What is the "Memeing" of the Green New Deal?

How Internet Memes Disrupt Political Discourse.

Yi Zhu

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University of California, Berkeley

College Writing R4B

Dr. Mary Grover

Abstract:

Internet memes in the digital age represent a novel medium of political discourse. Despite the growing popularity of political memes, there remains a lackluster understanding of their function. This project fills in the gaps of our current understanding of political memes by examining the nature of meme-based political discourse within the context of the Green New Deal (GND): a bold economic and environmental proposition that has been shunned by conservatives as a socialist takeover of the economy. Through the lens of rhetorical humor and identity theory, my analysis suggests that GND memes overwhelmingly function to increase partisan polarization and suppress meaningful discourse. In a political climate where extremism and foreign interests threaten the very nature of our democratic process, my finding that political memes disrupt open and meaningful political discourse – the keystone of America's democracy – is extremely concerning. Thus, this project not only reveals the limitations of memes as a medium for democratic discussion, but also warns of the overlooked danger that political memes pose to our American democracy.

Reflection:

As a physics major with a background in molecular biology (my parents are both molecular biologists), it was extremely tempting to choose a scientific research topic on climate change. However, I decided against doing so because I felt it would be more challenging and rewarding to research a topic in a field that, while I was interested in, was utterly unfamiliar to me. My first though was the psychology of climate change denial as I had always been curious as to why the pubic so egregiously ignores or misinterprets very well-established evidence for anthropogenic climate change. Conducting some research into that topic and reading about the identity theory of climate change denial, I began pondering if there were some yet-unknown tool for promoting environmental education. I personally find humor a very effective rhetorical tool, and thus, came upon the topic of environmental memes. While I initially approached environmental memes from the perspective of education, further research into the nature and function of political memes lead to my ultimate topic: the political function of memes within the context of the Green New Deal.

The initial stages of research required me to quickly get up to speed with the current knowledge on the theory of memes and how memes function in political discourse. This was greatly aided with my meeting with Prof. Carmen Acevedo Butcher, who guided me to a number of resources regarding meme theory. A particularly useful resource she recommended was Limor Shifman's *Memes in Digital Culture.* Shifman presents several real-world examples in which she claims memes have facilitated a participatory or "of-the-people" type of discussion. In addition, I found Davis et al.'s analysis of the ability for memes to delegitimate well-established corporations in their article "'You Can't Run Your SUV on Cute. Let's Go!': Internet Memes as Delegitimizing Discourse" to be quite enlightening.

The few examples of political memes that Shifman, Davis et al., and other scholars cite appear to paint a somewhat rosy picture of political memes as a medium capable of improving the nature of political discourse to be more open, accessible, and meaningful (perhaps even more democratic, though neither author explicitly stated so). On the other hand, I had also discovered Kate Yoder's reporting of Russian attempts to influence domestic environmental and economic policy via polarizing memes on climate change. This stunning realization that memes were being utilized as a malicious political weapon to "divide and conquer" the American public was my first hint that memes, despite their light-hearted and humorous connotation, represented a very dangerous type of political discourse.

At this point, I became slightly concerned that almost all of the sources I had found so far was based almost exclusively on anecdotal evidence. In addition, the sources appear to at some points concur while other points contradict each other. Shifman even presents opposing conclusions within her various analysis: in her book, *Memes in Digital Culture,* she claims that memes facilitate open and meaningful discourse, while in her study of the use of online humor in the 2005 general election, she concludes the humor is overwhelming used as a "vicious [and] highly aggressive political weapon." I therefore decided to research more about the theory of political memes in order to make sense of this tangled web of anecdotal evidence.

This is when I found Meyer's theory of the rhetoric of humor in his article "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication." Analyzing GND memes, in addition to Davis et al.'s memes on climate change and Yoder's Russian memes within the context of Meyer's theory, I was able to finally fit my sources into a cohesive picture. In addition, I found that identity theory when applied to Meyer's analysis of rhetorical functions of humor lead to an extremely enlightening lens through which to view GND and contemporary

political memes. Therefore, by examining existing analysis of the political function of memes though these two new frames, I synthesized my argument that political memes overwhelming function to polarize political issues and prevent more meaningful political discussion.

Note, during the editing process, Megan and Dr. Grover both encouraged me to conduct further analysis on the implications of GND memes on political polarization. While this is an extremely important and prescient point, I ultimately decided to not fully implement this suggestion because it was not the primary focus of my project, and for the sake of brevity, further analysis might have been a bit of a tangent. I did, however, further refine parts of my essay that lightly touched upon polarization, as I had not completely ignored meme's role in polarizing political discourse.

Throughout the research process, I have gained two key insights into research. The first is the necessity for a diversity of sources. During my initial phases of research, I became quite convinced that memes had an overall positive influence on political discourse through examples such as the Occupy Wall Street movement and Greenpeace's Let Go! campaign. However, this illusion was quickly shattered when I can upon sources such as Yoder, which revealed how memes can function as a very divisive medium. While I had recognized the necessity for a diversity of opinions before this project, I had not quite realized that when presented with only one side of the "story" it can be hard to even know where to begin searching for another perspectives. I will certainly keep this lesson in mind the next time I conduct research on a topic.

My second insight into research is that framing is key. As a physical scientist, I understand that data by itself is meaningless unless it is analyzed through a model or framework. This fact became particularly apparent to me as before I adopted Meyer's frame and the frame of identity theory, I could not make sense of how the numerous memes that I analyzed could lead to

a meaningful research claim. I first needed to fashion a framework of memetic analysis in order to understand and synthesize all the evidence I found. As I continue conduction research, this experience has taught me to become aware of the framework and associated assumptions that go into analyzing evidence I have amassed, and to search for a novel frame of understanding if I am stuck.

1. Introduction: The "Memeing" of the Green New Deal:

On September 17, 2011, hundreds filled Liberty Square in New York's financial district in protest of economic and social inequality in the United States. Incited in part by a simple online meme urging the public to resist corporate greed, this "people-powered movement" soon spread to "over 1,500 cities globally" (OccupyWallStreet, 2019). As evidenced by the onslaught of social media activity that popularized the Occupy Wall Street movement, politics and political discourse has moved to the digital age. Gone are the times of fireside chats: instead replaced by Twitter, and other social media platforms that place 260 million Americans – 79% of the US population (Statista, 2019) – at each other's fingertips. This new medium of political discourse has generated an unpreceded connectivity among many Americans and has provided a nation-wide forum for discussion.

For many, including Limor Shifman in her book *Memes in Digital Culture*, the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement provides ample evidence that memes constitute a valuable form of political discourse. She cites the movement's flagship "We are the 99%" meme: a series of user-generated posts depicting working-class citizens holding hand-written signs protesting the socioeconomic disparity between them and the richest 1% of the population. This was swiftly "counter-memed" by the "We are the 53%," a group of citizens lamenting excessive entitlements given to the 47% of Americans who do not pay taxes. This bona-fide political discussion[1] was further supplemented by the "We are the 1%" meme: a response to the 99% and 53% movement by the ultra-rich 1%. Shifman claims that this "exchange" of stories and opinions between

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[1] Whether such memes constitute meaningful political discourse will be addressed in a latter section.

liberals and conservatives within this debate constitutes rich, multifaceted political discourse only made possible by the novel medium of memes.

It is clear from the Occupy Wall Street movement that memes do play a significant and visible role in politics and political discourse. However, despite much research on the nature of Internet memes, there lacks a comprehensive understanding of memes' role in political discussion. Thus, a question of great importance to policymakers and to the public[2] is: *do memes encourage meaningful discussion and facilitate the transparent and participatory nature of American political discourse and politics?*

This project will address the questions posed above through the context of the Green New Deal (GND), a "proposed economic stimulus program…that aims to address climate change and economic inequality" (Green New Deal, 2019). As a resolution co-proposed by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a young, upstart, liberal House member, the GND represents the "peoples" fight to not only address climate change, but also to restructure American society. Among the GND's "populist" proposals include regulating the energy sector, promoting renewable energies, overhauling our transportation system, guaranteeing sustainable wages, and strengthening labor laws (Wolf, 2019). While liberals hail the GND's propositions as progressive, conservatives rebuke the GND as a socialist takeover of the government and economy.

Not unlike the Occupy Wall Street movement, the GND is an ideal case-study of the political function of memes as it has been subject to an avalanche of political controversy, polarization, and "memeing" (Figure 1). Additionally, the recency of the GND and related

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[2] As meme creators and consumers.

memes presents a fascinating and so-far unexplored avenue for this project to explore if and how memes encourage meaningful discourse.

Figure 1: A histogram depicting the frequency of stories from major US online news sources referencing the GND. At its peak popularity, the GND was the subject of nearly 150 news stories per day. Source: Media Cloud, 2018.
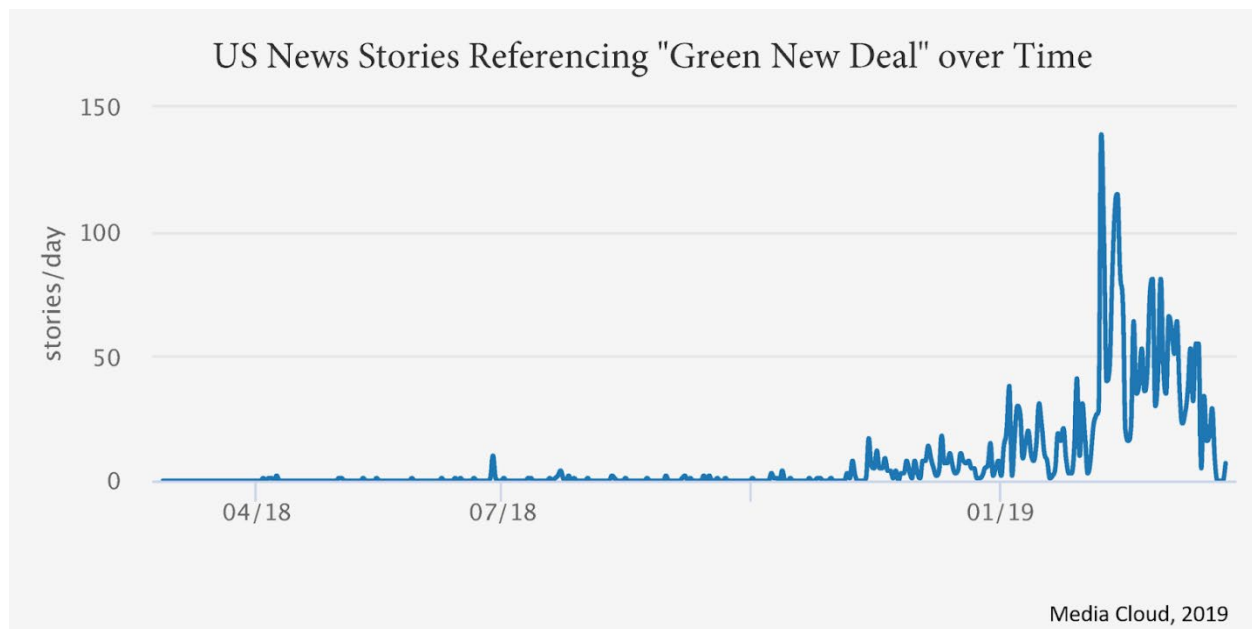

But what constitutes meaningful discourse? Within the scope of this project, I define meaningful discourse as a well-intentioned exchange of arguments and ideas that result in policies beneficial to the majority of the American public. This type of open and productive discussion is the foundation of our American democracy: an egalitarian system where all citizens wield power by expressing their wants, needs, and opinions through their ballot and though political discourse.

2. The Rhetoric of Humor: Memes as a Political Weapon

Evolutionary biology Richard Dawkins first described the meme as "a unit of cultural transmission[3]" (Dawkins, 1976). Since its inception, memes have experienced an exponential rise in popularity (Figure 2) due to the advent of the Internet: an uncensored and easy-to-access medium well-suited for the creation and propagation of memes (Shifman, 2011). In order to focus the scope of this project on Internet memes of the GND, I will define a meme as an expression of popular opinion in the form of a picture often captioned with humorous text. While humor is not a necessary component of memes, "historically, the most enduring and popular memes have tended to combine edgy humor [and] layered in jokes." (Romano, 2018) Therefore, examining memes through the frame of the rhetoric of humor provides an insightful avenue to understand the function of memes and their role in political discourse.

Figure 2: A histogram depicting the frequency of stories from major US online news sources referencing memes. Since the early 2000s the popularity of memes have grown at a significant rate. Source: Media Cloud, 2018.

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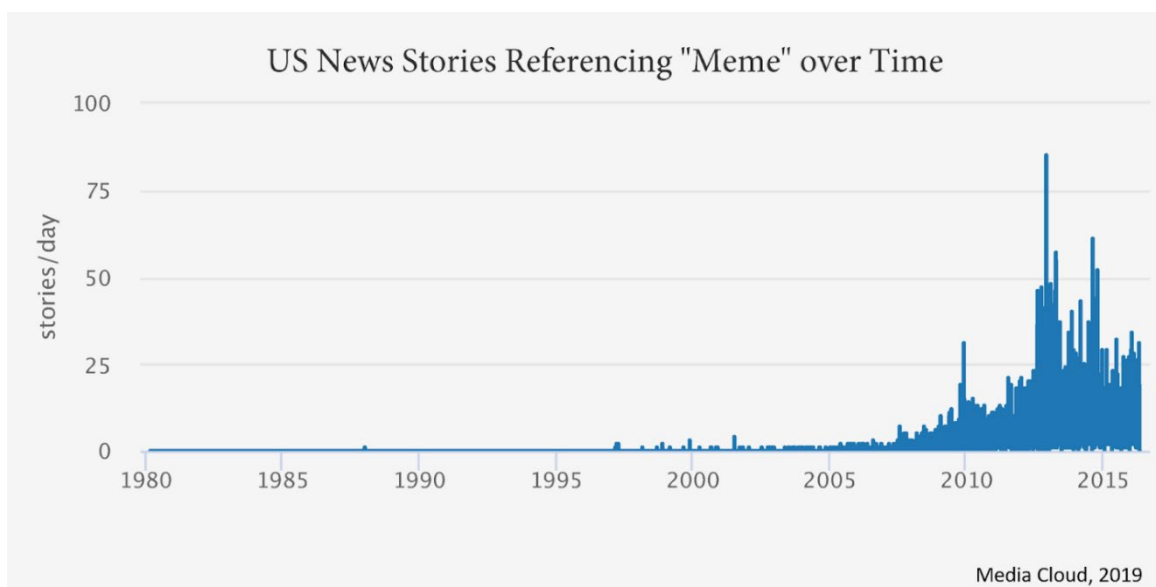
[3] A play on the word "gene" – a replicating fragment of genetic information.

In his article "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication," John C. Meyer suggests that the perception of humor is dictated by the mechanism through which it arises and the context in which it is perceived. He cites three theories of the sources of humor: (1) relief theory: humor arises from tense environments in order to reduce the stress or gravity of the situation, (2) incongruity theory: humor arises when people experience a violation of an expected pattern or norm, and (3) superiority theory: ridicule arises from a sense of superiority. From each, or a combination of these sources of humor, Meyer then postulates four rhetorical functions of humor (Figure 3): (1) identification: humor "[enhances] a speaker's credibility and [builds] group cohesiveness," (2) clarification: humor can be employed to "encapsulate [the speaker's views] into memorable phrases" that clarify their position, (3) enforcement: humor "allows a communicator to enforce norms delicately by leveling criticism while maintain some degree of identification with an audience," and (4) differentiation: humor allows the speaker to "[contrast] themselves with their opponents" and "their views with an opponent's views" (Meyer, 2000).

Figure 3: A visual representation of Meyer's model of how sources of humor can give rise to its various rhetorical functions. Note: incongruity and superiority as a source of humor both lead to multiple, and sometimes contradicting, functions. Meyer explains that this is because the context in which humor is perceived affects its function: the same humor can serve different rhetorical functions in different contexts. Source: Meyer, 2000.
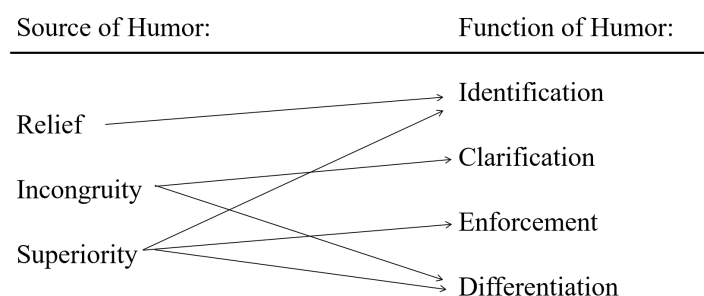
Meyer concludes in his paper that humor serves both positive and negative purposes in political discourse. Thus, applying his rhetorical framing of humor to the humor in memes, one may presume that, similarly, memes can serve both positive and negative purposes in political discourse[4]. In recent literature on the political function of memes, scholars citing specific "meme-driven" events often present a positive outlook. Shifman, for example, points to the Occupy Wall Street movement which successfully organized massive protests across the country and Davis et al. point to the Let's Go campaign, a 2012 Greenpeace campaign that successfully halted Shell's proposal to begin oil-drilling in the Arctic by delegitimizing Shell's public image through a series of Internet memes ridiculing their corporate greed (Davis et al, 2015).

However, these incidents do not provide convincing evidence that memes can in fact facilitate meaningful discourse (in fact, in latter paragraphs, I show the opposite to be true). In reality, "memers" appear to have largely ignored the potential for memes to mediate a civil and productive discussion. Instead, a study of meme-based climate change discourse finds that "meme-makers use their digital creations to… establish a sense of power of one ideological position over another" (Ross & Rivers, 2019). Shifman, Coleman, and Ward come to a similar conclusion in their case study of the 2005 UK general election. Monitoring campaign websites for use of humor and supplementing their data with interviews with campaign coordinators and officials, they found that campaigns with the purpose of garnering votes appeared most hesitant to use humor out of fear its jokes would be misinterpreted. On the other hand, campaigns aimed at dissuading voters from casting their ballot for a candidate "used humour extensively, as a vicious, highly aggressive political weapon" (Shifman, Coleman, & Ward, 2007).

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[4] Though, admittedly, more pragmatic readers may merely expect memes to propagate mockery or jokes.

So how can we reconcile some scholars' optimistic outlook of the political function of memes with the drearier reality that memes appear to be far more effective as a political weapon? I argue that by examining meme-based political discourse through Meyer's lens of the rhetoric of humor, we realize that almost all of the political memes examined so far, including the Occupy Wall Street and Let's Go! campaign memes, exclusively employ an attacking rhetoric. Furthermore, I claim that the contentious nature of political humor arises from the superiority and incongruity sources of humor (Meyer, 2000) which serves to enforce the meme creator's own opinion on climate change while rebuking and ridiculing opposing views.

Take for example the meme below (Figure 4), which ridicules climate-change deniers' refusal to recognize the devastating effects of climate change. Humor arises in this meme from mocking conservatives for supposedly believing that the effects of climate change can be simply mitigated by staying indoors. This meme encourages climate-change believes to reject the rhetoric of climate-change deniers as simply incorrect[5] and to differentiate their opinions from what author believes to be silly thinking. However, the hostility of such ridicule would naturally discourage a more thoughtful discussion on climate change between the two sides of the debate.

Figure 4: A meme ridiculing climate-change skeptics (superiority theory). The picture, in conjunction with the caption, depicts climate-change deniers as misguided in believing that climate change is not a pressing issue. However, this meme makes no attempt to rectify deniers' misconception and merely seeks to ridicule their opinion. Source: *Memeful*.

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[5] As opposed to a more sympathetic view that climate-change deniers' beliefs are well-intentioned but misguided or not entirely factual.

Figure 4 (continued):
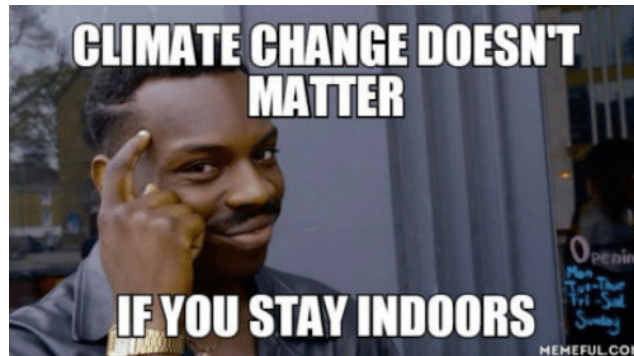
While it would certainly be inaccurate for me to claim that all political memes function in an attacking manner, I nevertheless argue that my analysis is not unique to the meme above. Take for example the aforementioned Let's Go! campaign. This "hoax" involved the creation and spread of memes captioned with absurd corporate-sounding text that appeared as though they were legitimate ads for Shell's actual Let's Go! campaign[6]. Davis et al., in their analysis "'You Can't Run Your SUV on Cute. Let's Go!': Internet Memes as Delegitimizing Discourse" examines these memes in the context of legitimacy theory[7], and concludes that Let's Go! memes ultimately serve to delegitimize Shell's drilling plans and turn public opinion against Shell[8]. While this analysis provides great insight into the function and effect of the Let's Go! campaign, it ignores the true nature and value of its meme-based discourse. Instead, returning to Meyer's frame of rhetorical humor, we see that Davis et al.'s analysis that Let's Go! memes "employ irony" and "mock corporate speak, and humor to delegitimize…Shell's Arctic drilling efforts" clearly falls into the Meyer's categories of incongruity and superiority theory. I further claim that

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[6] A campaign intended to promote Shell's efforts to develop cleaner biofuels.

[7] How "legitimacy get negotiated, uprooted, and questioned" (Davis, Glantz, & Novak, 2015).

[8] Greenpeace's Let's Go! campaign is credited as a contributing factor to Shell's later decision to halt their plans for Arctic drilling. Interestingly, this is no documentation of Shell's response to the fake campaign besides brief statements from Shell indicating that the meme were not legitimate ads.

the Let's Go! campaign does not even constitute discourse because "discourse" implies a back-and-forth exchange of arguments while the Let's Go! memes is merely a collective "shaming" of Shell. In fact, New York Times columnist Andrew Sorkin goes even as far as to call political memes such as those of the Let's Go! campaign and the Occupy Wall Street movement a "fad" (Sorkin, 2012): a collective movement of the public to mindlessly engage in whatever political culture is popular, whether it be ridiculing Shell or protesting economic institutions.

Figure 5: A meme from Greenpeace's Let's Go! campaign. This meme offers criticism of Shell's seemingly ruthless business practices by promoting an exaggeratedly tone-deaf business model of exploiting children. However, this meme merely employs its criticism to ridicule Shell. Source: *Houston Chronicle.*

Therefore, while humor can be harnessed to serve both rhetorically positive and negative purposes (Meyer 2000), it is clear in my examination of political memes and specifically climate-change memes that memes overwhelmingly serve as political tool to, rather than facilitating meaningful discourse, monopolize and sway public opinion. Interestingly, however, there have been few attempts to explain why political memes are so prominently weaponized.

3. Identity Theory: Memes as a Self-Defense Mechanism

While Meyer's framework is extremely effective at understanding how humor is utilized in rhetoric, it does not attempt to explain specifically how humor arises from political memes. Therefore, in order to address the question posed above, I will approach humor in GND through the lens of identity theory.

The identity theory of climate change acceptance or skepticism postulates that the strong divisiveness among climate-change believers and deniers result from a strong association of our beliefs with our personal identity. Bliuc et al. demonstrates that "US believers and skeptics have distinct social identities, beliefs, and emotional reactions that systematically predict their support for action to advance their respective positions," and further suggests that attacking an individual's beliefs on climate change is perceived as challenging that individual's character and identity (Bliuc et al., 2015).

Applying identity theory to the GND, I argue that the GND's proposed "socialist" policies to increase government control of the energy sector and guarantee job security is perceived by conservatives an attack on their political and cultural identity. This is evidenced by right-leaning pundits calling AOC, co-author of the proposition, a "socialist monster" and comparing the GND to the China's disastrous Great Leap Forward and the Holodomor[9] (Miele, 2019). Socialism has historically been stigmatized in the United States as a dangerous and disastrous system of economics and politics and a 2019 Monmouth University poll found that Americans, and overwhelmingly conservatives, see socialism as "incompatible with American

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[9] A Ukrainian famine in the 1930s as a "result of Joseph Stalin's policy of forced collectivization." The famine resulted in the death of an estimated 6-7 million people. (Library of Congress, 2016)

values" (Monmouth University, 2019). Therefore, identity theory postulates that conservatives will perceive their American identity and "democratic" culture as under attack by the GND.

How does this lead to the weaponization of GND memes? Jill Suttie, in her article "When Humor Widens the Political Divide," suggests that "out-group disparaging humor enhances in-group cohesion, particularly when members of the in-group experience a threat to their social identity" (Suttie, n.d.). Perceiving their social values to be attacked by the GND, conservatives thus use humor in memes to mock and belittle their perceived threat to their identity as a mechanism to preserve and protect their values. On the other hand, liberal pundits that agree with the propositions of the GND and who recognize the gravity and importance of the policy are less likely to utilize humor in memes to express their opinion, as corroborated by Shifman, Coleman, and Ward's study of the 2005 UK general election. This is also evidenced by my personal estimation of the scarcity of pro-GND memes: I find that there is less than 1 meme in support of the GND for every 100 memes in opposition to the GND[10]. Therefore, identity theory in conjunction with the identification function of humor provide a convincing explanation as to why political memes of polarizing topics appear to function almost exclusively as an attacking rhetorical tool as opposed to a means to promote discourse among disagreeing factions.

Figure 6: This meme suggests a correlation between the GND's perceived socialist economic policies and the political unraveling of the socialist government in Venezuela. It implies that the GND will result in an economic, social, and political crisis such as that of Venezuela (BBC News, 2019). Their view that the GND's policies will result in physical harm to the economy as well as the demise of their political identity is exemplified by the skulls at the bottom right of the

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[10] This analysis was based on a catalog of GND memes from Google Images.

image. This meme plays heavily on conservative stigma that socialism in incompatible with democracy and promotes in-group cohesion by recognizing the GND as a socialistic threat.

Source: *Watts up With That?*

4. "Me" + "Me" = "Meme": The Formation of Meme-Based Echo Chambers

The identity theory of political memes presented above not only explains the weaponization of memes, but also provides insight into how the spreading of memes presents a barrier to meaningful discourse. So how do memes spread? The theory of memetics address this question by examining memes in a manner consistent with genetics. Memetics postulates that just as evolutionary theory dictates only the most "fit" organisms can propagate via reproduction, only memes that are perceived to be humorous by an individual are further spread by that individual (Poulshock, 2012). In the case of political memes, I claim that memetic fitness – the capacity for a meme to become popular and widespread – is directly correlated to how agreeable a meme is with an individual or community's political opinions. This argument is supported by identity theory, which states that opinions challenging an individual's world view will be perceived as an

attack of that individual's identity and, thus, will prevent the individual to experience humor. Therefore, only memes that corroborate an individual or group's viewpoint will become mainstream within the community, and furthermore, memes misaligned with an individual or group's viewpoint will become extremely "unfit" and quickly go "extinct."

Additionally, Meyer states that "humor is situationally dependent…what would be perceived as quite humorous in once instance may seem irrelevant or only mildly interesting in another" (Meyer, 2000). Therefore, each political community and their unique opinions presents a memetic niche[11] in which only particular memes well-adapted to a community's political views can survive. This, in conjunction my analysis of identity theory, leads me to the conclusion that the mechanism through which memes spread intrinsically results in the formation of "echo chambers": a closed community of media and discussion whose members reinforce each other's opinion without regard to opposing arguments.

While memetics provides a convincing argument that the inherent nature of meme popularization restricts its ability to facilitate meaningful discourse, it is important to recognize the limitations of the memetic model. Some scholars argue that because the perception and spread of memes contains an unpredictable human element, the popularization of memes cannot be encapsulated by the simple ideas of evolutionary fitness and genetics (Heylighen & Chielens, 2009). While acknowledging these limitations, I nevertheless argue that memetics is an effective "jumping-point" to understand the spread of memes, and that sufficiently accurate in practice. Additionally, I claim that we can push this memetic model even further. While current analysis of successful or "viral" [12] memes go only so far as to explain why certain memes appear to

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[11] In reference to an ecological niche.
[12] In reference to a virus: a highly infections and communicable "agent."

dominate the public conscious, I propose that not only are these viral memes more widespread, but also, they actively reduce the total diversity of opinions in meme-based discourse. Just as how an invasive species gradually occupies more and more of an ecological niche and begin pushing the native population towards extinction[13], I argue that popular GND memes reduces the diversity of all GND memes available. For example, I conducted survey of 100 GND memes located via Google Images and found that the vast majority of all GND memes falls into three distinct categories based on content (Figure 7). Additionally, I argue that this lack of diversity is not unique to the GND. For example, almost all Occupy Wall Street memes fall into the three categories of "We are the 99%", "We are the 53%", and "We are the 1%."

Figure 7: Nearly all (~ 96%) of GND memes can be sorted into three categories: those that discredit the GND by mocking AOC (e.g. Figure 9), those that decry the GND as being socialist (e.g. Figure 6), and those that ridicule a particular stipulation of the GND that "cow farts" represent a concerning source of greenhouse emissions (e.g. Figure 8). Note: liberal, or pro-GND represents an insignificant proportion of memes (in concurrence with the previous section's conclusion that memes primarily function as a political weapon). In addition, AOC bashing memes represent the overwhelming majority of all GND memes (a point I will return to in the latter section).

Distribution of GND Memes by Category

- AOC (69%)
- Socialism (22%)
- Cow Farts (5%)
- Miscellaneous (4%)

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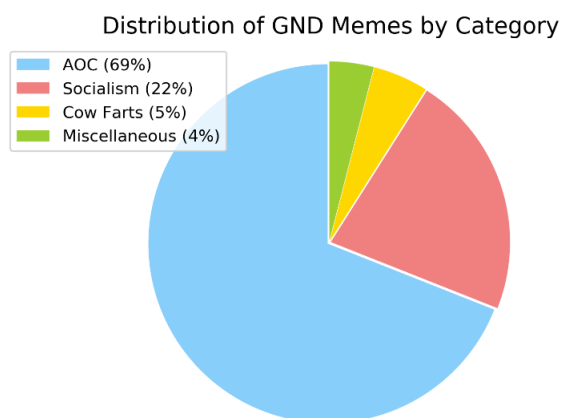
[13] In fact, invasive species are recognized as a leading threat to biodiversity (Tsutsui, Holway, & Case).

Figure 8: A meme poking fun at the GND's proposition to limit greenhouse-gas emission from the livestock industry: "cow farts." While this meme may appear innocuous, it exemplifies how popular, and largely nonsensical, memes monopolize the political discussion and prevent further, more meaning discourse, about the merits or drawbacks of the GND. Source: *me.me*
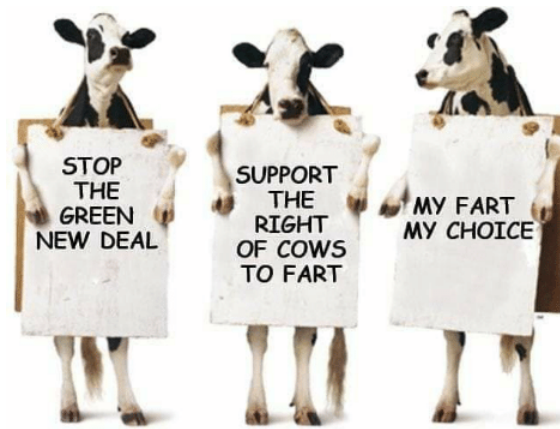

Stop cow discrimination now

This trend of popular memes stifling the diverse opinions of a large group of online "memers" is especially concerning because a meaningful discussion entails a sophisticated exchange of diverse opinions and evidence. Such depth of discussion cannot occur under the monopolization of a few memes. A study of twitter climate change discourse comes to the similar conclusion that "for the contentious topic of climate change" not only are most individuals "embedded within communities of like-minded users" but also "such self-reinforcing 'echo chambers' can prevent engagement with alternative viewpoints and promote extreme views" (Williams, Mcmurray, & Kurtz, 2015). The authors of the study further claim that cross-group interactions had a "moderating effect" whereby "exposure to a diversity of views was associated with a lower likelihood of holding a polarized view" (Williams, Mcmurray, & Kurtz, 2015). Therefore, from my analysis of the popularization of political memes, I conclude that the

necessity for a popular meme to be humorous gives rise to its polarizing function. Memes not only prevent meaningful discourse, but also may well facilitate the further breakdown of discussion between opposing political groups.

5. Attacks Ad Hominem: When Playground Banter Enter the Political Arena

However, even more concerning than the lack of diversity in meme-based political criticism of the GND, is the nature of such criticism. As alluded in the previous section, my inventory of GND memes reveals that over half of all memes provide no legitimate criticism of the proposition itself. Many memes instead attack the behavior, appearance, and even less-affluent background of AOC, an author of the GND. This type of ad hominem rhetoric[14] presents a serious barrier to meaningful discourse. In fact, Barnes et al., in their study of ad hominem rhetoric in political campaigns and political discourse finds that such attacks "disincentivize more sophisticated discussion" of the issues at hand (Barnes et al., 2018). That is, instead of critiquing the merits or faults of the GND proposition, public discourse has been instead distracted by the almost-juvenile attacks of AOC.

Figure 9: An example of an ad hominem of AOC. This meme seeks to turn public opinion again AOC's character rather than her policy. Source: *imgflip*.

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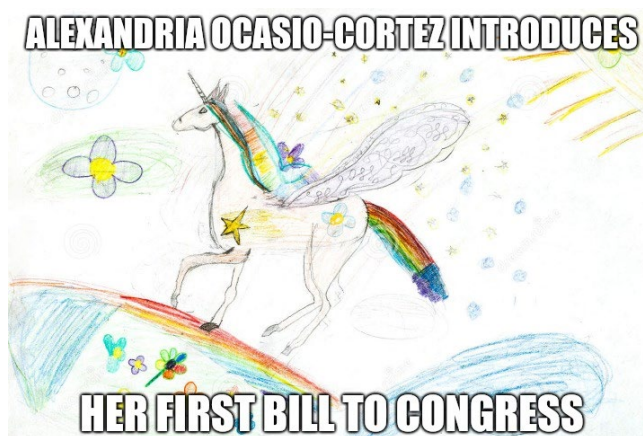
[14] An attack directed at a person's character rather than their position.

Figure 10: Another example of a personal attack of AOC. This meme criticizes, without evidence, AOC's lack of competence rather, rather than addressing the GND. Source: *Patriot Humor*.

But why is AOC such a prominent target for these conservative ad hominem attacks? Once again arguing through the context of identity theory, I claim that AOC is a "punching bag" for conservatives because she embodies the very ideas that they perceive to undermine their political and social identity. For example, as a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, AOC advocates liberal, or socialist, labor and healthcare policy (Stickles, 2019). To conservatives, who largely stigmatize socialism as undemocratic (as described in a previous section), this immediately present a challenge to their political ideology and identity. Thus, as *Vox* reporter Jane Coaston claims, conservatives "hammer" AOC in hopes of "sinking the most visible representative of the…[Democratic Socialist] Party" (Coaston, 2018). This may be further exasperated by her ethnic identity as the youngest Latin-American woman to hold a congressional office. This contrasts with Republican voters, who are overwhelmingly male, white, and old (Pew Research Center, 2018) – a group that may be unsympathetic to AOC.

However, identity theory is not enough to explain the mechanism through which these memes arise. Instead, examining ad hominem attacks within the context of the rhetoric of humor suggests that memes not only facilitate ad hominem attacks, but that the nature of the medium

may well promote such rhetoric. Because humor is an essential characteristic to the success and proliferation of memes, internet-users seeking to create popular memes may feel disincentivized to craft a thoughtful response to political policy in favor of a quick and simple jab at a politician's character. Furthermore, meaningful discourse may be inherently harder to convey via memes because an insightful back-and-forth of ideas and evidence intrinsically requires a less comical attitude that recognizes the gravity of the situation. This is best summarized by Nellie Bowles, who, in his New York Times article "The Mainstreaming of Political Memes Online," warns that memes "are replacing nuanced political debate" (Bowles, 2018).

Additionally, the above analysis explains why this pattern of memes promoting, or at least facilitating, such character attacks are not unique to the GND. For example, researching memes of a similar hot topic of political discourse, President Donald Trump, I located a popular meme depicting Trump holding an executive order that has been altered to show a child-like cat drawing. This meme quite literally overlooks, or rather, overwrites the actual policy Trump displays and instead mocks his supposed immaturity. The uncanny similarity between the Trump and AOC memes (Figures 9 and 11) demonstrates that such ad hominem attacks are quite universal across all meme-based political discourse and that the medium of memes itself is not conductive to meaningful discussion.

Figure 11: A meme of Trump displaying the first executive order he enacted. The document has been visuality altered to instead display what resembles a kindergarden drawing, suggesting that Trump is immature and incapable of enacting sensible policy. Source: *The Daily Dot*.

Figure 11 (continued):

6. Personal Bias: What I Do and Don't Bring to this Project

Here I will briefly address my own bias in this project. As a moderately liberal undergraduate student attending the University of California, Berkeley – an institution known for its liberal views – I myself experience a cultural bubble. For example, I was initially puzzled by the fact that the ad hominem attack of AOC (Figure 9) was considered humorous. However, having perceived the ad hominem attack of Donald Trump (Figure 11) to be quite hilarious, I realized that I had maintained a double standard. The Trump-attacking and AOC-attacking memes are near replicas of each other apart from the politician under attack and the "kindergarten drawing" of choice. Therefore, my initial inability to recognize the humor in the AOC-attacking meme reveals a personal liberal bias that managed to influence my initial analysis of the memes despite my attempts to maintain a neutral stance.

This incident has had a profound impact on how I have conducted my analysis throughout this final version of the project. Additionally, this anecdote provides personal evidence to support the arguments I've made in the previous sections. Living in the Berkeley "echo chamber," I was initially unable to appreciate the humor of the vastly conservative GND memes:

a fitting example of how humor in memes often function to polarize the "in" and "out" group. In fact, this incident reveals the effectiveness of such polarization as I approached my initial analysis with an open-minded attitude that is not often found in actual political discourse. Additionally, I can also attest to the capacity for memes to distract the public from more sophisticated political discourse. Prior to this project, I too viewed the Trump-attacking meme as merely humorous, and never pondered the specific policy obscured by the meme's facetious cat drawing.

7. Foreign Influence on Domestic Policy: Memes as a Political Weapon

While previous research has hinted at the propensity for memes to polarize political debate, there has been little mention of an ever more relevant and dangerous function of memes as a disruptive political weapon. This can be seen in a recent report from the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee, which reported the first definitive evidence that Russian propaganda agencies used memes in a "concerted effort to disrupt U.S. energy markets and influence domestic energy policy" (Yoder, 2018). Yoder reports that these memes presented extreme opinions regarding climate change that were "designed to appeal to either conservatives or liberals, without any middle ground." This, he claims, effectively polarizes the American public on climate issues and results in political chaos that allows the Russian government to more easily influence American domestic policy[15].

So how can foreign government so easily manipulate the American public? In the context of the rhetoric of humor and my pervious analysis of the polarizing effects of meme-based political discourse, I argue that memes provide the perfect medium for these divisive claims because the

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[15] This follows the "divide and conquer" technique: a divided public at each other's throats leaves open the opportunity for foreign interests to direct discourse towards ideas and policies that go against American interests.

popularity and longevity of a meme is not incumbent upon its logical or argumentative value, but instead dependent on how well its message aligns with the target audience's political opinions. The more extreme a meme's message is, the better it is received by its target audience. As a result, these memes push Americans further away from common ground and instead, as Yoder claims, "[stoke] the flames of America's cultural divides" (Yoder, 2018).

Figure 12: A meme created by a Russian ad agency with the purpose of inducing polarization of the climate-change debate by promoting a far-left position on clean energy. Source: US House Science, Space, and Technology Committee.

Figure 13 A meme created by a Russian ad agency with the purpose of inducing polarization of the climate-change debate by promoting a far-right position on clean energy. Source: US House Science, Space, and Technology Committee.

In addition, the mechanism through which the Russian government has caused discord within the American political debate is no different than that though which memes have caused massive polarization of conservative and liberal groups regarding the GND. This suggests that even without malicious intent, memes are highly effective at disrupting meaningful political discourse. Yet, such discourse is the key to the American democracy. Our democratic system operates on the fundamental freedom of Americans to openly debate and discuss policy. However, memes instead appear to stifle the nuanced nature of effective political discussion and, therefore, threaten our democratic system of politics.

8. Conclusion:

Political memes have become so prevalent and influential that the Washington Post characterized the 2016 presidential race as "the most-memed election in U.S. history" (Dewey, 2016). As memes begin to dominate more and more of the political conversation, it become evermore important to the understand the nature of meme-based political discourse and ultimately the impact of memes on policy.

This project addresses these questions and contributes to the current understanding of the political function of memes by examining memes in context of the GND: a recent and so-far memetically unexplored political movement. In my analysis of GND memes through the frames of the rhetoric of humor and identity theory, I propose that the necessity for humor in memes and the mechanism in which memes are popularized do no facilitate meaningful political discourse. Instead, political memes appear to encourage polarization, the formation of echo chambers, the repression of a diversity of widespread political opinions, and the ultimate breakdown of legitimate conversation in favor ad hominem or even nonsensical rhetoric. This tendency for memes to corrupt meaningful discourse has not gone unnoticed by domestic extremist groups

and foreign interests alike, who have employed memes as a weapon to disrupt rather than facilitate genuine discussion.

Therefore, the capacity for memes to promote divisiveness and polarization among the American public while stifling meaningful discourse and eliminating common ground represents a dangerous, yet largely unnoticed, threat to America's democratic system of politics.

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