Memetic Election Cycles in US Presidential Campaigns

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of *memetic election cycles*, examining how memes have become a central tool in U.S. political campaigns since at least the 2008 Obama campaign. Through a review of key literature on political communication, participatory culture, and digital marketing, the study analyzes the evolution of memes as viral political content, but also as a viable means to mobilize the masses behind increasingly polarized political parties and campaigns. It highlights how campaigns such as those of Obama, Trump, Biden, and Harris leveraged memes not only for voter engagement but also as branding tools that shaped public perception. Using examples from recent election cycles, including the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, the article discusses the role of memes as grassroots digital marketing and viral political advertising. Additionally, the research explores the potential influence of memes on voting behavior and the risks of disinformation. The findings suggest that memes serve as a hybrid form of digital folklore and marketing, influencing both electoral discourse and voter behavior.

Keywords: Digital Folklore; Memes; Vernacular Expression; 2024 US Presidential Campaign

1. Introduction

The 2024 U.S. Presidential campaign has seen its share of historic developments: the assassination attempts on former President Donald Trump, President Biden's withdrawal of his candidacy and subsequent endorsement of Vice President Kamala Harris, only 107 days before the election, to mention a few. Aside from these more formal examples, both campaigns have attracted and also embraced what can perhaps be best phrased as memetic messaging. This contribution examines the evolution of memetic messaging as a purposeful form of digital marketing of a political campaign and indeed specific ideologies of practice. For example, the 2008 Obama campaign certainly embraced a kind of American populism. While some debate exists as to proper definitions of populism, this contribution adopts the perspective of Bonikowski's (2016) view of populism that it is not an ideology per se but rather a rhetorical framework consonant as a tool for the left or right. However, Obama's 2008 campaign developed "renewed or reinvented" strategies to communicate "with potential voters and mobilizing volunteers" and, consequently, shared a common trait with Trump's 2016 successful bid for the presidency (Mørk, 2020, p. 185).

One perspective that requires serious attention is the technological affordance of social media platforms leveraged during political campaigns. While this may currently seem as an obvious point, some figures may clarify the rapidity of social media's adoption within society, often merging socio-cultural and political narratives. In 2008, worldwide Facebook users amounted to approximately 100 million; by 2016, this figure jumped to nearly 1.2 billion. With regards to Facebook's penetration within the U.S. market, in 2008, only 44 million people had active accounts compared with 180 million by 2016. The choice to leverage Facebook in 2008 was clearly fortuitous for the Obama campaign but also prescient for what came later. It also bears noting that in 2008, Facebook was still relatively new in terms of common perspectives about its basic utility and well before serious concerns about Facebook's leadership were addressed at U.S. congressional hearings in 2018 (The Washington Post, 2018). Facebook's novelty and Obama's 2008 campaign as a popular movement meant that in order to mobilize voters to support him as a *party outsider*, Obama had to "combine use of the internet with mobilizing grassroots" (Mørk, 2020, p. 205). Compared to the 2024 campaigns, the use of a highly visual and parasocially interactive platform like TikTok appears to extend the trend initiated by the Obama campaign many years earlier. One of the perhaps most iconic images to emerge during the 2008 campaign was the Obama *Hope* poster, also with versions using the word *Change* or *Progress*. Widely shared and garnering a variety of reactions, the image also spawned remixed parodies such as the Obama as Joker in figure 2.

Figure 1: Obama 2008 Hope Poster

Figure 2: Jokerized Obama

Note: The original cover of Time magazine featuring Obama was published October 23, 2006. After Obama's electoral victory in 2008, his visage was remixed into the Joker from *The Dark Knight* in 2009 and was initially posted to Flikr, seen by thousands before being removed from the site (Wiggins, 2019, p. 61).

An early perspective on the meaning behind the jokerized Obama offers some timely insight. Phillips (2009, para. 1) explained that "no one…has provided an airtight (not to mention fully coherent) account of what the Obama/Joker image is trying to express, each group has used the image to prove something nefarious about their political opponents". On this point, we can offer an alternative viewpoint. Shifman (2014) has stated that memes should be seen as a kind of postmodern folklore that connect personal and political realities, characterizing what she calls "networked individualism". Furthermore, Wiggins (2019, p. 62) emphasizes the role of ideological practice in that the meme, be it Obama as Joker or another, when leveraged by a particular individual or group, gathers meaning based largely on dichotomous us-them dynamics. This is particularly obvious given how in 2016, Trump's image was also modified into the Joker, also from *The Dark Knight*. With Obama as Joker, he becomes something threatening, alongside racial notions of blackness with a whiteface. With Trump as Joker, he becomes an agent of chaos, offering a truly outsider perspective on Washington. Taken together, these perspectives underline the important developments within social media environments for purposeful memetic messaging to promote and market political candidates and ideologies. In what follows, we offer a review of previous research on memes used as tools of political communication (Shifman, 2014; Mina, 2019; Wiggins, 2019) writ large but also the historical evolution of memes in U.S. political campaigns (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018; Ross & Rivers, 2017). In addition, we provide critical examples as to how individuals and groups have used memes as part of digital grassroots campaigns (Tran, 2022) and also to view memes as a form of political branding and marketing (Hunting, 2019).

2. Memes as Political Communication Tools

Several perspectives address common understandings of what constitutes memes as political communication tools. "Memes encompass a variety of formats, including text, images, sounds, and behaviors" (Ahmed & Masood, 2024, p. 2), and they "diffuse at the micro level but shape the macrostructure of society" (Shifman, 2013, p. 372). Some claim memes function in this way merely as imitators of previous content (Ahmed & Masood, 2024; Milner, 2013) whereby participatory audiences create and share such content in an apparent attempt to engage in a larger socio-cultural discourse. Yet others make a sharper distinction between memes as imitators and memes as part of a larger argumentative discourse. Galipeau (2023, p. 438) writes "memes have the power to constitute political discourse and to be a mirror of the culture from which they stem (Wiggins,

2019)". As its core, *politics* "consists of responding to conflict with dialogue" (Blattberg, 2001, p. 193). As individuals share information about news and events often through the curation of memes, a kind of dialogue or discourse emerges that addresses certain worldviews or ideologies. Within this discourse, an individual's attention becomes highly sought after, and the speed by which memes can be produced and spread may address how individuals perceive certain issues. The fact that memes are able to contain succinct messaging about potentially serious issues underscores the point about possible influence on human attention. Essentially, memes are symbolic, humorous, and easy-to-share digital artifacts that spread rapidly through social media. During politically polarizing times, it becomes even more important to frame the intentional messaging of a campaign or candidate during election cycles. Accordingly, a "political meme is a sub-genre of the internet meme and addresses some aspect of political philosophy and ideology" (Wiggins, 2019, p. 65). Specific to political campaigns, political memes refer to those digital expressions that individuals post, share and interact with about some issue or event during the campaign. However, since at least 2016, campaigns themselves have engaged with their constituents by also sharing political memes and related messaging online. This appears to be even more the case in the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The 2016 election cycle received considerable attention for this reason (Hunting, 2020; Mina, 2019; Nee & De Maio, 2019; Schill & Hendricks, 2017; Seiffert-Brockmann, Wiggins, & Nothhaft, 2023; Wiggins, 2017), perhaps due simply to the unconventional nature of the Trump candidacy and subsequent ascendancy to the White House. Memes such as Pepe the Frog and trending hashtags like #LockHerUp or #Deplorables made the 2016 election cycle demonstrate what others have referred to as 'memetic warfare', or the use of intentional disinformation campaigns to assuage opinion and occupy minds with content largely devoid of evidence-based substance (Blanchette, Livingston, Glaser, & Kennedy, 2021).

One of the factors contributing to an apparent increase in political memes in the 2024 election cycle is the activities of so-called political influencers. These are "content creators that endorse a political position, social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform" (Riedl, Lukito, & Woolley, 2023, p. 2). Because of the techniques used generally by social media influencers to sell products or otherwise draw attention to certain trends or issues, *political* influencers enter a "grey area between market and democracy" (de Gregorio & Goanta, 2022, p. 225).

3. Comparative Examples and Global Perspectives

This contribution often cites the Obama campaign as one of, if not, the first to use a more grassroots, social media-driven campaign style. One strategy with that style is to embrace a more progressive populism that allowed 'normal' people to engage with the campaign and the various policy issues that drove it and ultimately Obama to the White House. Yet others, well before Obama, employed efforts to resonate with common people thus allowing them an opportunity to relate to the candidate as a person as well as a politician. One of the first occurred during the presidency, and not the campaign, of then President Franklin D. Roosevelt, namely the fireside chats. Often speaking with a tone of familiarity, his fireside *chats* offered listeners direct commentary from the president for the first time. The fact that this occurred during his presidency is a distinction worthy of acknowledgement. The televising of the first presidential debate between then Vice President Richard Nixon and then Senator John F. Kennedy represents how the visual medium of television-a broadcast into people's homes for family and individual viewing, became a serious medium not just for entertainment. In a similar vein, Ronald Reagan's status as a former actor positioned television as a natural space for communicating his message visually during his campaigns. Jesse Jackson's 'Rainbow Coalition' embraced vernacular messaging and direct talk to potential voters during both bids for the White House, foreshadowing Obama's own use of grassroots movement-like campaigning. Governor Bill Clinton's appearance on the *Arsenio Hall Show* during which he played his saxophone, sought to engage with a more youthful image. This performance signalled a shift toward engaging younger audiences and bridging the gap between politics and entertainment. While Obama's 2008 campaign clearly marked a near permanent change in the way political campaign manifest their messaging, these earlier examples illustrate how shifts in communication styles—toward more relatable and participatory approaches—were integral long before the rise of social media. Aside from these U.S.-based examples, several international campaigns provide further evidence, not only of a gradual trend toward a more relatable, vernacular tone, but also one that invites polarized and even conspiratorial expressions alongside a participatory, almost grassroots-like campaign-as-movement.

The use of media in India's socio-political campaigns, from traditional to modern and digital forms, continue to play transformative roles in political and social mobilization. Sharma, et al. (2020) refer to mediatization as a way to explain and understand how social media continues to occupy a significant space within political communication and civic engagement in India. Kumar and Alam (2023) as well as Sharma (2016) explored the

use of folk narratives to mobilize and situate public opinion during India's freedom struggles from the 1950s onward. Perhaps it is with this rich history that prompted current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to use what Shifman (2014) has referred to as postmodern folklore, namely, memes in his campaign. It is important to consider that this point also includes language and expressions that are associated with memes such as blatant humour (which might depict a policy or group in a negative light to the others' delight) or irony (Mitzel, 2023). Intertextual references to films as well as to cricket merged with critiques and support of Modi's proposed policies in the forms of memes shared online by disparate users (Chatterjee, 2020). Pal et al. (2017) found that Modi's populist style of messaging on Twitter intentionally positioned him as addressing people directly, fostering a kind of in-group camaraderie. Additionally, his use of irony demonstrates how "political irony presents a form of personality politics" (Pal at al., 2017, p. 4198).

Similarly, during Jair Bolsonaro's successful bid for the Brazilian presidency in 2018, vernacular language became a dominant form of expression. For example, his team deployed WhatsApp groups to spread memes that largely trivialize and mock violence against perceived political opponents and marginalized groups such as "people of African descent, immigrants, women and the LGTBI community" (Fernández-Villanueva & Bayarri-Toscano, 2021, p. 449). In addition, the technological affordances of bots meant Bolsonaro's team and online supporters helped to increase the visibility of his public image, though some memes unintentionally lambasted him due to misspellings or other errors (Teixeira & Junior, 2020).

Finally, Brexit illustrates another example of vernacular turn in political discourse. Memes criticizing Boris Johnson's handling of the pandemic often overlapped with populist communicative strategies. Johnson's public image and rhetoric became subjects of satire, yet the memes' humour also occasionally reinforced his populist appeal by mirroring his own style of rhetoric (Kristensen & Mortensen, 2021). Well before the COVID pandemic, another British PM also leveraged a vernacular style in political messaging such as during the premiership of Harold Wilson. When in 1965 as Prime Minister, Wilson invested The Beatles as Members of Order of the British Empire, making a "deliberate appropriation of the imagery of youth". The award exemplified Wilson's attempt to promote a vision of a 'New Britain' characterized by forward-looking, youthful vigor" (Osgerby, n.d.). Taken together, these examples demonstrate a clear trend among politically progressive and otherwise populist leaders to embrace a vernacular rhetorical style with online expressions increasingly merging traditional with personal and relatable tones.

4. Evolution of Memes in U.S. Political Campaigns

As noted earlier, the 2008 Obama campaign was unique in its use of social media as a means to reach out to and garner support ahead of the election. Arguably, 2016 stands out as a seminal moment in terms of how individuals (but also campaigns) can adopt memes and related messaging to promote the candidate's brand. Indeed, a perception emerged after Trump's electoral victory that memes held not only a correlational, but also a causal link to explain the 2016 election result (Flores-Saviaga, Keegan, & Savage, 2018). Again, while this references merely a perception, the importance of memes and related content in terms of political influence and persuasion deserves greater attention and scrutiny. Moody-Ramirez and Church (2019) found that content, typically memes, generated and/or curated by average individuals embraced the perceived positive attributes of their preferred candidate and promoted the negative aspects of the opponent. This finding is important "because Facebook's large membership base allows users to share ideas with a large audience that, at one time, might have remained isolated" (2019, p. 9). Aside from concerns about bots, misinformation or disinformation, everyday people had the opportunity to share their perspectives, often by using humorous memes on Facebook. This elevated the platform's importance compared to traditional sources of information such as television, newspapers and radio. Tran (2022) found that users were weaponizing political internet memes to influence public opinion in the 2012, 2016 and also the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Tran's (2022) findings support previous arguments made by others (e. g., Foster, 2014; Tran, 2021; Zannettou et al., 2018).

Trump's 2016 campaign intentionally leveraged memes and related messaging in order to align itself with potential voters who were drawn to him as a perceived 'outsider' or even someone to fight the establishment, despite being a billionaire. Helping to reinforce this campaign brand for Trump, media reports amplified the efforts of anonymous 4chan users in producing and promoting larger-than-life versions of Trump (such as those referring to him as a 'God Emperor'), giving the impression that these efforts "'actually elected a meme as president' in the form of Donald Trump" (Colley & Moore, 2022, p. 4). Trump's unsuccessful 2020 bid for the White House also made use of memes in the campaign, often leveraging insults such as 'Sleepy Joe' to reference then-candidate Joe Biden. The folkloric and vernacular practices used among supporters of Trump ahead of and following the 2020 election embraced a more vocal expression of conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking

than in 2016 (Marwick & Partin, 2024; Wiggins, 2023). Trump's own efforts to brand himself as an 'outsider' accelerated folkloric practices among online users to continue to share memes and related content. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris' 2020 campaign also used memes, though to a much lesser extent than Trump and certainly less intentional than during the 2024 campaign (Griffin, 2020). One meme in particular featured Joe Biden as 'Dark Brandon', a meme that emerged because of an NBC reporter mishearing chants of 'F--k Joe Biden' as 'Let's Go Brandon', which then became a chant among Trump supporters to express disagreement with the Biden/Harris campaign (Schwedel, 2021). The Biden/Harris campaign also made use of Fortnite for vernacular promotion, using the digital game experience to engage with younger voters (Cruz, Hera, Gómez, & Lacasa, 2023). Fast forward to 2024 and following the exit of Biden from the campaign and near simultaneous endorsement of Harris for president, her campaign has intentionally incorporated memes and related messaging as part of their campaign, ostensibly to attract younger voters (Saric, 2024). Shortly following her sudden bid for the presidency, a video surfaced online in which Kamala Harris tells a story about her mother; in it, she asks 'You think you just fell out of a coconut tree?' which shortly became what Shifman (2014) refers to as hypermemetic, attracting variations on the theme. Although the segment is from a speech delivered in May 2023, online vernacular practice often finds ways to recontextualize content in efforts to situate it with current moments and perspectives (Varis & Blommaert, 2015). Trump's campaign has also used memes including those created by artificial intelligence. Following his claim that Haitian immigrants were eating the dogs and cats stolen from the residents of Springfield, Ohio, his official Instagram account posted several AI-produced memes such as one of a cat holding a sign that reads 'Kamala Hates Me' and another with candidate Trump apparently speaking to an audience of cats and dogs.

5. Method

In what follows, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of two particular memes from both the 2020 and 2024 U.S. presidential campaigns presents examples of this shift toward a more vernacular expression from the social media presence of official campaigns. CDA as an analytical tool also examines the context in which certain expressions are made, thus underpinning the possibility of malleable meanings (van Dijk, 1993). In addition, Wodak (2001, p. 10), asserts that using CDA helps to 'de-mystify discourses by deciphering ideologies'.

As noted above, during the 2020 campaign, two memes from each campaign were not only incorporated into official messaging but also developed into campaign products that individuals could purchase ostensibly to support the given campaign. In the case of the 2024 campaign, the shift in both campaigns toward a more deliberate vernacular messaging using memes forms the focus of the analysis. Thus, the emphasis here is not about whether the memes gained a viral spread, but rather that the choice to incorporate memes into official campaign messaging deserves a critical inquiry into the relevant discourse the campaigns both address and represent. Campaigns from both cycles increasingly embraced vernacular modes of expression, borrowing from grassroots internet cultures to craft messages that resonate with digital-native audiences. This *vernacular turn* underscores a collapse of traditional campaign strategies into participatory, humor-driven, and culturally embedded forms of communication, and also demonstrates how memes have evolved as a form of digital folklore (Shifman, 2014). This analysis examines dominant memes, namely 'Dark Brandon' and 'Let's Go Brandon' from the 2020 cycle, and 'Kamala Hates Me', 'Coconut Tree,' and 'Kamala is Brat' from 2024. Through a critical discourse analysis (CDA), the study highlights how these memes reflect broader shifts in political discourse, voter engagement, and campaign strategies. In the analysis, dominant themes pursuant to each meme per campaign cycle demonstrate a consistent incorporation of the vernacular into official campaign messaging.

5.1 Analysis: Memes in the 2020 Campaign

5.1.1 'Dark Brandon': Reclaiming a Narrative

The 'Dark Brandon' meme emerged as a subversive response to the sarcastic 'Let's Go Brandon' chant popularized by Biden critics. Originating in conservative spaces, 'Let's Go Brandon' mocked Biden's perceived incompetence, symbolizing a broader critique of his administration. In contrast, the 'Dark Brandon' meme reclaimed this narrative, depicting Biden as a powerful, almost mythological figure. Visual elements such as glowing red laser eyes and shadowy aesthetics imbued the meme with an ironic yet empowering tone, appealing to younger, progressive audiences. Incidentally, the glowing red eyes is also associated with a subcategory of vaporwave known as fashwave, referring to fascist (Hann, 2016). Typical with forms of digital folklore, online users can use imagery associated with one side or political ideology and repurpose it for their own uses, such as

the remixing of Joe Biden as 'Dark Brandon', coopting a kind of hypermasculine toughness typically associated with far-right movements. In terms of the discourse, 'Dark Brandon' reflects an interplay between grassroots creativity and campaign adoption. Initially a user-generated phenomenon, the meme was embraced by the Biden campaign, appearing on official merchandise. This feedback loop between users and campaigns demonstrates the hybridization of vernacular and institutional messaging. The meme's success lies in its dual appeal: it resonates with digital-native voters while subtly addressing critiques of Biden's leadership.

5.1.2 'Let's Go Brandon': Humor and Polarization

The 'Let's Go Brandon' meme originating from a misheard chant at a NASCAR event, exemplifies the weaponization of humor in political discourse. For Trump supporters, the meme encapsulated disdain for Biden, functioning as a rallying cry that transcended traditional political slogans. Its intertextuality, referencing sports culture while mocking mainstream media, likely enhanced its popularity (Mitzel, 2024). The discourse around 'Let's Go Brandon' once again employs humor, simultaneously reinforces group identity (centered around a common distaste of Joe Biden, among other possible factors) and delegitimizes opposition in general. By framing Biden as an object of ridicule, the meme constructs a simplistic binary: the strong, authentic Republican base versus an out-of-touch Democratic elite. This rhetoric amplifies polarization, turning political discourse into a battleground for cultural and ideological dominance.

5.2 Analysis: Memes in the 2024 Campaign

5.2.1 'Kamala Hates Me': Weaponizing Vernacular Humor

The 'Kamala Hates Me' meme, featured on Trump's 2024 official Instagram account and during the campaign, exemplifies the strategic use of vernacular humor to humanize complex political narratives. One of the campaign's most notable iterations featured a cat holding a sign that read, 'Kamala Hates Me'. This meme weaponized relatable, low-stakes internet humor to critique Harris, framing her as unlikable and disconnected, on the one hand. However, on the other, by stating at the only presidential debate in 2024 that 'They're eating the dogs', etc., Trump leveraged a conspiratorial claim that immigrants were stealing people's pets for food in order to indirectly stoke fears about immigrants in general. A similar practice occurred during Trump's first presidential term when conspiratorial claims emerged about the real origins of the COVID virus alongside discrimination and violence directed at Asian individuals (Hahn, et al., 2021). Given the ubiquity of cats in internet culture, the simplicity of using a cat in this way also *personalizes* political grievances. The meme constructs Harris as a symbol of Democratic failures, appealing to voters' emotions rather than their reason. This strategy mirrors the broader vernacular turn, where campaigns rely on culturally embedded humor to bypass traditional political rhetoric. Additionally, the use by the Trump campaign of AI-generated memes, for example to target Haitian immigrants with Trump framed as a protector of American values, combined fear-based rhetoric with common internet humor. Such memes depict immigrants as *others*, an almost faceless group representing varying degrees of moral, economic and also existential threats, thereby simultaneously legitimizing xenophobic narratives through memes as digital folklore. The discourse addresses how memes continue to be used to simplify complex issues into succinct internet jokes and also reinforce certain assumptions, such as Trump as a strong and decisive leader, assuming one subscribes to that particular ideological practice (Wiggins, 2019).

5.2.2 'Coconut Tree' and 'Kamala is Brat': Shifting Identity Politics

Harris' 2024 campaign leaned into meme culture with the 'Coconut Tree' and 'Kamala is Brat' memes. As noted above, the former originated from an anecdote Harris shared about her childhood, which was humorously exaggerated and remixed online. The 'Kamala is Brat' meme, derived from Charlie XCX's 'brat' aesthetic, positioned Harris as rebellious and relatable, appealing to Gen Z voters. While these memes attempted to humanize Harris, CDA revealed potential risks. The humor in the 'Coconut Tree' meme, while endearing to some, also invited mockery, undermining Harris' credibility. Similarly, the 'Kamala is Brat' meme's reliance on niche pop-cultural symbols risked alienating older voters. These examples highlight the double-edged nature of vernacular messaging: while it fosters relatability, it also exposes campaigns to ridicule and misinterpretation.

6. Discussion

From the perspective of 2024, it appears that memes have become an integral part of the political communication process, in terms of grassroots efforts to support and engage with a campaign but also centralized within the mechanism of each campaign prior to the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The intentional branding of Vice President Kamala Harris' campaign as 'brat' represents this apparent shift in leveraging memes and memetic messaging in political campaigns. Referencing the song 'Brat' by English singer and songwriter Charlie XCX, the 'summer of brat' Harris enjoyed stems in part from the sudden decision by President Joe Biden to suspend his own re-election campaign following a poor debate performance in June 2024. Incidentally, 'brat' refers to a kind of unapologetic, messy party girl aesthetic which one could also view as an evolution of an earlier 'riot grrl' aesthetic associated with a subculture that combines punk music, feminism and politics (Downes, 2012). When Charlie XCX tweeted 'kamala IS brat' on July 22, 2024, it triggered a participatory response garnering over 56,000 quote tweets responses and well over 300,000 likes. The Kamala Harris campaign then adopted the lime-green background and font attributed to Charlie XCX's album 'brat'. This illustrates how the traditionally formal manner to address political supporters and constituents has adapted to the digital vernaculars of online parlance. It bears noting that when the Harris campaign adopted the 'brat' aesthetic, it risked alienating potential supporters from using such vernacular, popular culture practices and confusing supporters who were already on board prior to the rebranding during the summer of 2024. One risk in particular is the desire to resonate with audiences, obviously comprised of individuals all with varying degrees of media usage. In contrast to Trump's rhetorical style, the Harris' campaign's adoption of a more vernacular style risked trying to seem *cool* thus inviting the potential outcome of alienating those whom the campaign is trying to address. While difficult to discern the degree of effectiveness of such approaches to campaigning, the fact that both campaigns adopted a more vernacular style which is an indication of the importance, perceived or otherwise, of a clear change in political communication, during and after a campaign is over. Before analysing specific examples of memes and related content from each campaign, it is worthwhile to consider how other political campaigns have incorporated more vernacular messaging since at least the 2008 Obama electoral campaign and victory. This does not assume a causal link to Obama's campaign style, though as Bimber and Copeland (2013, p. 135) note, one key difference was the "unusual character of the Obama campaign, which employed then-novel strategies and which generated social movement-like excitement among many voters".

Taken together, this process represents *a collapse of traditional politics and campaigning into the vernacular*. In this way, when political candidates or even their respective campaign apparatus uses memes as part of their messaging, we are witnessing a merging of official and vernacular discourse, akin to modern digital folklore. Traditional political campaigns have now adopted the informal, community-driven practices of internet users into their branding and messaging. This development (or transformation?) represents a shift in power dynamics within political and strategic communication, where any boundary between grassroots and official discourse now becomes increasingly blurred.

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