

Article

“Don’t Fauci My Florida”: Anti-Fauci Memes as Digital Anti-Intellectualism

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Abstract

In his prescient book *Achieving Our Country*, Richard Rorty predicts the rise of a Trump-like strongman built on attacking, among other public figures, “postmodern professors” (1998, p. 90). This speaks to the importance of anti-intellectualism to the populist movement in the US today. Always present in populist appeals, like McCarthy’s placement of “educated elites at the center of his communist conspiracy” (Peck, 2019, p. 129), this approach “seeks to undermine public discourse by attacking and devaluing education, expertise, and language” (Stanley, 2020, p. 36). The result of these attacks is a return to tribalism and power, key facets of populist rhetoric and strategies. With the Covid-19 pandemic dominating the US public discourse since 2020, the populist conservative movement has trained their anti-intellectual rhetoric towards a singular figure: Dr. Anthony Fauci. An anti-fandom community was thus born built around attacking and mocking Fauci, taking place within the larger populist movement. While this anti-Fauci rhetoric takes many forms, one of the most dominant is that of memes. Through an analysis of both formal (DeSantis merchandise and political cartoons) and informal (actual grassroots) anti-Fauci memes, I argue online communities have used anti-Fauci memes as a form of anti-fandom community building utilizing and bolstering anti-intellectual, populist rhetoric due to their ease of transmission, mutability, and personification of intellectualism on a singular figure. In this way, being “anti-Fauci” allows the populist argument to seem like a personal grievance rather than a focused attack on academic thought itself.

Keywords

Anthony Fauci; anti-fandom; anti-intellectualism; memes; online communities; populism

Issue

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1. Introduction

In his prescient book *Achieving Our Country*, philosopher Richard Rorty (1998, p. 90) predicts a rise in populist movements across the globe, arguing that older industrialized democracies could be heading into a “Weimar-like period, one in which populist movements are likely to overturn constitutional governments.” Specifically citing the US as a possible site for a fascistic future, he even more prophetically envisions a Trump-like strong man rising to power predominantly on cultural issues. This figure, Rorty (1998, p. 90, emphasis added) writes, is “someone willing to assure them [working-class] that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and *postmodern professors* will no longer be calling the shots.”

Beyond his seeming clairvoyance towards an election 18 years later, Rorty also usefully points to some of

the key features of populist authoritarianism, notably its emphasis on class-based anti-intellectualism targeting academics and scientific authority. When the Covid-19 pandemic began during the final year of Trump’s presidency, the populist conservative movement he helped spur trained their sites on a singular figure representative of this particular “elite intellectualism”: Dr. Anthony Fauci. As the long-serving director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and a key figure in both Trump and Biden’s Coronavirus Task Forces, Fauci became, in many ways, the public face of the federal government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In time, this led to his becoming symbolic of not just governmental public health, but the very idea of government’s relationship to science. As a public figure, Fauci bore the brunt of both praise and antagonism from a politically divided country, as the increased politicization of the pandemic and public health measures led

many to see Fauci as the human embodiment of these much more complex issues.

This article looks specifically at the anti-Fauci rhetoric that emerged in this time period and places it within a larger understanding of the conservative populist movement. While anti-Fauci discourse takes many forms, perhaps its most dominant in both formal and informal spaces is that of memes. Memes specifically referencing and targeting Fauci as an “enemy of the people” or figure to be ridiculed/undermined have proliferated through formal and informal conservative networks, including official merchandise, conservative political cartoons, and grassroots creations in online communities.

Through an analysis of anti-Fauci memes, I argue online communities have succeeded in using memes for specifically anti-intellectual, populist rhetoric due to memes’ ease of transmission, mutability, and the personification of intellectualism onto a singular figure. As seemingly grassroots creations (even when they are not), memes contain an inherent populist, anti-establishment quality that makes them ideal for disseminating contemporary populist messages to the masses. This article considers the ways anti-Fauci memes in particular tie into the anti-intellectual features of populism and allow for a shift in political discourse that emphasizes personal grievance over deliberative discourse.

2. Populism’s Anti-Intellectualism

Although covering a range of political ideologies and activities, “fundamentally, populism is a form of politics predicated on the moral vilification of elites and the veneration of ordinary people” (Bonikowski, 2017, p. S184). Right-wing authoritarian populism, then, combines this segmenting of the population with conservative political aims ranging from pro-business/anti-government policies to appeals to cultural “traditions” like heteronormativity and white supremacy. Indeed, the elites that become the targets of populist communities are dependent on the movement’s goals. “While elected politicians are often the immediate targets, populism just as often focuses on economic leaders, civil servants and intellectuals” (Bonikowski, 2017, p. S184). In Anthony Fauci, we see a figure that acts as both a civil servant and an intellectual, given his status as a doctor and leader of NIAID across multiple political administrations. Thus, the targeting of Fauci specifically directly lines up with recent right-wing populist activity more broadly (see Trump’s focus on “draining the swamp”), continuing traditions in American populism with a renewed interest in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Anti-intellectualism’s ties to populism are deep and thorough, particularly in the US, due to its unique political foundations. Indeed, Hofstadter (1963) described the persistent pattern of anti-intellectualism in American cultural history following the Second Red Scare of the 1950s. Within this foundational text, intellect, and its counter anti-intellectualism, proves difficult to define, at

least in terms of its cultural understanding. Yet three distinct types of anti-intellectualism emerge from an analysis of Hofstadter’s text, as noted by Daniel Rigney (1991): anti-rationalism, anti-elitism, and unreflective instrumentalism. Each form from its own social background, aligning most directly with religion, politics, and capitalism, respectively. For this reason, I will focus my analysis in this article on the *anti-elitist* attitudes of anti-intellectualism, as they are “associated primarily with populist political structures and movements” (Rigney, 1991, p. 436).

Attacking intellectualism in the populist strategy goes back decades and is most particularly notable in the US context during McCarthyism’s heyday. “McCarthy’s anti-communist crusade laid the groundwork for conservative populism’s cultural-educational vision of the elite” (Peck, 2019, p. 129), wherein the dangers of intellectualism and other egalitarian measures were laid out as challenging the very fabrics of “traditional” society and American culture. This “McCarthyist structure of feeling” went beyond anti-intellectualism; “antiforeignness, antiradicalism, and antiblackness were ‘active together’ to give meaning to un-Americanness, non-citizenship, dangerous threat, and subversion” (Burden-Stelly, 2017, p. 345). The issue was not so much the source of the subversion (intellectuals), but the resultant undermining of traditionally white, American (and thus conservative) values.

The strategy is to block rigorous debate from even occurring by attacking the source of information (ad hominem) rather than the content itself: “By rejecting the value of expertise, fascist politicians also remove any requirement for sophisticated debate” (Stanley, 2020, p. 36). This, in turn, allows for power and more explicit identity markers (like race) to have more value to political action than policy or ideology. Indeed, this lowering of debate to mere identity play and disagreement is a perfect foundation upon which memes can function. The utility of memes in the anti-Fauci and larger anti-intellectual populist movements is paramount to emphasizing personality attacks over matters of policy or actions.

As Rigney notes (1991, p. 441), “anti-elitist opposition to intellect has always had a sharp political edge,” taking the distrust of claims to superior knowledge, especially as such claims are often grounded in class privilege like the expense of college and the often higher-paying salaries that follow more advanced degrees. In this way, populist movements can better claim to support the interests of the “common people,” with the distinction being drawn along intellectual lines that themselves are indebted to classist divisions. These class-based resentments are apparent from populist politics in the 1960s up through today.

The importance of *class* over actual *intellect* leaves room for what Peck (2019, p. 185) terms “*popular intellect*...a working-class brand of intellectualism” that is pervasive in contemporary populist movements on the right. This is often seen on Fox News programming, where

intellectualism is only attacked when coming from “traditional” sources (like Dr. Fauci) that make their appeals to structures of academic and scientific power. “Fox News programming makes the case for a *lay* brand of intellectualism” (Peck, 2019, p. 151) that creates not so much an anti-intellectual identity but an “interface for conservative intellectual culture” (Peck, 2019, p. 187). This culture plays a key role in contemporary populist movements that seek to not necessarily undermine all displays of intellect, but only to prop up their own, limited (read conservative) versions of such intellectual exercise.

The result of this is a laundering of unscientific, non-rigorous intellectual inquiry into something *performing* as popular intellectualism wherein the markers of intellect (degrees, relationship to institutes, etc.) are co-opted in order to project a new brand of intellect to a populist, working-class identity. In this conception, particularly within the realm of Fox News, anti-Fauci memes and discourse are seen as challenging so-called elite power structures propping up Fauci more so than his intellectual acumen itself. Rather than challenging him on the merits of the science he expresses, the challenges are often tied into presentations of class and power, often framed as an attack on personal liberties/freedoms. This can particularly be seen in the content analysis of anti-Fauci memes and the ways he is targeted in such digital discourse.

Of course, the creation of an alternative intelligentsia contributes to gathering confusion over an agreed-upon truth. The wealth of misinformation and disinformation is ripe for being taken advantage of, as “in the post-truth era, right-wing populist leaders have adopted an anti-intellectual political attitude” where “the internal threat is represented by the establishment, intellectuals, and liberals” (Reyes, 2020, pp. 871–72). In practice, “anti-intellectualism means, among other things, devaluation of book learning, devaluation of high academic standards, and attacks on intellectuals” (Gencoglu, 2021, p. 14). Taken all together, “the composition, production, distribution, and circulation of right-wing discourse detaches academic knowledge from its original context and transforms it in service of anti-intellectualism” (Lawless & Cole, 2021, p. 150).

Within all of this activity, memes provide an ideal template to serve these multiple ends. As authorless digital ephemera, memes create a sheen of grassroots, humble beginnings despite the fact that many anti-Fauci memes come from formal power players within the conservative movement. And, thus, “memes [serve] as the means through which candidates [can] bypass institutional media such as television, print, and even digital press formats and the gatekeeping measures endemic to them” (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 57). The avoidance of traditional gatekeepers provided by memes lines up well with the creation of Peck’s *populist intellect*, as it allows for the formation of seemingly intelligent discourse without being subject to embedded power structures ripe for populist critique. In this way, memes

espousing anti-intellectual sentiment serve as a continuation of populist political activity targeting intellectual elites yet one making use of digital affordances. Memes, then, have simply become the newest form of ongoing populist discourse taking advantage of some of the unique qualities of networked digital communication, such as non-hierarchical information exchange, collaborative creation, and anonymous sharing.

What is more, “memetic propaganda strategies operationalize political divisions by aggrandizing the symbolism of enemyship” (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 189). Through their highly symbolic and iconographic nature, memes make it easier to create targets and outsiders, like Fauci, that come to represent larger systems that are antithetical to populist movements. In sum, the seeds and strategies of the contemporary conservative populist movement and its ties to anti-intellectualism are ripe for memes to proliferate and flourish. Yet, the production and messaging of these memes are only one part of the story; indeed, the ways memes are communally shared in an effort to create coalitions is just as, if not more important, to understanding the impact of anti-Fauci memes on contemporary populist movements.

3. Anti-Fandom’s Role in Populist Identity

This type of populist anti-intellectualism takes on a different, unique form when attached to a specific, *individual* figure like Fauci, making it akin to anti-fandom practices. Just as fandoms include a strong, positive emotional connection to a text or object (love, respect, admiration, etc.), so too does anti-fandom, though this time the feelings are primarily negative (hate, anger, disgust, etc.). What is more just as fandom is predominantly about building communities and identities around the object of attention, as does anti-fandom, with the activities of the anti-fandom providing fertile grounds for community building and identity formation. These are the features at play with anti-Fauci memes that feed into the larger community of online conservative populism.

Much like traditional fandom, “dislikes...are regularly performative, laying claim to communities of belonging and distancing us from communities of approbation” (Gray, 2021, p. 136). Disliking something—or someone—then, is not so much about the object or person in and of itself, but the communally valuable identities that can be assigned to such dislike. Much as communities of shared identities and practice emerge around fan objects, anti-fan objects of dislike also create opportunities for communal activity, identity formation, and production of artifacts such as memes. Anti-Fauci memes become the productive activity by which those within a particular community express their dislike and practice their anti-fandom, forming stronger bonds; these activities and feelings are precisely what populist politicians are exploiting when participating in anti-Fauci memes themselves, attempting to profit off of the grassroots movements rather than respond to them.

Like populist movements themselves, anti-fandom is itself rooted in perceptions of class. For Bourdieu, according to Gray, “dislike is a performance of cultural capital and a classed act of claiming superiority” (Gray, 2021, p. 136); however, in the case of anti-Fauci discourse, superiority is claimed by challenging traditional markers of intellectual expertise. This is how anti-Fauci memes participate in the construction of a popular intellect wherein expertise is challenged and supplanted with a new, conservative understanding of intellectualism and superiority.

Class, then, is challenged and upended by circumventing traditional gatekeepers, both in terms of publishing (memes being freely exchanged) and acknowledgment as legitimate (no need for peer review or academic authority). And so instead of following a logic of scientific inquiry or public debate, “cultural capital and the distinction between supposedly ‘pure’ or ‘legitimate’ taste and ‘barbarous’ or popular taste follow a logic of class” (Gray, 2021, p. 138). Bourdieu is, of course, talking specifically about cultural standards of taste and *not* standards of truth or scientific evidence; but within the contemporary conservative populist movement, there is no distinction—It is all evidence of a cultural battle and thus subject to class logics. In this way, support for an anti-Fauci position need not be based on science but rather a class-based criticism.

Anti-fandom’s connections to American conservative populism are not new, as has been particularly noted in the rise of the Tea Party since 2008. Despite the investment and organization by moneyed interests, the Tea Party performed grassroots activism and populist ethos in opposition to Barack Obama with claims based on both explicit (economic anxiety) and more implicit (racism) ways. The key identity formation for the Tea Party, indeed, was in this position as antagonists, “the Tea Party from its inception was formulated and positioned *against*, rather than *for* a given cause” (Sandvoss, 2019, p. 130).

And, thus, participation within the Tea Party or other supposedly populist movements is seen as an act of anti-fandom in many ways as it is positioned *against* a given object/symbol rather than for some specific policy. This relates to how both anti-fandom and populist movements are connected through community activity and identity formation more so than political policy. “What unifies Tea Partiers is thus not a coherent ideological vision, but their antagonism toward a projected Other” (Sandvoss, 2019, p. 135). In the case of anti-Fauci memes, the projected Other comes to represent traditional villains of populist rhetoric: intellectuals, elites, and government agents.

Fandom and anti-fandom are useful for understanding contemporary political activation due to their understanding of “affect-driven communities” (Reinhard et al., 2022, p. 1153). As they argue in their analysis of QAnon, “the field of fan studies can be productively applied to investigate the online discursive activities of QAnon com-

munity members to better understand how these communities can and have been built” (Reinhard et al., 2022, p. 1153). Fan studies (and thus anti-fandom studies) can be particularly useful in studying populist politics due to their nature of challenging authority. The ways fans circulate ideas and messages (like memes) are a form of empowerment and a way to challenge established narratives (like fanfiction). And, thus, the creation of an anti-intellectual or *populist intellectual* sphere within a populist movement is particularly attuned to fan-like participation and community building (Miro, 2021, p. 64).

In short, anti-fandom is in many ways at the root of so many contemporary populist movements, especially in the US, as the conservative movement continues emphasizing reactionary politics over constructive imaginings. Anti-fandoms do still create participatory movements and activities as fandoms do, yet they primarily do so in opposition to something else and thus are inherently reactionary in nature, making them naturally aligned with populist rhetoric that also emphasizes division from an Other who can easily be refashioned into an object of anti-fandom.

Anti-fandom regarding Fauci is explicitly political in nature, especially when coming from more formal political structures like GOP campaigns and politicians. The targeting of scientists or science communicators like Fauci is particularly relevant, as their position of authority is drawn from scientific principles as well as, in the case of Fauci, governmental positioning. Thus, the anti-fandom creations—like memes—serve to both attack and target the outsider as well as reaffirm community and belief systems within a particular ideological order. And so, anti-Fauci memes and their identity as productions of a broader Fauci anti-fandom play a key role in contemporary populist movements online.

4. Populist Messaging in Memes

A cursory internet search for anti-Fauci memes will bring back literally countless examples from a variety of named and anonymous sources, content aggregators and random social media users, and even for-profit opportunities to purchase meme-related ephemera. Like any other type of online memes, detailing their specific origins and creators is often impossible due to their inherent transmissibility and mutability. It is perhaps most beneficial, then, to consider how memes “emerge alongside the digital public that shapes and is shaped by their creation” (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 10). Memes thus help create communities that specifically exist alongside stronger insider/outsider dynamics. Indeed, “memes within the troll space compose a holistic system” (Phillips, 2015, p. 22), meaning they make sense only in relation to each other, making them less comprehensible to those outside the network. And so, memes become useful specifically for *populist* identity formation due to their reliance on group affinity and coherence. In this way, this article is less concerned with the particular origins of informal

anti-Fauci memes than how they represent a digital populist ethos, and how such an ethos transforms and is transformed by more formal structures.

Indeed, “memes are also sites of public investment through their circulation outside of their digital origins” (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 11), and thus an analysis of the ways anti-Fauci memes reflect contemporary online populism need not rely on always tracking their origins. However, this will become more apparent when examining formal anti-Fauci constructions by campaigns and politicians, as such actions show an important transference of populist imagining online and how such activity is neither entirely grassroots nor top-down structured, but rather a unique interaction between the two.

There is no limit to the formal elements of the anti-Fauci meme; while certain images and ideas replicate and repeat, the only unifying factor amongst them all is the specific targeting of Fauci himself. Whether by name, image-likeness, or both, the hailing of Fauci as a figure to be attacked, criticized, and distrusted is what ties these memes together and thus the community exchanging them. As such, this reinforces the argument that anti-Fauci memes play a crucial role in populist imaginings and community formation, emphasizing the individual enemy over larger, more nuanced political deliberation.

The “Dr. Anthony Fauci Meme Gallery” on Politically Incorrect Humor exemplifies this breadth of format and messaging. Visually one sees a mix of image macros featuring Fauci or other traditional meme templates, political cartoon-style drawings, and photoshops of Fauci in other contexts as a way to emphasize his status as an object of ridicule, scorn, or even fear. What is important is the emphasis on Fauci as an individual through these visual interpretations, and direct referencing, as this builds on anti-fandom principles of participatory culture that connect with populist targeting of classist intellectual figures.

These notions come across in the variety of messages present in many anti-Fauci memes, which can be categorized into three main areas: Confusion, Control, and Hypocrisy. Anti-Fauci memes based around Confusion often emphasize the allegedly mixed messaging from Fauci, a format whose goal is to undermine trust in both Fauci himself as well as science and government for the ultimate purpose of legitimizing disagreement and refusal to follow mandates/guidelines. Memes of this category utilize ideas like Fauci literally (and also figuratively) “moving goalposts” as a reference that changes to his predictions or recommendations are indicators of his inability to have a coherent message. Such memes also tie this idea to simpler exhaustion with updated recommendations and protocols, utilizing the feeling of confusion as a basis for non-compliance with scientific and governmental requests/requirements—another particularly powerful populist belief.

The next set of memes coalesces around the concept of Fauci (and thus, intellectual and governmental elites) as desiring Control over the populace. In these instances,

Fauci is presented as a power-hungry authoritarian, with references to his recommendations as “demands,” with particular humor being derived from increasingly inane and outlandish suggestions. Other memes are much more direct, like one simply superimposing a message on Fauci’s mask: “It’s not about safety, it’s about control.” These memes also play into populist messaging as populist rhetoric is often presented as an overthrow of some dominant elite class that has taken power over all forms of life: culture, science, government, and more. Once again, we see the “Other” present as what must be opposed while also framing the populist movement as inherent victims of oppression.

Also endemic to these Control-focused memes is a targeting not just of Fauci himself, but his supposed/imagined followers, often times making references to “sheep” or “zombies.” In these memes, Fauci-as-controlling is still the subject of much vitriol and anger, but the positioning is broadened to include those who mindlessly follow larger governmental and scientific guidelines (again embodied in the person of Fauci himself). Once again, populist ideology is strengthened by privileging an us-vs.-them mentality, but one with a particular form of anti-intellectualism. In this case, this is reminiscent of the *popular intellect* (Peck, 2019) in that these sheep following the guidance of Fauci and what he represents are a lesser intellect that does not value freedom. And, thus, through this positioning, the populist identity still retains a form of non-traditional intellectualism that relies on belief and ideology over traditional structures of intellect like education and research institutions.

A final category of anti-Fauci memes focuses on his supposed hypocrisy, making these the most personally targeted. Rather than focus on how Fauci represents scientific and governmental ineptitude (Confusion) and oppression (Control), here the focus is on how Fauci himself is somehow hypocritical by ignoring his own recommendations. These mostly focus on taking any image (regardless of context) of Fauci without a mask making a public appearance presented as clear-cut evidence of a double standard. The most circulated of these come from Fauci attending a Washington Nationals baseball game where he also threw out the first pitch (another moment utilized in many memes mocking his athleticism); in it, Fauci is seen with his mask around his chin, yet there is no context for if anyone is near him or if he was eating, drinking, or any other action within guidelines.

By emphasizing Fauci’s supposed hypocrisy, these attacks take on the most personal tone, though they can still be seen as representing not just Fauci’s individual hypocrisy but one lobbied against all elites. Again, this fits within populist strategies of accusing elites of playing by “their own set of rules,” empowering populist ideologies that seek to undermine and ultimately overthrow established orders.

In all of these cases, there are clear populist messages underlying the purposes beyond attacking Fauci himself.

As such, Fauci anti-fandom and anti-Fauci memes, as a particular encapsulation of that anti-fandom, become powerful carriers of populist messaging, as well as sites around which populist communities can form and collaborate in predominately online spaces. While these memes primarily exist in the exchanges of conservative social media and message boards, they have emerged and been reformed by more formal established, bases of conservative thought, primarily in the campaigns of Republican politicians.

5. Memes From Campaigns and Politicians

While memes are primarily considered inherently grassroots and informal, their language, process, and style can be coopted by formal figures and institutions in more top-down political action. After Barack Obama's presidential wins in 2008 and 2012 were seen as, in part, due to social media strategies, online campaigning has become more commonplace in local, state, and national elections. But it truly came into prominence following his tenure, as the "2016 presidential campaign threw into stark relief the centrality of social media—and of memes—in electoral politics" (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 53). Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and primary candidates—most notably Bernie Sanders—utilized memes through their campaign to invigorate and rally their bases. Indeed, "during and after the election, memes became tools for transmitting propaganda produced by the masses as well as institutional actors such as political campaigns" (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 54). This form of meme warfare in electoral politics has only increased since then, and anti-Fauci memes have become extremely common amongst conservative populist candidates and politicians.

Perhaps no single political actor has run with the anti-Fauci meme movement as much as Florida governor Ron DeSantis, who has clearly taken a strategy of courting Trump voters directly through his policies and, more importantly, his rhetorical style, gestures, and public image. Much like Trump, DeSantis has utilized memes to speak to a target audience in the conservative populist digital sphere. Like Trump, "who benefitted from and at times, capitalized on, this ecosystem and networked strategies" (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 160), DeSantis has been able to target Fauci through meme-like discourse in more formal campaign structures (advertisements, merchandise, public speeches). In this way, DeSantis, in a sense, launders the memes into something more traditionally understandable and reportable by mainstream news, garnering him both national attention as well as admiration amongst the base.

Anti-Fauci merchandise has been a cornerstone of the DeSantis campaign and public relations message throughout the pandemic. This has taken shape most notably in a line of "Don't Fauci My Florida" objects, including t-shirts, baseball caps, and koozies. The turning of "Fauci" into a verb meaning an attack on per-

sonal liberties is taken straight from meme discourse, and also supports populist anti-intellectual notions of anger towards elites on the basis of control—one of the primary messages of anti-Fauci memes.

Perhaps no single object better encapsulates the populist underpinnings of anti-Fauci memes than a drink koozie with the text "how the hell am I going to be able to drink a beer with a mask on?" as it both challenges Covid-19 safety protocols at the same time as reaffirming a populist value of drinking beer. In this one sentence, we see how the anti-intellectualism of anti-Fauci memes takes the form of reaffirming so-called traditional values based on a particular amalgamation of conservative masculinity and working-class iconography. Of course, it cannot be forgotten in all of this that such koozies are being sold to the direct financial (as well as social/cultural) profit of Ron DeSantis and the Republican Party, showing the unique relationship between base and party. Anti-Fauci memes, then, are not only a product of online populist communities but a key site of exchange between actual party elites (ironically) and the conservative base they are aiming to court.

Campaign ads by DeSantis also highlight this exchange, as one in particular builds on the message of Confusion around Fauci's presentation. The 60-second ad features clips of Fauci speaking to the press from across the pandemic, implying his lack of consistency by juxtaposing conflicting recommendations. Of course, this does not take into account the fluid nature of responding to a pandemic with new scientific evidence constantly being considered, but the message is clear, summarized with the tag "Dr. Fauci. He flips, he flops." The image then cuts to a serene beach with Ron DeSantis flip-flops in the sand (also for purchase) and the text "Fauci can pound sand."

Once again, there are many meme-like qualities to the ad, most notably in the aggressive tone in attacking Fauci, its emphasis on his supposed confusion, and the final message of class-based resistance with images of the flip-flops on the beach. The flip-flops themselves—notably the only thing in the ad directly referencing DeSantis—are also objects of non-elite populist imagery. Even the phrase exhorting Fauci to "pound sand" takes a decidedly aggressive colloquialism, tying DeSantis closer to an agitated base through tone as well as the use of more common vernacular.

While all of these objects, of course, require some level of semiotic analysis to interpret their meanings, DeSantis was much more explicit in the populist underpinnings of his constant attacks on Fauci during his speech at the 2022 Conservative Public Action Conference held in Orlando. Here, he declared Florida "defeated Fauci-ism" while also attacking the "scientific and technical elite" (Lemongello & Gillespie, 2022). Note the emphasis is on Fauci being defeated, not any specific recommendations or federal mandates. Fauci is the target, following the meme-trajectory of distilling a more nuanced, complicated series of scientific and governmental actions into a

personal attack. He then directly ties this to a larger battle against “elites,” solidifying the connection between attacking Fauci and populist ideology.

While DeSantis used his power as governor of Florida to attack Fauci, up-and-coming GOP politicians are using Fauci meme warfare to establish their credentials with a suspicious base. Mehmet Oz, best known as daytime television’s *Dr. Oz*, announced his candidacy for US Senate in Pennsylvania on November 30, 2021. Since then, a great deal of his campaign has focused on targeting Fauci, a reversal from his earlier support for vaccines, masks, and other recommendations from Fauci and others. This stark shift shows the power of the anti-intellectual populist movement, almost requiring Oz to train his sights on Fauci in order to break out in the Republican primary.

Oz has utilized literal memes in his actions, including an image posted to his Twitter featuring Fauci’s face superimposed over the character Charlie Kelly from *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, explaining an outlandish conspiracy (Oz, 2022b). This image has been used as a meme for years as a way of indicating someone is presenting bizarre ideas or should not be trusted or listened to. The text alongside the image states, “Masks are supported by science,” implying Fauci’s belief in masking is antithetical to science and based on conspiracy. This is all the more important when one remembers that Oz himself supported masking earlier in the pandemic. This type of meme warfare being deployed by Republican candidates, and specifically in such a way as to counter and shift their original messaging on an issue, shows the impact online populism in the guise of memes has had on contemporary conservative politics in the US.

Beyond individual memes, Oz has taken on the larger meme-like refrain of “debate me” to another level by frequently demanding a debate with Fauci on the topic of Covid-19 across multiple tweets (Oz, 2022a). One of the most important elements of this Tweet and the accompanying video is the phrase “doctor to doctor,” as Oz is positioning their credentials against one another. Once again, we see *populist intellect* (Peck, 2019) in effect, as rather than being entirely anti-intellectual, this particular charge rather seeks to set up an alternative intellect. Rather than seeking to eliminate all forms of intellectual comparison, this alternative intellect positioned by Oz is still trying to seek authority via intellect, yet through non-traditional means. Notably, here it is not so much Fauci’s status as a doctor under attack, but his position as antithetical to conservative positions on freedom and a connection to meme-based messaging about Fauci’s confusion and hypocrisy. So rather than being purely anti-intellectual in general, it is more anti-*traditional* intellectual. Oz’s goal in utilizing the “debate me” meme is to position himself as an intellectual authority via nebulous debate rather than by producing better data, information, or scientific inquiry; intellect still has a role, but it is being redefined for how it is gained/assessed.

It could be easy to dismiss these examples of anti-Fauci meme activity from DeSantis and Oz as mere cam-

paign bluster divorced from actual governmental action, yet anti-Fauci fandom and activity have become key to elements of Republican governance with the creation of what I call *legislative memes*. US House Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene introduced H.R.2316—Fire Fauci Act on April 1st, 2021. Unfortunately, not an elaborate April Fools’ prank, the bill literally calls itself the Fire Fauci Act, despite the text instead calling to reduce his salary and begin an audit of his activities as NIAID Director.

I argue this act (or rather, the filing of it publicly) can be seen as a meme itself, or at the least derived from meme activity around Fauci in both grassroots and formal circles. With no hope of actually being passed, the act serves functionally as a meme, aiming to provoke reaction while also hailing a like-minded community by extolling the community’s values. In this case, the personal focus of Fauci’s anti-fandom, realized through the construction of memes that make personal attacks easier than more nuanced deliberation, has led to a more personal, anti-fandom approach to actual governance based around personal retribution and targeting. These activities are in-line with populist anti-intellectual and anti-elitist thought, where policies and actions are based around a politics of personal grievance and Othering. While one cannot definitively state where anti-Fauci memes began and how much is top-down or bottom-up, the circulation and interaction across these spheres is indicative of a contemporary online populism that is only gaining prominence in contemporary American political life.

6. Conclusion

Returning to Rorty’s predictions regarding a populist rise in the US referenced at this article’s outset, he points to the larger stakes in allowing such a movement to grow:

One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. [Slurs for Blacks and Jews] will once again be heard in the workplace. All the sadism which the academic Left has tried to make unacceptable to its students will come flooding back. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet. (Rorty, 1998, p. 90)

In this chilling account, Rorty once again makes particular mention of the intellectual’s imagined position within this ideological framework. He predicts the college-educated being painted as the oppressive Others to be challenged, and this is seen in a small part in the rise of anti-Fauci memes in online populist communities. These anti-Fauci memes perform a specific brand of contemporary digital populism that emphasize personal grievance, anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism, and informal

community formation all at once. Yet, crucially, these acts are *not* entirely grassroots formed; as examples in this article show, anti-Fauci memes are as strong a piece of formal political messaging as grassroots organizing principles.

This widespread adoption of memes in both formal and informal political messaging indicates a growing power of memetic discourse in contemporary politics. Political memes expand even beyond what Shifman identified in 2014 as “about making a point—participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there” (Shifman, 2014, p. 121). What Shifman (2014, p. 150) sees as a “new arena of political discourse” and “bottom-up political influence,” has grown in disparate ways. While anti-Fauci memes certainly take the form of political discourse, they are best understood as an expression of anti-fandom and community formation within right-wing populist circles rather than simply a new form of debate. Indeed, rather than further democratic deliberation, the memes discussed in this article mostly exist within a given community, strengthening those identities, and thus increasing polarization.

The untraditional nature of memes does not make them unique in this regard, however. One need only to look at the growth of explicitly right- and left-leaning television, streaming, and digital channels to see the growing division of media ecosystems along ideological boundaries. Right-wing populist memes like the anti-Fauci memes discussed here are part and parcel of a larger right-wing populist media ecosystem, including Fox News, One America News Network, Newsmax, and many more. What anti-Fauci memes show in particular, however, is how the lines between formal and informal political messaging within right-wing populist spheres are becoming more blurred, with neither necessarily leading the way entirely but rather working in tandem. The rise of figures like Trump, Greene, and others is both reinforced by the popularity of memes and, in turn, encourages their further creation. If we are to better understand right-wing populist mediascapes of all kinds—formal and informal, traditional and new—we must become familiar with memes and memetic conversation as they become more fully ingrained into these political communities and their activities.

The unique digital features of memes indicate a shift in understanding contemporary digital populism that falls in line with historical trends in the ideology with updated digital media-based traits. In the end, memes serve as the perfect vessel for this style of online populism, and thus must be considered not only a grassroots phenomenon but one of increasing formal power in the circular exchange between a base and its political leaders.

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