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Cover Page Footnote

In developing this paper, I greatly benefited from the discussions guided by Professor Paris Aslanidis in his Fall 2020 seminar "Populism." I am also grateful to my friend and colleague in the Yale English Department Maria Del Mar Galindo for being willing to discuss the finer aspects of phrasing in this paper.

Social Media and the Construction and Propagation of Populist-Nationalist Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The growing overlap between three important phenomena—the increasingly widespread use of social media (especially as a tool for political communication), the current populist zeitgeist (as described by Cas Mudde), and the rise of right-wing nationalism—make the question of how social media can be employed as a platform for the amplification of populist-nationalist discourse particularly pressing. This paper explores the affordances of social media that allow for its employment in the creation and propagation of populist-nationalist discourse, particularly the elective affinity between social media and populism, the way that social media can provide a platform for the emotive element of populist-nationalist discourse, and how social media can facilitate the amplification of conspiratorial thinking (characteristic of right-wing populism). To further elucidate this theoretical discussion, this paper will also explore Donald Trump’s online discourse surrounding the 2018 migrant caravan as a case study. Ultimately, this paper highlights how social media has provided an effective medium for the increasing interplay between nationalist and populist discourse.

INTRODUCTION

While theoretically distinct, nationalist and populist discourses can overlap in significant ways in political practice. With the election of Donald Trump during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, we have increasingly seen how social media may be employed as a tool for political communication that incorporates and activates the kind of sentiments that characterize populist nationalism: anti-elitism, nativism, conspiratorial thinking, among others. This paper explores how social media has functioned effectively as a site for the interplay between nationalist and populist discourse: particularly, this paper looks at the elective affinity between social media and populism and the way that social media can provide a platform for the emotive aspect of populist-nationalist discourse. I will also pay particular attention to the question of how conspiratorial thinking and conspiratorial narratives can be quickly disseminated and amplified through social media platforms.

This paper begins with a brief overview of the theoretical distinctions between nationalist discourse and populist discourse. It then explores the affordances of social media that have allowed it to become a site for the interplay between nationalist and populist discourse, paying particular attention to the elective affinity between populism and social media, to the role of emotion within social media platforms and in populist-nationalist rhetoric, and to the relevance of conspiracy theory for populist discourses and social media’s ability to facilitate its dissemination. To further elucidate this theoretical discussion, this paper will then explore Donald Trump’s online discourse surrounding the 2018 migrant caravan as a case study.

This case study will also highlight how social media can function as a site for the spread of misinformation and fake news, contributing

to the conspiratorial element of populism. The extent of the influence of social media in the construction and propagation of populist-nationalist discourse should not be overstated and requires further examination before any definitive conclusions can be drawn. At the same time, as we continue to see increasing overlap between three salient phenomena—the increasingly widespread use of social media (especially as a tool for political communication), the current “populist zeitgeist”ⁱ (as Cas Mudde has defined it), and the rise of right-wing nationalism—the question of how social media can be employed as a platform for the amplification of populist-nationalist discourse becomes more pressing, particularly when we consider how using social media platforms could work towards further blurring the empirical boundaries between nationalist and populist discourse.

POPULISM AND NATIONALISM: PRACTICAL OVERLAPS AND CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS

Before delving into a closer examination of social media as a site of interplay between nationalist and populist discourse, it is important to arrive at a clearer understanding of the conceptual distinctions between the two discourses. In recent years, the election of various “populist” leaders on a global scale—including the United States’ Donald Trump, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, and Mexico’s Andrés Manuel López Obrador—has contributed to the rise of populism to the forefront of global discussions on the political sphere. The application of the populist label has often been complicated due to its conflation with the strong nationalistic elements present in these leaders’ rhetoric. It is this conflation, and the ensuing confusion,

ⁱ The “populist Zeitgeist,” a term coined by populism scholar Cas Mudde, refers to the phenomenon of populist discourse “becom[ing] mainstream in the politics of contemporary western democracies” (Mudde, 2004, p. 562).

that makes assessing the relationship and distinctions between nationalism and populism critical for academic conversations. While some scholars have argued in favor of a thicker definition of populism that sees it as having a nationalist dimension, claiming it more effectively relays the “productive ambiguity” that characterizes the rhetoric of appealing to “the people” (a defining element of populism), others have posited that in order to more clearly grasp how nationalism and populism interact practically, we must “start from a clear conceptual distinction” between them (Brubaker, 2020, p. 44; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2020, p. 317). While adopting a thicker definition has some merits, it ultimately produces too much ambiguity between the two discourses; arriving at clear conceptual distinctions between nationalism and populism proves useful not only in understanding them theoretically, but also in informing our perception of how these discourses intersect and interact in practice. This section will provide an overview of the theoretical distinctions between the two discourses.

The overlap between the two discourses can be observed empirically in various instances; in fact, many of the most well-known occurrences of “populist politics” have had nationalist elements, such as the “populist radical right and most of the Latin American populisms” (De Cleen, 2017, p. 1). Latin American literature on the subject has traditionally regarded “nationalism as integral to populism” (Brubaker, 2020, p. 45). The radical right is characterized by a combination of “populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism” (Bonikowski et al., 2019, p. 59). The example of Latin America highlights why some scholars have argued in favor of a theoretical conflation between nationalism and populism when “the distinction between the people and the elite is both moral and ethnic” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 14). Nonetheless, while merging these concepts may better reflect elements of the practical reality, it does a disservice to understanding them conceptually in a nuanced manner.

While scholarship on populism has conceptualized it in various ways—namely, populism as political strategy (Weyland, 2017, p. 3), populism as an ideology (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 5-6), among others—this paper understands populism as a kind of discourse (Brubaker, 2020; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2020; Laclau, 2005). Primarily, populism is characterized by the construction of “the people” against a corrupt or illegitimate elite (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 11-12). On the other hand, nationalist discourse centers on constructing an in-group (the nation) and an out-group (non-members of the nation), and particularly, constructs the nation as limited and as a community; nationalist discourse, unlike the discourse that characterizes populism, is not anti-elitist in and of itself (De Cleen, 2017, pp. 4-5). The construction of in-groups and out-groups is not specific to nationalism; it is the particular way that the nation is constructed—as limited, as a community, and as De Cleen would argue, sovereign (with independent decision-making capabilities that are free from interference)—that further clarifies the particularities of nationalist discourse (De Cleen, 2017, pp. 4-5). The “nation” as a discursive signifier (De Cleen, 2019, p. 4) or as an “organizing principle” (Greenfeld, 1992, p. 7) is the essential component that structures nationalist discourse. The nation’s status as the in-group is established and solidified by a “shared time (a shared past, present, and future) and space (a shared territory with borders and certain characteristics)” (De Cleen, 2017, p. 5). This conceptualization of the nation illuminates our understanding

of the particular ways through which the in-group of nationalist discourse is constructed; this construction, unlike with populist discourse, is not inherently anti-elitist.

Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis’ spatial framework for understanding the conceptual distinctions between populism and nationalism is particularly compelling. Within a spatial plane, populism is “structured around a vertical, down/up axis that refers to power, status and hierarchical position” while nationalism is situated “along a horizontal in/out axis that distinguishes...members from non-members,” differentiating between “the own nation from other nations” (De Cleen, 2017, p. 7; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2020, p. 315). This spatial framework facilitates the visualization of key definitional aspects of nationalism and populism—horizontal in-group/out-group construction and the hierarchical antagonism between “the people” and an illegitimate elite, respectively. Importantly, nationalist discourse may construct the nation in terms of in- and out- racial or ethnic groups and while certain populisms may also imbue “the people” with a racial or ethnic dimension, populism is mainly concerned with the vertical antagonism between “the people” (in its different forms, including racially constructed forms) and an elite that is perceived as illegitimate. Working with this understanding of the conceptual distinctions between nationalism and populism will allow for a clearer discussion of social media as a site suited for the interplay between the two discourses.

SOCIAL MEDIA: A SITE OF INTERPLAY FOR NATIONALIST AND POPULIST DISCOURSE

Elective Affinity Between Social Media And Populism

As posited by Paolo Gerbaudo, the “mass networking capabilities of social media...provide a suitable channel for the mass politics and the appeals to the people [that are] typical of populism” (2018, p. 745). Gerbaudo describes recent instances where social media played a role in populist movements—including “Nigel Farage’s UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Marine Le Pen’s Front National” on the Right and Bernie Sanders in the U.S. and “the rise of Podemos in Spain” on the Left—and refers to the phenomenon as an “‘elective affinity’ between social media and populism”; he argues that social media has worked in favor of populist movements and “against establishment movements by providing the former a suitable channel to invoke the support of ordinary people against the latter” (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 746). Importantly, he situates this phenomenon of elective affinity within the context of “the convergence of two global trends”: an era of “rapid technological development” and the “profound economic crisis shaking the legitimacy of the neoliberal order”; this convergence has allowed for populism to manifest in the significant way that it has in the political sphere of the digital era (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 746; Postill, 2018, pp. 754-755).

The convergence of fast-paced technological innovation and worsening economic conditions mentioned above can create a space for populists to appeal to “digitally connected and politically disgruntled [electorates]” through social media (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 748). Social media can be used to communicate populist rhetoric as “a means of recruiting disaffected citizens,” particularly by channeling common populist themes like “emphasizing the sovereignty of

the people; advocating for the people; attacking the elites; ostracizing [those who do not belong to the dominant group]; and invoking the heartlands” (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1109; Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 747). There are two main factors that have contributed to social media’s propensity for populist appeals: how the perception of social media as “a voice for the underdog...in opposition to mainstream news media” has constructed a narrative that favors populist movements and how social media “provides means of ‘crowd-building’” that rallies “politically disaffected individuals around evocative symbols and leaders and against common ‘enemies of the people,’” which are most commonly imagined to be the elites in power (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 748). These two factors will be discussed in more detail below.

“Traditional mass media,” a term that is used interchangeably in this paper alongside “mainstream media,” refers to traditional forms of media, including print (newspapers and magazines) and broadcast (television and radio), that serve as popular communication channels, “influence large numbers of people, and are likely to represent generally accepted beliefs and opinions” (Hongcharu & Eiamkanchanalai, 2009; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Traditional mass media channels, which, at least in theory, must “adhere to professional norms and news values,” have been criticized over the perception that they are simply extensions of the “financial and political establishment” (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1110; Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 749). In opposition to this perception of mainstream media as serving elite interests, social media has emerged as a “direct linkage to the people,” allowing “populists to circumvent...journalistic gatekeepers” (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1110). While the narrative that social media provides a space to circumvent the traditional establishment is problematic—given that social media platforms themselves are “controlled by gigantic capitalist companies” with “profit-driven agendas”—these platforms have nonetheless unquestionably provided a “channel for individual expressions” devoid of “intermediation [from traditional] news media” (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 749). Thus, despite that social media platforms’ ownership and management is dominated by the elites, the public may be more inclined to trust social media as “the people’s voice” since they perceive it as more distant from the establishment compared to traditional media, even if this may not entirely be the case in actuality.

The increased trust of social media as the “people’s voice” coupled with the decline in authority of traditional news sources contributes toward setting the stage for “new actors to enter the space of news and opinion-making,” facilitating the communication of populist (and often populist-nationalist) rhetoric (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 749). Importantly, the creation of “alternative news channels,” which “set the psychological conditions for...electoral mobilisation,” have often preceded populist movements (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 750). This further highlights the role that social media may play within populist movements, establishing itself as a method for communicating and amplifying the “voice of the people” (Gerbaudo, 2018, pp. 749-750).

Social media’s elective affinity with populism can also be observed in the “aggregation logic embedded in its algorithms and the way it can focus the attention of an otherwise dispersed people” (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 750). Social media supplies “gathering spaces” that contribute to the creation of “political communit[ies]” in the form

of “online crowds”; this formation is facilitated by the “algorithms of social media and its aggregative capabilities,” such as the “filter bubble effect” (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 750). More specifically, the filter bubble effect refers to the focusing of users’ attention on contents that match their particular interests; by filtering information in this way, the filter bubble effect can favor “a polarisation of public opinion” due to the way it “restricts users’ attention on content” that is aligned with “their existing ideological standpoints while insulating them from alternative views” (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 750). While potentially concerning—due to their propensity to “exacerbate [existing] social divisions”—filter bubbles can be productive for populism because of their “mobilising effect,” aiding in the creation of “online crowds of like-minded” people, in other words, aiding in the construction of “the people” (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 750).

Therefore, populism finds its elective affinity with social media through the perception of social media as being less beholden to elite influence (compared to traditional media sources), and thus as a valid platform for the “voice of the people,” as well as through social media’s “crowd-building” capabilities, which are heightened by the effects of algorithmic filtering and “filter bubbles” (Gerbaudo, 2018, pp. 748-750). While Gerbaudo recognizes further work needs to be conducted to arrive at a clearer understanding of this elective affinity, the aforementioned factors provide a good start towards better understanding the relationship between social media and populism. One factor that should also be considered is the role of emotion, both within populist and nationalist appeals. The following section will explore the potential relationship between social media and the emotive element of populist-nationalist discourse.

Social Media and Populist Nationalism: The Role of Emotion

While often disregarded and considered outside the rational and structural kind of political analysis that should characterize social science, studying the role of emotions can provide significant insights into the construction and adoption of populist-nationalism as well as its potential relationship with social media (Goodwin et al., 2001, p. 1). Populist and nationalist discourses both invoke emotions as a key component of their messages: nationalism’s “affective dimension” is employed in the horizontal construction of in- and out- groups, and “embod[ies] the semipermeable line between love and hate in the political sphere,” while political discussions on populism frequently connect populist sentiment to fear and anger (Goodwin et al., 2001, p. 85; Rico et al., 2017, p. 444). Social media can be conceptualized as a “global multiplier through which emotional experiences are shared and strengthened,” allowing for emotions, which are felt at an individual level, to be “simultaneously shared with and by others” (Jalonen, 2014, p. 53). It is the centrality of emotion within both populist-nationalist discourse and social media platforms that facilitates the interplay between the two.

As established earlier, populist discourse “involves an appeal to the entirety of the political community against [the] common enemy [of the] unresponsive political elites” while nationalist discourse creates a common enemy through the horizontal construction of in- and out- groups (De Cleen & Stavarakakis, 2020, p. 315; Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 747). Populist-nationalist (i.e. right-wing populist) discourse, which generally is “highly exclusionary and xenophobic,” constructs the empty signifier of “the people” “in opposition

to migrants and ethnic and religious minorities”; it also is often characterized by “a claim to speak for working people, whose interests are no longer well represented by traditional parties” and by “a call for a return to (an invented) ‘tradition’” (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 747; Gusterson, 2017, p. 210; Laclau, 2005). Therefore, the emotive element of this discourse is present in various forms: the fear, anger and anxiety that surrounds “the people’s” constructed perception of out-groups (religious and ethnic minorities); the indignation towards an elite perceived as “illegitimate”; and the nostalgiaⁱⁱ embedded in populist calls for a past “(invented) tradition” (Gusterson, 2017, p. 210; Hameleers et al., 2016, p. 870; Kazin, 1995, p. 39; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 11-12).

“It is the centrality of emotion within both populist-nationalist discourse and social media platforms that facilitates the interplay between the two.”

Because social media has been found to be a site that is particularly well-suited for the propagation of emotion, particularly negative emotion, it follows that social media platforms can be employed to propagate the kind of negative sentiments that characterize populist-nationalist discourse in the non-virtual world. While it is not yet clear whether positive or negative emotions “dominate social media,” negativity bias may manifest in online interactions, with “psychological studies show[ing] that negative experience...has a greater impact on people than do neutral or positive experiences”—with negative events “elicit[ing] stronger and quicker emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses”—and that “negative emotions are more contagious than positive ones” (Jalonen, 2014, pp. 57-58; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 224). Similarly, it has been found that “Twitter users who express...negative emotions [tend to] cluster together”; this can be helpful for the formation of groups that are unified through a cohesive narrative that employs negative emotion, as is the case with populist-nationalism (Quercia et al., 2012, p. 1).

Social media can also be an effective tool for propagating the negative sentiments traditionally associated with populist-nationalism because people are more likely to share emotionally charged content; a study conducted by Stefan Stieglitz and Linh Dang-Xuan found that “emotionally charged Twitter messages tend to be retweeted more often and more quickly compared to neutral ones” (2013, p. 217). Those who seek a platform for the spread of a populist-nationalist agenda can thus potentially benefit from the use of social media not only because it can potentially reach vast num-

ii While nostalgia is not an inherently negative emotion, in this context, nostalgic motifs are employed with the aim of constructing a narrative that, while calling for a past time, is exclusionary of outside groups, like religious and ethnic minorities, and therefore employs negative (often xenophobic and nativist) sentiments; this connection between negative emotions and nostalgia is further highlighted by a study conducted by Eefje Steenvoorden and Elco Harteveld which argues that “societally pessimistic [voters] are attracted to the nostalgic nature of the populist radical right” (2018, p. 28).

bers of people through interconnected social networks, but also because it favors the kind of emotionally-driven content found in their political agenda and rhetoric (including the release of anger and grievances towards an elite perceived as illegitimate, nativist and xenophobic constructions of ethnic and religious minorities, etc., as mentioned above).

Conspiracy Theories, Fake News, and the Construction of Populist-Nationalist Discourse on Social Media

Among the various factors that have been suggested as contributing towards, what Paolo Gerbaudo labels, Trump’s “digital prowess,” as well as his eventual political victory in the 2016 presidential elections, many have highlighted the crucial role of social media as a channel for “fake news”—intentionally false news reports that aim to disinform (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 746). While it is difficult to demonstrate what particular factors were the most significant and how impactful social media was in actuality, its use in populist movements and the fact that it is increasingly becoming more intertwined with our political realities make this phenomenon worthwhile of further study.

While the long and intricate history of conspiracy and populism is beyond the scope of this paper, the two often intersect in important ways: for example, both can activate and rely on anti-elitist sentiment (fostering “distrust of the establishment”) and can perpetuate an “unnuanced” perception of the world as a “battlefield for an epic battle between good and evil that only those in the know can see” (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2018, p. 94). Literature on populism today views populist rhetoric as one of “Manichean conflict, pitting “a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others,’” a dividing sentiment that can be used to fuel “conspiratorial convictions” (defined by Vincent F. Hendricks and Mads Vestergaard as “a belief that an organization consisting of individuals or groups is plotting and acting in the dark in order to reach a specific goal that is often malignant”) (Boyte, 2020, p. 64; Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2018, p. 94).

Social media platforms can be utilized to quickly disseminate conspiratorial thinking and conspiratorial narratives, including through the rapid spread of fake news articles. This process is self-reinforcing: it has been found that Facebook users “with conspiracy convictions have a greater than average tendency to accept fake news and undocumented claims” (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2018, p. 95). Thus, not only can social media work towards spreading and instilling conspiratorial narratives and ways of thinking, but it could also strengthen previously held conspiratorial convictions. When prominent populist leaders, who may enjoy large social media followings, contribute to the production and dissemination of these narratives, the impacts of these can be quickly amplified as they are repeatedly shared and posted.

CASE STUDY: DONALD TRUMP’S ONLINE RHETORIC AND THE 2018 MIGRANT CARAVAN

The way in which these features of social media intersect with and multiply the impacts of political rhetoric that utilizes populist-nationalist discourse can be observed in several case studies, includ-

ing the campaign and administration of Donald Trump. Since his campaign for the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump has continually employed elements of both populist and nationalist discourse, as evidenced by his most famous slogans “Make America Great Again” and “America First”: these slogans advance the construction and preservation of the nation while establishing a central group, “the people,” in this case presumably white American citizens. Additionally, “Make America Great Again” deploys another populist tactic in which nostalgia is activated, furthering the populist claim that a return to an earlier and better social and economic reality is both possible and desirable (Kazin, 1995, pp. 29, 39; Kenny, 2017, p. 263). It is this combination of nationalist and populist elements that often earns the phenomenon characterized by Trump’s rhetoric described above the name of “nationalist populism” or alternatively, populist nationalism (Gusterson, 2017, p. 209). Trump’s populist nationalism has found an effective platform on social media. While social media has remained a primary method of communication for Trump’s rhetoric throughout his campaigns and presidency, and there are multiple occasions that can attest to this, this case study will provide a close analysis of one significant instance of Trump’s online communication during the 2018 migrant caravan.

In 2018, coinciding with the moments leading up to the U.S. midterm elections, thousands of migrants traveled across Central America to the US-Mexico border “fleeing persecution, poverty, and violence in their home countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador” with the goal of obtaining asylum in the U.S. Trump’s rhetoric surrounding the 2018 migrant caravan had political implications for the midterm elections, as characterized by his warnings to the American people. For instance, Trump stated, “if you don’t want America to be overrun by masses of illegal aliens and giant caravans, you’d better vote Republican” (BBC News, 2018). The intersection of Trump’s rhetoric surrounding this mass migration, which he characterized as “an invasion,” and his particular use of social media platforms (primarily Twitter) to spread this rhetoric’s inherent populist-nationalism is explored below through a close analysis of one of his tweets at the time (BBC News, 2018).

Less than a month before the 2018 midterm elections, Trump took to Twitter to express his opposition to the migrant caravan (Lind, 2018). On October 18, 2018, he tweeted: “I am watching the Democrat Party led (because they want Open Borders and existing weak laws) assault on our country by Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, whose leaders are doing little to stop this large flow of people, INCLUDING MANY CRIMINALS, from entering Mexico to U.S.....” (Lind, 2018). Trump’s employment of social media to propagate his populist-nationalist rhetoric is thus evident in the manner through which he uses tweets to generate a populist construction of the Democratic Party as an illegitimate ruling class, a nationalist/populist-nationalist construction of outsiders by sowing fear towards immigrants (which incorporates emotionally-driven language), and a populist conspiratorial perception of the Democratic Party and the migrant caravan (through misinformation).

Throughout his campaigns and presidency, Trump has portrayed the Democratic Party as a party that caters to elite interests and that has not upheld the will of the people; he has thus, in populist fashion, posited himself as someone who will advocate for the

American people, “challeng[ing] the dominant order and giv[ing] a voice to the collective will” (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 191). In this tweet, Trump furthers this perception of the Democratic Party by portraying them as a common enemy of the American people whose interests—according to Trump, “open borders and existing weak laws”—are at odds with what the people want. Social media proves to be an effective platform to convey this populist message: Twitter serves as a “direct linkage to ‘the people’” allowing Trump to bypass traditional media outlets (a medium that is considered to be beholden to elite influence) to reach vast networks of the citizenry rapidly (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1110). The bypassing of mainstream media can lend Trump more credibility as the “voice for ‘the people.’”

In addition to social media’s ability to bypass traditional news organizations and to provide a platform for the construction of the voice of the collective will, Twitter’s features as a discursive space can also create an environment that is apt for populist rhetoric. For instance, Twitter’s character count favors the simplification of messages. This simplified language maps unto traditional populist discourse, which is characterized by being “simple, direct, emotional, and frequently indelicate” (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 191). Trump’s use of Twitter to convey his condemnation of the migrant caravan gives him the appearance of “telling it like it is,” since he is directly addressing “the people,” and allows him to use the kind of direct, everyday language that is characteristic of populist appeals (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1110).

Social media platforms are also conducive to the kind of emotionality that is associated with both populist and nationalist discourses. As explored earlier, emotions are central to social media experiences. Emotions can drive the formation of online groups and they can increase the likelihood of a message being propagated and amplified. Trump’s rhetoric of a national “assault” and his construction of immigrants as criminals work towards the nationalistic (and nativist) pursuit of horizontally constructing in- and out- groups by instilling feelings of fear, anxiety, and outrage towards an out-group who is perceived as a threat to the standing of the dominant social group (the nation); it is these kinds of negative, emotionally-charged messages that thrive on social platforms, contributing to the amplification of Trump’s populist-nationalist rhetoric.

Populism, particularly right-wing populism, can also incorporate conspiratorial elements in its discourse; a study conducted by Eric Oliver and Wendy M. Rahn found that individuals who support populism’s anti-elitism are “far more likely to endorse conspiracy theories of all types than not” (2016, p. 198). Trump’s tweet proposes two unsubstantiated theories that can promote conspiratorial thinking, positing that the migrant caravan “includ[es] many criminals” and is a “Democrat[ic] Party led” occurrence. Without the fact-checking function that traditional news sources (are meant to) provide, Trump’s baseless claims on Twitter can be directly transmitted to the American public, allowing these conspiratorial statements to go uncorrected and to be amplified with the help of social platforms.

This amplification of Trump’s claims is further heightened by the ease with which fake news may be spread on social media. Misinformation, in the form of inaccurate “fake news” articles and im-

ages, can be spread through social media platforms and have the impact of corroborating Trump's claims, lending his conspiratorial, populist-nationalist rhetoric more credibility. For instance, viral images at the time of the migrant caravan falsely claimed the migrants "were carrying dangerous diseases" and had injured "Mexican police officers...in bloody street fights" (Roose, 2018). Therefore, social media platforms provided a space for misinformation to spread rapidly and provide unfounded support for Trump's populist-nationalist rhetoric that constructed migrants as threats to the nation and framed the Democratic Party as an elite and disconnected ruling party that was working against the interests of the American people by supporting and even organizing the caravan.

CONCLUSION

Social media platforms have provided an effective medium for the increasing interplay between nationalist and populist discourse. The elective affinity between social media and populism—derived from social media's perceived ability to communicate the "voice of the people" and its distance from the media establishment—the centrality of emotion within social media and within populist-nationalist discourse, and the amplification of conspiratorial thinking (characteristic of right-wing populism and heightened through "fake news") have allowed social media platforms to become an effective site for populist-nationalist discourse. As social media continues to become integrated into our everyday realities, questions surrounding the extent of its role in the construction and propagation of populist-nationalist discourse become increasingly relevant.

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In developing this paper, I greatly benefited from the discussions guided by Professor Paris Aslanidis in his Fall 2020 seminar "Populism." I am also grateful to my friend and colleague in the Yale English Department Maria Del Mar Galindo for being willing to discuss the finer aspects of phrasing in this paper.

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