truth. From this, we can gather that memes, which come from “the people” are a more reliable source of knowledge, which also give power to “the people” to escape from the cave. To this end, we can also see how memes help to create an *enlightened* ‘people.’

This idea is further demonstrated by the third meme in Figure 27 from the code “red pills.” The term red-pill comes from the Matrix franchise and it denotes giving someone harsh or unpleasant information that can possibly alter their point of view. It is often used in The_Donald as slipping information into memes to change their minds (Red pill, 2018). Here is an image of Trump taken from an old Pizza Hut commercial, with text that reads, “Did you know that Donald Trump eats his pizza backwards? It’s true! And it’s a big scandal. Google pizzagate to find out more.” The intention of the meme is to get those who don’t support Trump to google “pizzagate” a far-right conspiracy theory which links prominent democrats to a D.C. pizza parlor said to be a cover for a child sex ring.¹⁸ This links the meme to the subtheme of *distrust in institutions*, as well as it helping to show the importance of spreading knowledge; once the unsuspecting target finds out about pizzagate, not only will they be red-pilled on the corrupt and perverted elites, but they will hopefully then become a supporter of Trump. In this way, the meme works as a way to spread conspiracy theories believed by The_Donald and

¹⁸ The_Donald was prominent in circulating information about pizzagate and even spun-off an alternate subreddit devoted entirely to organizing subscribers to comb through documents and “decipher” emails. Eventually Reddit banned the pizzagate subreddit after repeated threats to the employees culminated in an armed man going to the pizza restaurant to self-investigate.

hopefully gain new supporters as well, through education. As such, the meme illustrates how *knowledge is power*, and that the *enlightened* “people” should help proselytize their ideology.



Figure 27. Memes enlighten “the people.” “Ghislaine Maxwell,” (Ponderonautics, 2019) “Memetic cave of truth,” (BasedFaggotIsMyGod, 2019) and “Donald Trump and pizzagate” (Sftsoap, 2019) demonstrate *knowledge is power*, and how memes bring help to make an enlightened “people.” They also demonstrate a *distrust in institutions* as memes and conspiracy theories are the preferred source of information.

The memes in Figure 28 are representatives of Table 10’s (Appendix II) theme of *control* and a subtheme of *changing the narrative*; this is done by re-appropriating leftist words and terms through memes. The first shows Trump in front of a crowd of screaming fans; there are signs saying, “Thank you Lord Jesus for President Trump,” emphatic supporters, and Trump touching the face of a baby. The title says, “We are the ‘super elites,’” a phrase taken from a Trump speech in 2018. Trump’s use of elites changes the usage of a term usually saved for the 1% and corrupt institutions and reapplies it to his adoring fans, who judging from the homemade sign, seem to belong to this group of *true Americans* scattered across the nation’s “flyover states.” This meme shows that in addition to his supporters taking control of the narrative, Trump does the same. The second meme in Figure 28, again has Trump positioned in front of a crowded venue, with text that reads, “#Trumpbodycount.” This references the August 2019 alleged suicide of Jefferey Epstein, after whose death, the hashtag was generated. In the initial usage the hashtag blames the death on Trump, who may have been implicated in Epstein’s dealings, had he not died in protective custody in prison. However, The_Donald began reusing the hashtag to indicate Trump’s large fan base, while simultaneously getting #Clintonbodycount to trend. As such, all three examples demonstrate how the people are able to gain back *control* of what they deem to be false narratives, by changing them with memes.

The third meme to represent this category is an example from the code, “the left can’t meme” and the subcode “leftist memes The_Donald likes.” In the image, we see Trump, a notorious fast-food consumer, excitedly holding two bags of McDonald’s while his entourage follows behind solemnly. The text derides such a display of enthusiasm on the memorial of 9/11 and creates the image of Trump acting inappropriately happy during what should be a

contemplative day. However, it is this exact portrayal of a “winning” attitude that many followers of Trump admire, and although this meme was posted as a critique of Trump, it could also be argued that this meme is a positive reinforcement of American resilience in light of tragedy. It also shows how they can reclaim the image, by liking it, even when it’s meant as a jab towards Trump, countering the meme’s effectiveness to upset them and giving them *control* by *changing the narrative*.



Figure 28. Changing the narrative. “We are the ‘super elites,’” (RlzJohnnyM, 2019) “Trump Body Count,” (Maymay4america, 2019) and “Trump on 9/11” (RedNewEnglander, 2018) illustrate the theme of *control* by taking back phrases and images made by the left. Here they are re-appropriated with messages more befitting of the ideology and values of Trump supporters.

The first two memes in Figure 29 demonstrate the theme of *persecution*, by highlighting how being a Trump supporter leads enemies to persecute, attack, and silence them. The first meme shows alt-right figure Milo Yiannopoulos alongside, InfoWars host Alex Jones, and Pepe the Frog in a quarantined container, with Reddit’s mascot locking them away. This is directly referencing the Reddit quarantine as well as platforms like YouTube and Twitter silencing right-wing voices. The second meme is a photo taken from the 2018 Women’s March, with a man in a MAGA hat up against a crowd of angry protesters. His movements appear to convey his confusion at the anger hurled towards him. Both memes help to illustrate how the simple act of wearing a MAGA hat or espousing right-wing views can land Trump supporters in hot water and lead others to persecute them.

The next theme of *stronger together* is represented in memes which make the point of how Trump brings people together and how his supporters are united together against the enemies. The third meme in Figure 29 demonstrates this through a meme format called “epic handshake;” coded under “Trump brings people together,” we see how races and ethnicities come together in a mutual hatred for illegal immigrants. Each arm represents a different group (blacks, whites, and legal Hispanics) united by “hating illegals.” Moreover, each arm strengthens the other, meaning together they can fight and be more powerful, united by the same hateful rhetoric espoused by Trump. The fourth meme also illustrates how Trump unites people, but through love. In this example of a wholesome meme, Pepe is making a heart symbol with his hands, with text that reads “MFW our quarantine resulted in the addition of thousands

of new family members.” This alludes to the Reddit quarantine, which motivated many people to join The_Donald, and demonstrates how people are brought together *because* of the enemy. In this sense, it is the enemies who are forcing “the people” together who can then unite and become *stronger together*. This meme is also interesting because instead of focusing on a mutual hatred such as the previous meme, it is focusing on mutual appreciation for free speech, traditional values, and the desire to make America great and uses an ironically earnest meme in an unironic way.

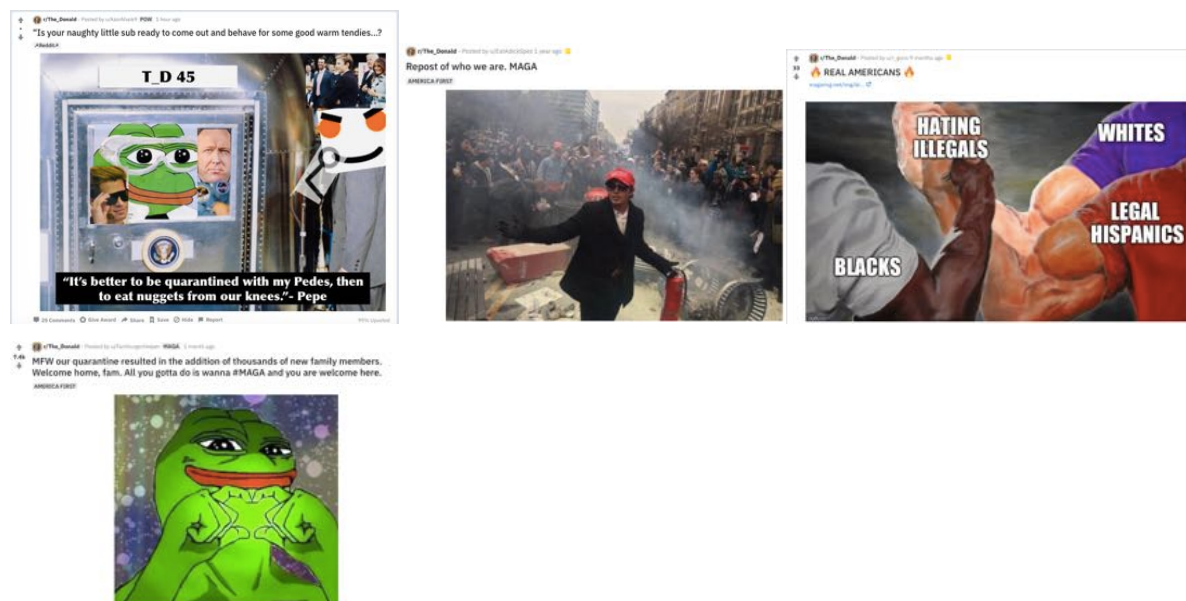


Figure 29. Persecution and support. The first two memes “Reddit quarantining free speech” (AzorAhai69, 2019) and “This is who we are” (EatAdickSpez, 2018) show the dangers of being Trump supporters because of the persecution it entails. While “Trump’s epic handshake” (r_guns, 2018) and “Welcome frens” (FamburgerHelper, 2019) illustrates how Trump brings people together, either through hatred or love of American values.

The first meme in Figure 30 demonstrates Table 10’s, (Appendix II) theme of *theft* of “the people.” The first is a meme that circulated in the summer of 2019 and is a photograph of an elderly couple sleeping on the streets. The text reads, “Elderly couple sleeping on the streets in Dana Point, California getting no social services help from California because ‘they are overwhelmed with illegals.’”¹⁹ The text sets up a “false dilemma” by conflating the separate issues of homelessness and illegal immigration and making it appear that an individual cannot care about one issue as well as the other (Palma, 2019). In this way, it demonstrates that helping illegal immigrants, is akin to taking away from “the people.” The second also shows *theft*, but by Americans on welfare. In this three-paneled meme, the top image is a cartoon cat fishing, with text that reads, “me working overtime.” The second panel overlays the words, “income

¹⁹ According to Snopes.com, it is unclear where this image originated from, though the first instance occurred in Australia with text adapted to the situation there.

tax” over the fishing bucket and in the third panel shows another cat fishing from the fished bucket with overlaid text saying, “people on welfare who’ve never worked a day in their life.” This meme says that those on welfare are cheating the system by taking away from the hard-working Americans. This meme then sets up a dichotomy of who the people are, (hard-working Americans) and who are stealing from them (people on welfare). It also derides the system of income tax, which seemingly all goes to support those not willing or unable to work.

The third meme in Figure 30 helps to illustrate the importance of the need for *protection*. This idea was brought out by the memes in RQ2, and touched on again here, implying that the people are in need of protection against their enemies. The meme shows the silhouette of a woman holding a smoking gun who appears to have just shot off the head of a man climbing over the adjacent bathroom stall. The text reads, “new restroom signs for Texas,” and plays into the notion that transgendered and more inclusive, gender-neutral bathrooms could never exist in states which place a high priority on personal protection and allow guns to be openly carried. This supports the line of thinking that allowing transgender people into bathrooms leads to instances of sexual assault and allows for “perverts” in bathrooms. This was a major issue for Trump when he first took over as president and is continually bandied about still when warning of the evil intentions of enemies. It is also why *protection*, in this case the right to carry a firearm, is warranted for “the people.”



Figure 30. Theft and the need for protection. “Old homeless couple” (BrutalTruth101, 2019b) and “American theft” (Aosdnffoia, 2019) shows how enemies and others take from “the people,” and illustrates the theme of *theft*. “Texas bathrooms” (BrutalTruth101, 2018) shows the need for *protection* of the people and refers to a talking point that was popular during the campaign, inclusive and transgendered bathrooms.

The final theme this main group brings out is the *superiority*, and how “the people” feel that they are better than their enemies. The first meme of Figure 31 makes this point with a juxtaposition of two people who have become memes on both the right and left sides of the political spectrum. On the left side of the image (representing the Right) is a photo of Nick Sandmann, a student from Covington High School, smirking at a Native American protestor. His likeness became a meme in January of 2019, when a video of him went viral and people

either derided how he was “mocking” the protestor or applauded his perseverance to stand up for his beliefs against a hostile crowd. On the right side of the image (representing the Left) is a photo of Jessica Starr, an anti-Trump protestor whose visage of her screaming at Trump’s inauguration has become known as “Screaming Trump protestor” and has come to represent the ridiculous, and overly emotional performance of the Left. Placing the images side-by-side with text that reads, “There has never been a better comparison of Right and Left” demonstrates how the Right react calmly and coolly, while the Left overreact and do so for attention, making the point that the Right is better than the Left.



Figure 31. The Right’s superiority and “meme magic.” “Left vs Right” (Anonmilitary, 2019) juxtaposes depictions of well-known memes on both ideological side and demonstrates the Right’s *superiority*. This idea is carried over into “Border wall suit man” (MAGARULER, 2019) who made himself into a meme, proving that he is superior at manipulating MSM and the internet through “meme magic.”

This idea of *superiority* is further explored in the category “better at the internet.” The second meme of Figure 31 shows an image of a man who made himself famous by showing up at a Trump rally in a “border wall suit,”²⁰ effectively making himself into a real-life meme, using Trump’s memetic elements (the wall, red MAGA hat). It helps illustrate the *superiority* of Trump supporters by showing how well they can make memes, as well as how they can use *meme magic* to bring them to life. Because memes are seemingly random as to whether or not they go viral, the fact that he has made himself into a meme gives credence to the idea of meme magic. It also demonstrates how those on The_Donald are better at manipulating the elite MSM and SNS with the creation of themselves as memes. This is similar to the ways in which Donald Trump has manipulated the media (especially during his campaign) by keeping focus on himself and also leaning into memetic representations of himself.

4.4.2. Concluding Remarks

²⁰ See interview with Blake Marnell about where the idea for making himself a meme came from here: <https://video.foxnews.com/v/6039749722001/#sp=show-clips>

The themes from the main group, “the people” are brought out a number of memes about how The_Donald sees and defines their own group. Firstly, the memes help to define an idea of a *true American*, this is a hard-working individual who works to build-up and make America great, not take from the system. These memes also created a dichotomous grouping of what an American can be, “good” and “bad” and anything that lands a person in the bad grouping is automatically excluded. The people are further defined by the next theme of *traditional values and gender roles*, which delineates how a family unit and those within should be composed, mostly by adhering to gender and sexual normative roles. This theme also brings out a subtheme of how The_Donald assumes that the *traditional family is under attack*, with memes advocating for straight pride. Another subtheme was nostalgia and a desire to return to past values. Embedded within this idealized past, however, is subtly racist undertones.

The next category of memes helped highlight how *knowledge is power*, and memes advocating for vigilantism show how the people are those who are *enlightened*. These memes also bring out a subtheme of *distrust in institutions* and show why memes are so important to The_Donald, as they are information that comes from “the people,” and as such can be trusted. The ideas presented here also demonstrate why it is pointless to argue against “the people,” because they are the ones who know the true information unmanipulated by MSM. Interestingly, these ideas are reminiscent of claims made by Trump, that he himself is a “stable genius” and “like, a smart person,” (@realDonaldTrump, 2018) showing how “the people” place an emphasis on themes similar to Trump. Moving on from there, we see memes that work towards *changing the narrative* and taking *control*. These consisted of memes that were started by the left and re-appropriated by the right. This theme reinforces later themes of *superiority* over enemies, as well as a desire for *control* of their own image.

More themes that were brought out were the ideas that “the people” are persecuted against, but at the same time, this *persecution* forces the beleaguered masses to come together and through Trump, are made *stronger together*. We also see the theme of theft, and memes quite pointedly show that enemies are taking away from “the people.” And it may be because of this that protection is seen to be necessary, as expressed in the next category. Finally, *superiority* is addressed and how important it is for The_Donald to be able to show not only how they are better than their enemies, but how through *meme magic* they can manipulate the manipulators, similar to what Trump himself does.

4.5: “Lock Them Up”: The Corrupt, Perverted Elites

4.5.1. Analysis: RQ4 the elites

The memes for RQ4 tell a story of what The_Donald sees as the elites, comprised of both the political establishment as well as wide-ranging groups of rich business people, celebrities, and those that they pay off to keep their secrets. This is most clearly expressed in the first set of memes coming from Table 11's (Appendix II) category, "Interconnected groups of elites are involved in far-reaching sordid activities." The first meme of Figure 32 demonstrates this idea with another meme in the format of Steven Crowder's "Change My Mind" Campus Sign. Here, Crowder's face is that of Pepe the frog, indicating that this is how those that like and follow Pepe (Trump supporters) feel. The campus sign reads, "There is literally more evidence of a pedo ring connecting elites in Hollywood and DC than there is of Trump-Russia collusion. Change my mind."²¹ The meme shows that even months before the general public was talking about elite sex rings, this was a popular topic on The_Donald. And much like 2016's pizzagate, this category demonstrates the theme of *conspiracy theory*. Such a designation allows for propagation without the need of facts, as the meme is the fact, especially because these memes illustrate the subtheme of an inherent *distrust in the system*. If there are pedophilic sex rings catering to the rich and powerful, how will they ever be brought down, if these are the very people they are catering to? Likewise, how can anything these people say be believed, as they would be of course trying to cover for their crimes.

The second meme of Figure 32 uses the Clintons as a stand-in for the elites to illustrate the subtheme of *abuse of power*. Using the Flex tape format again, the problem of the "Epstein Testimony" is solved by the Clintons through the use of "suicide," implying that it was the Clintons who had Epstein killed before he could testify, potentially bringing down what this meme calls, the "deep state." The deep state is a conspiracy theory that a hidden government is actually in charge underneath the legitimately elected government. Not only does this meme show the *power* that the deep state has, the ability to murder someone in prison, but it shows the lengths it will go to keep this *power*.

The third meme in Figure 32 also expresses the theme of *conspiracy theories*, but focusing on Open Society's George Soros, a boogeyman on the right for his use of "globalist" policies to *destroy America*. Soros's donations to the DNC and democratic groups demonstrate that he is using his money to gain *power* by supporting organizations and groups that can bring down the US. This is illustrated with the allegation that the Honduran caravans that arrived in

²¹ This meme was published on March 26th, 2019, three months before the arrest of convicted sex offender Jefferey Epstein, for sex trafficking. Epstein was linked to politicians, royalty, and celebrities before dying of what was ruled a suicide while in his prison cell.

the US in 2018 were funded by George Soros as a deliberate attempt to flood America with paid migrants. Although there is no proof of any connection between the Open Society or Soros himself and the caravans, these ideas nevertheless circulated by way of conspiracy theories propagated by memes similar to this. In October 2018, when another such caravan made its way to the US-Mexico border, even Trump alluded to “a lot of money” that was passed “to people to come up and try and get to the border by Election Day, because they think that’s a negative for us,” (Qiu, 2018). This shows how far up the chain these conspiracy theories reach, or alternatively where these may come from for some individuals.

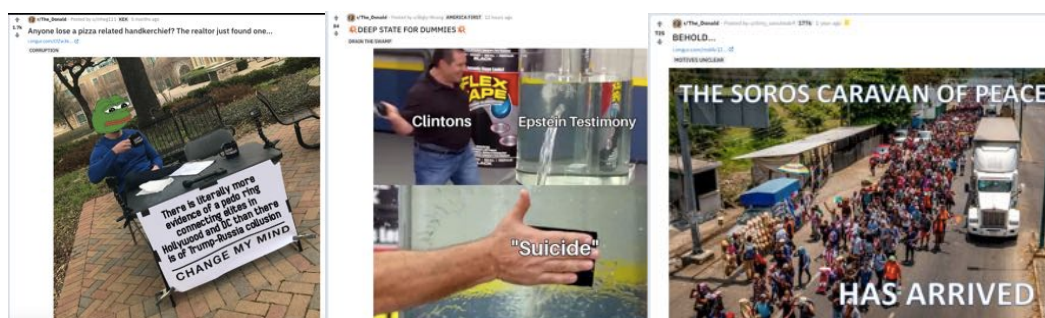


Figure 32. Elite conspiracy theories. Memes such as “Change my mind on pedo rings” (nthegg111, 2019) and “ Clintons fixed Epstein” (Bigly-Wrong, 2019) show the amount of power that the elite hold through the use of conspiracy theories. Outside actors such as George Soros are also part of conspiracy theories such as one where he is accused of funding the Honduran Caravan. “Soros caravan of peace” (dirty_sanchez69, 2019) illustrates this idea.

The next theme looks at how elites use *fake news* to fit or change a narrative. The first category does this through the subtheme of *manipulation*. The first meme of Figure 33 shows a meme of a man labeled “democrat politicians and celebs” using an ax whose movement is labeled “white supremacy” to chop a log labelled “USA,” demonstrating how the elites use scapegoats to divide and destroy the US. By placing the blame on white supremacy, the elites can manipulate the public into believing their narrative, as opposed to the truth. This idea is further highlighted in the second meme of Figure 33 which shows a photo collage labeled “Mass Shooters 2019,” and purports to be a photo of, “Every person charged with or arrested for shooting 4+ people in a single incident.” Because most of the photos appear to be people of color, this meme is attempting to change the MSM’s narrative that white supremacy is to blame for the mass shootings that have been occurring in the US (Cobb, 2019; Beckett, 2019). This meme also helps illustrate the subtheme that *facts aren’t racist*, and it is in fact the elites (who manipulate race to fit their narrative) who are the racist ones.²² The subtheme also gives the

²² While this meme isn’t inherently racist in-and-of-itself, as the criteria it sets up, every person who shot four or more people in 2019 is correct, it does not take in account context, as gang-related crimes (of which is disproportionally people of color) are normally not included in the FBI’s definition of mass shooters, (MacGuill, 2019).

person who made this meme, and whoever shares it, impunity in spreading racist rhetoric, as they are allowed to “hide” behind the facts.

Manipulation by the *fake news* is apparent in the third meme of Figure 33, which demonstrates how the media actively manipulates the news. Here the top image shows a close-up of some children in a cage, while the bottom shows a zoomed-out photo of children in a cage with poster boards. The heading to the post says, “Telemundo faking a protest with kids in cages. Fake news!” This meme is meant to show that what the media reported, that children are locked in cages in detention centers is actually not true, as the photo actually comes from a protest in Dallas in June 2018 that was taken out of context (LaCapria, 2018). By zooming in on a protest picture, the media is actively manipulating what its viewers see, demonstrating that the news is fake, and not to be trusted.

In addition to using fake news to change a narrative, it can also be used to create a new (leftist) narrative, which brings out the subtheme of *propaganda*. The fourth meme of Figure 33 demonstrates this with a juxtaposition of two photos of a bridge taken in 1964 and again in 2018. Because the two photos appear to look the same, with the same water levels over the course of 50 years, the meme intends to prove the falseness of climate change. Instead it is believed that climate change is made up by the establishment in order to further their own agenda, amounting to little more than *propaganda*.

The last two memes of Figure 33 also explore this theme, by the code “promoting diversity over truth.” The fifth meme shows a wheelchair-bound Muslim girl on the moon next to the EU and rainbow flags. The title reads, “How leftists imagine the Apollo 11 landings,” and implies that those on the left and the left-leaning media tend to promote diversity over what actually happened. This is in reference to the push for greater representation in the media, and what those on the right see as over-valuing minorities, while under-valuing white people. Those on The_Donald, however, see this as a way to *propagate* a certain agenda, one where the achievements of white people are belittled and *erased*. This idea is explored more clearly in the sixth meme which shows how people of color are taking over the roles originally designed to be “gingers” in movies and TV shows. Photos of the original characters are shown side-by-side their newly re-casted counterparts, with text that reads, “They took ‘er jobs.”²³ The meme hides behind the word ginger here, instead of saying, white, but the intention is obvious; again, we see how the media’s *propaganda* of diversification is leading to *white erasure*.

²³ This is a quote made famous by the TV show South Park poking fun at how immigrants are accused of stealing jobs from American citizens.

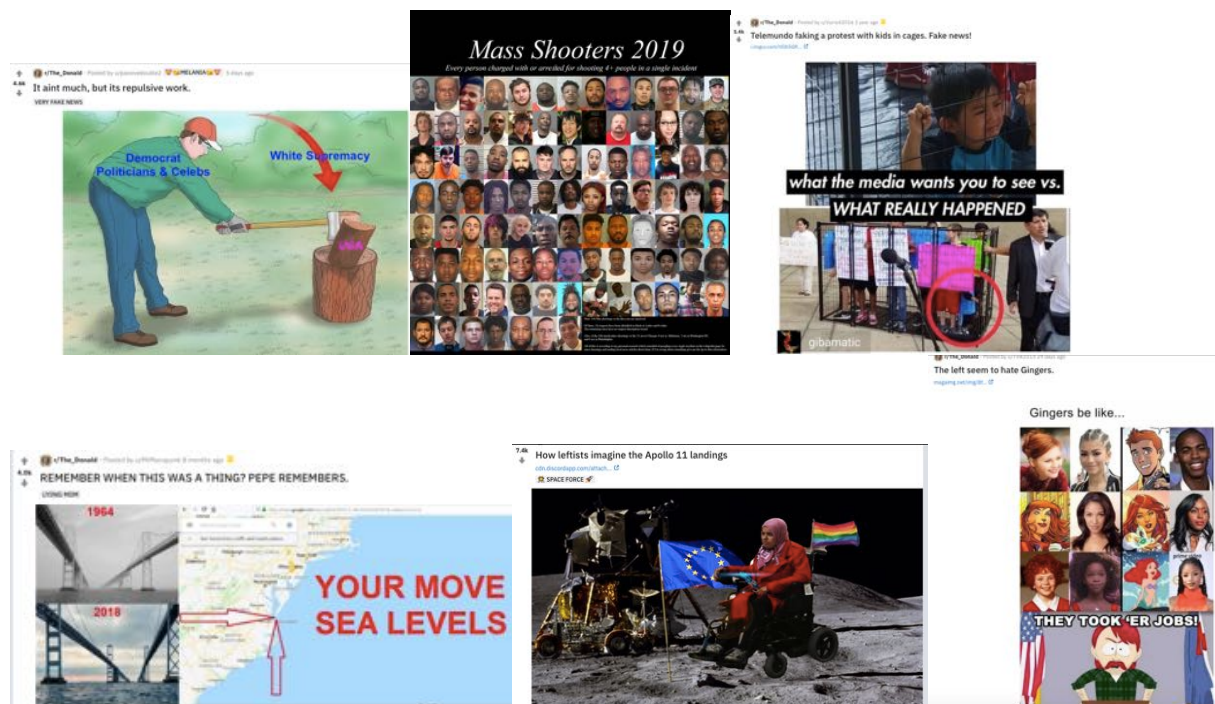


Figure 33. Manipulation and propaganda. The memes here illustrate how the elites *manipulate* and lie to get across their agenda. “White supremacy is dividing the US” (passivedouble2, 2019) and “Mass Shooters 2019” (Specious_Lee, 2019) show how the MSM blames white supremacist movements on the upsurge in shootings, while “Fake news Telemundo” (Varrick2016, 2018) seeks to expose the lying MSM. “Your move sea levels” (MrManayunk, 2018), “How leftists imagine the moon landing” (WeWillNeverYield, 2019), and “Gingers are losing their jobs” (Tink2013, 2019) showcase the *propaganda* that the MSM pushes while also expressing fear in *white erasure*.

The next theme uncovered in Table 11 (Appendix II) explores ways in which one might *combat the establishment*, demonstrated through the category, “ways to help fight the establishment.” The first meme in Figure 34 shows a snippet from a Breitbart headline pertaining to Reddit’s quarantining of The_Donald. This meme is interesting, because it falls under the code “Alternative news sources,” meaning that if one is to combat the establishment, they must look to these alternative news sources. However, the news source, Breitbart is covering a story about The_Donald, in a way that is in-line with how the subreddit speaks and thinks, and is geared towards the same reader base. This means that not only is Breitbart a good alternative to the MSM as its content is aimed towards Trump supporters, but it also shows the relationship The_Donald has with media it deems worthy, namely a cyclical relationship of one gaining content from the other. This creates a very specific bubble of information that is shared and cited as legitimate media. This meme demonstrates that although, Trump supporters are very much against fake news and news with an agenda, they have no problem with it when it supports their ideology, especially when it can be used to *combat the establishment*.

The second meme in Figure 34 demonstrates a different way in which this theme can be achieved, by looking past identity politics. Here the meme compares the white power movement to the black power movement by saying, “‘white power’ scares people who aren’t white. ‘Black power’ scares people who aren’t black. Make America Great Again is the only thing that scares the establishment.” With a bottom photo showing an interracial handshake behind a red MAGA hat. This meme compares “white power” to identity politics, and downplays its aim in exterminating, subjugating, and keeping power over other races, while also equating it to the “black power movement” aimed at promoting the self-sufficiency and cultural institutions of oppressed African Americans. It also indicates that supporting Trump is a way for both white and black nationalists to come together; however, in this way, identity politics remains, but becomes instead a Trump-based populism. Both of these memes show that it is possible to *combat the establishment*, but only by aligning oneself with Trump’s ideology; however the second one is interesting because as the President of the United States with the majority of the Senate, Supreme Court, and populace behind him, Trump *is* the establishment.

The next theme is how the elites *keep control of the establishment*. The third meme in Figure 40 takes the famous Change/Hope poster for Obama, but re-worked to read, “Lock him up,” a catchphrase also often used for Hillary Clinton during her campaign. The meme here implies that Obama was involved in criminal activities that necessitates his imprisonment; as such his *control of the establishment* came at the price of *corruption*, though the meme does not go into detail about what exactly that entails. The fourth meme in Figure 34 gives us a different way in which power is maintained, but through control of the MSM. Here the image shows a painting of a military campaign being led by the Democrats on horseback. The major MSM outlets are following behind and the text reads, “Artist’s conception of the media retreating from the Russian Collusion campaign and beginning the Anti-White Supremacy campaign, 2019 (colorized).” This implies that the media follow whatever “fake” attack the democrats organize, and that because the collusion charges did not stick, they will now begin accusing Trump of being a white supremacist. This meme shows that *power over the media’s narrative* is another way to *keep control of the establishment*.

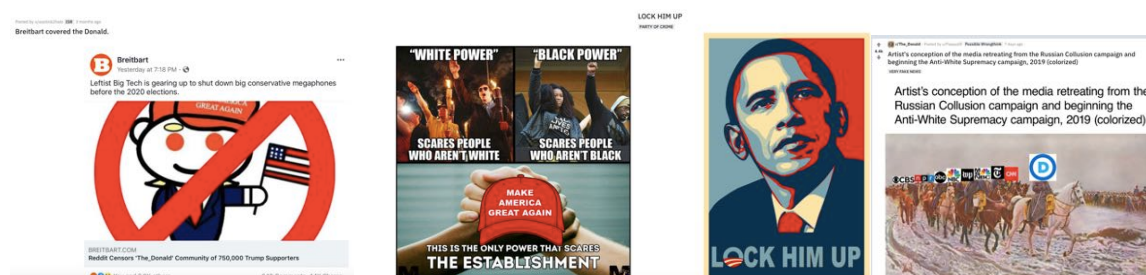


Figure 34. Combatting the establishment and keeping control. The first two memes, “Breitbart covered TD” (austin62halo, 2019) and “Trump scares the establishment” (CaptChrisPBacon, 2018) shows how to fight the establishment through supporting Trump and Trump-approving MSM. While “Lock him up” (A1waysLurk1ng, 2019) reuses a line from the 2016 campaign to accuse Obama of corruption as a means to keep power. This is reinforced by “MSM following the Dems” (PapayaSF, 2019) which demonstrates the elites’ power over the media’s narrative as a means to keep control.

The next theme that is brought out is that of an *anti-Trump establishment*. These memes attempt to prove that the media has a bias against Trump and his supporters. The first meme of Figure 35 lays this clearly with text that reads, “The media keeps calling me a racist because they hate me. There’s no point in telling me to tone it down, they’re still going to keep calling a racist because they hate me.” The meme points out the futility in Trump, “toning down his rhetoric,” because it argues that the MSM will hate Trump regardless. The establishment is anti-Trump to begin with, so there’s no point in attempting to appease them. This meme essentially gives Trump free reign in his rhetoric and exonerates him from repercussions of his words and how they might potentially affect his populace. The second meme in Figure 35 utilizes this same logic, but within the confines of ignoring Trump’s accomplishments. Here the rendering of Trump is shown achieving, a “booming economy, lowest unemployment, better trade deals, world peace,” but the Media disregards all these and instead hurls insults at Trump. Again, this meme makes the point that it matters little what Trump accomplishes, because the media already has its own agenda, which includes hating Trump and stirring up more hatred for POTUS. Both of these memes bring out the subtheme of *futility in appeasement* and give Trump carte blanche in his authority and rhetoric.



Figure 35. Anti-Trump establishment. “Trump has to tone it down” (ShadowXXE, 2019) demonstrates that the MSM hate Trump no matter what he says, and as such there is no need to “tone down the rhetoric” which essentially gives Trump carte blanche in what he says. It along with “You is Nazi” (AlaskanJuggalo4TRUMP, 2018) shows the futility in appeasing an unloving MSM.

The first meme in Figure 36 was originally posted by Donald Trump Jr. and depicts Joe Biden sniffing Bill Clinton in a blue dress within Obama’s presidential portrait. All these components form a memetic logic that works to *delegitimize the elites*. Here Joe Biden comes from a series called “Creepy Joe Biden,”²⁴ Bill Clinton is seen wearing a blue dress which is

²⁴ This is a photoshopped image of Biden whispering in the ear of the wife of the U.S. Secretary of Defense. As it appears that he is perhaps sniffing the person it’s photoshopped over, this image is used often on The_Donald

taken from a painting that was found in Jeffrey Epstein's New York mansion, after his arrest in July 2019. These two figures are on and behind Barack Obama, which ties all three democratic leaders together. Clinton's painting, which is bizarre and connected to Epstein, is coupled with Biden's inappropriate behavior, and work together to make the joke that the elites are all grouped together in strange and perverse activities. Much like RQ1's use of shit-posting to *delegitimize* the enemies, this category of meme achieves the same.

The theme of *groupthink* is represented by the second meme in Figure 36 with a rendering of the left as an NPC whose opinion is formed by those around them, in this case more NPCs. The text insinuates that internet forums like Reddit and the MSM helps to breed NPC behavior. The *groupthink* mentality takes over, and instead of disagreeing with the crowd, the user will perpetuate this way of thinking (here, liberalism). This indicates that through elite channels (MSM and Reddit), *groupthink* is spread and maintained, and the left are the most susceptible to this behavior.

The final theme that is brought out in Table 11 (Appendix II) is that the elites are *traitors*. The third meme in Figure 36 shows this with the photoshopped faces of several prominent democrat leaders including Joe Biden, Dianne Feinstein, and Kamala Harris following behind George Soros and holding the Chinese flag. The text below the image says "China First" and it implies that the democrat party are not abiding by Trump's "America First" stance, but instead to the wants and will of "globalists" such as Soros, which ultimately stand to benefit China. This meme contends that the democrat party is not looking out for the interest of America and are in fact traitors.

This idea extends not only to democrats, but also republican leaders who do not abide by Trump. The last meme in Figure 36 shows Texas' republican House Representative, Dan Crenshaw, in the meme format, of singer Drake in his "Hotline Bling" video. The meme consists of 4 panels, wherein the top two show that someone, here Crenshaw, does not like something, here, "2A shall NOT be infringed" and the bottom panels show Crenshaw liking, "2A shall be infringed." This is in reference to Crenshaw's potential backing of "red flag" laws (gun control laws) after the August 2019 shooting in El Paso Texas. The title of the meme says, "Sell Out" and implies that because Crenshaw has potentially come to consider red flag laws, the second amendment is being infringed. The meme also uses Crenshaw's eyepatch to cover the "not" in the bottom panel, poking fun of his missing eye. This is interesting, because up until this instance, Crenshaw was seen as one of the "good guys" on The_Donald. This meme

to demonstrate how inappropriate and weird the former Vice President acts towards women (Creepy Joe Biden, 2019).

demonstrates that not only are the elites limited to democrats, but party alignments are only important as long as they are in sync with Trump and his supporters' views. Those that don't are sell-outs, and *traitors*.



Figure 35. Delegitimizing elites, groupthink, and traitors. “Perverting elites” (PhantomFuck, 2019) brings together prominent heads of the democratic party to poke fun at and *delegitimize* them. “NPCs follow groupthink” (NervousScene10, 2018) makes the point that MSM and online message boards like Reddit perpetuate elite-led *groupthink*, but only for those on the left. “China first” (CarlosDangersLaptop, 2019) and “Crenshaw infringing on 2a” (Frieza_Sama, 2019) demonstrate how democrats and republicans who disagree with Trump are *traitors*.

4.5.2. Concluding Remarks

The memes coded under the main group, “the elites” tell us a number of things about what The_Donald thinks about the establishment. First of all, the theme of *conspiracy theory* is brought out with a number of memes that show that the elites are not only connected to each other, but are involved in sordid, criminal activities as well. Memes that referenced pizzagate and Epstein work together to show the perversion of the elites and the *distrust in the system* that can then arise. Memes that reference sexual assault allegations and Epstein’s suicide bring out the sense of *power* that the elites wield, as well as the lengths they will go to maintain this *power*. George Soros is used as a stand-in for a left-wing boogeyman and puppet-master, who is able to pull the strings to gain *power* and *destroy America* in the process.

The next theme is that of *fake news*, supported by subthemes such as *manipulation*, *facts aren’t racist*, *propaganda*, *white erasure* and *delegitimate media*. Here memes showcase how the MSM is able to *manipulate* the news to fit their agenda, which must then be corrected by outlets like The_Donald, who although contend that *facts aren’t racist*, are able to hide racist sentiments behind such “facts.” Although this is as much *manipulation* as is being carried out by the MSM, such similarities are never addressed. Moreover, it is believed that the MSM is merely leftist *propaganda* that intends to re-write societal roles, expectations, and goals. These include the idea that climate change exists, as well as the elite’s plan to *erase* the achievements and values of white people. Lastly, memes that highlight the ridiculousness of the MSM illustrates how the media is *delegitimate* and as such not to be trusted or believed.

The theme of *combat the establishment* is supported by a number of memes which showcases alternative news sources and points out ways in which “the people” can fight the elites. An interesting thing that was brought out here is the cyclical nature of these “worthy” news sources, such as Breitbart and The_Donald. This shows that these are deemed legitimate not only due to the parallel thinking, but because each relies on the other for news and facts. Other memes here also show that by supporting Trump, one is actually combatting the establishment, although in reality, Trump is just as much part of the establishment.

The next theme that is illustrated is that of how the elites *keep control of the establishment*. This is achieved through subthemes such as *corruption*, wherein the memes point out the corrupt, criminal activities that the democrats engage in in order to maintain their power. In conjunction to this is another subtheme of *power* over the media’s narrative, which helps to push their agenda and spread their message. Similarly, the following theme, *anti-Trump establishment*, hammers home this message, by proving that there is a strong bias against POTUS. The memes here showcase the establishment’s (especially the MSM’s) hatred for Trump and help to illustrate the scenario of *futility in appeasement*. Here, no matter what Trump achieves, the media will hate him and call him and his base racist, so there is little point in “toning down the rhetoric.” This is the memetic equivalent of a damned if he does, damned if doesn’t attitude and essentially gives the President carte blanche in his words and actions. Moreover, the memes in this category shows how the elites work to *delegitimize Trump*, and as such prove they cannot be trusted to give an unbiased assessment of Trump.

The theme of *delegitimization* of the elites is brought out in the next category, which showcases memes which seeks to make fun of and smear the names and actions of those deemed as elite. Through shit-posting, the memes are able to tarnish the image of elite *a priori* to any future action they take. The final themes are *groupthink* and *traitors*. *Groupthink* seeks to show how the elites use MSM to create unthinking followers and how this way of thinking is maintained. Yet it is interesting because this same mentality is dominate on The_Donald, as users who disagree with the sentiments on the board are downvoted and banned. This shows that although the subreddit is guilty of the same behavior, it is forgiven if it pertains to what they believe. Similarly, the theme of *traitors* shows how those who disagree with Trump (democrats and republicans) are actually traitors to America and its values. These memes show that it is only through Trump that the nation will survive and thrive, and the rest are sell-outs working for another leader (Soros) or agenda (destroying the constitution). This also brings out an interesting point of how party lines matter less than issue, as even republicans such as Dan Crenshaw can be labelled traitor when they go against certain issues.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The memes presented in this research bring out a number of implications related both to populism and meme studies. Firstly, we can conclude that memes have the ability to convey a wide range of ideas: a total of 75 themes across all four research questions came about from this sample of 931 memes. Table 2 categorizes the list of themes and subthemes that is also found in the matrices in Appendix II (Tables 8-11). These ideas were all encompassed in the “simple packaging” that memes provide, and as vehicles for such a vast amount of information, memes can be utilized in a number of different ways. This research represents the first time that political memes were used in defining a group’s ideology, and its results can be useful in establishing meme research’s standardization. Furthermore, this could potentially widen the scope of literature’s functions of political memes to include the concept of “meme magic,” as the memes from The_Donald appeared to fulfill a number of functions not clearly delineated by Shifman’s original three (memes as grassroots activity, expression, and political advocacy). “Meme magic” is the idea of meme-ing events into happening in real life and a number of memes included in this research were seemingly created with the intention of influencing the offline space (memes as “vigilantism,” “making themselves into memes,” the “Straight Pride” memes that resulted in a parade). However, as this set of memes were not coded for “how” or “why,” only the “what” of their content, further iterations of coding might garner additional insights as well as locate the exact role, extent, or amount of influence political memes play in spreading populism. For now, we can at least definitively conclude that memes are able to communicate a vast number of ideas, many of which are related to populism.

Table 2. Categorized list of themes and subthemes for each RQ. By author.

| | Theme & subtheme RQ1 | | Theme & subthemes RQ2 | | Theme & subthemes RQ3 | | Theme & subthemes RQ4 |
|---|--|---|--|---|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Delegitimization | 1 | People over government | 1 | True Americans | 1 | Conspiracy theories |
| 2 | Dehumanization | 2 | God-given rights | 2 | Heartland | 2 | Distrust |
| 3 | Traditional masculine and feminine attitudes | 3 | Government distrust | 3 | Patriotism | 3 | Power |
| 4 | Mob Rule | 4 | Enemy distrust | 4 | Traditional values and gender roles | 4 | Perversion |
| 5 | Liberalism creates enemies | 5 | Constitutional Rights | 5 | Traditional family is under attack | 5 | Fake News |
| 6 | Invasion | 6 | Embodiment of rights and American values | 6 | Nostalgia | 6 | Manipulation |
| 7 | Changing the narrative | 7 | Will of the people | 7 | Knowledge is power | 7 | Facts aren’t racist |
| 8 | Hypocrisy | 8 | Will fulfilled through Trump | 8 | Distrust of institutions | 8 | Delegitimate Establishment |

| | | | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------------|----|---|----|--|----|---|
| 9 | Manipulation | 9 | Threats to “will of the people” | 9 | Enlightenment | 9 | Propaganda |
| 10 | Dishonest enemies | 10 | Protection | 10 | Trump supporters are the majority | 10 | White erasure |
| 11 | Destruction of America | 11 | Territorial sovereignty | 11 | Control | 11 | Combat Establishment |
| 12 | Racism disguised as facts | 12 | Dog-whistling | 12 | Changing the Narrative | 12 | Keeping Control of the Establishment |
| 13 | Treasonous Enemies | 13 | Preserving will of the people | 13 | Persecution | 13 | Corruption |
| 14 | Perverting American values | 14 | Issue flip-flopping | 14 | Stronger Together | 14 | Control of MSM |
| 15 | Feminism makes bad women | 15 | Personal sovereignty | 15 | Theft | 15 | Anti-Trump Establishment |
| 16 | Unamerican | 16 | Threats to “our” rights | 16 | Protection | 16 | Futility in appeasement |
| | | 17 | Enemy Infringement | 17 | Superiority | 17 | Persecution |
| | | 18 | Minority over majority | 18 | Meme magic | 18 | Delegitimize Trump |
| | | 19 | Threats to the rights of pre-born citizens | | | 19 | Hypocritical Establishment |
| | | 20 | Distortion of the will of the people | | | 20 | Groupthink |
| | | | | | | 21 | Traitors |

Secondly, although it is not within the purview of this paper to argue that sharing memes equates to political participation, the amount of memes shared in The_Donald, their content, and their various purposes seem to clearly line up with Ross & Rivers’ (2017) assertion for them to be added as new tools of political participation. Especially memes that exist to influence the real world (“meme magic”) or work as an educational tool (such as “Mass Shooters 2019” which attempts to change the narrative or “Fake news” which exposes the lying MSM) demonstrate not only the diverse uses of memes by the posters and those who share them, but it disputes Halubka’s derision of such clicktivist activities as an “impulsive and disposable political gesture” (2014, p.129). This is further disputed by the coordinated messaging that is being communicated by the memes. Future studies might explore this aspect and look at how meme posters view their activity in the context of political participation.

Thirdly, the ideas gained from the research lined up with literature’s previous understanding of right-wing populism, such as Norris & Inglehart’s (2019) definition for authoritarian populism: *conformity, security, and obedience*; and Mudde’s (2007) indicators for right-wing populism: *nativism, authoritarianism, and populism*. In this research, conformity to the group is expressed in themes of *traditional values and gender roles, traditional masculine and feminine attitudes, and majority over minority*; security comes about in the need for the group’s *protection*; and obedience is seen in the theme *stronger together* which shows a group loyalty to one another, as well as the subtheme *futility in appeasement*, which demonstrates how the The_Donald will stick by Trump, no matter his rhetoric. Comparing this research to Mudde (2007), we see that nativism is expressed through the theme of *true Americans*;

authoritarianism is seen in themes of *control* or *changing the narrative*; and populism is seen in *people have the true power, will of the people*, and *Trump is the fulfillment of the will of the people*. These themes are compared to both sets of indicators in Table 3.

The fact that memes were able to convey the same ideas that were brought out in previous research offers legitimacy and validity to this methodology as a reliable means of understanding populists, allowing them to define their own ideology, and understanding the relationship between “the people” and their memes from the bottom-up. This is contrasted to a top-down approach of analyzing party manifestos, speeches, and political communications delivered by populist parties: the primary way in which a Trump-based populism was formulated in Ch. 1.4.1 and how literature has applied such indicators (Mudde, 2007). If studying the memes from the *populi* can deliver similar findings, then this ensures that memes should be considered for future studies about populism, especially if the focus is on a comparison of top-down messaging to bottom-up. Another avenue this research opens up is as a point of comparison for any future attempts to apply this methodology to memes in different online environments or in the analysis of memes by other populist movements. In that way, these results would be compared to other populist case studies in generating a broader theory of the phenomenon.

Table 3. Comparing populist literature’s indicators to the themes found in this research. By author.

| Comparing Populist Indicators | |
|--|--|
| Authoritarian populism (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) | Right-wing populism (Mudde, 2007) |
| <i>conformity, security, and obedience</i> | <i>nativism, authoritarianism, and populism</i> |
| Trump-based populism | Trump-based populism |
| <i>Traditional values and gender roles, Traditional masculine and feminine attitudes, majority over minority; protection; stronger together, futility in appeasement</i> | <i>True Americans; control, changing the narrative; people have the true power, will of the people, Trump is the fulfillment of the will of the people</i> |

Thirdly, as mentioned above, this research was able to bring out various themes and subthemes (Table 2) which roots what the supporters in The_Donald believe to either a right-wing or authoritarian populism (Table 3). However, the themes and subthemes thicken both definitions and demonstrate what the “add-on” ideology of a Trump-based populism means for “the people.” A Trump-based populism believes in protecting the interests of True Americans and their traditional values from the infringement of God-given American rights such as free speech, the right to bear arms, the right to vote in free and fair elections. Through means of control, delegitimization, and education via their pre-approved media, Trump and his supporters can maintain power over the corrupt, perverted elites, the left, and those who come to America to take without giving anything in return. “The people” are under attack by internal and external hordes bent on destroying America, but united together behind Trump, who fulfills

the will of the people, the global establishment attempting to destroy America's sovereignty and borders is combatted, and the rights of the majority are protected from the minorities. With a disdain for educational institutions, mainstream media, progressive ideals, and 97% of scientists (Scientific Consensus: Earth's Climate is Warming, 2019) a Trump-based populism is helping to usher in an era of fear, conspiracy theories, and deflection that can easily write off dissenters as "fake news," overly emotional, sensitive "snowflakes," or "joking" caricatures of entire cultures. The anonymity of memes, the obfuscation of irony helped by Poe's Law, and being able to hide behind "facts" exonerates both politically incorrect and outwardly racist, homophobic, and xenophobic ideas, while also perpetuating the fear of white erasure or the need for "Straight Pride." However, this ideology is not static and support for or a call for removal of institutions such as the electoral college can be conjured at will, depending on the benefits. Party lines as well mean little if a core component or issue is challenged. Arms are extended to those with like-minded opinions or who produce like-minded media and memes, even if concepts such as groupthink and propaganda are derided as the work of the elite MSM. A Trump-based populism utilizes the indicators of populism and applies it to American specific ideas and modern talking points and solutions. The memes that come from supporters give control to the people, who help create the message and set the tone of Trump's rhetoric, while also disseminating the content via memes, SNS, and online forums. They represent not only a chain in populist communication logic (Engesser et al., 2017), but an integral part of the ideology itself.

In contrast to the numerous, vague and conflicting definitions of Trumpism presented in Ch 1.4.1., this research has attempted to systematically establish indicators from the bottom-up that can go towards defining this ideology. Having this definition is important because not only does Trump represent the dominating strain of American populism, but as the face of the Republican party, he also represents American politics and is helping to set the standards for modern populism worldwide (Finchelstein, 2019). This methodology however brings out a limitation, in that the research was limited by the thematic content of the chosen memes; it's possible that other themes might have developed had there been a broader range of data.

Another limitation that came about when using this framework was the fact that memes specifically looking at how Trump is portrayed were not analyzed. Table 1 shows that in populist communication logic, the charismatic leader falls under the "messenger" category. As this research focused only on the indicators for "content," there was no possibility to look at only a strict portrayal of Trump through the memes. However, as this ideology is so concerned

about Trump as a person, such an analysis may have given additional insights to the overall definition. Additional limitations are discussed in Ch. 3.2.9.

Fourthly, this kind of research shows the value of defining populism as an ideology through its supporters; as a common argument in literature is that populists don't call themselves populists, (Canovan, 1981). We see here that many memes purposively lean into populist imagery, narratives, and rhetoric, which even if this comes originally from Trump, is clearly expressed by "the people" within their memes. This is important because it opens up new ways to study the ideological approach, which in the past did not look towards party members (Mudde, 2007, p.37). This research shows the value in considering the voice of supporters as well. It also opens up the idea of exploring origin of the rhetoric; much insight could be gleaned from recognizing whether or not an idea began with Trump or formed online which was then circulated to Trump, as that would show the way in which this ideology was ultimately formed as well as how others might generate.

Fifthly, the themes that were brought out were similar in each research question. Ideas such as *distrust*, *perversion*, *hypocrisy*, *traditional values delegitimization*, *protection*, and *control* came up a few times, meaning that memes are communicating similar messaging. The fact that they came from more than 656 unique users shows that this messaging is consistent across a number of different users; this gives credence to the notion that there is indeed an underlying ideology hidden in the memes, as many memes express similar objectives. This quantitative information also shows that though there was some overlap, the memes were in general not coming from one specific source (Appendix III, Tables 12-15). Additional studies might find value in examining the users more in-depth along with the memes, or perhaps talking to users themselves. The limitations of this research saw the posters' information as secondary to the content of memes, but perhaps looking at the posters in conjunction to the memes they post might bring out a more complex picture of political memes.

Finally, there was a difficulty in limiting memes to their "what," as in order to understand what the meme was communicating, one sometimes needed to consider the "why" or "how." This does not so much diminish the work that Engesser et al. (2017) achieved in their development of the theoretical framework used here, so much as give support to the notion that populism should not be limited to one approach and is best understood as a combination. Moreover, such difficulty in understanding memes calls into question previous studies that relied only on quantitative data or else refuses to comprehend the intertextuality of memes. Future studies might find value in coding memes for each question, which would help to understand how each approach reinforces one-another. Doing so would also give a clearer

picture of what exactly memes are able to achieve, how users are using memes, how they are helping to spread populist communication, and to what purpose.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study used QCA to endogenously examine political memes that were created and shared by users in the pro-Trump subreddit The_Donald. The aim was to construct a definition of the ideology pertaining to a Trump-based populism using only user-generated memes. Doing so would allow the creators and sharers of such memes to construct and define the own indicators for their ideology. This was a bottom-up approach towards populism enlisting an often-used, modern medium, political memes, that will aid in trying to understand elements of populism in the digital age. The research questions used common indicators from populist literature and succinctly categorized by Engesser et al. (2017). These included:

RQ1: How are the perceived “others” depicted and excluded through memes?

RQ2: How is the “general will” of the “people” depicted in memes?

RQ3: How are the “people” depicted in memes?

RQ4: How are the “elites” portrayed through memes?

QCA was used to categorize and code the 931 memes and the analysis elicited a total of 75 themes and subthemes that went towards composing a definition of a Trump-based populism. For RQ1 the results showed that shit-posting enemies was a way to dehumanize and delegitimize them, creating a narrative where liberals become automatically associated with overly-emotional and illogical “snowflakes,” brainwashed NPCs, or perverted sexual deviants, while foreigners and minorities are reduced to caricatures and blamed for treason and crime against America. Regarding the portrayal of the “general will” and popular sovereignty in RQ2, it can be seen that American rights are quickly being degraded and infringed upon by enemies and elites. Rights such as those outlined in the first and second amendments are seen as “God-given” and any force that oversteps on these rights are anti-American and go against the principles of the Constitution laid out by the Founding Fathers. However, Trump is both a modern-day incarnation of these original values as well as vehicle through which popular sovereignty can thrive. In RQ3, “the people” are portrayed as hard-working, “true Americans” who believe in traditional, conservative, and nostalgic values. They are seen as persecuted for their belief in Trump, and many highlight the need for protection as their way of life is eroded by the enemies and elites. “The people” are also shown to be more enlightened and less manipulated by MSM, and alternative sources of information, including memes and conspiracy theories, are frequently emphasized. This RQ also highlights the importance of the group’s ability to control the narrative and manipulate world events through “meme magic.” Finally, in RQ4, the elites are seen as a tightly connected, conspiratorial group, able to manipulate the media and propagate their worldview to change societal dynamics and erase the achievements of Donald Trump and white people in general, in order to maintain power for themselves.

Despite being faced with “facts,” the elite continue their own narrative, while refusing to engage with Trump, building both resentment and distrust for “the people” who see Trump attempting to fight this establishment.

A Trump-based populism is rooted within right-wing and authoritarian populism, and the variety of themes which often overlapped between RQ’s and the 656 different meme posters help back this up that it is its own ideology based on Trump. However, there were limitations to this research and having to follow certain indicators, as well as not coding for the “how” or “why” are different approaches that might be considered for future research. It may be concluded that memes are able to communicate a number of different messages, one of which is spreading populist communication. For a Trump-based populism they even go so far as to becoming part of the ideology itself. The overall research showed that not only was this ideology consistent to aspects of populism found in previous literature, but it helped in furthering research into political memes and demonstrated that how such studies are important and necessary considering the current political climate.

In July of 2019, Donald Trump held a social media summit and invited far-right media provocateurs to the White House, including Redditor and frequent The_Donald poster, Carpe Donktum. This outward display of attention towards alternative media demonstrates the value that POTUS puts on these voices and this outlet. After the summit he Tweeted, “[e]ach of you is fulfilling a vital role in our nation – you are challenging the media gatekeepers and the corporate censors to bring the facts straight to the American People. Together, you reach more people than any television broadcast, BY FAR! #SocialMediaSummit.” (realDonaldTrump, 2019). For populists like Trump, social media and its memes can not only reach more people, but the fact that they are created by “the people,” in this case, Trump’s supporters, give legitimacy and strength to memes. Acting as vehicles to spread political ideology means discovering more about memes should be a top priority in political science.

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Appendix I. Tables of Keywords.

Table 4. Keywords for RQ1. Source: author.

| RQ1 Keywords | | | | | |
|----------------------|---------------|-------------------------|------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|
| First round: | Liberal | Left | Immigrant | Socialist | Flair “enemy of the people” |
| | Flair “Spicy” | Flair “finish the wall” | Flair “NSFCucks” | NPC | Flair “violent left” |
| | Libtard | Feminist | Antifa | enemy | Flair “snowflake” |
| | Snowflake | Islam | racist | Dems | Muslim |
| Second round: | Nasty woman | Flair “nasty woman” | shill | Cuck | Soy |
| | Indoctrinate | Flair “shit post” | Horde | Caravan | pedo |
| | Ban | Ilhan | trigger | TDS | AOC |
| | Mexican | Flair “racist left” | Bernie | Squad | pride |

Table 5. Keywords for RQ2. Source: author

| RQ2 Keywords | | | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| First round: | Will of the people | Our rights | Our freedom | Inalienable rights | People’s rights |
| | Nationalism | Sovereignty | Majority | Border | Citizen rights |
| | Flair “walls work” | Wall | America first | Flair “America First” | General will |
| Second round: | 1a | 2a | Amendment | Constitution | Constitutional right |
| | Founding fathers | Force | Infringe | Power people | Flair “enemy of the people” |
| | Free speech | Gun | Flair “MAGA” | Globalism | We the people |
| | Flair “NSFCucks” | Voter id | Electoral college | Flair “pro-life” | God-given |
| | Human rights | Protect | minority | rights | Flair “2 nd amendment” |
| | Foreign interference | Sharia law | #demandvoterid | Illegal voting | Open border |

Table 6. Keywords for RQ3. Source: author

| RQ3 Keywords | | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| First round: | people | pedes | Heartland | Flair “MAGA” | Rural |
| | Flyover | TD | Majority | The right | The-Donald |
| | Flair “walls work” | Republicans | America first | Flair “America First” | Legal American |
| | American | Flair “choose greatness” | Right wing | Pizzagate | Racist fact |
| Second round: | Hero | True | Hard-working | Real | Real people |
| | Based | Left can’t meme | Best | Taxes | Flair “enemy of the people” |
| | Free speech | Welfare | Bots | Super elite | Trump |
| | Flair “NSFCucks” | Toxic masculinity | Trigger | Salty tears | Flair “salty tears” |
| | Legal | Blue collar | Stand for the flag | MAGA | Flair “Sunday gunday” |

Appendix I cont.

Table 7. Keywords for RQ4. Source: author

| RQ4 Keywords | | | | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| First round: | Elites | Establishment | Democrats | System | MSM |
| | Soros | Unelected global governance | Globalist | Deep state | Flair “enemy of the people” |
| | Reddit | Swamp | America first | Hillary | Killary |
| | Fake news | Pizzagate | pedo | corrupt | Flair “drain the swamp” |
| Second round: | Very fake news | Conspire | Hypocrite | Enemy of the people | Failing news |
| | Flair “party of crime” | Flair “#stopthebias” | Epstein | Clinton | Obummer |
| | caravan | narrative | pedophile | Super elite | dems |
| | Flair “Corruption” | Flair “you’re fired” | Flair “party of crime” | China | Flair “ridiculous bullshit” |
| | Reddit | Redacted | Flair “socialist left” | Flair “lying MSM” | Flair “walls work” |

Appendix II. Coding Matrices.

Note: parentheses indicate number of memes.

Table 8. Matrix for RQ1: The enemies. Source: author

| RQ1: the enemies | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|--|
| Theme & Subtheme (What?) | Category: (How?) | Code: (Through this) | Subcode: | subsubcode |
| Delegitimization | Shit-posting Enemies | You can't argue with liberals | Liberals are illogical (5) The left overreact and are led by emotion (4) Democrats are dumb/simplistic (3) | The Left are "snowflakes" (3) "The Squad" are stupid/ not qualified (4) |
| Delegitimization Dehumanization | | Liberalism is a disease | Before and After Liberals (4) | |
| Delegitimization | | Liberals are mentally ill (6) | | |
| Delegitimization Dehumanization Traditional masculine and feminine attitudes | | Making Fun of Liberals' and Democrats' appearance | The left are parodies/ memes (10) Liberal men are cucks/soy boy/ not real men (3) Liberal women are are ugly/ degenerates/ freaks (5) | "This is who is calling you racist" (3) Antifa (2) body shaming liberals (5) |
| Delegitimization Dehumanization | | Making Fun of Immigrants | Immigrants are jokes/cartoons (5) | |
| Delegitimization Dehumanization | | Making fun of Muslims (3) | Ilhan Omar (6) | |
| Mob Rule Liberalism creates enemies | America is being overrun by unthinking masses | The liberal agenda is indoctrination | Schools are centers for indoctrination (5) Universities are centers for indoctrination (3) | |
| Mob Rule Liberalism creates enemies | | The prevalence of progressive culture is a way to indoctrinate youth | Books, games, and TV shows about progressive culture for children (4) | Gay Pride Month (1) Drag Queen Story Time (1) |
| Mob Rule Liberalism creates enemies | | Liberals are mouthpieces of the MSM and other elite entities (2) | Liberals are NPCs (4) | |
| Mob Rule Invasion | | Foreign invaders | Muslims are taking over America (4) Illegal immigration is invasion/horde (3) | |
| Changing the narrative | Enemies are the source of hateful/ violent rhetoric | The Left is racist (2) | the left and Dems say/do racist things but are not held accountable (3) | |
| Changing the narrative | | Those on the Left are the source of America's violent and hateful rhetoric | Left are hateful (3) Left are anti-semitic (2) Dems = dictators/facists (1) | |
| Changing the narrative | | Enemies are Violent | Violent left (4) | Antifa (3) Violent feminists (2) |

Appendix II cont.

| RQ1: the enemies (Cont.) | | | | |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| Theme & Subtheme (What?) | Category: (How?) | Code: (Through this) | Subcode: | subsubcode |
| Changing the narrative | | The left dehumanize (2) | | |
| Hypocrisy | Enemies are Hypocrites | Liberals are hypocrites (3) | Liberals have a double standard for themselves and those on the right (5) | |
| Hypocrisy | | Democratic politicians are hypocrites (4) | | |
| Manipulation Dishonest enemies | Enemies manipulate/fake to get what they want | Immigrants are faking to get into the country (3) | No women or children in the caravan (2) Muslims fake being “good” citizens (2) | |
| Manipulation Dishonest enemies | | Democrats fake their race (2) | Dems pander to get the black vote (2) | |
| Manipulation Dishonest enemies | | The left Fake crimes (3) | The left can play the race card to get away with crimes/actions (2) | |
| Manipulation Dishonest enemies | | The left Fake tears/ distress (3) | | |
| Destruction of America Racism disguised as facts | Enemies are creating problems in America | Democrat Cities (5) | Dem cities are a mess because they are focusing on the wrong issue (3) | |
| Destruction of America Racism disguised as facts | | The Left create problems out of nothing (6) | They create new problems at the expense of real problems (4) | |
| Destruction of America | | MSM creates problems | Brainwash people (1) Provoke fighting (1) | |
| Destruction of America Treasonous Enemies | | Democratic policies and politicians will destroy America with foreign ideologies | “The squad” are socialists/Marxists, want to turn America socialist (2) The squad are terrorists (4) | liberal view of socialism is simplistic, not rooted in reality (7) |
| Destruction of America Treasonous Enemies | | The left hates America (3) | | |
| Destruction of America Treasonous Enemies | | The left are responsible for helping (other) American enemies | Diversity is our strength (The left hate white people) (4) The Left help Islam in the West (3) Democrats care more for the interest of immigrants and illegal persons than Americans (6) | |
| Perverting American values | Enemies have wrong values | The Left (SJWs and feminists) are ruining traditional values (3) | | |

Appendix II cont.

| | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| RQ1: the enemies (Cont.) | | | | |
| Perverting American values | | Hurt children | <p>Liberals expose their children to “degenerate” activities (2)</p> <p>Liberal families unnecessarily transition their children (3)</p> <p>Child drag (2)</p> <p>Liberalism protects pedophiles (2)</p> <p>Liberals are pedophiles (1)</p> <p>Gay culture is “grooming” children (6)</p> <p>Islam is a religion of pedophilia (3)</p> <p>Immigrants endanger their children (1)</p> | |
| Perverting American values Feminism makes bad women | | Feminism makes “bad” women | <p>Feminists are disgusting (2)</p> <p>“Nasty Woman” - Outspoken left-leaning women are “nasty”</p> | <p>“Nasty” outspoken female celebrities (2)</p> <p>Women who disagree with Trump are “nasty” (4)</p> |
| Perverting American values | | Enemies are helping others pervert American values | Liberals support Islam (4) | |
| Perverting American values Unamerican | | Dangerous foreign Enemies | <p>Muslims are large, violent groups (4)</p> <p>Illegal immigrants are violent, criminals (3)</p> | Muslims do not have modern, Western values (4) |
| Perverting American values Unamerican | | Immigrants are not patriotic Americans (4) | | |
| Total: 248 | | | | |

Table 9. Matrix for RQ2: popular sovereignty. Source: author

| RQ2: Popular Sovereignty | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|---|----------|------------|
| Theme & Subthemes (What?) | Category: (How?) | Code: (Through this) | Subcode: | subsubcode |
| People over government God-given rights | “The people” hold the power | God-given rights cannot be taken away (5) | | |
| People over government | | Rights based on citizenship (3) | | |
| People over government God-given rights | | Right to protect ourselves (2) | | |

Appendix II cont.

| | | | | |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| People over government Government distrust | | People have power over their government (7) | | |
| People over government Enemy distrust | | People have power over enemies (1) | | |
| Constitutional Rights | Constitutional rights protect popular sovereignty | With the Constitution, the Found Fathers implemented a tool to protect the rights of sovereignty of “the people” (5) | The second Amendment helps to protect these rights from the government and enemies (7) | |
| Constitutional Rights Embodiment of rights and American values | | Trump is following in the footsteps of the found fathers and those values (5) | Trump supporters are following in the footsteps as well (3) | |
| Will of the people Fulfilled through Trump | Trump represents the will of the people | “We the people” and Trump (7) | | |
| Will of the people Will fulfilled through Trump | | Approval rating = will of the people (3) | | |
| Will of the people Threats to “will of the people” | | Democrats against Trump ignore the will of the people (6) | Taxation without representation ((3) They refuse to build a wall (4) | |
| Protection Territorial sovereignty Dog-whistling | Tools to protect America’s sovereignty | America First and Trump’s policies (4) | Nationalism over globalism (6) | |
| Protection Preserving will of the people | | Voting republican protects our rights (2) | | |
| Protection Preserving will of the people | | Voter ID (4) | | |
| Protection Preserving will of the people Issue flip-flopping | | Electoral college (3) | | |
| Protection Personal sovereignty | | Guns protect our rights (4) | | |
| Protection Territorial sovereignty | | Border sovereignty(2) | The wall (4) | |
| Protection Territorial sovereignty | | ICE (2) | | |
| Threats to our rights Enemy Infringement | Internal enemies are a threat to our rights/ constitutional rights | Political enemies are going against the constitution (6) | | |
| Threats to our rights Enemy Infringement | | Enemies are limiting out freedom of speech | Liberalism restricts freedom of speech (7) The establishment (MSM and tech companies) are limiting free speech (4) | |

Appendix II cont.

| | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| | | | Trump supporters have less rights (2) Reddit quarantine is limiting free speech (2) | |
| RQ2: popular sovereignty (cont.) | | | | |
| Threats to our rights Enemy Infringement | | Democrats want to eliminate 2 nd amendment (4) | | |
| Threats to our rights Enemy Infringement Minority over majority Threats to the rights of pre-born citizens | | Progressive ideas and values infringe on Americans' rights (5) | Minority over majority (3) Gay culture and rights are forced on the people and infringe on the rights of Americans (6) Feminism infringes on Americans' rights (3) Universal healthcare infringes on Americans' (doctors') rights (3) | Reproductive rights and abortion take away the rights of pre-born citizens (6) |
| Threats to our rights Enemy Infringement | External enemies are a threat to popular sovereignty and Americans' rights | Islam is taking these rights away (3) Immigration is taking these rights away (2) | | |
| Distortion of the will of the people | Enemies want to change US demographics to distort the "will of the people" | Democrats want to eliminate white people (2) | | |
| Distortion of the will of the people | | Democrats want open borders (6) | | |
| Distortion of the will of the people | | MSM wants to change demographics (1) | | |
| Distortion of the will of the people | | Illegal voting (1) | Democrats support illegal voting (6) Foreign entities are interfering with the voting process (4) | Democrats and voter ID propaganda (6) |
| Total:174 | | | | |

Table 10. Matrix for RQ3: the people. Source: author

| Matrix for RQ3: the people | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|--|---------------|
| Theme & subthemes (What?) | Category: (How?) | Code: (Through this) | Subcode: | subsubcode |
| True Americans Heartland | Trump supporters are "real" Americans | Hard-working Americans (8) | Hard-working immigrants (1) Blue collar (6) Trump supporters in the wild (2) | |
| True Americans Patriotism | | Patriots (5) | Stand for the Flag (3) 'Merica (6) | |
| True Americans Patriotism | | Heros | Martyrs for America (4) Died protecting Americans (2) Armed Forces (2) Veterans (3) | Seth Rich (4) |

Appendix II cont.

| | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| True Americans Heartland | | Heartland | rednecks (1) rural (2) | Liberals stay out of business (2) |
| True Americans Heartland | | Legal immigrants (7) | | |
| Traditional values and gender roles Traditional family is under attack Nostalgia | Trump Supporters have traditional values | Traditional Family (4) | Traditional gender roles (2) Straight Pride (3) Traditional children (2) | Strong men (2) |
| Traditional values and gender roles Nostalgia | | God-loving (3) | | |
| Traditional values and gender roles Nostalgia | | 1950's Americana nostalgia (4) | | |
| Knowledge is power Distrust of institutions | Trump Supporters fight enemies with knowledge | Expose Enemies (3) | Support media who exposes deep state (4) Dig into enemies (1) Vigilantism (2) | |
| Knowledge is power Distrust of institutions Enlightenment | | Meme warfare (6) | Upvoting (2) "it's honest work" (2) | |
| Knowledge is power Enlightenment | | Red Pill (6) | | |
| Knowledge is power Enlightenment | | Racism disguised as facts (3) | | |
| Knowledge is power Distrust of institutions | | Free-thinking (6) | Can't be manipulated by enemies (4) | |
| Trump supporters are the majority | Many/most of "the people" love Trump | Lots of Trump supporters (2) | The_Donald (3) | |
| Trump supporters are the majority | Trump draws big crowds | Inauguration (1) Trump Rallies (4) | | |
| Trump supporters are the majority | | Silent Majority (2) | | |
| Control Changing the Narrative | Re-appropriating Leftist language/themes | Deplorable (3) | | |
| Control Changing the Narrative | | White Privilege (5) | | |
| Control Changing the Narrative | | #Trumpbodycount (3) | | |
| Control Changing the Narrative | | Male Privilege (2) | | |
| Control Changing the Narrative | | Toxic Masculinity (2) | | |

Appendix II cont.

| | | | | |
|--|--|---|---|--|
| RQ3: the people cont. | | | | |
| Control Changing the Narrative | | ID is voter suppression (2) | | |
| Control Changing the Narrative | | Racism (1) | POC for Trump (3) Red hat is racist (2) | |
| Control Changing the Narrative | | Using well-known memes for their issues (3) | | |
| Control Changing the Narrative | | Super Elite (4) | | |
| Control Changing the Narrative | | Pepe (11) | | |
| Control Changing the Narrative | | Left memes TD like (so bad it's good) (4) | | |
| Persecution | The right are persecuted | Enemies silence the Right (2) | Enemies keep the silent majority silent (4) | |
| Persecution | | Right are targeted/threatened (7) | | |
| Persecution | | Right are demonized (1) | | |
| Persecution | | Right are dehumanized | Right are bots (3) | |
| Persecution | | Whites are discriminated against | White pride is racist (3) White people and their... (2) | |
| Persecution | | Christians are discriminated against (1) | | |
| Stronger Together | Stronger Together | Trump supporters support one another (2) | | |
| Stronger Together | | TD is a family (2) | Frens (2) | |
| Stronger Together | | Support businesses that support Trump (3) | | |
| Stronger Together | | Americans helping Americans (4) | | |
| Stronger Together | | Trump brings people together (5) | | |
| Theft | Things are being taken away from "the people" | Immigrants take from "the people" (3) | | |
| Theft | | Socialism (2) | | |
| Theft | | Taxes=theft (2) | | |
| Theft | | Welfare (1) | | |
| Theft | | Transgendered people rob sports (1) | | |
| Protection | Protection is necessary | Guns (2) | Sunday Gunday (3) Women protect themselves (4) Protect Children (4) | |
| Superiority | Trump supporters are superior to their enemies | The "Best" women (4) | | |

Appendix II cont.

| | | | | |
|----------------------------------|--|-------------------------|---|--|
| Superiority | | Better than enemies (7) | Trolling (4) | |
| Superiority | | Triggering the Libs (4) | Fredo (2) | |
| Superiority | | Making fun of enemies | Salty tears (4) Not offended (2) | |
| Superiority Meme magic | | Better at internet | Make themselves into memes (4) Left Can't Meme (4) | |
| Total: 273 | | | | |

Table 11. Matrix for RQ4: the elites. Source: author

| RQ4: The Elites | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|--|
| Theme & subthemes (What?) | Category: (How?) | Code: (Through this) | Subcode: | subsubcode |
| Conspiracy theories distrust Perversion | Interconnected groups of elites are involved in far-reaching sordid activities | Elites are involved in international pedophile rings (8) | Pizzagate (2) | |
| Conspiracy theories Abuse of Power distrust | | Elites are murders (2) | FBI's involvement with Epstein (2) Clintons murder to cover up Epstein findings (3) | |
| Conspiracy theories Abuse of Power distrust | | Deep State (7) | | |
| Conspiracy theories Power | | Outside elite forces | China is censoring Reddit (4) Globalists (1) Soros (4) | Caravan is funded by Soros (4) |
| Fake News Manipulation Facts aren't racist | Establishment dishonestly manipulate the narrative to blame certain enemies/to fit their agenda | Blame wrong target (1) | Blame is placed on white extremism/supremacy (2) | |
| Fake News Manipulation Facts aren't racist | | Race is changed to fit the narrative (3) | Fake stats for gun control (4) | |
| Fake News Manipulation | | Stories are ignored for not fitting narrative (4) | Stories are ignored once they fulfill their purpose (2) | |
| Fake News Manipulation | | Media covers up news stories (1) | Distraction (6) | |
| Fake News Manipulation | | Censoring (2) | | |
| Fake News Manipulation | | Manipulating Images (4) | | |
| Fake News Manipulation | | Leftist Narrative (2) | Left bias (1) | |
| Fake News Propaganda White erasure | | Establishment is creating their own (leftist) narrative | Made-up Narratives (1) Climate Change (4) Promote Diversity over truth (3) News=Propaganda (5) | Changing societal dynamics (3) Whites are bad (5) |

Appendix II cont.

| | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| Fake News Delegitimate Establishment | | The MSM is not a legitimate source of news | MSM is not credible | Ridiculous headlines (6) Fake News (6) |
| Fake News Delegitimate Establishment | | MSM reporters are jokes (4) | | |
| Combat Establishment | Ways to help combat the establishment | Alternative news sources | Breitbart (4) Tabloids (1) 4chan (3) OANN(3) The donald (4) | |
| Combat Establishment | | Move past identity politics (2) | | |
| Combat Establishment | | Support Trump | Trump is draining the swamp (4) Trump goes against establishment (6) | |
| Keeping Control of the Establishment Corruption | How the Establishment keeps control of power | Democrats manipulate politics (5) | Democrats manipulate (black) voters (2) Dems manufacture issues for political gain (3) Democrats are the party of crime (6) | Reparations (3) Female accusers are paid (3) Above the Law (4) |
| Keeping Control of the Establishment Control of MSM | | Media works for democrats (4) | Media covers for democrats (3) | |
| Keeping Control of the Establishment Control of MSM | | Censorship (4) | Banning (1) Cancellation (2) | |
| Anti-Trump Establishment | The Establishment and MSM have a bias against Trump | Double standard for left and Trump (4) | | |
| Anti-Trump Establishment Futility in appeasement | | Blame Trump (4) | | |
| Anti-Trump Establishment Delegitimize Trump | | Lies about Trump | Trump and his base are racist (5) Correcting MSM narrative (4) | |
| Anti-Trump Establishment | | Conspire against Trump (3) | Targeting Trump supporters (2) Focusing on those against Trump (2) | |
| Anti-Trump Establishment Futility in appeasement | | Ignore Trump's achievements (3) | Reducing Trump's popularity (3) | |
| Hypocritical Establishment | The Establishment are hypocrites | Democrat party are the real racists (4) | Democrats aren't as diverse as they claim to be (1) | subsubcode |
| Delegitimate Establishment | Delegitimization of elites through shit- posting (6) | | | |

Appendix II cont.

| | | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|---|---|--|
| RQ4: the elite | | | | |
| Groupthink | MSM is groupthink for enemies | MSM does the thinking for people (2) | MSM creates NPCs (3) Creates Terrorists (1) Liberals buy into groupthink (3) Liberals demand groupthink from MSM (2) | |
| Traitors | Establishment sell-out America | Democrats | Dems are run by globalists (5) The Democrats sell out (black) Americans for immigrant votes (2) | |
| Traitors | | Republicans who don't support Trump (6) | | |
| Total: 236 | | | | |

Appendix III. Tables of Meme Posters

Table 12. Meme posters RQ1.

| RQ1 Meme posters | | | | | | | |
|------------------|----------------------|------|---------------------|------|----------------------|------|----------------------|
| 1 | chazmc | 73 | basedBlumpkin | 145 | GreatandPowerfulAhhs | 217 | BanHammerDrunk |
| 2 | Le-BongJames23 | 74 | MrKurtz86 | 146 | PLUSER | 218 | dirtysanchez 69 |
| 3 | make reddit great | 75 | ImaginaryCock | 147 | PlanetFPV | 219 | SuperEliteBot |
| 4 | Willdogs | 76 | Cajun rrobear | 148 | HotMess42 | 220. | YourOwnGrandmother |
| 5 | XFearAo911X | 77 | ENVYNITAZ | 149 | juneofthewild | 221 | accelizardo |
| 6 | KAG2020 | 78 | Swastikker | 150 | endprisim | 222 | MAGAnificent 1776 |
| 7 | URL deleted | 79 | GenericInsult | 151 | FlipBarry | 223 | ENVYNITAZ |
| 8 | Big Shot Gangster | 80 | Xerogator | 152 | Blackkit27 | 224. | DaniEl Ben Freeman |
| 9 | beer hog | 81 | sgt soju | 153 | spumonil | 225 | user deleted |
| 10 | BrutalTruth101 | 82 | sylar4199211 | 154 | Repbulokrater | 226 | RealSour |
| 11 | MethMouthMary | 83 | ThadThundercock | 155 | emonTHINK | 227 | redpilled brit |
| 12 | WheeeeeThePeople | 84 | mysteryman64030 | 156 | BrutalTruth101 | 228 | RPM2020 |
| 13 | josi borg | 85 | 1Individual | 157 | sargentpilcher | 229 | Matterak |
| 14 | thebrownwaterdog | 86 | LOKSTED | 158 | Shea bob | 230 | libtardhater |
| 15 | LB EOTM 0915208 | 87 | zambonibill21 | 159 | bennybugbug1 | 231 | Bravesaint |
| 16 | Business-Socks | 88 | Url Deleted | 160 | ThraShErDDos | 232 | RoyHobbs3 |
| 17 | 452020 | 89 | Kek saved the world | 161 | longmicropenis | 233 | SwampMidget |
| 18 | FuzzieMuff | 90 | JohnCrissy | 162 | DoxProofBro | 234 | WhoDatNoy1 |
| 19 | Andrewski18 | 91 | John Lager | 163 | Business-socks | 235 | Kaliforniax |
| 20 | GEOTUSgal | 92 | Magnoker | 164 | Sustainable Saltmine | 236 | indyfactsndata |
| 21 | thequeen shapeshifts | 93 | Brutaltruth101 | 165 | cartoon88 | 237 | ReynardBeauregard |
| 22 | oughthere | 94 | friartrump | 166 | FatherXnos | 238 | acelizardo |
| 23 | Breitbook | 95 | vv33cl | 167 | Devine interventio | 239 | Dabbadoo7 |
| 24 | AdministrativeSuit | 96 | AutoriiNovici | 168 | miltonf314 | 240 | ENVYNITAZ |
| 25 | Isolutionary | 97 | RekTurSaFeSpaCe | 169 | Jarl69 | 241 | bitbleed |
| 26 | TrudopesEyebrow | 98 | attashi ki | 170 | Kratomlol | 242 | rampage 980 |
| 27 | tanksmart1 | 99. | Nthog111 | 171 | NSA-HQ | 243 | FabianWolfgang |
| 28 | Greg-2012 | 100. | Branford524 | 172 | Nuguns63 | 244 | DnDstuffs |
| 29 | mr shamalama | 101 | Thewickersnipper | 173 | FactCheckOnTheFly | 245 | Spaceforce commander |
| 30 | pat1975 | 102. | adamn45 | 174 | Lips2000 | 246 | beer hog |
| 31 | HMFIC sheepdogs | 103. | hildoditler | 175 | Arbitraged84 | 247 | TrumpOrTreason |
| 32 | IncrediblenrE1 | 104. | Jwestor | 176 | URL Deleted | 248 | sgt richard |
| 33 | zambonibill21 | 105. | dubstep-for-kids | 177 | SalutaryMass22 | | |
| 34 | AdamHulten916 | 106. | URL deleted | 178 | Bchdrum22 | | |
| 35 | cobaltcolander | 107. | URL deleted | 179 | Trumoe | | |
| 36 | Mrs fonebone | 108. | loskillbw | 180 | Blackkit27 | | |
| 37 | realdangermaus | 109. | Alexandresk | 181 | MegaMindxXx | | |
| 38 | ape snake | 110. | Toxic Femininty | 182 | YourOwnGrandmother | | |
| 39 | MrBodeci | 111 | Chris muse | 183 | KillumanitiAJ | | |
| 40 | CannabisBarbie | 112 | mikeroolz | 184 | jingowrex | | |
| 41 | WelcomeToAttitude | 113 | MAGAallthetime | 185 | JSmitty112 | | |
| 42 | ArchangellePepe | 114 | StendarrKnight | 186 | becray | | |
| 43 | Just sOme guy2 | 115 | Many Coconut | 187 | Stupendous Intellect | | |
| 44 | Dr Trumps Wild Ride | 116 | oex52 | 188 | ENVYNIATZ | | |
| 45 | indyfactsndata | 117 | Anonymouseude | 189 | longmicropenis | | |
| 46 | SSMDive | 118 | swiet | 190 | DuhHarro8814 | | |
| 47 | Niezrenx | 119 | Sr388S | 191 | The-Boondoggler | | |
| 48 | inFAM1S | 120 | URL deleted | 192 | JohnCrissy | | |
| 49 | TheAndredal | 121 | Reddit2124 | 193 | and7weil | | |
| 50 | Manmadora | 122 | HotMess42 | 194 | TruetoPooh | | |
| 51 | FactCheckOnTheFly | 123 | TrumpCardUpMySleeve | 195 | Lightmakerflex1 | | |
| 52 | Makasar10 | 124 | MAGaInCT | 196 | mammadora | | |
| 53 | AditKhan90 | 125. | Truf Serum | 197. | awesomepossumcausem | | |
| 54 | Workinating | 126. | vigilrexmei | 198 | Dorkus-Maximus-III | | |
| 55 | lightmakerflex1 | 127. | IsNOTIam | 199. | scrublordmcgee69420 | | |
| 56 | mooch11 | 128. | popetrentpope | 200 | . indyfactsndata | | |
| 57 | FliesTheFlag | 129. | Guy-Fietty69u | 201 | Url deleted | | |
| 58 | -Howitzer- | 130. | Oda nicullah | 202 | TerriChris | | |
| 59 | Arokz | 131. | RusticRock | 203 | heckh | | |
| 60 | URL deleted | 132 | URL deleted | 204 | ENVYNITAZ | | |
| 61 | MinuteGrass | 133. | Nullus Tutella | 205 | Canadians 4 Liberty | | |
| 62 | JohnCrissy | 134 | vladTepes14 | 206 | Avatarius87 | | |
| 63 | T D | 135. | Dabbadoo7 | 207 | DanIsSwell | | |
| 64 | OccasionalCotrexNPC | 136. | ENVYNIATZ | 208 | xcat1lonetee | | |
| 65 | icemann0 | 137. | ENVYNIATZ | 209 | therealzeezy | | |
| 66 | eh flat | 138. | longmicropenis | 210 | url deleted | | |
| 67 | ItNeverEnds- - | 139. | SocialSushiEater | 211 | killumanitiAJ | | |
| 68 | ntheg111 | 140. | BearDidIt | 212 | longmicropenis | | |
| 69 | i SunTzuMe | 141. | J-holdd | 213 | Optimistik32 | | |
| 70 | cemann0 | 142. | alxl | 214 | mcdaguc | | |
| 71 | Captain Cameltoe | 143. | TrumpHouseRules | 215 | url deleted | | |
| 72 | Ycyfyffufuffyy | 144. | highenergywinning | 216 | BigPictureShow | | |

Appendix III cont.

Table 13. Meme posters RQ2.

| RQ2 Meme posters | | | | | |
|------------------|----------------------|-----|----------------------|-----|---------------------|
| 1 | WTCMolybdenum4753 | 73 | Dickslikeyeezus | 145 | JonestownKool-aid |
| 2 | saltyliberaltears13 | 74 | Trumpican | 146 | vv33cl |
| 3 | LosPepesContra | 75 | Tom Brett | 147 | BasketOfPepes |
| 4 | absurdness | 76 | Killfoe | 148 | PhantomFuck |
| 5 | The Zotico | 77 | elaearae | 149 | watershed2018 |
| 6 | TurdinthePunch | 78 | Bulldog65 | 150 | LoveBLKAZNWHT |
| 7 | Str8DonLemon | 79 | Business-Socks | 151 | KaliforniaX |
| 8 | IAM HeavenlyTrumpet | 80 | thecricketsareloudin | 152 | Exciting Coffee |
| 9 | ItHappenedaweekago | 81 | friartrump | 153 | BIG HUB |
| 10 | Flojtlasse | 82 | loyaltyrusty | 154 | Alibonofu |
| 11 | MrBodeci | 83 | studentDMD | 155 | ReynardBeauregard |
| 12 | Please Clap | 84 | MarvelousMisanthrope | 156 | IAM HeavenlyTrumpet |
| 13 | SitelessVagrant | 85 | Oswald guadalupe | 157 | Jlynbk |
| 14 | Deathstalker1776 | 86 | TheLastShah79 | 158 | mad-liberals |
| 15 | KilluminatiAJ | 87 | url deleted | 159 | Leakmouth |
| 16 | URL not found | 88 | PepeTheRacistFrog | 160 | dtabbaad |
| 17 | psybrnaut | 89 | PLUSER | 161 | gijoeusa |
| 18 | geocitiesuser | 90 | WeAreGonnaMAGA | 162 | url deleted |
| 19 | Stretchychesse78 | 91 | Jazeboy69 | 163 | Crackerjack-karma |
| 20 | iRubGuacOnMyArmpits | 92 | FeelTheBernieSanderz | 164 | longmicropenis |
| 21 | im on shrooms | 93 | hngry4thebreez | 165 | User obscured |
| 22 | Chinchook | 94 | FrogLips01 | 166 | User obscured |
| 23 | PhantomFuck | 95 | jomamasophat | 167 | User obscured |
| 24 | mysteryman64030 | 96 | PhantomFuck | 168 | User obscured |
| 25 | tangohunter8071 | 97 | Business-socks | 169 | User obscured |
| 26 | ilikeeichmann | 98 | seems legit83 | 170 | topmostkekofpraise |
| 27 | DrLawyerPl | 99 | ImpressiveShare8 | 171 | Toohightocomply |
| 28 | XR29005 | 100 | Edge23 | 172 | preferedfault |
| 29 | LamboLimo | 101 | hedgewik | 173 | 442snub |
| 30 | AutoriiNovici | 102 | KaliforniaX | 174 | raffitaffy26 |
| 31 | Five Star Amenities | 103 | LosPepesContra | | |
| 32 | duodad | 104 | KaliforniaX | | |
| 33 | xaserverg | 105 | notgordonbombay | | |
| 34 | highenergywinning | 106 | macredsmile | | |
| 35 | AlexJonesHasAIDS | 107 | watershed2018 | | |
| 36 | Dabbadoo7 | 108 | onebaduce | | |
| 37 | TrimHer | 109 | XR29005 | | |
| 38 | CUCKEWE | 110 | Lapse rate | | |
| 39 | TrentonJay | 111 | Nightman96 | | |
| 40 | Trump unchained | 112 | LoveBLKAZNWHT | | |
| 41 | Bigly-Wrong | 113 | MuericaFirst | | |
| 42 | AcidicNature | 114 | John Holliday | | |
| 43 | Strongman2711 | 115 | ftwrthtxs | | |
| 44 | SocialMustardWarrior | 116 | VaeVictis001111 | | |
| 45 | Muh Walking MXbabies | 117 | hudsonlife | | |
| 46 | desmoinesdavid | 118 | gillymead | | |
| 47 | CaptChrisPBacon | 119 | John Holliday | | |
| 48 | Oda nicullah | 120 | greatgrandmapede | | |
| 49 | rjb77ca | 121 | url deleted | | |
| 50 | Yakzi | 122 | carswelk | | |
| 51 | XxSaltyMermaidxX | 123 | Communism Fails | | |
| 52 | QuietJackfruit | 124 | BasedBoyScout | | |
| 53 | Lambolimo | 125 | thancock14 | | |
| 54 | KrakNup | 126 | IAM HeavenlyTrumpet | | |
| 55 | Kek saved the world | 127 | BanHammerDrunk | | |
| 56 | RoastChickenFlavor | 128 | Black-Guns-Matter | | |
| 57 | XR29007 | 129 | The Capt Midnight | | |
| 58 | Wilderbeast1969 | 130 | CisSiberianOrchestra | | |
| 59 | cemann0 | 131 | PlayGeetarSometimes | | |
| 60 | TurdinthePunch | 132 | Bulldog65 | | |
| 61 | XR29005 | 133 | url deleted | | |
| 62 | ITeachFuckingScience | 134 | shwiftyget | | |
| 63 | Blackkit27 | 135 | MagamangPrestige | | |
| 64 | ImpressiveShare8 | 136 | LosPepesContra | | |
| 65 | BambooWsp | 137 | conservanillendad | | |
| 66 | RedNewEnglander | 138 | Leatherwood123 | | |
| 67 | mbp4295 | 139 | EwenAndmeme | | |
| 68 | FactCheckOnTheFly | 140 | frankaTV | | |
| 69 | Useful Vidiots | 141 | url deleted | | |
| 70 | PodestaAmberAlert | 142 | DieHardOriginalist | | |
| 71 | Strongman2711 | 143 | JenkinsF | | |
| 72 | adp 17 | 144 | Acelizardo | | |

Appendix III cont.

Table 14. Meme posters RQ3.

| RQ3 | | | | | | | |
|-----|----------------------|------|----------------------|------|----------------------|------|----------------------|
| 1 | Tlundy11 | 73 | Call Me Spongeboob | 145 | erefernow | 217 | shea bob |
| 2 | didyouassumemygender | 74 | 1776YearOfOurLord | 146 | erefernow | 218 | itsanoobsgame |
| 3 | WeAreGonnaMAGA | 75 | milton314 | 147 | Isolutionary | 219 | BrutalTruth101 |
| 4 | PhantomFuck | 76 | civnat cuck | 148 | Purplepunch | 220. | dabbadoo7 |
| 5 | Igolfohio | 77 | some1thing1 | 149 | KrakNup | 221 | kenshin onek |
| 6 | Unfunded | 78 | Big Shot Gangster | 150 | OgdenSherafNBR1 | 222 | URL Deleted |
| 7 | Socky555 | 79 | KillumanitiAJ | 151 | URL deleted | 223 | PepeTheRacistFrog |
| 8 | CaptChrisPBacon | 80 | KaliforniaX | 152 | CedTruz | 224. | PepeTheRacistFrog |
| 9 | dtmurray87 | 81 | KaliforniaX | 153 | opencircuitfarmer | 225 | Aosdnffoia |
| 10 | downsouthjeeper | 82 | The3Cursed | 154 | MarkCSteven | 226 | URL Deleted |
| 11 | Shepherd231 | 83 | Dorkus-Maximus-III | 155 | AddictedReddit | 227 | Nthegg111 |
| 12 | Helen Kellerz | 84 | 66 Cheville SS | 156 | ohchristworld | 228 | Mad Hattie |
| 13 | OUTLAW 474 | 85 | frzlr | 157 | RlzJohnnyM | 229 | Mrs Fonebone |
| 14 | Sr atrevete | 86 | reddit99888 | 158 | ENVYNITAZ | 230 | 22oregon22 |
| 15 | dinker | 87 | Pondermautics | 159 | Bulldog65 | 231 | blackjack1556 |
| 16 | saintofsandiego | 88 | ultimate MAGA | 160 | threebabies | 232 | BrutalTruth101 |
| 17 | kierre2 | 89 | 23zulu | 161 | preferredfault | 233 | Business-Socks |
| 18 | BroJobBriggs2 | 90 | -MrG- | 162 | threebabies | 234 | jesseal |
| 19 | toohightocomply | 91 | n0wd0y | 163 | DontTouchMyPepe | 235 | Brandish |
| 20 | Rjb77ca | 92 | BasedFaggotIsMyGod | 164 | billthedozer | 236 | zambonibill21 |
| 21 | CarlosDangersLaptop | 93 | Shepherd231 | 165 | ForeignerNextDoor | 237 | DragonOnYoFace |
| 22 | medicpwnr87 | 94 | LoveBLKAZNWHT | 166 | history enthusiast15 | 238 | DISPOS3-0f-4FT3R-US3 |
| 23 | NoleKusm | 95 | reallythateasy3 | 167 | -Howitzer- | 239 | GreasinMonkey |
| 24 | CUCKEWE | 96 | Steveharvey | 168 | Dyl Speed | 240 | 84jetsfan |
| 25 | milton314 | 97 | Scuba724 | 169 | url deleted | 241 | FinanceCokeAddyXans |
| 26 | URL deleted | 98 | MrPickleSandwich91 | 170 | JohnCrissy | 242 | Catalyst317 |
| 27 | Dubbelbier | 99. | iworkforgeotus | 171 | we4donald | 243 | cjcivcx |
| 28 | SurpriseAuralSex | 100. | sftsoap | 172 | RedNewEnglander | 244 | MAGADAD |
| 29 | basedBlumpkin | 10 | MrJibaku | 173 | URL Deleted | 245 | Sloth-of-Wrath |
| 30 | papa-goat | 102. | Tlundy11 | 174 | tvfilm | 246 | WeAreGonnaMAGA |
| 31 | I hate Chris Rock | 103. | Fox-Dragon | 175 | not-sorry- | 247 | AttariArtist |
| 32 | Russ14nib0t | 104. | CarlosDangersLaptop | 176 | stdsxs31 | 248 | Anonmilitary |
| 33 | Roll Troll Roll | 105. | Lincoln Ford | 177 | GreecePole | 249 | shitnickel |
| 34 | BarefootTraveller | 106. | DieHardOriginalist | 178 | AzorAhai69 | 250 | hillaryisgoingdown |
| 35 | JustaPeede | 107. | elsenordave | 179 | RetardedBurst | 251 | jhomes55 |
| 36 | DeploraBen | 108. | ITeachFuckingScience | 180 | matty14ice | 252 | BreadTwists |
| 37 | JollyGoodFallow | 109. | Catalyst317 | 181 | xr29006 | 253 | edpings1 |
| 38 | darkqcles | 110. | borderpac | 182 | URL deleted | 254 | FactCheckOnTheFly |
| 39 | hippoponis | 111 | Red Privilege | 183 | Deplorable Ruski Bot | 255 | SendItDownrange |
| 40 | ChrisJKnott | 112 | InfintyAhimsa | 184 | promisethestarz | 256 | superdmp |
| 41 | twistedhobbs | 113 | TechNarcissit88 | 185 | dabbadoo7 | 257 | ThePepeine |
| 42 | SilentPr3dator | 114 | realSvenLaden | 186 | marye9c7 | 258 | thecricketsareloudin |
| 43 | dirty sanchez69 | 115 | TopHatCock | 187 | EatAdickSpez | 259 | KonnectFour |
| 44 | Big Shot Gangster | 116. | Feeling Tomatilo | 188 | Tattootempest | 260 | Carmobusch |
| 45 | dirty sanchez69 | 117. | email12123 | 189 | CAelephant | 261 | TheAssOfHats |
| 46 | seriousblak | 118. | greatgrandmapede | 190 | BothOccasion | 262 | ConKid1776 |
| 47 | themightywatchtower | 119. | DestroyerOfHypocrisy | 191 | cholo888 | 263 | NeoSupaZupa |
| 48 | Five Star Amenities | 120. | vir4030 | 192 | TDSinReal | 264 | Big Shot Gangster |
| 49 | poohead150 | 121. | D80Buckeye | 193 | CommanderSmokeStack | 265 | Nighthawkboss121 |
| 50 | Guntoast6 | 122. | Hippoplatypus7 | 194 | URL deleted | 266 | billthedozer |
| 51 | Mrs Fonebone | 123. | TheNCRVeteran | 195 | J-holdd | 267 | Thefrontierzman |
| 52 | TrumpHouseRules | 124 | NewThingsNewStuff | 196 | TBLv14 | 268 | MAGARULER |
| 53 | url deleted | 125. | NPC snowflake | 197. | some1thing1 | 269 | algurchico90 |
| 54 | CeremonialDickCheese | 126. | solomon ecclewise | 198 | some1thing1 | 270 | RedNewEnglander |
| 55 | esquire4u | 127. | TuckerMate | 199. | walkintheforest1 | 271 | Nomadtrader22 |
| 56 | Pandermautics | 128. | vv33cl | 200 | IcculousBased | 272 | billthedozer |
| 57 | MangroveEarthshoe | 129. | phop78 | 201 | Five Star Amenities | 273 | Burtdundee |
| 58 | variable312 | 130. | Manmadora | 202 | youaintlaboef | | |
| 59 | ENVYNITAZ | 131. | MethMouthMary | 203 | FamburgerHelper | | |
| 60 | Talesin | 132 | PESKYJE55 | 204 | cjcivcx | | |
| 61 | Electric Plankton | 133. | Goup98 | 205 | wearecounterculture | | |
| 62 | -Howitzer- | 134 | Vladimir putin001 | 206 | JohnnyBitcoinCash | | |
| 63 | KeepMarxintheground | 135. | TerriChris | 207 | deal with it | | |
| 64 | TheAndredal | 136. | Bodyman4U | 208 | acmemegaman | | |
| 65 | DavidBlaine | 137. | VERY STABLE DRAGON | 209 | UnSocial Soul | | |
| 66 | peacekeeper76 | 138. | SunTzuMe | 210 | tedkennedysnavellini | | |
| 67 | masshole3 | 139. | blubberdong | 211 | PhantomFuck | | |
| 68 | zingestmeerkat | 140. | Maymay4america | 212 | RahkeemTheMachine | | |
| 69 | unclepaul84 | 141. | vv33cl | 213 | ntheg111 | | |
| 70 | zambonibill21 | 142. | vv33cl | 214 | r_guns | | |
| 71 | burtdundee | 143. | gijoecusa | 215 | gallymead | | |
| 72 | Yah I said that | 144. | mrnewports | 216 | themightykekfish | | |

Appendix III cont.

Table 15. Meme posters RQ4.

| RQ4 Meme posters | | | | | | | |
|------------------|----------------------|------|----------------------|------|----------------------|------|----------------------|
| 1 | Gillymead | 73 | shawnesty | 145 | AIwaysLurkIng | 217 | NervousScene10 |
| 2 | Bumpy Nugget | 74 | URI deleted | 146 | JamesGatsby | 218 | Deplorable Ruski Bot |
| 3 | Hawkeyeflame | 75 | ZWass777 | 147 | JohnnyBitCoinCash | 219 | William-of-Ockham |
| 4 | knowses | 76 | KaliforniaX | 148 | Bamboowsp | 220. | Leakmouth |
| 5 | Apps4Life | 77 | KaliforniaX | 149 | Grim Rippers | 221 | CuckWivesMatter |
| 6 | ntheg111 | 78 | Isaac5129D | 150 | Bigly-Wrong | 222 | RexMAGA2016 |
| 7 | KaliforniaX | 79 | Business-socks | 151 | VideoSource0 | 223 | uncle_nurgle |
| 8 | Pliablemoose | 80 | Tink2013 | 152 | Sea Still | 224. | whoopies tds |
| 9 | LoveBLKAZNWHIT | 81 | Ellaspaw | 153 | CTR Sucks | 225 | CarlosDangersLaptop |
| 10 | mockyavelli | 82 | Mamemoo | 154 | Exit64E | 226 | ebookroundup |
| 11 | vv33cl | 83 | IamTHE3Percent | 155 | Cajun robear | 227 | badcompanygg |
| 12 | Mike Kivett | 84 | lightmakerflex1 | 156 | MrSean3231 | 228 | GunToast |
| 13 | Ruejitsu | 85 | PodestaAmberAlert | 157 | Jeffsmith67589 | 229 | Fit Official |
| 14 | maganeto | 86 | ILikeToShitPost | 158 | PapayaSF | 230 | FuzzieMuff |
| 15 | quebert123 | 87 | zambonibill21 | 159 | dickslikeyeezus | 231 | Nesruk |
| 16 | SmartOstrich | 88 | Were Alone Together | 160 | LoveBLKAZNWHIT | 232 | JoStonesoul |
| 17 | JSmitty112 | 89 | Avatarius87 | 161 | nickgoturi | 233 | rprobens |
| 18 | MAGAguitar | 90 | Catalyst317 | 162 | --TheMadHatter-- | 234 | Frieza Sama |
| 19 | Bigly-Wrong | 91 | hidodtier | 163 | URI deleted | 235 | MAGAallthetime |
| 20 | Bennykbenny7 | 92 | TravelinMan4 | 164 | DaveBlaine | 236 | tsmargarita |
| 21 | MAGAallthetime | 93 | mysteryman64030 | 165 | qioan | | |
| 22 | Crypulous | 94 | 1Individual | 166 | BrutalTruth101 | | |
| 23 | Comntrinchief | 95 | Yard-Dog | 167 | spkle | | |
| 24 | 10gauge | 96 | Orangesawracist | 168 | USA-7-4-1776 | | |
| 25 | URI deleted | 97 | RedNewEnglander | 169 | LosPepesContra | | |
| 26 | URI deleted | 98 | Tech363 | 170 | ActuallySalty | | |
| 27 | DuhHarro8814 | 99. | variable312 | 171 | bchdrum22 | | |
| 28 | vv33cl | 100. | AngersFlame | 172 | jiggel x | | |
| 29 | Alibonfo | 10 | badcompanygg | 173 | Hidodtiter | | |
| 30 | LosPepesContra | 102. | Mikeroolz | 174 | coolwhipsando | | |
| 31 | tedandlisa123 | 103. | HallmarkChannelXmas | 175 | couranto | | |
| 32 | dirty_sanchez69 | 104. | zambonibill21 | 176 | switchhand | | |
| 33 | Muh Troof | 105. | PhantomFuck | 177 | RealAlcibiad3s | | |
| 34 | URI deleted | 106. | TupacShikur | 178 | doofface99 | | |
| 35 | passivedouble2 | 107. | Sir Fistington | 179 | ShadowXXxE | | |
| 36 | Omept | 108. | Supports45- | 180 | Comntrinchief | | |
| 37 | Nancydrew246 | 109. | basedBlumpkin | 181 | mamemoo | | |
| 38 | Business-socks | 110. | SwampDrainerLocal911 | 182 | FlipBarry | | |
| 39 | andhya60 | 111 | dieselwind | 183 | heyyoualtvd | | |
| 40 | NoStumpElTrumpo | 112 | SwampDrainerLocal911 | 184 | writeidiaz | | |
| 41 | NoStumpElTrumpo | 113 | Clendi | 185 | stikkkit2em | | |
| 42 | NoStumpElTrumpo | 114 | itsanoobsgame | 186 | Necrovoter | | |
| 43 | Leakmouth | 115 | austin62halo | 187 | MagamangPrestige | | |
| 44 | Tito Mojito | 116. | rjb77ca | 188 | Headline Correction | | |
| 45 | Deplorable Ruski Bot | 117. | Nesruk | 189 | Mymaga | | |
| 46 | couranto | 118. | rslashtheunderscore | 190 | Grover70 | | |
| 47 | nethyek | 119. | DanIsSwell | 191 | zlatan4ever | | |
| 48 | Business-socks | 120. | CaptChrisPBacon | 192 | Keiichi81 | | |
| 49 | URI deleted | 121. | kross2007a | 193 | Drueburgendy | | |
| 50 | ThomasBH | 122. | Ssne8m0b34 | 194 | Mangonel88 | | |
| 51 | NJPhisherman | 123. | MeetMeAttheBoarder | 195 | url deleted | | |
| 52 | Militum | 124 | Redmagahat | 196 | Dub Taylor | | |
| 53 | xrsiti | 125. | KaliforniaX | 197. | esquire4u | | |
| 54 | jwestor | 126. | MethMouthMary | 198 | AlaskanJuggalo4TRUMP | | |
| 55 | TrumpHouseRules | 127. | DanIsSwell | 199. | LosPepesContra | | |
| 56 | 1st Covfefe | 128. | Feanor22 | 200 | Elvathelion | | |
| 57 | Catsfive | 129. | BoondockSaint45 | 201 | MusicLuhver | | |
| 58 | Mamemoo | 130. | Business-socks | 202 | uncle_nurgle | | |
| 59 | Varrick2016 | 131. | URI deleted | 203 | vashxkun91 | | |
| 60 | URI deleted | 132 | Jeffsmith67589 | 204 | TrumpHouseRules | | |
| 61 | BrutalTruth101 | 133. | tsmargarita | 205 | Canadians 4 Liberty | | |
| 62 | Maymay4America | 134 | Atomic2797 | 206 | mbp4295 | | |
| 63 | Irishcrazy | 135. | shawnesty | 207 | Crypulous | | |
| 64 | chris muse | 136. | Jeffsmith67589 | 208 | roadhand2010 | | |
| 65 | Jack MemeHoff | 137. | WheeeeeThePeople | 209 | Bump-4-Trump | | |
| 66 | IAM HeavenlyTrumpet | 138. | BowelSharpton | 210 | DaniEl Ben Freeman | | |
| 67 | M i c K | 139. | Gold-Eyed-Cat | 211 | PhantomFuck | | |
| 68 | throwaway2143658 | 140. | slickbilly777 | 212 | youaintlaboef | | |
| 69 | MrManayunk | 141. | NotEnoughFloyd | 213 | CanaPede45 | | |
| 70 | WeWillNeverYield | 142. | Jeffsmith67589 | 214 | PLUMBUM2 | | |
| 71 | Coolair99 | 143. | dropcord | 215 | TheRealGrantEdwards | | |
| 72 | awesomepossumcausem | 144. | CommanderSmokeStack | 216 | Baboonliberation | | |

I,

Amanda Haynes

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20/01/20