

THE IMPACT OF THE POST-TRUTH ERA ON PROGRESSIVE POPULISM:
THE CASE OF ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

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ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF THE POST-TRUTH ERA ON PROGRESSIVE POPULISM: THE CASE OF ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

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While the post-truth era already benefits populist movements by its nature, it has also paved the way for the emergence of post-truth politics and communication. Many populists all around the world saw the potential of this factless environment and intended to benefit from it by applying strategies of post-truth politics and communication through social media. These strategies include resorting to manipulation and disinformation tactics; distortion of the facts; creating a sense of community in the digital sphere; portrayal of a charismatic leader; exploitation of the emotions of audiences; propagating conspiracy theories. In this thesis, the post-truth politics and communication strategies employed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in her 2020 New York District Election campaign will be examined. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a young left-wing populist leader, distinctly from the right-wing populist leaders who dominate the literature regarding our field of research. She is considered successful by many, possibly due to her effective usage of digital media. Her 2020 New York District Election campaign is suitable for our research because it is her most recent campaign with not much examination in the literature.

Keywords: post-truth, digital populism, post-truth politics, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

ÖZ

POST-TRUTH ÇAĞININ İLERLEMECİ POPÜLİZM ÜZERİNDEKİ ETKİSİ: ALEXANDRİA OCASİO-CORTEZ ÖRNEĞİ

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Post-truth çağı, doğası gereği popülist hareketlere fayda sağlarken, aynı zamanda post-truth siyasetin ve iletişimin ortaya çıkmasına da zemin hazırlamıştır. Dünyanın dört bir yanından bu gerçeksiz ortamın potansiyelini gören birçok popülist lider post-truth siyaset ve iletişim stratejilerini uygulayarak ondan yararlanmayı amaçladı. Bu stratejiler arasında manipülasyon ve dezenformasyon taktiklerine başvurmak; gerçeklerin çarpıtılması, dijital alanda bir topluluk duygusu yaratmak, karizmatik bir liderin tasviri, izleyicilerin duygularının sömürülmesi, komplo teorileri yaymak bulunmaktadır. Bu tezde, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tarafından yürütülen 2020 New York Bölge Seçimleri siyasi kampanyası sırasında kullanılan post-truth siyaset ve iletişim stratejileri incelenecektir. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, araştırma alanımızla ilgili literatüre hâkim olan sağcı popülist liderlerden farklı olarak, öncelikle sol popülist bir lider olduğu için seçilmiştir. İkincisi, genç ve yükselen bir figür olması, muhtemelen dijital medyaya daha aşina olması, son başarısında önemli bir faktör olabilir. 2020 New York Bölge Seçim kampanyası, en son kampanyası olması ve literatürde fazla inceleme yapılmamış olması sebebiyle araştırmaya uygundur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: post-truth, dijital popülizm, post-truth siyaset, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

To all outliers

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AOC	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
GAN	Generative adversarial networks
U.S.	United States

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Donald J. Trump's unexpected victory in the 2016 American presidential election brought about questions regarding social media, rational thinking, fake news, and resurgence of populism. Many researchers have related the election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 with the post-truth condition. Consequently, the term "post-truth" was chosen as the word of the year by the *Oxford Languages* in 2016, and the word started to become popular among academic circles. *The Oxford Languages* defined "post-truth" as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford Languages, 2016). This condition is very related to the nature of social media because social media fosters communication that is more informal and similar to colloquial language, relying more on emotions than on logic (Manucci, 2017).

The usage of media for propagandistic purposes has always been crucial for the success of political leaders. The extensive propagation of social media in the past two decades has changed the way and the medium via which politicians carry out their propaganda and communicate with their voters. Current parties' political communication methods heavily rely on social media (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). It is now essential for politicians to effectively use social media during their political campaigns since social media allows political actors to engage directly with their

supporters and avoid news journalists, which increases their likelihood of success (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013).

However, the popular utilization of social media for political campaign purposes has its implications on the global political scene. Currently this trend gives the impression of favoring particular kind of politicians, namely populist leaders all over the world, as Luca Manucci states: “populist discourses, because of their alleged emotional tone and simplistic content, are supposed to fit the logic of online communication, granting a comparative advantage to populists vis-à-vis old-style political actors” (Manucci, 2017, p. 468).

The widespread propagation of social media usage has favored populist leaders, who express their indignation towards traditional media and can now can directly communicate with their voters, create a sense of community, and disseminate their messages without any filter of the traditional media that could hinder the affective characteristics of populist rhetoric, which helps populist discourses to gain more credibility (Manucci, 2017). The unmediated way of reaching out directly to the public also leads populists to frequently resort to deceitful tactics, as seen in the Brexit referendum, the 2016 presidential election in the United States (U.S.), and the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil (Prior, 2021).

The voters who are influenced by the post-truth condition, are inclined to make decisions based on their emotions instead of facts, therefore they are more prone to believe in the distorted reality created by populist leaders. The emergence of the post-truth era therefore coincides with the resurgence of populism in global politics. It is because the post-truth condition creates ideal settings for populism to rise, since populism appeals more to emotions rather than objective facts (Manucci, 2017).

On the other hand, conspiracy theories and populism tend to go well with each other. The majority of conspiracy theories typically criticize elites¹ and advance Manichean ideologies in which political rivals are seen as enemies of the people, which tend to fit populist narratives quite well (Uscinski J. , 2020). By this way, the creation of the image of the “other” to divide the social into antagonistic two camps required by populism according to Ernesto Laclau’s² theory of populism (Laclau, 2005), becomes possible (Yablokov, 2015). Therefore, conspiracy theories have become a factor that benefits populist narrative and populism.

With the emergence of the internet, people gained opportunity to share derived speculations without limitations. This allowed conspiracy theories to vastly propagate all over the world. The widespread dissemination of conspiracy theories made people more skeptical about what to believe. As a result, conspiracy theories distorted the confidence in government institutions (Einstein & Glick, 2015). On the other hand, the more exposure to the conspiracy theories makes it more believable for people (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Therefore, social media has become a fertile ground for them to become more believable since people are more exposed to them. Because of the mostly unverifiable nature of conspiracy theories, along with the decline of trust to the public institutions, dubiousness commonly remained among people about reality. Thus, the extensive spread of conspiracy theories through social networks has contributed to the emergence of the post-truth condition.

¹ The term “elite” refers to a small and powerful group of people with disproportionate wealth, privilege, and political power.

² Ernesto Laclau is a post-Marxist political theorist with prominent contributions to the theory of populism.

While the post-truth era already benefits populist movements by its nature, as mentioned above, it has also paved the way for the emergence of post-truth politics and communication. Many populists around the world saw the potential of this fact-free environment and intended to capitalize on it by employing post-truth political communication strategies via social media. These strategies include resorting to manipulation³ and disinformation tactics; distortion of the facts; creating a sense of community in the digital sphere; portrayal of a charismatic leader; exploitation of the audiences' emotions; propagating conspiracy theories.

The purpose of this thesis is to answer the research question of how Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez employed post-truth politics and communication strategies during her 2020 New York District Election campaign and on her campaign website. I have chosen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, first because she is a left-wing populist leader, distinctly from the right-wing populist leaders who dominate the literature regarding our field of research. Second, because she is a young and rising figure, possibly more familiar with digital media, which might be a prominent factor in her recent success. Her 2020 New York District Election campaign is suitable for our research because it is her most recent campaign with not much examination in the literature.

We are witnessing a “populist moment” (Mouffe C. , 2018). The resurgence of global populism includes not only the rise of right-wing populist leaders but also left-wing populism, despite the fact that current populism research focuses primarily on right-wing populism. The support for left-wing populism is growing, especially among the younger generation (Fukuoka, 2020). This thesis aims to make a contribution to shedding light on changing political communication methods as factor behind the

³ Manipulation means any effort to exploit someone's emotions in order to influence how they act or feel.

resurge of global populism. This thesis also aims to fill the gap in the literature regarding how populists articulate populist discourse using social media channels in the post truth era. This topic possesses great importance because new media technologies are drastically changing political communication.

To accomplish the goal of this thesis, subsequent to the literature review and methodology in the first chapter, the terms “post-truth” and “populism” in the second chapter will be meticulously elaborated and explained as to how they are related to and promote each other. In the third chapter, a prominent leftist political figure in U.S. politics, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, will be investigated. Starting with her political background, her populist rhetoric and use of social media for political purposes will be analyzed. To conclude this chapter, how she carried out her political propaganda during the congressional New York district elections in 2020 will be looked into. In the fourth and last chapter, the findings that answer the research question of this thesis will be assessed.

1.1 Literature Review

The rising populism worldwide stirs up researchers to conduct research regarding its possible causes and eventually leads them to research the relationship between populism and social media, which has become a popular field recently. The research on populism is in great extend dominated by political theory and political studies, while communication aspect of the phenomenon is often seen as periphery. Therefore, research on populist communication is not very advanced, despite its core function in triumph of populism (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017).

Trump’s presidential election in 2016 constitutes a milestone for the shift of academic attention to the field since his victory was extensively attributed to the post-

truth phenomenon. Despite the post-truth's recent popularity, being that it is a new area for research, academic works are yet limited and the potential for further research is still existing.

Waisbord (2018) explains in his article how massive propaganda systems that are intentionally intended to deceive public have evolved with the extensive transformations in public communication in the digital era⁴. In the past, these massive propaganda systems which construed mass politics and communication of the twentieth century, were functioning thanks to the concentration of information resources and the unrivaled ability of powerful actors on a broad scale, including the government, companies, and the media, to distort reality for purposes of politics, commerce, and ideology. In democratic societies, due to the economic relationships, ideological associations, and news-making customs, media systems were in harmony with political and corporate elites, helping realize what political and corporate elites wanted to design. Where there was media scarcity, society was mostly depending on traditional news sources such as newspapers, television, and radio broadcasts to form opinions on reality, and propaganda was working well. Facts, truth, and critical reasoning were eliminated by mass propaganda systems (Waisbord, 2018).

On the other hand, Waisbord (2018) elaborates on what way mass systems of deception has taken form and function with substantial transformation of public communication in the digital era. He claims that the news media took multilayered forms, splintering into the traditional media, social media and digital platforms, social media being the main platform for public expression. Public communication has shifted from being pyramidal to multilayered flows of news, hence the mass

⁴ Also known as "the information age", digital era is a period in history marked by the shift from traditional industry to an economy centered on information and communication technologies.

propagation of lies no longer is solely controlled by states and corporate actors. Yet, systems of mass deception are still operating, using different methods from past (Waisbord, 2018).

Waisbord (2018) points out that, even though misinformed, misled communities existed before Internet, the new form of public communication has amplified the range and scale of propagation of beliefs not based on facts and digital communities became easy target for disinformation campaigns by not only states and corporate actors, but also by profit-driven promoters and regular citizens. In this sense, while public communication has become more accessible with the digital communication and created more opportunities for public expression, it has also paved the way for the post-truth condition. Now, the deception is not top-down and monopolized by the state, politicians, and corporate actors, but propagated and duplicated by regular citizens (Waisbord, 2018).

Helder Prior (2021) also intends to explain the affiliation between post-truth politics and populism. He starts with explicating the core characteristics of populism. He mentions that an important part of populism is the figure of charismatic leader and personalism (Prior, 2021), and makes reference to Laclau's populism explanation, which asserts that this charismatic leader usually claims himself to masses that he is the savior of the country while founding emotional connection with them who expect satisfaction of social demands (Laclau, 2005). He makes more references to Ernesto Laclau's conceptualization of populism which asserts that populism is a "political discursivity" which aims to refer to public demands opposite to the institutionalist system controlled by administrative elite (Laclau, 2005; Prior, 2021).

Populism is not an ideology on its own, but it is a low-density ideology merging with other dense(total) ideologies e.g., socialism, liberalism, fascism (Mudde &

Kaltwasser, 2017). Prior makes references to Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser who are among the protagonists of the ideational approach to populism. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser state in their book titled *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, that via establishing a personalistic electoral vehicle, without being tied to a political organization, the populist figure becomes able to submit himself as a clean figure who can be the voice of the ordinary man without no mediator between him and the masses (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Prior enriches his discussion regarding populism by presenting another interpretation of populism as a “political style” that aims to create a bond between political agents and the people. This perception is based on communicative plans of politicians to make polarization possible between the “ordinary people” and external or internal adversaries (Canovan M. , 1999; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). The populist leaders employ a rhetoric that reinforces the belief that a state of crisis to be fixed, which is why their discourse is overstated and involves bolstering stress between two antagonistic groups through a plain and direct expression of the “common man” (Prior, 2021). Prior also highlights that within the scope of the symbolic division of the society into two groups as “pure people” and the “others”, the “others” do not always refer to the elite class, it may also refer to “ethnic minority groups”, “immigrants”, religious groups or other social components of society that aggravate feelings of rejection and are eventually blamed for social issues by the populist discourse (Prior, 2021).

On the topic of digital populism, Prior (2021) states that digital communication has changed the way populists communicate with people, in such a manner that they are now able to directly communicate with people without any obstructions of the traditional media. This made populists develop new political communication strategies, which include the effective usage of internet and social media. The power

of digital media brings opportunities for populists to reach infinite number of citizens while also making them become contactable by those citizens. The large-scale circulation of unfiltered messages to masses in social networks paves the way also for the widespread circulation of messages formed deliberately by populists for the purpose of the manipulation of public opinion (Prior, 2021).

Digital populism often employs disinformation strategies and manipulation of reality due to the unmediated contact with “the people,” and directly infusing their propagandistic indoctrination (Prior, 2021). In this context, Prior gives the examples of the referendum of Brexit and electoral events such as the 2018 Brazilian and 2016 American presidential elections, during which political communication strategies that include disinformation and manipulation of the masses were employed by populist leaders.

Digital social networks play a huge role currently in manufacturing of disinformation by populist figures and their propagation especially among citizens who are emotionally involved with the populist movements and messages (Prior, 2021). With the dispense of the gatekeeping of traditional media, digital network platforms such as Facebook, *Twitter*, *WhatsApp* or *YouTube* became means of contemporary political communication by creating a horizontal communication network between citizens and political leaders, making possible the flow of all types of information, including those which are false, algorithm driven, and to be filtered (Prior, 2021). The deterioration of trust by public towards traditional media has caused social media platforms to emerge as a fertile ground for the populist rhetoric to resonate and for audiences to declare their fury against the elite class and traditional institutions, paving the way for the mass mobilization required for the populist movement (Prior, 2021). Prior mentions that Facebook and *Twitter* offer four

opportunities to increase the potential for populist communication: bringing in the possibility of constructing a close link with the audience, offering unmediated connection with the public without journalistic interference, building a sense of community and acceptance among otherwise dispersed groups, and boosting the potential for personalization (Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019; Prior, 2021).

Regarding the discussion on post-truth, Prior (2021) states that it is an era in which facts are disregarded and emotions and judgments are imposed on facts regarded as "objective" because of the processes by which they are propagated or reiterated in digital media. Meanwhile, it also refers to the environment in which facts are less effective in forming public opinion than emotions or beliefs. Prior also states that the term "post-truth" also refers to a period when decentralized and fragmented production methods for false information and alternative worldviews replaced the centralized methods of propaganda and reality falsification. It is for this reason that post-truth became a prominent political tactic in numerous populist leaders' electoral campaigns.

Prior classifies fake news as essentially post-truth due to their appeal to emotions and the method by which they are constructed and propagated in the digital media, while reiterating that even though rumors and false information have been present since the advent of the press, the digital age has made it possible for them to spread widely. In essence, fake news consists of emotionally engaging materials that grab people's attention by creating some sort of sensation while supporting political and ideological beliefs, and they are broadcast through digital social networks and supported by commercial advertising and political propaganda (Prior, 2021). According to Prior, the creation of fake news is primarily driven by two factors: the first is financial: when consumers click over to the originating site from news pieces

that become viral on social networks, significant advertising income can be generated; and the second is ideological: certain false news publishers aim to advance the candidates they favor (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Prior, 2021).

Paolo Gerbaudo (2018) is another researcher who discusses the affinity between social media and populism. He argues that the relationship between social media and populism stems from the fact that social media's vast reaching and networking skills serve as an effective platform for populism, while underlining that this partnership must also be understood in the context of ideological considerations, as well as the subversive and rebellious attitudes that have come to be associated with social networks during the periods of rapid technological advancement and severe economic crisis, which have shaken the legitimacy of the neoliberal order (Gerbaudo P. , 2014; Gerbaudo P. , 2018). He criticizes that populism has become a label to refer to all those political trends deemed to be risky, illogical, and demagogic, and reiterates that this trend only encapsulates some aspects of populism which include xenophobic right populist rhetoric, ignoring the main reasons of this upsurge and the inadequacies in the neoliberal system that have led to widespread dissatisfaction (Gerbaudo P. , 2018). This approach disregards the fact that populism may also pursue emancipatory and progressive goals as demonstrated by the growth of left-wing populism in the United Kingdom, the U.S., and other nations since the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis (Gerbaudo P. , 2018). Unlike right wing populism, in left wing populism the unity of the people is achieved by the movement against unethical privilege, as shown by crooked politicians, opportunistic businesspeople, and greedy bankers who are accused of exploiting common people (Gerbaudo P. , 2017; Gerbaudo P. , 2018).

Gerbaudo (2018) argues that it is primarily due to the way that social media has come to be perceived as a platform for the people's voice in opposition to corporate

media, which is accused of working together with the financial and political establishment, that social media has become an appropriate channel for populist appeals. Since the financial crisis, there has been a significant decline in public confidence in the mainstream media (Carr, Barnidge, Lee, & al., 2014). Growing public skepticism of mainstream media outlets is the result of their glaring inability to correctly forecast the 2008 financial crisis he says, and adds that an increasing segment of the population now considers mainstream media as being more responsive to the political associates' and extremely rich owners' agendas than to the actual interests and needs of the general public (McChesney, 2015).

Because of the aggregation logic built into its algorithms and the ability to concentrate the attention of a scattered population, social media has favored the growth of populists according to Gerbaudo (2018). The “lonely multitudes” created by the hyper individualism of neoliberal societal structure have been able to consolidate in social media conversations, where the fragments of the scattered social networks might be reforged into a new political community, into an “online crowd” of partisan followers (Gerbaudo P. , 2018).

The fact that the masses are making an unexpected comeback in the political and social discourse in the age of the Internet and social networks is noteworthy, Gerbaudo states (2018). The algorithms of social media and its aggregative capacities enable the emergence of these masses. The “filter bubble”⁵ (Parisier, 2011) effect, which tends to direct users' attention solely to materials that fit their interests, is one illustration of these aggregative qualities. Because it focuses users' concentration on material that supports their preexisting ideologies while shielding them from opposing

⁵ A filter bubble is an algorithmic bias that is caused by the algorithms that search engines, social media sites, and marketers use to personalize the user experience, which consequently limits the information an individual user sees on the internet

viewpoints, the filter-by-interest mechanism and the related “economy of attention” might favor a polarization of public opinion. This filter bubble tendency has structural political ramifications that are concerning since they have the potential to widen socioeconomic gaps. When seen through the lens of populist movements, filter bubbles can have a mobilizing impact, promoting the development of online crowds of like-minded individuals who, while having no connection beforehand, have similar beliefs (Gerbaudo P. , 2018).

Gerbaudo (2018) defines the so-called “network effect”, the feature that increases the likelihood of further connectivity for highly linked nodes, as another factor of social network algorithms that stimulate the establishment of digital crowds. This may be observed in the social media environment when timeline algorithms favor postings with a large number of reactions in the seconds and minutes after their release (Gerbaudo P. , 2018).

Social media’s vulgar propensity and the fact that it gives some content and leaders a greater proportion of prominence might support the uniting goal of populist politics according to Gerbaudo (2018). Millions of disgruntled people who would normally be without a common organizational connection may gather as an online community, amplifying the influence of each of its members, thanks to the celebrity and personality constituent of social media (Gerbaudo P. , 2018).

Manuel Arias Maldonado (2017), on the other hand, has investigated how the results of the digitalization of the public sphere, such as the rise of the importance of emotions in politics, favors mostly populist movements. He initially indicates the core characteristics of populism like the presence of two camps, the people, and the elite; their antagonistic interrelationship; and the choice for the public will as a vehicle for democratic decision-making under popular sovereignty (Stanley, 2008). He states with

regards to the two antagonistic camps that even though genuine people represent only a fraction of the whole public, the “people” is shown as a single, inseparable group, and the rest, the elites, as foes of the “people”. He adds that the “people” differ from one nation to the next, while relying also on to the ideology of the movement: right-wing populists tend to favor a nationalistic vision of the people, whilst left-wing populists typically incorporate indigenous communities (Maldonado, 2017).

While all political movements strive to arouse emotions and use emotional rhetoric to achieve its goals, populism sticks out for a number of reasons in this regard according to Maldonado (2017). Populism is the ideology that most overtly rejects the notion that democracies are constructs of reason or that they are regarded as moving toward social reason (Villacañas, 2015), and makes a direct attack on liberalism and defends an emotional social link because it holds that society cannot be built on a rational base. The link between the people and their leader, as well as the nature of a communal subject (the people) that fights against its foes (the elite or the establishment), are all examples of the populist movement’s emotive core (Maldonado, 2017).

Maldonado (2017) reiterates the populist leader’s central role in the affective framework of the populist movement. The leader enables the self-identification of the follower with the movement (Villacañas, 2015), and becomes the personification of the abstract concept of the “people,” upon which the entire populist structure is based. Therefore, the charismatic leader gives the people some sturdiness that is created by saying it, transforming the negative feelings sparked in the masses against the elite (who are held responsible for the dissatisfaction of social needs) into positive feelings toward the movement’s leader and the moral project that (s)he symbolizes (Maldonado, 2017).

In this regard, it is plausible to assert that leaders of populist parties play a crucial role in establishing the emotional framework of their movements. Maldonado (2017) underlines that the hallmark of the outsider is arguably the characteristic of populist leadership that is most frequently observed. This gives the populist leader a compelling, combative, anti-establishment discourse that appeals to voters in tumultuous times (Maldonado, 2017).

Maldonado (2017) adds that even if populists are not often skilled storytellers, their narrative is compelling because it is built on the human predisposition for tribal connection. According to Maldonado, in populist narrative, there are two tribes which are the elite and the people. When the country is opposed against its foes on the outside or even from inside, ethnic nationalism also operates on a similar principle. This is more evident in right-wing populist movements. The sense of belongingness provided by nationalistic sentiments is an essential part of political emotionality and paves the way for people to identify themselves with one tribe over the other. In addition to promoting intra-group collaboration, tribal instincts also shape our sense of reality and values, leading us to overrate our own group's qualities and underestimate those of others — oftentimes unconsciously (Haidt, 2012; Maldonado, 2017).

Even though populism has existed since the nineteenth century, the digitization of the public sphere appears to promote the type of political behavior populism thrives at and to boost employment of affective methods, Maldonado (2017) mentions. As a result of the shift from vertical mass communication to mass self-communication, where individuals produce and disseminate material that can be instantly debated in both directions, people are now co-protagonists in the formation of opinion (Castells, 2009). On the subject of how social media, blogs, and comment sections of webpages are utilized to discuss political discussions, "rhetorical rationalism" has eroded while

a more "genuine" dialect that prioritizes an emotional register, individual experience, and a dubious perception towards elites is now more common (Thompson, 2016; Maldonado, 2017).

According to Maldonado (2017) the sheer number of channels and platforms available has reached an all-time high, further fracturing the public and making it more challenging for various political or social groups to coexist in a single area. People communicate with others who already share their opinions on social networks, which turn out to become "echo chambers" (Sunstein C. , 2008; Reese, Routigliano, & Jaekwan Jeong, 2007). Maldonado states that it is reasonable to expect polarization among the audience and therefore in public discourse, which is actually the repetition and reinforcement of a natural human inclination for polarization and misunderstanding. He also underlines the importance of the sense of being a community that is bolstered by direct interaction via social networks in triumph of populism, while also the people's interaction with not only the leader, but also with each other contributes to their bonding and enhances the people's notion (Maldonado, 2017).

Social media platforms make it simpler for populist movements to provide their supporters with their own news, while the anti-establishment rhetoric of populism implies a mistrust of traditional politicians and the mainstream press (Maldonado, 2017). This causes post-truth or post-factualism which at the same time contribute and result from populism according to Maldonado. While populism, on the one hand, weakens confidence in experts and reasoned discourse, the discredit of experts and reasoned discourse and appearance of "truthiness" boost the ascent of populism. Facts are evaluated more on whether they feel right than on their veracity and the reliability of the source that revealed them. In light of this, political performance hence becomes

more significant when facts are insignificant. Thus, the populist manner is favored by digitization, and while it is fueled by the anger caused by economic upheaval, non-populist agents also use it as a tactic to seize or hold onto social influence or power (Maldonado, 2017).

This chapter provides a summary of the connections between social media, post-truth, and populism in order to set the stage for the current investigation. The literature regarding the topic of this thesis suggests that social media provides a fertile ground for populism to flourish, therefore provides opportunity to observe populism. In this context, our research will focus on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's social media presence, as she is known as a very active user of social media, and how she employs post-truth politics to boost her populist appeal.

The post-truth condition caused by social media and the digital age have annihilated the significance of facts in forming opinions, replacing facts with emotions in the decision-making process. This alteration in decision-making processes also favors populism, which always takes a dubious stance against facts and follows a strategy that induces emotions in its followers. Populist leaders can employ specific communication strategies to exploit the consequences of the post-truth condition.

Populists' belief that mainstream media is under the domination of the elite or the establishment force them to utilize social media and digital networks for political communication and as news sources. The unmediated nature of social media allows charismatic populist figures, which is one of the essential keys of populism, to establish strong and direct communication with their followers, enhancing the self-identification of their followers with the movement (Maldonado, 2017). The consideration of social media as the main news source allows populists to be more exposed to fake news and conspiracy theories circulating on social media. The fake

news and conspiracy theories assist in forming an image of the antagonistic two camps required by populism: genuine “people” and the foes. Populist leaders also often resort to strategies of manipulation and disinformation, which further enhance the creation of these images and persuade their followers.

Social media also provides necessary conditions for the formation of a sense of community among the followers of populist movements, which constitutes an essential characteristic of populism. The followers’ interaction with each other in digital spheres reinforces their bond with the movement and further consolidates their ideas. This is also a result of the “echo chamber” effect that make people exposed to content that supports their already existing beliefs in digital networks. This increases polarization within society, populism intends to create and benefit from.

1.2 Methodology

The present research aims to analyze content in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s social media publications, news articles about her during her 2020 New York District Election campaign, as well as her campaign website with the aim of understanding how post-truth politics are enacted by AOC. For this purpose, the research will adopt a qualitative approach and employ critical discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis methodology to analyze the data. Since a major part of the media consumption happens in online platforms, the corpus of the research will be conducted using online search engines and social media. To limit the scope of the research, the most popular online articles about AOC and her *Twitter* and *YouTube* publications within the time period of August 2020 and February 2021 as well as her campaign website are selected for analysis.

According to Cynthia Hardy, Bill Harley and Nelson Phillips (2004), discourse analysis and content analysis might be considered as complementary and even mutually beneficial in the investigation of social reality. Discourse analysis concentrates on the relationship between text and context, whereas content analysis concentrates on the text that has been separated from its context (Hardy, Phillips, & Harley, 2004).

Discourse analysis is a sub-section of linguistics that includes the scientific analysis of how formation of sentences and words belong to our social setting. It investigates how socially produced concepts and things come to be and are maintained in the world and aims to uncover the processes of their production (Hardy, Phillips, & Harley, 2004). The main distinction between discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis is the latter's fundamental problem-oriented, multidisciplinary approach. Thus, critical discourse analysis is not concerned in examining a language unit per se but rather in researching social phenomena, which are inherently complex and necessitate the use of several disciplines and methodologies (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The critical discourse analysis in this research will allow to analyze and reveal post-truth elements in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's discourse in social media.

On the other hand, content analysis is defined as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). Content analysis is a scientific method employed to deepen our understanding of certain phenomena. As can be deduced from the definition presented here, content analysis is not restricted to textual material, and other relevant sources may be included, such as images, sounds, symbols, and signs.

CHAPTER 2

POPULISM AND POST-TRUTH

2.1 Populism

Populism has become a prominent political phenomenon recently, especially after the Great Recession of 2008. The academic interest towards populism has been heightened by populists' recent victories, particularly in the U.S. and Europe (Hadiz & Chryssogelos, 2017). Some scholars argue that we are witnessing a "populist moment" (Mouffe C. , 2016) or "a populist zeitgeist" (Mudde C. , 2004). To some, the term implies right-wing populism, in the sense that even particular traits associated with it are raised to general traits. Although right-wing populism currently dominates politics, populism may exist across all political spectrums and frequently does so in left-wing narratives (Oswald, Schäfer, & Broda, 2022). There are various conceptualizations of populism. In this section, theoretical framework of populism for our research will be defined.

Most scholars agree that populisms represent a duality between "the elite" and "the people". The main argument of populists who assert to speak for and represent the "people" is this duality. Ernesto Laclau, who is a post-Marxist political theoretician with influential work on populism, does not consider populism as an ideology, nor as a political regime. According to Laclau, populism is a discursive strategy employed the division of society into two sides and urging the "underdog" to be mobilized against "those in authority" (Laclau, 2005). This populist discourse, from the point of

view of Laclau, is not theoretically established and does not apply to only one side (left or right) of the political spectrum (Laclau, 1977).

Laclau (2005) posits that populism should not be considered as a movement or an ideology that has a specific social base. He considers populism as a political logic that works through forging links of equivalence between disparate identities, which implies that the concept of “the people” is invented as a political subject by the movement. “The people” show up as an opposition to elites that are keeping “the people” away from power. On the other hand, Laclau mentions that through common identification with some potent symbol or ideal, which he names as empty signifier, the unity and the emotional bond of the people are realized. The empty signifier allows the creation of chains of equivalence between opposed demands (Laclau, 2005).

In Laclau’s theory, the populist discourse, based on empty signifiers initially, transits into another stage through the introduction of the floating signifiers. While empty signifiers serve for creation of popular identities when frontiers between the community and its environment are secure, the floating signifiers are used for the shifting of those frontiers when engage in conflict with their enemies (Laclau, 2005).

Benjamin Arditì (2022) in his article, summarizes development of Laclau’s theory which consists of six-steps. First, (1) institutional channels are unable to respond to a variety of social demands. (2) These demands develop into unsatisfied demands that form an equivalence or solidarity relationship with one another, which then (3) converge on common symbols. (4) These can be exploited by leaders who appeal to the disgruntled masses, starting a popular identification process that (5) unites the people as a collective actor to challenge the current government and (6) demand regime change (Arditì, 2022).

In the duality between “the elite” and “the people”, the elite degrade the people whether culturally or economically according to populist mentality and it is believed that elites despise the general populace for purportedly lacking knowledge of the complexities of social and political life (Oswald, Schäfer, & Broda, 2022), which implies that we should instead “rely on ordinary citizens’ common sense” (Galston, Hunter, & Owen, 2018, p. 34). While the pledge to speak and act on behalf of “the people” is the central component of the populist repertoire, because speaking and acting on behalf of the people is also a key component of democracies and not only of populism, it entails the commitment to speak and act on behalf of the people and also against “the elite” (Brubaker R. , 2017).

In the ideational approach to populism, the duality between two antagonistic camps also exists. In ideational approach, populism is considered as a thin-centered ideology, a type of ideology that is not completely developed and coexists alongside a thick ideology like fascism, socialism, or nationalism, that predicts society’s eventual split into two homogenous and hostile groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, and which contends that politics ought to reflect the people’s general will (Mudde C. , 2004, p. 543). According to this approach, populism does not provide a comprehensive vision of world and lacks the depth and breadth of other fully formed, “thick” ideologies like communism and liberalism. This approach aids in bridging populism’s supply and demand sides (Mudde & Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 10) and explains why populism exists within other ideologies.

In this sense, Mudde (2017) asserts that populist ideologies are fundamentally built on three morally divisive principles: “the people” as a uniform “pure” group that populists define in accordance with the target group of their politics; as the opposite of “the people,” “the corrupt elite”; the consensus that politics should reflect people’s

general will because people are morally pure, so that they possess the common sense (Mudde C. , 2017, p. 33). The “common sense” of the populace or of “the heartland” is revered by populist ideology (Taggart, 1995). Nothing is more significant in populist democracies than the “public will” of the populace, not even constitutional protections or human rights (Mudde C. , 2007). The ideational approach to populism is able to explain why populism exists on various political spectrums.

Therefore, the duality between two antagonistic camps is necessary for populism. With the image of an enemy, followers of populist movements find motivation to unite around a charismatic leader and stand against a common enemy to claim their rights back. The perception of an enemy is therefore present in populist leaders’ discourse. The enemy of “the people” can vary, depending on populist movement’s inclination.

The figure of a charismatic leader is another core characteristic of populism. The populist leader often portrayed as “a man of action rather than words, who is not afraid to take difficult and swift decisions” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 64) because this is one of their key methods of appealing to the masses. The mobilization of the masses depends on charismatic leader’s attraction. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) also remarks that the populist movement’s monist foundation, particularly its emphasis on the “general will,” may potentially encourage authoritarian inclinations, regardless of their manifestations.

The charismatic leader “crystallizes common affects, and affective bonds” (Mouffe C. , 2018, p. 70). In the absence of charismatic leaders, populist movements “may become unproductive and wither away” (Hawkins, 2010, p. 43). The populist leader typically presents himself to the people as the nation’s messiah, forging an emotional bond with the voter that hopes for the political system to be resolved and

unmet social needs addressed (Laclau, 2005). For the political subject to be constructed symbolically in populism, charismatic leadership is essential, therefore populist leaders act as catalysts for mobilization (Diehl P. , 2020).

The importance of a charismatic leader in populism also present in Carlos de la Torre's definition of populism, whose research focuses on Latin American populism in particular. De la Torre defines populism as:

Borrowing from strategic and discursive-ideological approaches, I understand populism as a Manichaeian discourse that divides politics and society as the struggle between two irreconcilable and antagonistic camps: the people and the oligarchy or the power block. Under populism a leader claims to embody the unitary will of the people in their struggle for liberation. Populism produces strong popular identities and is a strategy of top-down mobilization that clashes with the autonomous demands of social movement organization. However, populist glorification of common people and their attacks on elites could open spaces for common people to press for their agendas. The tension between top-down mobilization and autonomous mobilization from below is characteristic of populist episodes. (de la Torre, 2017, pp. 195-196)

According to de la Torre (2020), leaders of the populist movement assert that they reflect and embody the desires, will, and ambitions of a uniform people. All those who disagree with their assertion that they incarnate the people are labeled as adversaries of the nation, the leader, and the people. Populists deal with enemies rather than political opponents, he adds.

Hadiz and Chrysosgelos (2017), on the other hand argue that the increasing mistrust of the formal institutions that organize social, financial, and political control inside countries is closely related to populism. This perception contributes to the idea that populism and post-truth condition are interrelated, since post-truth condition is also related to the public's distrust towards formal institutions as mentioned before. They also tie populism's resurgence to the dissatisfaction with political structures that seem to maintain and strengthen the current class system. They claim that those who

got into the modernization and progress idea and established self-identities strongly related to upward social mobility and material success may find such societal inequities to be especially upsetting. Those include what Roy Olivier termed the “lumpen-intelligentsia” (Olivier, 1994), a social group typically composed of young, educated individuals with a wealth of aspirations for upward mobility but few realistic opportunities. These individuals’ claims to the label of “middle class” could be quite shaky, in part because their consumerist aspirations are so easily frustrated by real social conditions (Hadiz & Chryssogeolos, 2017).

Rogers Brubaker treats populism as a discursive repertoire as well as a stylistic repertoire. Brubaker (2017) proposes five essential components of a populist repertoire: antagonistic re-politicization, majoritarianism, anti-institutionalism, protectionism, and the employment of the “low” style political communication as conceptualized by Ostiguy (Ostiguy, 2009). The “low” style not only performed through forms of talking but also through physical actions and beings because being close to the “people” can be enacted and communicated through attire, sexuality, gesture, and food (Diehl P. , 2017; Moffitt B. , 2016, pp. 63-68).

From the point of view of Brubaker (2017), acknowledging populism as a discursive repertoire has three implications. Firstly, it implies that political actors are aware of a series of historically rooted, standardized aspects of political speech. Secondly, in contrast to purely logical requirements, the repertoire metaphor proposes that examples of populism are interrelated with what Wittgenstein memorably referred to as a “family resemblance” (Wittgenstein, 1958). As there might not be a characteristic shared by all instances, attempting to define a necessary or adequate collection of characteristics for designating a party, leader, or discourse as populist may not be effective. The family resemblance concept also implies that certain

components of the repertoire are not exclusively populist and instead can be found in other political repertoires. It is the mixture of these elements that defines populism instead of the use of particular components from the repertoire, according to Brubaker. Thirdly, Brubaker states that the repertoire metaphor offers a technique to refute the assertion that populism is pervasive. Because even though the populist repertoire is consistently available in modern democratic circumstances, it is not consistently used. Political, financial, and cultural situations all have different cultural resonances and political traction, which affects how appealing certain repertory pieces are to political actors, Brubaker posits.

Our research will assess and approach populism as a political style. According to Margaret Canovan (1984), who is an important theorist in political style approach to populism, populism is not a matter of substance but a style, and that it is a rhetorical style to appeal to the people. Stylistic approach to populism considers populism as a way of doing politics, which also implies that populism can be a characteristic of both left-wing and right-wing politics and it may present itself in a variety of settings and with various organizational structures. Texts, speeches, public discourse can be considered as units of analysis for stylistic approach to populism, which is adequate for our research.

According to Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey (2014), who are key theorists of stylistic approach to populism, the concept of style can be used to analyze phenomena that are typically classified under the themes of organization, ideology, or discourse. These concepts, in their opinion, lack the effectiveness component of politics and do not consider the fact that political performance produces political beings (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). The consideration of populism as a political style allows us to examine populism as a component of mainstream politics, since it reflects

the situational appearance of populist traits in the behavior of politicians (Kranert, 2020).

The stylistic approach to populism is focused on communicative methods of populist leaders; in particular the discursive factors that create polarization between the “pure people” and their enemies (Canovan M. , 1999). The sense of a crisis, disruption, or threat serves as the catalyst for populism (Taggart, 2000). Therefore, the rhetoric of populist leaders is commonly based on the idea of a state of crisis in society that needs to be fixed. As a result, the populist discourse is enacted by a discursive repertory that appeals to a conflict between two antagonistic blocks, the ordinary people and the elites or other social groups such as immigrants or ethnic minorities, using a basic, colloquial language.

The manifestation of crisis or threat is related to a larger mistrust of the intricate machinery of contemporary governance and the complex nature of policy solutions, which frequently call for lengthy design and implementation processes, evaluations, consultations, and reports (Moffitt B. , 2016). Populists, contrarily, favor immediate action over “slow politics” (Saward, 2011), which involves discussion and negotiation so that the factors that prevents addressing the crisis could be disregarded, eliminated, or replaced (Moffitt B. , 2016).

The political style approach to populism also reflects the politico-cultural and socio-cultural components, in which populism is seen as a relational phenomenon between political leaders and their societal substrate (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 73). Ostiguy (2017, p. 73,74) contends that identity construction, rather than challenging global viewpoints, is the central component of this populist connection between leaders and the social base. In this sense, he presents concepts of the “high” and the “low” as a core component of distinction in political appeals which he underlines is key for the

understanding of populism. According to him, the populist connection is established by “low appeals,” which implies the employment of allegedly impolite accents, body language, tastes, and performances and fosters a harmony between populist leaders and their followers (Ostiguy, 2017).

Some intersections between stylistic and discursive approaches to populism exist, stemming from stylistic approach’s consideration of stylistic aspects in discursive elements. Nonetheless, the political style approach encompasses elements other than discursive elements, such as body language and self-presentation, which the discursive approach does not consider. The main difference between the two approaches is that the stylistic approach is more concerned with these aspects, whereas the discursive approach is more concerned with discursive content and ignores how the content is conveyed or enacted (Moffitt B. , 2016).

As can be deduced from the summarization of the fundamental approaches to populism in this section, populism is a vague and contested term that many academic discussions revolve around. The stylistic approach to populism will establish the framework for the present research. Since post-truth elements are observable in the conduct of politics, this will enable the analysis of post-truth elements in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's political style.

3.2.1 Left-Wing Populism

The global upsurge of populism grows mainly due to economic decline and the type of populism differs among generations. While support for right-wing populism, which promotes nativist policies has increased among the older age, left-wing populism is gaining popularity among younger generations (Fukuoka, 2020). In an environment where there is still no full consensus on the true nature of populism, left-wing

populism, of course, is a controversial topic. In this section, the approaches of different scholars to the term will be mentioned.

There are distinctions between left-wing and right-wing populism. The left-wing variant of populism offer more and reinforced democracies and do not pander to their supporters through xenophobia and racism (de la Torre, 2020). From de la Torre's point of view, the legitimacy of left-wing populists rested on their ability to win elections, eliminate their rivals, and forge new hegemonic blocs through the use of the electoral process. However, these populists weakened the democracy rather than strengthening it. Some of the liberal democracy's procedures and structures were kept, but they were utilized to manipulate the public discourse, civil society, and election results (de la Torre, 2016).

De la Torre (2016) states that left-wing populism in Latin America sprung into being as a result of massive public opposition to neoliberalism. He categorizes as a second element in the ascent of left-wing populism the belief that neoliberal elites and politicians had ceded national sovereignty to the international institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, or the U.S. government (de la Torre, 2016).

Major political representation problems about the reliability of democratic institutions occurred in a number of Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, according to de la Torre (2016). Political parties were seen as the implementers of neoliberal policies by domestic and international elites, which widened socioeconomic inequality and they are disintegrated as political outsiders came to power on pledges to oust dishonest officials, try out participatory models of democracy, and enact wealth redistribution measures (de la Torre, 2016).

These left-wing populists' key innovation was their plea to the revolutionary nature of constituent power to reinstate all institutions using votes rather than guns,

according to de la Torre (2016). Populist language was successful in fostering identities that were utilized to challenge elite power, and populist hostility created spaces for institutions of the underclass to express their own demands (de la Torre, 2016).

Laclau and Mouffe, on the other hand, argue that left-wing populism offers a progressive alternative to the current socio-political system in addition to being the sole effective counterbalance to its right-wing counterpart. To construct their theory, Laclau and Mouffe drew on a variety of theoretical frameworks including psychoanalysis. The sovereignty of the political and discursive domain of social reality, is heavily emphasized in their book titles *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). They oppose Marxist notions of class reductionism and economic determinism because the post-Marxist position they have taken rejects the idea of an objective material reality that transcends subjective perception and symbolic creation. They also defend their theories on ontological basis rather than on the basis of sociohistorical actuality (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014).

Mouffe's book titled *For a Left Populism* contains her observations and suggestions regarding left-wing populism. Mouffe (2018) marks the distinctions between right-wing and left-wing populism. Right-wing populism promises to restore democracy and popular sovereignty which seen as "national sovereignty" and only available for who are considered true "nationals". She mentions that right-wing populists ignore the call for equality and create a "people" that excludes a variety of groups, typically immigrants who are viewed as a threat to the identity and economy of the country. Even though right-wing populism expresses numerous resistances to post-democracy, it often does not portray the enemy of the people as being produced by neoliberal forces, according to Mouffe.

On the other hand, left-wing populism seeks to deepen and expand democracy, according to Mouffe (2018). Left-wing populist strategy tries to merge democratic demands into a unified will to establish a “we,” a “people,” who will face off against the oligarchy. She says that in order to achieve this, a chain of equivalence between the demands of the working class, immigrants, and the fragile middle class must be established, in addition to other democratic demands. Such a chain’s goal is to establish a new hegemony that will allow democracy to become more radical as left-wing populism desires, she says.

The populist approach of the left suggests a break with finance capitalism and the neoliberal system which are discordant with democracy according to sociologist Wolfgang Streeck (2017), in order to construct a new hegemony and radicalize democracy, Mouffe (2020) states. It seeks to develop a new hegemonic configuration that can uphold the importance of principles like social justice and equality. She continues, "such a strategy does not include denial of the institutions that support democratic pluralism, but rather their adoption." According to Mouffe, left-wing populism uses what Antonio Gramsci called a "war of position" to unite democratic movements and forge a collective will that can change power dynamics and establish a new social and economic paradigm in order to trigger a rupture on that scale.

Óscar García Agustín offered his insight regarding left-wing populism in his book titled *Left-Wing Populism*. According to Agustín (2020), there is no distinction between left and right-wing populism with regards to their opposition to liberal democracy. From a left-wing standpoint, populism is viewed with skepticism because it would entail giving up on both the left’s emancipatory agenda and its efforts to alter the neoliberal system, he states.

To some extent, the shifting trend from the radical to the populist left existed before the 2008 financial crisis according to Agustín (2020). Yet, after 2008 the popular movements, social protests and the crisis of representation intensified. Briefly, he states that the radical left had already been adopting some populist concepts even when extreme right-wing populism predominated (p. 5).

Agustín (2020) includes in his book the definition of left-wing populism as “the combination of the populist impetus of expanding representation (through the appeal to “the people” against the elites) and higher participation and of the left tradition to promote equality and social justice” (p. 10), which combines egalitarianism and democratic ideals to describe the left’s core values according to him.

Agustín (2020) mentions that the three qualities of this definition are transversality, inclusivity, and participation. Political demands and suggestions must be transversal, that is, they must be presented or expressed in a wide meaning that frequently goes beyond the conventional left vs. right ideological viewpoint, if they are to be accepted by a social majority. From Agustín’s point of view such a transversal shift is supported by the term “the people,” but it may conflict with the ideological frameworks used by the left historically. Left-wing populism must be inclusive not just of the communities that do not believe represented but also to ensure the multiplicity of those who are represented if the goal is to promote representativeness via the articulation of “the people”, Agustín says. Even though it is assumed that populism and pluralism are irreconcilable, in truth left-wing populism generally supports diversity and plurality in society. To guarantee that people are included in organizational discussions, policy-making processes, and deliberative processes, left-wing populism also needs to be participatory, according to Agustín.

In his article, Paolo Gerbaudo (2016) presents his remarks regarding left-wing populism. The crisis of legitimacy of neoliberal hegemony occurred after the 2008 financial catastrophe paved the way for new populist formations both on the left and right. The upsurge of both left and right-wing populism is a sign of this extreme discontent with the neoliberal establishment. The neoliberal worldview, with its notion of a self-regulating economy and a world of unrestricted flows outside the supervision of governments, is criticized by both right and left-wing populism. However, the construction of their criticism differs in some ways. Right-wing populists want to usher in a monopoly capitalism for the twenty-first century that is more exploitative and dictatorial, as well as a society that is intolerant of racial and religious minorities. On the other hand, left-wing populists suggest for a radical alternative to the status quo, which includes a plan of financial redistribution from the rich to the poor to overcome the current level of massive inequality, the protection and expansion of public services, and the creation of a more inclusive social structure.

Regarding the distinctions between left and right-wing populism, Gerbaudo (2016) indicates that while right-wing populists view immigrants and racial minorities as adversaries of the people, according to left-wing populists, as an elite group characterized in terms of power and socioeconomics, the Oligarchy is the adversary. Therefore, the adversaries of left-wing populism mirror those of the conventional Left, he remarks. The building of the enemy gains a political dimension thanks to left-wing populism. According to him, Left-wing populism condemns corruption in politics as a mechanism for vested interests to triumph over the greater good and not only attacks capitalists but also emphasizes the role performed by their political supporters.

Gerbaudo (2016) mentions that Right- and left-wing populism both typically emerge during periods of severe instability, or of “organic crisis,” borrowing Antonio

Gramsci's expression. Many individuals feel as though they have no voice during these periods because the pre-existing systems of representation become disconnected from their conventional social basis. The crisis of neoliberal system, which has governed politics for the past 30 years, is currently experiencing an organic crisis, according to him. He states that the 2008 economic crisis exposed the fallacy of the neoliberal ideology, caused significant social unrest, and brought in a period of interregnum, a period of transition outside of the neoliberal system, the outcome of which is still up in the air.

Gerbaudo (2016) also remarks that the left's desire for radical democracy is coupled with a dependence on charismatic and individual leadership. While the commitment to radical democracy may appear to be at odds with the appearance of charismatic leadership, he claims that this is not entirely accurate. The existence of a charismatic leader may dismiss the possibility of political intrigue. It assigns one person the task of executing the political mandate, giving the populace a clear pressure point to make sure their wishes are followed through. He also suggests that in order to prevent authoritarian deviations, leaders must be properly managed and supervised.

3.3.1 Background of Populism in U.S.

Populism originated in America and eventually extended to Europe and Latin America (Judis, 2016). Since the U.S.' foundation, populist style and rhetoric have existed in the country, in events including the American Revolution's agrarian movements; Andrew Jackson's presidency; the People's Party; early 20th century prohibition and socialist movements; the New Deal workforce movement; the 1960s new left movements; the Ronald Reagan presidency; the Tea Party; and the 21st century progressive left movements (Cowburn, 2022).

The history of populism in U.S. politics reaches back to the People's Party in the 19th century. Joseph Lowndes (2017) remarks that the characteristics and tensions of the People's Party, in which an extensive coalition of both workers and farmers who joined together in a number of economic and political organizations culminated, still exist in American populism today.

The People's Party was established in 1892, and they pushed for unemployment insurance, women's suffrage, and direct Senate elections, reinforcing the idea that the Senate ought to be answerable to the people (Oswald, Schäfer, & Broda, 2022). Many regulations were implemented with their undertaking, including safeguards for employment or changes to health and housing laws. These endeavors frequently provided the groundwork for the extensive social changes of the 20th century (Oswald, Schäfer, & Broda, 2022).

Political discourse in the U.S. has been characterized by confrontation between the strong and the weak and frequently involves debates over the nature of Americanism itself (Kazin, 2017). Because America began as both a political undertaking as well as a nation, populist discourse is inextricably linked to the prevailing views of "the people" (Cowburn, 2022). As a result, such terminology is employed to signify who is supporting the continuing effort and to demarcate group identity, with those who are not part of the "people" being judged as "transgressing the nation's founding creed" (Kazin, 2017, p. 2). Shared ideas help to build American populism by influencing it to support current structures, most significantly by elevating democracy (Cowburn, 2022).

Mike Cowburn (2022) in his article, states the core tenets of populist rhetoric in the U.S. Since the nation and the constitutional system are seldom assailed, U.S. populist rhetoric concentrates on the players and institutions accountable for having

“corrupted” the mission of America by disobeying the desire of “the people”, according to Cowburn. Early populist rhetoric perceived the great geographic breadth, in particular the physical separation between the capital of the nation and the majority of the agrarian people in the country’s historical past, as a source of distinction, he continues. While “the people” are portrayed as virtuous as in other nations, it also has a definite racial dynamic in the U.S. The term “the people” has been used to limit the membership of White people, with racial division being the most commonly cited horizontal split in populist discourse, typically linked to claims that rural areas represent the “true” America, Cowburn mentions.

2.2 Post-Truth

Although the term post-truth is relatively new to our lives, its impact on our culture and politics has been significant. The term has attracted many researchers’ attention due to its complex nature, yet there has not yet been a consensus on its origin, causes, and what it actually is. There are various interpretations of the term. This section of the thesis will discuss and investigate the term and its various interpretations.

The term "post-truth" first appeared in a Nation magazine article titled "A Government of Lies" by Steve Tesich in 1992. Tesich explains post-truth through a problem he called the “Watergate Syndrome” and contends in his article that American society has deliberately chosen to live in a post-truth society at the cost of democracy. To be even more specific, he states that people no longer want to learn the truth and have started to associate them with bad news. The author criticizes society in an effort to stop it from progressing toward a post-truth world in which the truth no longer matters (Tesich, 1992). While Tesich (1992) mentions the term post-truth, his interpretation was different from what the term refers to currently. However, the

interpretation of Tesich covers some aspects of the term we are referring to today, such as the loss of significance of facts in politics and the erosion of democratic institutions.

Ralph Keyes with his book in 2004 titled *The Post Truth Era: Dishonesty in Contemporary Life* assists the conceptualization of the term and discusses it in detail for the first time. In his book, to explain how the worrisome tendency towards the proliferation of dishonesty occurred, he investigates the causes of the deterioration in ethics and gives a concise history of lying from the medieval era to the present. He looks at the effects of a society that accepts lying as a faultless crime, with little to no repercussions for the liar but a disconcerting rise in distrust in the society as a whole (Keyes, 2004). Keyes (2004) conceptualizes the term “post-truth” as the proliferation of lies and dishonesty in our culture and emphasizes a crisis of confidence. He claims that, as opposed to before, when people approached estimates by doubting their ability to represent the truth, they are now approaching estimates with hesitations that center on exposing the falsehood. He states that technological developments facilitate deception in our culture, pointing out that people lie more often through technological communication tools than in person (Keyes, 2004).

Keyes’ elaboration of the term was one of the first definitions. He asserts that a number of factors, including the upsurge of celebrity fandom, the preference for entertainment and faux authenticity over morality, academic “post-modernism,” which relativizes all notions of truth, and so-called “techno-aided deception” (p. 197), which permits lying without repercussions due to online anonymity, underlie this culture or era of deception.

From a different point of view, Peter Dahlgren (2018) considers post-truth as a new epistemic regime in which emotional response precedes reasoned analysis and factual evidence. Transparency and accuracy are replaced by algorithmic analyses of

what individuals want to hear. Referred to as "the people", "democratic masses" are also involved in the scene and now only hear whatever they want to hear. According to Dahlgren (2018), this trend is related to the advent of digital media, which supports political "echo-chambers" (p. 25), resulting in both new conditions and an entirely new "epistemic regime".

Yuval Noah Harari (2018) approaches the term "post-truth" from an evolutionary perspective. According to Harari, the post-truth era has always existed throughout human history. He discusses the fact that humans are a post-truth species, and they derive their power from fabricating and clinging to lies. Their capacity to generate and disseminate fiction grants them the ability to rule the planet. Only humans are capable of creating made-up stories, disseminating them, and persuading millions of people to believe in them, making humans the only mammals capable of working cooperatively with many strangers. He attributes the formation of nations and religions to the post-truth characteristic of the human species and gives various examples in his book (Harari, 2018). According to Harari (2018), power and truth have an inverse correlation. While spreading lies helps people acquire power, desiring to know the reality of the world reduces power, according to Harari. He discusses a dilemma regarding scholars: should they let everyone learn the truth even at the cost of division, or should they try to bring people together by making sure everybody accepts the same narrative? The most influential scholarly institutions own their power to their preference of unity over truth, whether they were run by priests, mandarins, or communist ideologues according to him (Harari, 2018).

From Harari (2018) point of view, humans are a species that values power over truth. They are busier to dominate the world than to comprehend it. Even in the times they intend to comprehend the world, they do so with the aspiration of controlling it

in a more efficient way (Harari, 2018). Harari, in this sense, defines post-truth as the human species' ability to believe in fiction and lies. According to his definition, post-truth is a blessing for the human species rather than a curse. However, his approach to the term is very distinct from other authors. While his observation that humans own its power to their ability to believe in things that are fictional is agreeable, his use of the term is not in the same vein with other philosophical discussions about post-truth. From our standpoint, the question regarding post-truth is whether humans are no longer able to designate "reality," even though reality consists of lies and fabrication. It has become much harder, as a consequence of the post-truth condition, to reach consensus regarding what to consider true.

Lee McIntyre (2018), on the other hand, in his book published in 2018 *Post-Truth* shares his insights regarding the term "post-truth," and makes the following statements while discussing the term:

So is post-truth just about lying, then? Is it mere political spin? Not precisely. As presented in current debate, the word "post-truth" is irreducibly normative. It is an expression of concern by those who care about the concept of truth and feel that it is under attack. But what about those who feel that they are merely trying to tell the "other side of the story" on controversial topics? That there really is a case to be made for alternative facts? The idea of a single objective truth has never been free from controversy. Is admitting this necessarily conservative? Or liberal? Or perhaps it is a fusion, whereby largely left-wing relativist and postmodernist attacks on the idea of truth from decades ago have now simply been co-opted by right-wing political operatives. (p. 6)

McIntyre (2018) mentions that there are many interpretations and elusiveness regarding the term "post-truth". He states that post-truth is not about cynicism, lying, indifference, delusion, political spin, or ignorance like many authors mentioned while defining the term, and there is nothing new about them. Instead, what is novel in the post-truth era is a question about reality itself, not only about the notion of knowing reality according to McIntyre (McIntyre, 2018). McIntyre (2018) claims that real

problem in the post-truth era is the fundamental notion that some facts count more than others depending on what one wants to be true, rather than any specific (outrageous) belief. For him, the deniers of climate change do not really reject facts; they only wish to acknowledge those facts that fit their beliefs. He further explains his observation by stating that it is not a rejection of facts, rather it is a distortion of the method by which facts are reliably obtained and employed to form one's conception of reality (McIntyre, 2018).

McIntyre (2018) makes emphasis on why post-truth occurs. He claims that people oppose facts when it is in their best interests and when they are attempting to make a statement that is more important to them than the facts. From this point of view, he concludes that post-truth refers to a sort of intellectual superiority in which its proponents attempt to convince someone to accept a belief whether or not it is supported by solid evidence (McIntyre, 2018). Regarding the topic of post-truth and postmodernism relationship, McIntyre (2018) discusses the notion that while right-wing conservatives were criticizing postmodernism as a leftist degeneracy few decades ago, now they have discovered in postmodernism the strategies they require to disprove the superiority of scientific hypotheses. In this regard, he cites Judith Warner's (2011) article titled "Fact Free Science", in which she posits that postmodernism has helped and encouraged right-wing science. He quotes her sentences; "questioning accepted fact, revealing the myths and politics behind established certainties, is a tactic straight out of the left-wing playbook" (Warner, 2011, para. 5) and "is now a required practice for Republicans eager to play to an emboldened conservative base ... [the] political zeitgeist [has] shifted." (Warner, 2011, para. 7). He also quotes her; "attacking science became a sport of the radical right." (Warner, 2011, para. 7).

Regarding the discussion, McIntyre (2018) mentions another author, Chris Mooney who criticized Warner's article (Mooney, 2011). He quotes Mooney's statements:

First, the idea that conservatives would be strongly influenced by the abstruse arguments and wordplay of left wing academia doesn't make any sense. Do we not recall that starting in the 1970s, conservatives created an armada of ideological think tanks— including many think tanks that now dispute climate change—precisely so as to create their own echo chamber of “expertise” outside of academia? To them, 1990s postmodernism would be the quintessential example of effete academic uselessness. But that's not even the biggest objection to Warner's line of thinking. The biggest objection is that climate change deniers do not look, behave, or sound postmodern in any meaningful sense of the term. (Mooney, 2011, para. 5, para. 6)

The idea that science is the embodiment of “truth” is something with which climate deniers blithely agree. They think that they are right and that the scientific consensus about global warming is wrong—objectively. They're not out there questioning whether science is the best way of getting at the truth; they're out there talking as though their scientists know the truth. Can you picture James Inhofe citing Derrida or Foucault? The very idea is comical. (Mooney, 2011, para. 9, para. 10)

McIntyre (2018) elucidates his own point of view about the discussion. He states that even though right-wing leaders and other scientific skeptics were not reading Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, the notion that science does not possess a monopoly on the truth eventually found its way to them. Thus, he continues, it is plausible to assume that right-wingers are attacking the veracity of other scientific statements that conflict with their conservative ideology using the same kind of justifications and strategies as postmodernism (McIntyre, 2018).

Some scholars intend to explain post-truth through the perspective of political theorist, Hannah Arendt. Dorota Sepczyńska is one of them. Sepczyńska (2019) states in her article that one could argue that Hannah Arendt was a pioneer in the field of critical examination of post-truth issues. Although Arendt did not use the phrase “post-truth,” she discussed the contemporary political deception, which is equivalent to what

we now refer to as “post-truth”, Sepczyńska says. Arendt outlines a situation in which reality is changed into opinion, facts are replaced with fiction, and vice versa, Sepczyńska continues. According to Sepczyńska, this phenomenon occurs when the past is rewritten in order to portray a politician. It is intended to deceive everyone, it uses the mass media, and it is a practice that is embraced by the masses, for whom there is no distinction between truth and fiction, emotion and reason, or for whom such a distinction is not relevant. These three characteristics describe its mass nature (Sepczyńska, 2019).

From Arendt’s point of view, post-truth and post-politics are connected, according to Sepczyńska (2019). She continues to interpret post-truth from Arendt’s perspective and mentions that post-truth does not cause politics to become post-politics; post-politics is what creates post-truth. She claims that according to Arendt, governmental management in post-politics serves the interests of capitalist or religious groups as well as the private domain. Values and political institutions like freedom, equality, solidarity, and communication power are gradually eroding (Sepczyńska, 2019).

Sepczyńska (2019) makes the following observations regarding post-truth and populism. According to her, post-truth is a component of the populist revolution that turns political power into violence in the name of a social cause. Deep social and psychological changes are its root cause. They take place when the markets, which serve administrative authority, subjugate the realm concerned with reaching consensus regarding discursive thought and communicative power. This creates conditions that encourage the growth of the masses and the mob, which in return leads to populist movements and ideologies. The Creators and supporters of post-truth are the victims of social exclusion who lack the security that comes with having a paying job. These

people no longer value the distinction between fact and fiction, personal opinions and political consensus, nor do they have faith in democratic institutions. They anticipate clear justifications and answers. Both the masses and the mob lack the virtue of citizenship, which includes being involved in politics as well as listening to others, being willing to justify and explain things in terms that are acceptable to everyone, not showing partiality when making decisions that affect everyone, and being willing to change one's own opinions. These individuals are constrained by their ideologies and negative feelings (Sepczyńska, 2019).

As it is evident, post-truth has a great variety of interpretations depending on the point of the view. In this research, post-truth will be considered as a condition that hinders the decision-making process of the people regarding what is real, thus making them prone to make decisions based on emotions.

2.2.1 Post-Truth and Neoliberalism

While mentioning about the causes of the post-truth era, we cannot disregard the role of economic policies playing in this respect. In this chapter, various theories of causal relationship between neoliberalism and the post-truth era will be presented.

Luca Mavelli (2020) studied the ramifications of conceiving neoliberalism as a religion and its meanings. He intends to demonstrate in his article how the neoliberal “sacralization” of the economy has had the effect of totalizing the commodification process, which has led to the formation of “post-truth politics” and “post-fact society,” among other things. Post-truth politics is the manifestation of a sacralized “truth market” that views neoliberalism and ignorance as necessary preconditions for the possibility of freedom, he posits.

Mavelli (2020) regarding the question of whether a new era of “post-truth politics” has begun, he refers to Michel Foucault’s conception of truth. Mavelli quotes Foucault’s following statements:

each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980)

Mavelli (2020) deriving from Michel Foucault’s idea, who considers truth as “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements” (Foucault, 1980, p. 133) says that a regime of truth is the result of a power structure, which it helps to maintain by advancing a set of regulations “according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true” (Foucault 1980, 132). Therefore Mavelli concludes, the question isn’t whether we’ve reached a post-truth era, which according to him not the case because doing so would require conquering power and attaining what Foucault would regard as an ontological improbability. Instead, the question is whether the political and social structure “according to which the true and the false are separated” has altered from a circumstance in which it was primarily “produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media)” (Foucault 1980, 131), to one defined by a “new temporality and spatiality of news production, circulation, and consumption,” within which “power exploits [our] new ‘freedoms’ to participate/produce/express (aswell as consume/diffuse/evaluate)” (Harsin, 2015; Mavelli, 2020).

Mavelli (2020) discusses in his article how neoliberal commodification involves a concurrent cycle of profanation-things become commodities after being cut off from themselves-and sacralization-due to the commodification of all things, the market has evolved into a “sacred” order of meanings. He contends that this approach has two main effects on the current “regime of truth”: it has made facts more and more like commodities and encouraged the growth of a neoliberal “truth market,” which further blurs the line between “facts” and “beliefs” (Mavelli, 2020).

The existing “commodification of facts” is related to the exponential multiplication of the media channels with the digital age, such as, podcasts, digital communities, digital newspapers and mostly social media, which have helped to expand the news offering in an era of heightened competition and customization, according to Mavelli (2020). He mentions that these developments have frequently been appreciated by claiming that competition increases the quality of the outcome, the multiplication of information sources removes the monopoly of existing media companies, encouraging democratic participation, and the possibility of tracking the events more closely that concern us thanks to the “algorithmic selection of news by socialmedia platforms” (Rulyova & Hannah, 2017).

On the other hand, Mavelli (2020) claims that the conversion of news, opinions and facts into commodities caused as well an alteration in their purpose and goal. People are now more likely to see stories, news, and viewpoints in the social media feeds that support the preexisting opinions because of the algorithmic personalization of data, which increased the demand for “echo chambers, filter bubbles, and confirmation bias” (Glaser, 2016), he states. This demand has been more and more satisfied by a growing supply of “false” or “junk-food news” (Viner, 2016), offered by both reputable and less reputable news sources, who are all involved in a

competition for “clicks” and “traffic” and, consequently, advertising, capital, and investments, he continues. Whether a story is true or not in this setting simply matters in terms of “whether people click on it” (Glaser, 2016; Mavelli, 2020).

The previously flimsy and frequently arbitrary distinction between “facts” and “beliefs” has become more and more eroded as a result of neoliberal commodification of facts, according to Mavelli (2020). By establishing a false balance that disregards rules, complexity, carefulness, and depth and measures the “truthfulness” of a narrative in terms of “clicks,” “likes,” or the amount of times it is shared, it has contributed to desecrating or profaning the authority of traditional media, which has then helped to elevate the neoliberal market logic as the “sacred” structure that ought to control the creation, transmission, and acceptance of facts (Mavelli, 2020).

While some theorists assert that populism rises from the inequities of the social and economic dynamics of neoliberalism (Cayla, 2021), deriving from the content of this part of research, they also play a role in the emergence of the post-truth era. It seems like these two phenomena partly caused by neoliberalism, namely populism and the post-truth era, feed off of each other and further reinforce their effects.

2.2.2 Post-Truth and Social Media

The widespread adaptation of social media usage is the most prominent factor in the emergence of the post-truth era. It is also true that the reflections of the post-truth era can most clearly be observed in the social media and digital spheres, since post-truth politics and communication mostly take place on such digital platforms.

The media has always been an important factor in the formation of public opinion and how politics play out. It has been considered a fourth pillar of democracy in democratic systems. With the tremendous growth of social media, public news

sharing has acquired a new dimension. Now, the common man is able to share their own content on social media platforms, changing the role and dynamics of the media in politics. As discussed in previous chapters, the unmediated circulation of information that is not based on facts creates a propenent environment for the post-truth era.

The proliferation of social media also offered politicians a new, direct way of contacting their followers, facilitating the establishment of an emotional link with them. The unmediated nature of social media also paved the way for the employment of manipulation and disinformation strategies by politicians. The role of social media dynamics in the post-truth era will be discussed in this section of the research to better understand the relationship between social media and the post-truth era.

2.2.2.1 Disinformation and Misinformation

Nor disinformation, neither misinformation are new terms specific to our time. However, the ascendance of populism in international political structures led as a result these terms to acquire more traction in the public discourse, shrinking the room for debate based on facts (Nyhan, 2018; Armitage & Vaccari, 2021). On the other hand, the widespread adoption of social media facilitated their extensive and rapid propagation. Due to their propensity to encourage rapid, unquestioning behavior based on scant cognitive evaluation, the attributes of digital media increase vulnerability to ideologically compatible misinformation (Barlett, 2018). Although they both pertain to the dissemination of false, deceptive, or misleading information, the terminology differ due to the degree of purpose (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021).

Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakshan (2017) describe the term “misinformation” as the unintentional spread of false information. Misinformed

consumers are typically unconscious that they consume and share misleading content, in contrast to disinformation agents who are conscious that they spread incorrect information in an effort to fool others (Tumber & Waisboard, 2021). According to Wardle and Derakshan, even though misinformation is not a new phenomenon, the emergence of the internet and social technology have brought about fundamental changes to the way information is produced, communicated, and distributed. It is now simpler than ever for anybody to produce and share content thanks to widely available, affordable, and powerful editing and publishing technology; due to the social networks, information consumption that was formerly private is now public; a faster news cycle and mobile devices have enhanced the rate at which information is shared; since knowledge is shared in real time between vetted peers, it is much less likely to be contested (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Stephen Lewandowski (2020) in his article indicates some crucial aspects of the psychology of misinformation. He states that misinformation can remain ingrained in people's memories even when people are aware that a piece of information is wrong and when they accept a correction. He also mentions that the impact of accurate information are undermined by the existence of misinformation. Not only does misinformation misinform, but it also calls into question the veracity of all information, undermining democracy (Lewandowski, 2020).

Johanna Dunaway (2021) mentions that social media and digital platforms may intensify the effects of misinformation not only through persuasion but by increasing familiarity as well. She indicates that even though information is incorrect, repeated exposure to it improves the perception of its accuracy (Swire, Ecker, & Lewandowski, 2017; Pennycook, Cannon, & Rand, 2018). When misinformation is extensively distributed and persistently spread over networks, it boosts familiarity (Weaver,

Garcia, Schwarz, & Miller, 2007), cognitive accessibility (DiFonzo, Beckstead, Stupak, & Walders, 2016), ease of processing (Schwarz, Newman, & Leach, 2016), and perceptions of consensus (Leviston, Walker, & Morwinski, 2013), all of which affect how accurately judgments are made (Dunaway, 2021).

Disinformation, on the other hand, is the intentional spread of misleading information to further political, financial, or other goals (Tumber & Waisboard, 2021). As by its definition the term disinformation can be confused with propaganda. Disinformation emphasizes intentional deception via fabrications, whereas propaganda might involve spreading only some concepts that are not always clearly incorrect (Tumber & Waisboard, 2021). The goal of the disinformation can be varying: convincing people to agree with certain people, groups, ideas, or future actions; convincing people to disagree with specific people, groups, concepts, or future activities; create emotional responses to a certain person, group, concept, or planned action with the hopes of fostering support or opposition; exaggerate the severity of something said or performed; prevent a humiliating or criminal conduct from being believed; generate uncertainty over previous events and activities; or highlight the significance of detecting disinformation on social media (Shu, Wang, Dongwon, & Huan, 2020).

The social media plays a big role in proliferation of disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The mainstream media's position as the information gatekeeper has been threatened by social platforms (Resnick, Ovadya, & Gilchrist, 2018), which have significantly increased the quantity of content accessible by decreasing the barrier to entry for news production and delivery (Lazer, et al., 2018). This has made it possible for politicians to engage with the audience directly, free from the constraints that typically come with journalistic mediation, especially for those who can afford

large-scale online ads (Siegel, 2018). Through the use of bots and cyborgs (hybrid human/automated accounts), social media has helped to artificially inflate problematic content while also enabling regular people, especially partisan activists, to easily generate and spread material of different veracity (Cook, Ecker, & Lewandowsky, 2015; Armitage & Vaccari, 2021).

Disinformation is frequently spread by politicians particularly during electoral campaigns (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021). Modern disinformation allows for the easy targeting and dissemination of incorrect information to billions of people, who can then quickly spread and repeat these falsehoods, creating possibility for everyone to take part in disinformation operations as a recipient and a distributor, voluntarily or not (Tumber & Waisboard, 2021).

2.2.2.2 Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories are defined as conceptions about a set of actors cooperating together covertly to accomplish a hidden objective that is thought to be illegal or malicious (Zonis & Joseph, 1994). There are some social psychological reasons behind conspiracy theories. People use conspiracy theories as a way to satisfy their desire for distinctiveness (Latian, Muller, Nurra, & Douglas, 2017). They can also support a feeling of personal or collective identity and give many people a pleasure who are drawn to their ‘alternative’ narrative status recognized exclusively by an enlightened people, whereas the uninformed “sheeple” accept the official account of what happened (Butter & Knight, 2020).

According to Jaron Harambam (2020), conspiracy theories are a prevalent theme in modern politics, as 2016 U.S. presidential elections, during which they are used by every candidate, demonstrated clearly that they are a wonderful technique to

incite voters. Regarding the said election, he remarks that the utilization of conspiracy theories by Donald Trump, who undeniably won the election, has received the most attention. He has accused his competitor Ted Cruz's father of being involved in the John F. Kennedy assassination and launched numerous conspiratorial attacks against Hillary Clinton in an effort to cast doubt on people's beliefs about her wellbeing, honesty, and links. Hillary Clinton regularly attacked Donald Trump by implying that he had secret ties to Russia and intentions to influence the upcoming elections, while Bernie Sanders frequently adverted the "one percent" as misleading and extorting the general public (Harambam, 2020).

Harambam (2020) claims that considering all the varied conspiracy theories that are prevalent in modern Western countries, the most important modern political and cultural challenges is the problematization of official information. In this regard, he mentions the post-truth era and Hannah Arendt, who asserts that the issue with persistent falsehoods in the public sphere is not that individuals start accepting them but rather that they won't acknowledge anything else. As a result, people are left at the whim of the current demagogue in power (Arendt, 1967; Harambam, 2020).

On the other hand, Michael Barkun (2013) in his book highlights that conspiracy theories claim to be empirically meaningful, or testable by the accumulating range of evidence about the perceptible world. According to him, such structures are not demanded to be taken on faith by those who adhere to them. Instead, they frequently use sophisticated evidence demonstrations to support their arguments. In this regard, he refers to Richard Hofstadter, who said that conspiracy literature frequently imitates the system of citation and presentation of evidence used in traditional scholarship (Hofstadter, 1965; Barkun, 2013).

However, Barkun (2013) also indicates that the obsession with evidence obscures a more serious issue: despite the assertion that the conspiracy theory is empirically solid, the more broad its assertions, the less significant the evidence becomes. Due to the non-falsifiability of conspiracy theories at their core, this dilemma exists. Regardless of how much evidence a conspiracy theory's supporters gather, confidence in it ultimately comes down to faith rather than fact (Barkun, 2013).

Barkun (2013) makes some important remarks regarding conspiracy theories and digital networks. According to him, people whose worldview is based on conspiracies discover online virtual communities of like-minded individuals. There may be numerous copies of the single document in different locations, some of which may be similar, some of which may be somewhat different, and some of which may include annotations made by the poster. While the outcome is similar to the several versions of urban tales that spread through word of mouth, in contrast to oral versions, all of the variations may theoretically be concurrently available to the web visitor, who may therefore be inclined to determine the veracity of a story by counting how many times it has been recounted. He mentions by this way, repetition serves as the equivalent of direct proof in establishing credibility. Because it is in the essence of rumors to surface precisely when conventional methods of assessing veracity are unavailable, a possible rumor consumer may wind up basing their decision on the veracity of a specific rumor on the grounds of how broadly it is spread, giving rumors a self-validating character as a result. Thus, the believability of rumors depends on how often they are told (Barkun, 2013).

Some theorists highlighted the connection between conspiracy theories and populism. With its social media, echo chambers, and counter-publics, the Internet is thought to be an especially fertile ground for both (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016; Del

Vicario, et al., 2015). Both are commonly considered as threats to democracy and as being intimately related to extremism (Akkerman, 2017; Van Prooijen, 2018), and both are frequently perceived as inaccurate and oversimplified solutions to urgent concerns like globalization (Calance, 2015; Brubaker R. , 2019). Some scholars, such as Mihnea Stoica contend that conspiracy theories are essential to populism (Stoica, 2017).

2.2.2.3 Echo Chambers

An echo chamber is the concept that humans have a confirmation bias that causes them to utilize social networks and other information sources in a manner that validates their preexisting biases and connects them with like-minded others (Nickerson, 1998; Sunstein C. R., 2017). This bias might result in the emergence of rather cohesive groups of like-minded people with constrained perspectives and unilateral political knowledge (Sunstein C. R., 2017). A homogeneous bias amongst media consumers may result from this social filtering of media preferences by people, like who they follow on social networks (Nikolov D, 2015; Dutton & Robertson, 2021).

Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel and Justin M. Rao (2016) argued in their article that the cost of creating, disseminating, and gaining access to various political viewpoints has drastically decreased thanks to the Internet, which has resulted in an increased amount of information available to citizens and their options for news sources. With more options, people can decide to just consume information that supports their preexisting opinions (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). In fact, there are various supporting research indicating that in controlled trials, participants frequently select news items from publications that share their political viewpoints (Garrett, 2009; Iyengar & Kyu, 2009; Munson & Resnick, 2010). Additionally, people are more prone

to spread information that supports the views of their immediate social circles (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969; Myers & Bishop, 1970; Spears, Lea, & Lee, 1990; Schkade, Sunstein, & Hastie, 2007; Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016).

Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017) explained in their research why echo chambers are so alluring. They offer welcoming environments where people can converse about their beliefs and worldviews without worrying about conflict or hostility. They give us the chance to perform our identities to individuals who hold similar worldviews. Although this behavior is not novel, the platforms have taken advantage of it since they believe it will encourage people to stay on their websites longer (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Agents who disseminate disinformation are aware that consumers and spreaders of these messages will increasingly do so from within these echo chambers, where there is no one to refute their viewpoints according to Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017). This means that their communications are significantly less likely to be interpreted negatively by the intended audience. As a result, agencies focus on audiences that they are aware are more responsive to the message. The likelihood is high that the message will thereafter be spread by the initial receiver if they succeed in doing that. And studies have shown that even when we sense that a message is incorrect, we are considerably more inclined to believe it when it comes from somebody we know (Lindgren, Corbett, & Jaigris, 2017), which is why disinformation can spread swiftly (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

2.2.2.4 Filter Bubbles

The technology firms are businesses, thus in order to satisfy their shareholders they must urge consumers to stay on their website for as long as feasible and maximize the

amount of ad exposures (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). They do this by modifying the algorithms to display more of the content that users have previously shared, liked, or commented on (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Personalization of content through machine learning algorithms being used by social media platforms, search engines, and news sites (Agichtein, Brill, & Dumais, 2006; Hannak, et al., 2013; Das, Datar, Garg, & Rajaram, 2007) possibly leads to creation of “filter bubbles” (Parisier, 2011). Filter bubbles are conditions where algorithms unintentionally increase ideological division by automatically suggesting content that a person is likely to find agreeable (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016).

Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017) remark in their report that the core issue is that “filter bubbles” exacerbate polarization by enabling us to exist in our own digital echo chambers and limiting the perspectives we are exposed to to those that support rather than contradict our own beliefs. Social media are built to capitalize on this intrinsic tendency, even if confirmation bias occurs outside of digital platforms as well.

2.2.2.5 Deep Fakes

“Generative adversarial networks,” often known as GANs, are a type of machine learning method that can be used to produce fake videos. GANs were created in 2014 by a graduate student named Ian Goodfellow as a means to algorithmically create new sorts of data out of current data sets. GANs are a versatile technology that may also be used to create new text from pre-existing text or new audio from pre-existing audio (Schwartz, 2018).

Up until late 2017, the application of this machine learning technique was primarily restricted to the AI research community. The term deepfakes became known in 2017, when a Reddit user with the alias “Deepfakes” started uploading digitally manipulated pornographic content. With the help of the Google’s open-source machine learning tool TensorFlow, he constructed GANs to put famous people’s faces on pornographic content (Schwartz, 2018).

Deep learning is the key technological component in the creation of deepfakes, as the name implies. By programming a deep neural network named an autoencoder, deepfakes exchange the characteristics of a source with those of a target, such as the source’s voice, face, gender, and clothing styles (Floridi, 2018; Karnouskos, 2020).

According to Jan Kietzmann, Linda W. Lee, Ian P. McCharly and Tim C. Kitzmann (2020), the influence of deepfakes is substantial because although credibility of photography has decreased over the past several decades due to image-editing capabilities (Westling, 2019), we still place a lot of weight in photographic evidence (Granot, Balcetis, Feigenson, & Tyler, 2018; Porter & Kennedy, 2012). We frequently put even more credence in the familiar voices and videos that we see (Brucato, 2015). Despite being essentially robust in natural environments, the visual system of the brain is susceptible to error. Even if something is improbable, if we observe it with our own eyes, we accept it to be true or real. It is incredibly simple to spread deepfakes on social networks that give businesses and users the technology and the tools to produce and share content (Kietzmann, Lee, McCarthy, & Kietzmann, 2020).

Deepfakes blur the line between the real and the fake, contributing to the post-truth condition. They can easily be used to manipulate people for certain goals, which are not aware and have not developed consciousness for such a technology.

2.3 Post-Truth Politics

Understanding the complex dynamics altering media and politics has become increasingly important due to the fast spread of new communication technologies. We are currently living in the era of a new hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), as political theorist Andrew Chadwick has suggested. Politicians may now engage directly with the audience thanks to the new Web 2.0 hybrid model, which incorporates social media, blogs, reality TV, and other platforms, but at the same time faith in the more established institutions in both politics and the media is steadily diminishing. On the other hand, in this new hybrid environment, disinformation and conspiracy theories spread almost instantly in digital networks. The negative consequences of this greatly increase when we take into account that humans are prone to reject the truth when it conflicts with a bias we possess (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

This environment also facilitated populist leaders to get in touch with their followers. Now, they can bypass traditional media and establish direct communication channels with their followers. Populism now is able to make use of social media to stir up political emotions of wide range of audiences. Through social media technology, populism and its political presentation can promote the mobilization of political emotions in the digital public sphere (Flew & Iosifidis, 2019).

The new public sphere that emerged with the popularization of social media networks differs strictly from that which Habermas referred to as “the public sphere” (Habermas, 1991), a place where an enlightened public discussion is expected to take place in. At the present time, every individual possesses a device by which they can broadcast their personal views, opinions, and judgments. Social networks also permit their users to accept or reject content they are exposed to in order to differentiate

themselves, leading to an intensification of their subjectivity. As a result, rational judgment is debilitated, and affective opinions become impactful.

Social media, in this context, does not promote the development of an educated, logical debate since they influence and amplify an irrational public mood (Flew & Iosifidis, 2019). According to Stephan Lewandowsky and his colleagues, like medical knowledge, politics should be based on objective information rather than feelings or opinions. However, if current trends continue, we could live in a future where medical field is controlled by the "opinion market" rather than medical specialists, they remark (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017, p. 353).

Social media platforms may be used to influence public agendas, shape public opinion, and promote social change (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2018). As it is mentioned in the previous section, social media is one of the core reasons for post-truth condition to emerge. The post-truth condition has implications for the way politics work as well, defined as post-truth politics. One of the things that fuels populism and that threatens democracy is post-truth in politics (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2018).

The political arguments that characterized the 2016 US presidential election and the UK's vote on leaving the European Union are frequently cited as shining examples of post-truth politics. The vote for Brexit was successfully achieved concurrently with Trump's stunning triumph in what has been labeled the "post-truth politics", which is according to Petros Iosifidis and Mark Wheeler (2018) mostly based on fake news, the improper use of statistics, and appeals to emotion rather than to policy and facts. They underline that politics of post-truth is one of the things that fuels populism and one of the things that threatens democracy.

According to Susana Salgado (2018), the predominance of emotions over actual information and solid, objective data is the most defining characteristic of the

post-truth politics. Language is chosen to elicit specific emotional responses; passionate, provocative, and contentious statements are utilized to elicit specific emotional responses. This type of political communication's primary goal is to disseminate credible perceptions of reality, not necessarily facts she states.

From Salgado's points of view, post truth politics and the deliberate dissemination of controversial material and emotionally charged political discourse online are closely connected concepts, as well as spreading fabricated, twisted information on purpose to get a benefit in political disputes (Salgado, 2018).

There is lack of depth in conceptualization of the notion of post-truth politics. Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen (2018) intends to address this issue and conceptualize post-truth politics in his article. He contends that the concept of post-truth should be viewed as a degradation of straightforward factual facts, which everyone is theoretically capable of verifying. He proposes a two-step mechanism for how post-truth operates. From a structural perspective, it results from a number of media-related, economic, and cultural elements that weaken the concept of the "common world" and render truth less and less meaningful in public discourse; it is connected to what he refers to as "careless speech". The two sides are interdependent and mutually reinforce one another.

What Hyvönen refers to as "careless speech" is being "free from care", indifferent to both the truth and the world as a shared arena where things become public. He says that it denotes a refusal to consider alternative viewpoints as well as a resistance to the idea that words matter, and communication has consequences. It entails casting doubt on whether what is spoken aloud is truly intended; it entails holding that anything may be left unsaid. Along with not caring about truth, "careless speech" often pays little attention to the specifics of the lies it includes.

Post-truth politics should be regarded as a situation where political communication is becoming more disconnected from the factual infrastructure according to Hyyönen (2018). He states that the most effective cases of post-truth politics are those in which explicit falsehoods about things that theoretically anybody might verify are utilized – though perhaps not necessarily intentionally – for diverse political reasons towards both opponents and one's own followers.

Hyyönen mentions about “Paranoid Style” aspect of the post-truth politics, characterized by “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” (Hofstadter, 1965) existing in current politics, in particular with the use of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories frequently develop into comprehensive worldviews (Hyyönen, 2018). Thus, conspiracy theories enable the rejection of some uncomfortable aspects of reality as either not occurring or being genuine (Jonathan, 2012; Hofstadter, 1965).

Hyyönen (2018) also addresses “image-making” and “bullshit” in relation to public relations regarding the precedents of post-truth politics. He states that due to the mass media nature of our culture, the image produced by PR methods is typically far more apparent than the "original", therefore it usually succeeds in replacing reality or possibly overlaying it with a specific, filtered version of it. On the other hand, he explains how Harry Frankfurt’s conceptualization of bullshit differs from “careless speech” mentioned above. Bullshitters use words that are a blend of banalities, soundbites manufactured by advertising firms, common sense "truths," and business jargon, while careless speech undermines the fundamental concept of such packaging rather than presenting a neatly packaged respectable persona he states.

Some researchers, like Silvio Waisbord, refers as post-truth communication to the notion we refer as post-truth politics. Since in our research we also consider post-

truth politics as a communication strategy, post-truth politics and post-truth communication refer to the same concept. Waisbord (2018) analyzes the close relationship between populism and post-truth communication. He argues that the resurgence of populist politics is a consequence of the solidification of post-truth communication as a peculiar component of contemporary politics, and states that the anti-elitist characteristic of populist politics shows itself by opposing to facts determined by elites like experts and scientists. According to him, the term post-truth refers to changes in the institutional frameworks of public discourse that are necessary for truth-telling and agreements on the portrayal of reality. Truth-telling necessitates that the public share standards and opinions about how to comprehend reality. Consensus on specific norms that underpin the way in which assertions about reality are regarded as authoritative and valid is necessary.

Waisbord points out that post-truth communication brings forth the lack of conditions in the public sphere for people to reach a consensus on norms and objectives required to designate the truth as attestable suggestions regarding reality. While acknowledging that these conditions—consensus on judgments and norms to designate reality—might never have existed and truth has always been suspected, he emphasizes that now, unlike in the past, it is much more difficult to maintain rational, fact-based, scientific assertions about reality as unquestionably true and dominant, in such conditions that any claim about reality and truth can garner widespread attention on the Internet and reach wide groups of people. Therefore, he states, post-truth communication is the cognizance by those who still deem truth-telling as a sole, rational valuation of reality designated by official institutions, of truth is *ad infinitum* fugacious, fragmented, disputable, enigmatic. In this sense, post-truth assumes that the social tie of truth signifies that the statements made about the world are subjected and

partial, which refutes the possibility of truth since it assumes that subjectivity is insurmountable and different societies do not share the same norms and values.

With regards to how populism and post-truth communication related, Waisbord (2018) states that populism rejects the probability of truth as a shared perspective in a democratic society, strongly believing in the requirement of narratives to constitute context and articulate politics. For populism, the people and the elites have their own proper truth, and shared truth is not possible due to the contentious nature of politics. Populism accepts that facts are not parts of the truth-telling, and they are not unbiased, indisputable, supreme phenomena that can be confirmed, but contrarily they are supplementary to narratives. It is not mainly concerned with constructing facts to back up claims, instead it is concerned with the reconfirmation of the unarguable binary narrative in any event, which results in the cherry-picking facts that affirm present narratives and to rejecting discordant facts. Waisbord suggest that “post-truth communication is exactly where populism wants politics to be – the realm of divided truth, binary thinking, and broken up communication” (Waisbord, 2018, p. 30).

In this research, post-truth politics will be considered a type of political communication strategy employed by politicians in which facts are much less important and heavily rely on stimulation of emotions in people, distortion of the facts by using rhetorical tactics, and spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories with the aim of reaching their goals in an environment influenced by advanced media and communication technologies. Therefore, creating a sense of community in the digital sphere, stimulation and manipulation of the emotions of people, creating a sense of community in the digital sphere, the portrayal of a charismatic leader, resorting to disinformation, distortion of the facts, and propagating conspiracy theories will be considered the employment of post-truth politics in the analysis in the third chapter.

CHAPTER 3

CASE: ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, also known as AOC, represents New York's 14th congressional district. Ocasio-Cortez was elected to Congress in 2018 at the age of 29, making her the youngest woman to do it in American history. AOC strives to be visible throughout the whole spectrum of accessible media and frequently makes headlines with sensational comments and appearances, while also placing a very high value on social media use during political campaigns and continuing to do so after being elected, highly benefiting from the potential of hybrid media systems⁶.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a left-wing populist figure in American politics. Her political movement heavily relies on the image of a charismatic leader speaking on behalf of "the people", and her rhetoric aims to stir emotions, create two antagonistic camps, "the people" and "the other", and involves "low" style (Ostiguy, 2009) which are characteristics of populist rhetoric. As a distinguishing feature of left-wing populism from right-wing populism, "the other" in AOC's rhetoric refers to the oligarchy rather than marginalized social groups, and the nature of "the people" is inclusive rather than exclusive (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014).

⁶ The hybrid media system is a term used by communications scholar Andrew Chadwick (2017) to emphasize how various media not only coexist but also function as a system that grows as a result of interactions between more traditional and more contemporary media logics. In this system, ties between organizations, groups, and people are intricate and constantly changing because of adaptability and dependency.

Creating a common identity with her constituency has served as the foundation of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's career. In order to establish herself as a legitimate representative of "the people," she mixes a personal identity distinguished by her activist background with a populist one characterized by far-left anti-elitist rhetoric (Rasulo, 2020). This is evident in her language that emphasizes community ties and solidarity against the establishment. Her argument is that "the people" need genuine political representation, and she presents herself as one of them by identifying with their issues and pursuits on a daily basis (Santamaría, 2021).

In this chapter, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's employment of post-truth politics, the framework of which is defined in the second chapter, during her 2020 New York District Election political campaign will be analyzed in selected cases, as well as her campaign website.

3.1 Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Campaign Website

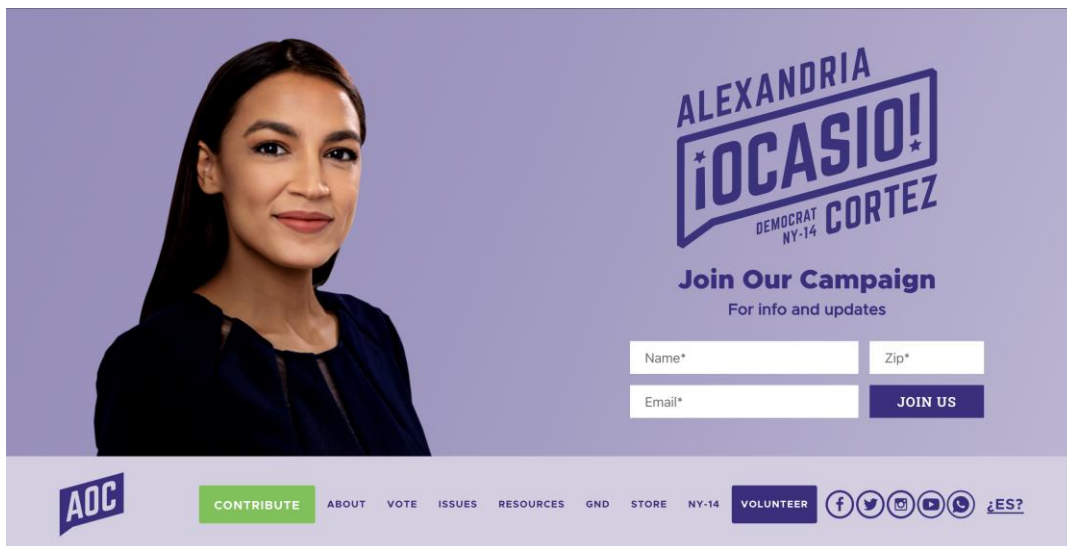


Figure 1
Homepage of AOC's website

When Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's campaign website shown in Figure 1 is examined, her social media links, through which she can construct direct communication channels with her audience, can be seen in the bottom right corner. Right next to her social media links, there is also a link to the Spanish version of her website so that she can appeal to the Hispanic majority of her campaign district, the Bronx and Queens.

Furthermore, as it can be seen in bottom left corner of Figure 1, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez embraces the acronym of her name i.e., AOC. Abbreviations have a prominent position in American slang language. They are colloquial and informal, and their primary purpose is to satisfy expressive or emotional needs and foster a feeling of community within a group (González, 1992). As abbreviations are colloquial and informal language, they can be associated with populism. The acronym AOC, meanwhile, might emphasize that Ocasio-Cortez is belonging to "the people", among which informal and colloquial language is commonly used.

Abbreviations are also popularly used in social networks, especially among younger generations and in *Twitter* due to its maximum character boundary. When a new abbreviation is created in social media, most people frequently imitate and use it, causing the abbreviation to be soon accepted by all spheres of society (Agustina, 2021). Therefore, Ocasio-Cortez's use of her name's acronym might contribute to her popularity, especially in digital networks.



Figure 2
WhatsApp invitation Banner on AOC's website

As can be seen in Figure 2, taken from her campaign website's main page, she reserved a special space for encouraging New York District 14 residents to join her *WhatsApp* group, which is not very common among political leaders. The social platform *WhatsApp* is especially prone to echo chambers effect we have mentioned in second chapter due to its group feature (Akbar, Panda, Kukreti, Meena, & Pal, 2020). *WhatsApp* is also used to communicate a staggering number of messages. Many *WhatsApp* users experience emotional tiredness as a result, which causes them to frequently transfer disinformation without verifying it (Banaji & Bhat, 2019). *WhatsApp* groups may also allow followers of the Cortez's movement communicate with each other, which increase the effect of fostering the sense of community (Maldonado, 2017) and reinforcing their beliefs via reiteration as a consequence of the echo chamber effect.

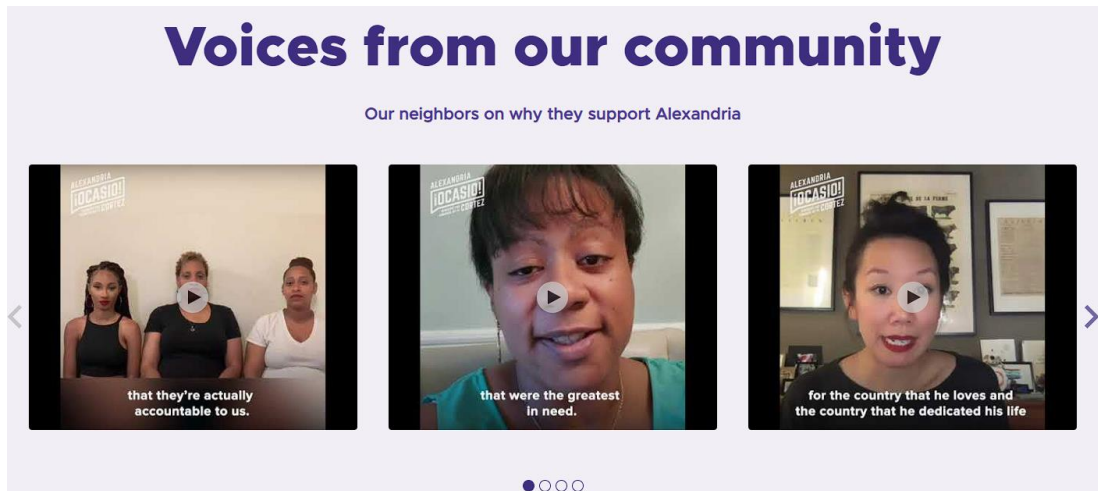


Figure 3
“Voices from our community” section on AOC’s website

In the section of the website shown in Figure 3, 12 video clips have been uploaded under the title “Voices from our community”, of various residents of the Bronx and Queens from different backgrounds, in which they are explaining why they are voting for Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and encouraging viewers to vote for her as well.

The section of the website seen in Figure 3 allows and facilitates the self-identification of viewers with the populist movement. It is a call for viewers to become part of the movement’s community, fostering their sense of belonging with the aim of appealing to their tribal instincts which influence their perception of reality and values (Haidt, 2012).

Meet Alexandria

Alexandria is fighting for a country that works for us all, not just a wealthy few.

Early Life

Alexandria was born in The Bronx to working class parents: her father was a small business owner and architect from the South Bronx, and her mother cleaned homes after moving to New York from Arecibo, Puerto Rico. As school violence and dropout rates in The Bronx rose in the early 90's, her parents put their savings together and purchased a modest home 30 miles north of the city in search of better schools for the family. As a result, much of Alexandria's adolescence was spent in transit between her tight-knit extended family in The Bronx and school in Yorktown Heights. It struck Alexandria as unfair, even then, how the opportunities available to children and their families were often based on their ZIP code.



Alexandria went on to study Economics and International Relations at Boston University. At the start of her sophomore year, Alexandria's father passed away suddenly from cancer at just 48 years old. Facing huge medical bills, the family risked foreclosure and her mother took another job driving a school bus. The unjust medical debt left a lasting impression on Alexandria, and she sought out an internship in the late Sen. Ted Kennedy's office. Upon graduating college, Alexandria came back to The Bronx and pursued work in education and community organizing: as an Educational Director for the National Hispanic Institute, she worked with promising high school youth to expand their skill-sets in community leadership and social enterprise; she also piloted projects to help improve literacy skills in young children and middle-schoolers. But as the economy floundered, Alexandria found herself working two jobs and 18-hour shifts in restaurants to help keep her family afloat, while balancing student loan and insurance payments.



Figure 4

AOC's background section on her website

A section of the website is reserved for the presentation of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's background, as seen in Figure 4. In this section, it is mentioned that Ocasio-Cortez is from a working-class, immigrant family, which can be considered disadvantaged. She was subjected to many difficulties during her youth as a result of being part of a disadvantaged group in society.

The section in Figure 4 is intended for the invention of the concept of "the people", which is necessary for populism according to Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism. For Laclau, the populist discourse divides society into two groups, "the people" and "the elite", and calls for the "underdog" to stand up against "those in power" (Laclau, 2005). The antagonism between "the people" and "the elite" is prominent in the text. In this part, Ocasio-Cortez posits herself as a member and a representative of the underdog social group "the people", members of which face many

social difficulties while, on the other hand, "the elite" group possess abundant opportunities. The disadvantages of the underdog "people" group stem mainly from economic reasons, a reflection of financial discontent that occurred after the 2008 financial crisis, a typical characteristic of left-wing populism.



Figure 5
"Fact checks" section on AOC's website

One of the tabs of her campaign website is titled "Fact Checks", as shown in Figure 5. This tab aims to refute derogatory accusations that appeared in social media against Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Yet, this section does not encapsulate all the accusations against AOC, but only a small fraction of them. Even though only a small fraction of the news is fact-checked and justifies AOC, it still reinforces the perception that AOC stands on the side of truth and innocence in a post-truth environment where distinguishing fake news is hard to achieve. In a post-truth environment, politicians have very strong motivation to demonstrate that they are victims of fake-news. This is because doing so highly increases their credibility, which has substantial importance in such an environment.

3.2 News Media Appearances

3.2.1 *Vanity Fair* Interview

As can be seen in Figure 6, AOC appeared on the cover page of the December 2020 issue of *Vanity Fair*, a popular fashion, culture, and politics magazine, with an expensive custom-made white suit by *Ali ette*, a New York-based fashion designer. An interview with AOC is included in the same issue of the magazine.



Figure 6
Vanity Fair magazine cover for the December 2020 issue

In fact, according to the Daily Mail’s article (Smith & McIntyre, 2020), the total price of the designer suits, earrings, and slingbacks that AOC showed up with in the magazine amounts to more than \$14,000. According to the same article, AOC was gifted one of the suits, from a luxurious brand called Loewe, with a \$2,850 price tag, which was later denied by AOC’s spokeswoman. Many social media users and

republicans have criticized AOC's appearance in such expensive clothes, claiming that it contradicts socialist values, which she claims to be defender of.

Under one of the photos appearing in *Vanity Fair's* interview with AOC, posing while wearing an expensive dress and earrings, are situated AOC's words: "Dressing the part has been an unexpected struggle, but it's also a way to connect with constituents" (Ocasio-Cortez, 2020).



Figure 7

AOC's Twitter response to the accusations regarding her appearance on Vanity Fair's cover

AOC defended herself in her tweet, demonstrated in Figure 7, regarding the topic. In her tweet, AOC uses the word “appearance” and draws attention to her appearance instead of her clothes. By doing so, she implies that the critics intend to criticize her appearance, not her clothes, and diminishes the significance of the price of the clothes she wore in the magazine. The criticism came in the tweet's subtext, not because the clothes were expensive, but because republicans were envious of how good she looked in them. By doing so, she personalizes the criticism in order to add an emotional context, deflecting it from its true target.

In her tweet, AOC also mentions that the clothes she wore in the magazine were borrowed. The main reason for the criticisms, however, was her consent to appear in such clothes; whether the clothes were borrowed or her own is irrelevant in addressing the criticisms. On many occasions, AOC mentions that she comes from a working-class background and that the capitalist system is unfair against disadvantaged social groups, which she claims to be representative of. Contradictorily, fashion is considered one of the most hyper-capitalist⁷ businesses and is strongly related to consumerism. Elizabeth Wilson referred to fashion as “the child of capitalism” (Wilson, 2003, p. 13). AOC’s preference to appear with such expensive fashion goods that symbolize high-class social groups approves and praises the capitalist system implicitly.

Her tweet also implies that the criticisms were only made by Republicans. On the other hand, she degrades Republicans by implying that they are racist, envious, get mad frequently, do not know how to look good, and also gives them advice. She first implicitly labels critics as Republicans and then attacks their credibility by degrading them so that they are not to be taken seriously. Her words, which contain popular and coarse language, also reflect the “low style” (Ostiguy, 2009) of populism as Pierre Ostiguy conceptualized.

Populist rhetoric is commonly depicted as being extremely emotive and intended to elicit affective reactions (Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2022). In the article in *Vanity Fair*, AOC frequently mentions that she was subjected to many death threats in her past, her past as a bartender, and the difficulties she and her family faced as she was growing up, inspiring compassion and admiration in readers.

⁷ Hypercapitalism is a term used to describe a relatively recent type of capitalistic social organization, characterized by the intensity and speed of global flows, which incorporate the exchange of material as well as immaterial products, people, and information.

3.2.2 Twitch Among Us Stream

On October 19, 2020, AOC posted the tweet demonstrated in Figure 8 to announce her *Twitch* live stream to play the game titled “*Among Us*”.



Figure 8

AOC's Twitter invitation to play Among Us

On October 20, 2020, AOC initiated her first stream on *Twitch*, a live streaming platform for mainly gamers where users have the option to watch others play games, chat with other viewers, or broadcast their own gameplay live, to encourage voters to vote in the November 3 election during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the stream, as can be seen in Figure 9, AOC played an online video game called “*Among Us*”⁸ during the stream, which was especially popular during the COVID-19 lockdowns, with 12 popular streamers, some of whom had 5 million followers on the platform. The fact that *Among Us* includes a voting system, which is a key element of the game, allowed AOC to frequently remind viewers to vote early. The livestream attracted more than 400,000 viewers, and her *Twitch* account reached more than 250,000 followers ahead of the stream. Her stream became the fifth-most-

⁸ Up to 10 players can collaborate in *Among Us* to complete chores on a spacecraft. Three of those individuals have been given the job of the “Impostor,” which means they have a secret motivation to kill the rest of the team and obstruct the current mission. To win the game, either every impostor should be properly identified or only impostors should be left alive.

watched stream overall on the *Twitch* platform up until then, according to the gaming website Dexerto (Norton, 2020).



Figure 9
AOC during the voting on Among Us

By initiating the mentioned live stream, AOC used another social platform, *Twitch*, apart from *Twitter* and *Instagram*, as a political tool. The vast majority of *Twitch* users are between the ages of 16 and 34 (Clement, 2022). Many of the *Twitch* users are not eligible to vote, but those who are often do not vote. Young Americans are typically less likely than other age categories to vote (Davies & Fuchs, 2019). Playing a live stream game on the *Twitch* platform can allow her to reach such potential voters.

Since *Twitch* is mainly a gaming live stream platform, many viewers are gamers themselves. Therefore, AOC playing live on the platform allows viewers to emotionally identify with her and increase their sense of community, which plays an important role in populism. Unlike *Twitter* or *Instagram*, since *Twitch* is a live streaming platform, the viewers need to be present at the same time, which can be an

increasing factor in forming a sense of community. According to Maldonado (2017), the sense of being a community that is strengthened through direct engagement via social networks plays an important role in the success of populism. People's interaction with one another and with the leader strengthens their bonds and improves their perception, according to Maldonado. Through the Twitch stream, she is also able to reach more than 400,000 people and directly communicate her political message without any restriction.

3.2.3 *YouTube Primary Election Video*

On June 18, 2020, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez uploaded her primary election promotion video, titled “*A Better World is Possible*”, to *YouTube* platform. At the start of the video, as shown in Figure 10, AOC mentions that New York is facing three ongoing crises: the health crisis with COVID-19, the economic crisis, and the crisis of racism in law enforcement.



Figure 10
AOC during describing crises on her YouTube campaign video

As mentioned in Chapter 2 of our research, the perception of a crisis is fundamental for populism to flourish. AOC’s specifications of crises, such as the

economic crisis and the crisis of racism, are particular characteristics of left-wing populism, in distinction to right-wing populism. Her drawing attention to racism is a demonstration of left-wing populism’s intention to expand and deepen democracy, while her mentioning of the economic crisis shows left-wing populism’s anger towards the neoliberal system, which is incompatible with democracy (Streeck, 2017). Later in the video, she says the sentence, “But what if these broken systems weren’t built to last in the first place?” which also indicate dissatisfaction with the current neoliberal order.

In the video, she presents herself as a solution to the mentioned systemic problems. She says that people are gathering around a movement that has never been seen before to build a better world. The video then shows AOC’s followers, one of whom has AOC’s campaign logo printed on her shirt, packing groceries for people in need during that time. The video then continues with AOC distributing groceries to the people, as can be seen in Figure 11.



Figure 11
AOC during delivering groceries on her YouTube campaign video

AOC’s *YouTube* video for her campaign includes portrayal of a charismatic leader who is defending “the people” against crises and helping them by distributing

provisions. On the other hand, AOC mentions that “people are coming together in an unprecedented movement”, appealing to the tribal instincts of people who desire to belong to a community. Followers of AOC’s political movement are shown in the video, emphasizing the sense of community.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

In recent years, the rise of populism has become increasingly prominent in global politics. While there are other economic and social conditions that have contributed to the emergence of the populist upheaval, populist politics are also facilitated by trends in public communication, particularly the dissolution of the mass media system of the twentieth century and the formation of fragmented media spheres through social media and digital networks. Social media and digital networks allowed populist leaders to overpass the filters of the traditional media which could thwart the emotive elements of populist discourse and establish direct communication channels with their followers.

The nature of social media in the modern age benefits populist leaders who rely on emotional rhetoric, since social media facilitates communication based on emotions (Manucci, 2017). The instantaneous flow of information through social media also has had an impact on people's decision-making processes, increasing the importance of emotions over facts in the process, leading to the emergence of the post-truth condition.

The post-truth condition, by mitigating the significance of the facts in the decision-making process, makes the creation of a false perception of the world much easier, benefiting populist leaders by allowing them to distort facts and manipulate the emotions of audiences using digital networks and social media. In this sense, the rise

of populist politics is a symptom of post-truth communication becoming a distinctive aspect of modern politics. Populism as a form of post-truth politics prospers with the state of public communication today.

This study comprises in-depth analysis of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's employment of post-truth politics during her 2020 U.S. Congressional District Elections campaign in selected cases and as well as her website in order to answer the research question of how she employed post-truth politics as a left-wing populist figure.

The framework of post-truth politics is determined in the second chapter. In our view, post-truth politics is a political communication strategy used by politicians in which facts play a much less significant role and largely rely on the stimulation of people's emotions, twisting the truth through the use of rhetorical strategies, and disseminating false information and conspiracy theories in order to achieve their political aims. Therefore, in order to analyze the data, fostering a sense of community online, stimulating and manipulating people's emotions, portraying a charismatic leader, using deception, distorting the truth, and spreading conspiracy theories are determined as indicators of the employment of post-truth politics. Qualitative critical discourse analysis and content analysis methodologies are employed for the analysis of the data.

The third chapter consists of analysis of the data. The analysis shows that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez resorted to post-truth politics during her 2020 U.S. Congressional District Elections campaign and on her campaign website. Her campaign website contains many elements that facilitate the self-identification of the constituents with her populist movement, foster a sense of community, and portray her as a charismatic leader. These are elements such as the acronym of her name, video

clips of her voters, and a bibliographic text that foster her charisma and indicate her pertinence to "the people". AOC's eagerness to establish direct communication channels with her constituents can also be deduced from her website.

Her media appearances analysis, on the other hand, has shown that by wearing such expensive clothes in a magazine, her actions contradict the values she claims to defend, indicating a post-truth condition in her political conduct. In her *Twitter* response to the critics, she uses deception rather than responding to the core reason why she was criticized. With her *Twitch* stream, she intends to reach and establish communication with large numbers of people by playing an online game live, allowing their self-identification with her and promoting a sense of community. In her *YouTube* election campaign video, on the other hand, she portrays herself as a leader and creates a sense of crisis, for which she presents herself as a solution, while also appealing to the people's sense of community.

The present research is limited by Alexandria Ocasio Cortez's campaign website and selected cases during her 2020 U.S. Congressional District Elections campaign. In order to understand her use of post-truth politics better, research on other events is required. On the other hand, left-wing populism and post-truth politics are understudied areas in literature. Further research on other left-wing populist leaders in the context of post-truth politics will better clarify how they employ post-truth politics differently from right-wing populist leaders.

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APPENDICES

A. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKÇE ÖZET

İletişim teknolojilerinde meydana gelen gelişmeler sonucu internet kullanımı ve sosyal medyanın son 20 yılda hızla yaygınlaşması toplumların siyasi ve kültürel hayatlarında derin etkileri olmuştur. Tarihte propaganda amacıyla medyanın etkili kullanımı siyasi liderlerin başarılarında önemli rol oynarken, son dönemde sosyal medyanın yaygınlaşması siyasetçilerin propagandalarını yürütme ve seçmenleri ile iletişim kurma biçimlerini değişikliğe uğratmıştır. Artık siyasetçilerin siyasi kampanyaları sırasında sosyal medyayı etkili kullanmaları vazgeçilmez bir öneme sahiptir. Günümüzde, siyasi partilerin siyasi iletişim yöntemleri büyük çoğunlukla sosyal medyaya dayanmaktadır (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Sosyal medya, siyasetçilerin destekçileri ile direkt olarak etkileşime geçebilmeleri ve haber muhabirlerini atlatabilmelerine imkân sağlayarak başarı şanslarını artırmaktadır (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013).

Sosyal medyanın bir diğer etkisi de insanların karar verme sürecinde duyguların öneminin artması, olguların öneminin ise azalması olmuştur. Bu durum literatürde post-truth çağının sonucu olarak kabul edilmektedir. Post-truth kelimesi, 2016 yılında Donald J. Trump'ın Amerika Birleşik Devletleri başkanı olmasıyla popülerlik kazanmış, Trump'ın zaferi büyük oranda post-truth çağının bir sonucu olarak yorumlanmıştır. Öyle ki, “post-truth” kelimesi 2016 yılında Oxford Languages tarafından yılın kelimesi olarak seçilmiş ve “nesnel olguların kamuoyu algısını

şekillendirmede duygulardan ve kişisel inançtan daha az etkili olduğu durumlarla ilgili veya bu durumları işaret eden” şeklinde tanımlanmıştır (Oxford Languages, 2016). Post-truth durumunun meydana gelmesi sosyal medyanın yaygınlaşmasıyla yakından ilgilidir çünkü sosyal medya halk diline yakın, resmi olmayan ve mantıktan çok duygulara dayanan bir iletişimi teşvik etmektedir (Manucci, 2017).

Bir diğer yandan, sosyal medyanın siyasi kampanya amacıyla kullanımının yaygınlaşması dünya siyasetinde popülist liderlerin diğer eski tarzda siyasi aktörlere kıyasla öne çıkmasına sebep olmaktadır. Bunun sebebi, popülist söylemlerin basit içeriği ve duygusal niteliğinin çevrimiçi iletişimin mantığına daha uygun olmasıdır (Manucci, 2017). Popülist liderler artık sosyal medya aracılığıyla seçmenleri ile direkt olarak iletişim kurabilmekte ve popülizm için önemli olan topluluk hissini oluşturabilmektedirler. Ayrıca, geleneksel medyaya karşı öfkelerini ifade ederken aynı zamanda mesajlarını geleneksel medyanın filtreleri olmadan doğrudan yayabilmekte, bu durum mesajlarının inanılabilirliğini artırmaktadır (Manucci, 2017). Popülist liderlerin sosyal medya aracılığıyla toplum ile doğrudan iletişime geçebilmeleri aynı zamanda onların 2016 Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve 2018 Brezilya Başkanlık Seçimlerinde olduğu gibi toplumu yanıltıcı yöntemlere başvurmalarının da önünü açmaktadır (Prior, 2021).

Bu bağlamda, sosyal medya, post-truth durum ve popülizm birbiriyle bağlantılıdır. Sosyal medya popülist söylemin yayılımını ve etkisini güçlendirirken aynı zamanda post-truth durumun ortaya çıkmasına da sebep olmuştur. Ortaya çıkan post-truth durum, duyguların kitlelerin karar verme süreçlerinde oynadığı rolün önemini artırmış, duygusal bir zemini olan popülizmin öne çıkmasına yol açmıştır. Bu sebeple, post-truth çağının ortaya çıkışı ile dünyada popülizmin yeniden yükselişi aynı döneme denk gelmektedir. Popülizm nesnel gerçeklerden çok duygulara hitap

ettiğinden, post-truth durum popülizmin yükselmesi için uygun zemini yaratır (Manucci, 2017).

Post-truth durum doğası gereği popülizmi öne çıkarırken, diğer yandan da post-truth siyaset ve iletişimin de önünü açmıştır. Dünyanın birçok bölgesindeki popülist liderler nesnel olguların önemini yitirdiği bir ortamın sunduğu imkanların farkına varmış, buna uygun duyguları önceleyen post-truth iletişim stratejilerini benimsemişlerdir. Post-truth siyaset kavramı genellikle eski Amerika Birleşik Devletleri başkanı Donald Trump ve eski Brezilya devlet başkanı Jair Bolsonaro gibi sağ popülist liderler ile bağdaştırılmış, post-truth siyaset sol popülist siyasete yansımaları genellikle göz ardı edilmiştir. Bu tez literatürdeki bu boşluğu doldurmada katkı sağlamaktadır. Tezde post-truth siyaset bir iletişim stratejisi olarak kabul edildiğinden, post-truth siyaset ve post-truth iletişim kavramları aynı bağlamda kullanılmıştır. Öte yandan, post-truth siyasetin içerikleri manipülasyon ve dezenformasyon yöntemlerine başvurmak, olgusal gerçekleri çarpıtmak, dijital ortamda topluluk hissi taratmak, karizmatik bir lider algısının oluşturmak, dijital ortamda toplulukların duygularının istismar edilmesi ve komplo teorileri yaymak olarak belirlenmiştir.

Tezde post-truth siyasetin sol popülizme yansımalarını araştırmak için Amerika Birleşik Devletleri siyasetinde demokrat parti üyesi sol popülist bir aktör olan Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez seçilmiştir. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez 2018 yılının kasım ayında gerçekleşen ara seçimlerde rakibi cumhuriyetçi Anthony Pappas'a karşı büyük bir farkla kazanarak Amerika Birleşik Devletleri Temsilciler Meclisi'ne New York 14. Bölge'den seçilmiştir ve Amerika Birleşik Devletleri tarihinin en genç kongre üyesi olmuştur. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez'in sol popülist, genç ve latin kökenli siyasi bir şahıs olması, yaptığı açıklamalar ve hareketlerle medyada sık sık yer alması, ayrıca

sosyal medyayı etkili ve sıkça kullanması sebebiyle tez araştırması için uygun olduğu kabul edilmiştir. Araştırmada tezin yazıldığı dönemde en son kampanyası olması ve üzerine yeterince araştırma olmaması sebebiyle Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez'in 2020 yılında gerçekleştirdiği New York 14. bölge seçim kampanyası seçilmiştir. Tezin amacı Alexandria Ocasio Cortez'in 2020 yılında gerçekleşen New York 14. bölge seçim siyasi kampanyasında ve kampanya internet sitesinde post-truth siyaset ve iletişim stratejileri uyguladı araştırma sorusuna cevap vermektir.

Dünyada popülizmin yükselişi sadece sağ popülizmi değil, sol popülizmi de kapsamaktadır. Sol popülizme destek özellikle genç nesiller arasında artmaktadır (Fukuoka, 2020). Bu tez, dünyada popülizmin yeniden canlanmasının ardındaki faktör olarak dijital medya ile değişen siyasal iletişim yöntemlerine ışık tutmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, popülist liderlerin post-truth çağında sosyal medya aracılığıyla popülist söylemi oluşturmalarına ilişkin veri sunmaktadır.

Bu araştırma, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez'in sosyal medya paylaşımlarındaki içeriği, 2020 New York Bölge Seçimi kampanyası sırasında kendisi hakkında çıkan haberleri ve seçim kampanyası web sitesini, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tarafından hakikat sonrası politikaların nasıl uygulandığını anlamak amacıyla analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amacı gerçekleştirirken ilgili veriyi analiz için niteliksel bir yaklaşım benimsenmiş, eleştirel söylem analizi ve niteliksel içerik analizi metodolojisi uygulanmıştır. Günümüzde medya kullanımının büyük çoğunluğu çevrimiçi platformlarda gerçekleştiğinden, araştırma çevrimiçi arama motorları ve sosyal medya kullanılarak yürütülmüştür. Araştırmanın kapsamını sınırlandırmak için, Ağustos 2020 ve Şubat 2021 arası dönemde Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez hakkında en popüler çevrimiçi makaleler, onun *Twitter* ve *YouTube* paylaşımları ile birlikte siyasi kampanya web sitesi analiz için seçilmiştir.

Cynthia Hardy, Bill Harley ve Nelson Phillips'e göre söylem analizi ve içerik analizi, sosyal gerçekliğin araştırılmasında tamamlayıcı ve hatta karşılıklı olarak yararlı olarak kabul edilmektedir. Söylem analizi, metin ve bağlam arasındaki ilişkiye odaklanırken, içerik analizi, bağlamından koparılmış metne odaklanmaktadır (Hardy, Phillips, & Harley, 2004).

Söylem analizi, cümle ve kelimelerin oluşumunun sosyal koşullara nasıl ait olduğunun bilimsel analizini içeren dilbilimin bir alt bölümüdür. Toplumsal olarak üretilen kavram ve fikirlerin dünyada nasıl oluştuğunu ve sürdürüldüğünü araştırır ve bunların üretim süreçlerini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır (Hardy, Phillips, & Harley, 2004). Söylem analizi ile eleştirel söylem analizi arasındaki temel fark, eleştirel söylem analizinin esas olarak problem odaklı, çok disiplinli yaklaşımıdır. Bu nedenle, eleştirel söylem analizi, kendi başına bir dil birimini incelemekle değil, doğası gereği karmaşık olan ve çeşitli disiplinlerin ve metodolojilerin kullanılmasını gerektiren sosyal olguları araştırmakla ilgilenmektedir (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Bu araştırmadaki eleştirel söylem analizi, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez'in sosyal medyadaki söylemindeki post-truth unsurları analiz etmeye ve ortaya çıkarmaya olanak sağlamaktadır.

Öte yandan, içerik analizi metinlerden (veya diğer anlamlı kaynaklardan) kullanım bağlamları hakkında geçerli ve tekrarlanabilir çıkarımlar yapmak için bir araştırma tekniğidir (Krippendorff, 2004). İçerik analizi, belirli olgular hakkındaki kavrayışımızı derinleştirmek için amacıyla kullanılmaktadır. İçerik analizi metinsel materyalle sınırlı değildir ve resimler, sesler, semboller ve işaretler gibi diğer ilgili kaynaklar da dahil edilebilir.

Dünya çapında yükselen popülizm, araştırmacıları popülizmin olası nedenleriyle ilgili araştırmalar yapmaya yöneltmiştir. Popülizm üzerine yapılan

arařtırmalara büyük ölçüde siyaset teorisi ve siyaset çalıřmaları hâkim olurken, olgunun iletiřim yönü genellikle ana arařtırmanın dıřında görülüyor. Bu nedenle, popülizmin yükseliřindeki temel işlevine rağmen, popülist iletiřim üzerine arařtırmalar çok ileri seviyede değildir (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017). Donald Trump'ın 2016'da Amerika Birleřik Devletleri'nde gerçekteřen başkanlık seçimlerindeki zaferi büyük ölçüde post-truth olgusuna atfedildiğinden, bu zafer akademik ilginin alana kayması için bir kilometre tařı teřkil etmektedir.

Silvio Waisbord popülizm ile post-truth iliřkisini arařtıran önemli teorisyenlerden biridir. Waisbord (2018), popülist siyasetin yeniden diriliřinin, post-truth iletiřimin günümüz siyasetinin kendine özgü bir bileřeni olarak yerleřmesinin bir sonucu olduđunu savunmaktadır. Aynı zamanda, popülist siyasetin anti-elitist özelliğinin, uzmanlar ve bilim adamları gibi seçkinler tarafından belirlenen gerçeklere karşı çıkararak kendini gösterdiđini belirtmektedir. Waisbord'a göre post-truth olgusu, gerçeğin söylenmesi ve gerçekliğin tasviri üzerine uzlařma için gerekli olan kamusal söylemin kurumsal çerçevesindeki deđiřikliđi ifade etmektedir. Gerçeğin anlatımı gerçeğin nasıl kavranacađına dair kamuoyunun uzlařmış olduđu ortak normları ve fikirleri gerektirmektedir. Bu fikir birliđi gerçeklik hakkındaki iddiaların yetkili ve geçerli kabul edilmesinin temelini oluřturmaktadır.

Waisbord, post-truth iletiřimin, gerçeđi dođrulanabilir önermeler olarak belirlemeyi sađlayan insanların normlar ve amaçlara iliřkin uzlařıya varmaları için kamusal alanda kořulların eksikliđini ortaya çıkardığına iřaret eder. Bu kořulların - gerçeđi belirlemek için yargılar ve normlar üzerinde fikir birliđi- daha önce de var olmamıř olabileceđini ve gerçeklerden her zaman řüphelenildiđini kabul ederken, geçmiřten farklı olarak artık rasyonel, gerçeklere dayalı, gerçeklik hakkındaki bilimsel önermelerin tartıřmasız dođru ve geçerli olarak iddia etmenin çok daha zor olduđunu

vurguluyor. Bu nedenle, post-truth iletişimin resmî kurumlar tarafından yaratılan gerçeklik anlatısının tek ve rasyonel kabul eden kişiler tarafından gerçekliğin sınırsız bir şekilde tartışmalı, esrarengiz, parçalara bölünmüş ve kısa ömürlü olduğunun farkına varılması olarak olduğunu söylemektedir. Bu anlamda post-truth, toplumsal gerçeklik bağının dünya hakkında yapılan önermelerin öznel ve kısmi olduğunu ifade eder, bu da özneliğin aşılabilir olduğunu ve farklı toplumların aynı normları ve değerleri paylaşmadığını varsaydığı için gerçeklik olasılığını reddeder.

Popülizm ve post-truth iletişimin nasıl ilişkili olduğuna ilişkin olarak Waisbord (2018), popülizmin demokratik bir toplumda ortak bir bakış açısı olarak gerçeğin olasılığını reddettiğini, bağlam oluşturmak ve siyaseti ortaya çıkarmak için anlatıların gerekliliğini güçlü bir şekilde kabul ettiğini söyler. Popülizm için, halkın ve elitlerin kendi doğruları vardır ve siyasetin çekişmeli doğası nedeniyle ortak doğrular mümkün değildir. Popülizm, doğrulanabilir gerçeklerin gerçeklik anlatısının bir parçası olmamakla birlikte bunların tarafsız, tartışılmaz, doğrulanabilecek üstün olgular olmadığını, aksine anlatıların tamamlayıcısı olduğunu kabul eder. Popülizm esas olarak iddiaları doğrulamak için gerçek olgulardan faydalanmakla ilgilenmez, bunun yerine herhangi bir olay hakkında ikili anlatının varlığının onaylanmasıyla ilgilenmektedir. Bu da mevcut anlatıları onaylayan olguların özenle seçilmesine ve uyumsuz olguların reddedilmesine olanak sunmaktadır. Waisbord, parçalanmış gerçeklik, ikili düşünce ve kesintili iletişim alanı olan post-truth iletişimin tam olarak popülist siyasetin bulunmak istediği yer olduğunu söylemektedir.

Popülistlerin ana akım medyanın seçkinlerin ya da müesses nizamın egemenliğinde olduğu dair inançları, onları siyasi iletişim ve haber kaynağı olarak sosyal medyayı ve dijital ağları kullanmaya zorlamaktadır. Sosyal medyanın doğrudan iletişimi sağlayan yapısı, popülizmin temel gerekliliklerinden biri olan karizmatik

popülist figürlerin takipçileriyle güçlü ve doğrudan iletişim kurmasına olanak sağlamakta, takipçilerinin hareketle özdeşleşmelerini güçlendirmektedir (Maldonado, 2017). Öte yandan, sosyal medyanın ana haber kaynağı olarak kullanılması, popülist hareketlerin takipçilerinin sosyal medyada dolaşan yalan haberlere ve komplo teorilerine daha fazla maruz kalmalarını sağlamaktadır. Sahte haberler ve komplo teorileri, popülizmin gerektirdiği toplumda karşıt iki grup olduğuna dair algıyı oluşturmaya yardımcı olmaktadır: gerçek “halk” ve düşmanlar. Popülist liderler ayrıca sıklıkla, bu algının yaratılmasını daha da artırmak ve takipçilerini ikna etmek için manipülasyon ve dezenformasyon stratejilerine başvurmaktadırlar.

Sosyal medya, öte yandan, popülizmin bir diğer temel özelliğini oluşturan popülist hareketlerin takipçileri arasında bir topluluk duygusunun oluşması için de gerekli koşulları sağlamaktadır. Popülist hareketlerin takipçilerinin dijital ortamda birbirleri ile olan etkileşimleri hareketle olan bağlarını kuvvetlendirmekte ve fikirlerini daha da pekiştirmektedir. Bu aynı zamanda dijital ağlarda kullanıcıları zaten var olan inançlarını destekleyen içeriklere maruz bırakan “yankı odası” etkisinin de bir sonucudur. Yankı odası etkisi, popülizmin yaratmayı ve yararlanmayı amaçladığı toplum içindeki kutuplaşmayı artırmaktadır.

İnternet sayesinde çeşitli siyasi bakış açılarını yaratma, yayma ve bunlara erişim sağlama maliyeti büyük ölçüde azalmış, bu da vatandaşlara sunulan bilgi miktarının ve haber kaynakları seçeneklerinin artmasına neden olmuştur. Dahası, çok daha fazla seçenek sayısı olması nedeniyle, insanlar yalnızca önceden var olan görüşlerini destekleyen bilgileri tüketmeye karar verebilmektedirler (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). Öyle ki, kontrollü araştırmalarda katılımcıların sıklıkla kendi siyasi görüşlerini paylaşan yayınlardan haber almayı seçtiğini gösteren çeşitli destekleyici araştırmalar vardır (Garrett, 2009; Iyengar & Kyu, 2009; Munson & Resnick, 2010).

Tezin ikinci bölümü popülizm kavramının irdelenmesi ile başlamaktadır. Popülizm, özellikle 2008 finansal krizinden sonra son zamanlarda öne çıkan bir siyasi fenomen haline gelmiştir. Popülizme yönelik akademik ilginin popülist liderlerin özellikle Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve Avrupa'daki son zaferleriyle arttığı gözlemlenmektedir (Hadiz & Chryssogelos, 2017). Bazılarına göre popülizm terimi sağ popülizmi ima etmekte, sağ popülizm ile özdeşleşen özelliklerin popülizmin genel özellikleri olduğu kabul edilmektedir. Her ne kadar sağ popülizm şu anda siyasete hâkim olsa da popülizm tüm siyasi yelpazelerde var olabilmekte ve sıklıkla solcu anlatılarda da kendini göstermektedir (Oswald, Schäfer, & Broda, 2022).

Araştırmacıların popülizme yönelik çeşitli yaklaşımları bulunmaktayken, çoğu araştırmacı, popülizmlerin "seçkinler" ve "halk" arasındaki bir ikiliği temsil ettiği konusunda hemfikirdir. "Halk" adına konuşma ve onu temsil etme iddiasındaki popülistlerin temel argümanı bu ikiliktir. Popülizm alanında önemli bir teorisyen olan Ernesto Laclau'ya (2005) göre "halk" kavramı, popülist hareket tarafından siyasi bir özne olarak icat edilmekte, "halk" onu iktidardan uzak tutan güçlere karşı bir muhalefet olarak belirmektedir.

Popülist zihniyete göre "seçkinler" ve "halk" arasındaki ikilemde, seçkinler, halkı kültürel veya ekonomik olarak güçsüz bırakırken, seçkinlerin, sosyal ve politik hayatın karmaşıklığı hakkında bilgi sahibi olmadıkları varsayımı üzerinden genel halkı hor gördüklerine inanılmaktadır (Oswald, Schäfer, & Broda, 2022). Bu bağlamda popülizm sıradan insanların sağduyusuna güvenilmesi gerektiğini ima etmektedir (Galston, Hunter, & Owen, 2018).

Karizmatik lider figürü, popülizmin bir başka temel özelliğidir. Kitlelerin hitap etmenin önemli yöntemlerinden biri olmasından dolayı popülist lider genellikle zor ve hızlı kararlar almaktan korkmayan, sözden çok icraat insanı olarak tasvir edilmektedir

(Mudde & Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2017). Kitlelerin harekete geçirilmesi karizmatik liderin çekiciliğine bağlıdır. Popülist hareketin liderleri, bütünleşmiş bir halkın arzularını, iradesini ve emellerini yansıttıkları ve somutlaştırdıkları iddiasında bulunmaktadır ve halkın vücut bulmuş hali olduğu iddiasına katılmayan herkesi, ulusun, liderin ve halkın düşmanı olarak etiketlemektedirler (de la Torre, 2020).

Bu tezde popülizme yönelik stilistik yaklaşım benimsenmiştir. Popülizme stilistik yaklaşıma göre popülizm bir siyaset yapma biçimi olarak kabul edildiğinden, bu yaklaşıma göre popülizm hem sol hem de sağ siyasetinin bir özelliği olabileceğini ve kendisini farklı ortamlar ve kurumsal yapılarla gösterebileceğini kabul etmektedir. Metinler, konuşmalar, kamusal söylem gibi unsurlar stilistik yaklaşım için analiz birimi olarak kabul edilebildiğinden bu tezde post-truth unsurların analizi için uygun bulunmaktadır.

Popülizme stilistik yaklaşım, popülist liderlerin özellikle “asıl halk” ile düşmanları arasında kutuplaşma yaratan söylemsel faktörler olmak üzere iletişimsel yöntemlerine odaklanmaktadır (Canovan M. , 1999). Kriz, bozulma veya tehdit hissi, popülizm için katalizör görevi görmektedir (Taggart, *Populism*, 2000). Bu nedenle, popülist liderlerin retorikçi genellikle toplumda düzeltilmesi gereken bir kriz durumu fikrine dayanmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, popülist söylem, günlük hayata ait basit bir dil kullanarak sıradan halk ve seçkinler ya da göçmenler gibi diğer sosyal gruplar arasındaki çatışmaya hitap eden söylemsel bir repertuar tarafından sergilenmektedir.

Tezin ikinci bölümünün ikinci alt başlığında post-truth kavramı ele alınmıştır. Post-truth terimi ilk olarak 1992'de Steve Tesich tarafından yazılan "A Government of Lies" başlıklı *Nation* dergisi makalesinde yer almıştır (Tesich, 1992). Tesich post-truth'u “Watergate Sendromu” adını verdiği bir sorun üzerinden açıklamaktadır ve

yazısında Amerikan toplumunun demokrasi pahasına post-truth bir toplumda yaşamayı bilinçli olarak seçtiğini iddia etmektedir. Bu bağlamda, insanların artık gerçekleri öğrenmek istemediklerini ve artık gerçekleri kötü haberlerle bağdaştırmaya başladıklarını belirtmektedir ve toplumun gerçeklerin önemi olmadığı post-truth bir dünyaya ilerlemesini durdurmak amacıyla toplumu eleştirmektedir.

Öte yandan Peter Dahlgren (2018) farklı bir bakış açısıyla, post-truth kavramını, duygusal tepkinin mantıklı analiz ve olgusal kanıttan önce geldiği yeni bir epistemik rejim olarak ele almaktadır. Dahlgren bireylerin duymak istediklerinin algoritmik analizleri şeffaflık ve doğruluğun yerini aldığı söylemektedir. Bu yeni rejimde "halk" olarak anılan "demokratik kitleler" de sahneye dahil olmuş ve artık sadece duymak istediklerini duymaktadır. Dahlgren'e göre bu eğilim hem yeni koşullara hem de tamamen yeni bir rejime yol açan siyasi yankı odalarını oluşmasına zemin hazırlayan dijital medyanın ortaya çıkışıyla bağlantılıdır.

Tezin ikinci bölümünde post-truth ile sosyal medya ilişkisine de değinilmiştir. Sosyal medya kullanımının yaygınlaşması post-truth çağın ortaya çıkmasında en belirgin etkidir. Post-truth siyaset ve iletişim en çok sosyal medya aracılığıyla gerçekleşmekte olduğundan dolayı post-truth çağın yansımalarının en net olarak sosyal medya ve dijital mecralarda gözlemlenebilmektedir.

Demokratik sistemlerde demokrasinin dördüncü ayağı olarak kabul edilen medya, kamuoyunun oluşumunda ve siyasetin gidişatında her zaman önemli bir faktör olmuştur. Sosyal medyanın büyük ölçekte yaygınlaşmasıyla birlikte kamuya açık haber paylaşımı yeni bir boyut kazanmıştır. Artık kitlelerin kendi içeriğini sosyal medya platformlarında paylaşabilir hale gelmesi medyanın siyasetteki rolü ve dinamikleri değiştirmiştir. Gerçeklere dayanmayan bilginin kesintisiz dolaşımı, post-truth çağına elverişli bir ortam yaratmaktadır. Öte yandan sosyal medyanın

yaygınlaşması aynı zamanda politikacılara takipçileriyle yeni ve doğrudan bir iletişim yolu sunarak onlarla duygusal bağ kurmayı kolaylaştırmaktadır. Sosyal medyanın aracısız doğası, politikacılar tarafından manipülasyon ve dezenformasyon stratejilerinin kullanılmasına da imkân vermiştir.

Post-truth çağı ile sosyal medya ilişkisi bağlamında yankı odaları ve filtre balonu kavramları göze çarpmaktadır. Yankı odası, insanların sosyal ağları ve diğer bilgi kaynaklarını önceden var olan önyargılarını doğrulayacak ve onları benzer düşünen diğerleriyle bağlantı kuracak şekilde kullanmalarına neden olan bir doğrulama önyargısına sahip olduğu kavramdır (Nickerson, 1998; Sunstein C. R., 2017). Bu önyargı, sınırlı perspektiflere ve tek taraflı siyasi bilgiye sahip, benzer düşünen insanlardan oluşan tek tip grupların ortaya çıkmasına neden olmaktadır (Sunstein C. R., 2017).

Öte yandan filtre balonu kavramı sosyal medya kullanıcılarının daha önce paylaştığı, beğendiği veya yorum yaptığı içeriğin daha fazlasını görüntülemek için algoritmaların oluşturulmasını ifade etmektedir (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Filtre balonları, algoritmaların kullanıcıların kabul edilebilir bulması muhtemel içeriği otomatik olarak önererek ideolojik bölünmeyi sonuç olarak artırdıkları durumlardır (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016).

Tezin ikinci bölümünün üçüncü alt başlığında post-truth siyaset kavramına ilişkin tezin üçüncü bölümde yapılacak olan analizin çerçevesi belirlenmiştir. Medyayı ve siyaseti değiştiren karmaşık dinamikleri anlamak, yeni iletişim teknolojilerinin hızla yayılması nedeniyle giderek daha önemli hale gelmiştir. Yaşamakta olduğumuz yeni “hibrit medya sistemi” (Chadwick, 2017) çağında, politikacılar sosyal medya, bloglar, TV ve diğer platformlar aracılığıyla izleyicilerle doğrudan etkileşime geçebilmekteyken aynı zamanda kurumlara olan inanç istikrarlı bir şekilde

azalmaktadır. Öte yandan bu yeni hibrit ortamda dezenformasyon ve komplo teorileri dijital ağlarda neredeyse anında yayılmaktadır. Bu durumun olumsuz sonuçları, insanların sahip olduğu önyargılarıyla çelişen gerçekleri reddetmeye eğilimli olduğunu dikkate aldığımızda daha da artmaktadır (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

Sosyal medya platformları, kamu gündemlerini etkilemek, kamuoyunu şekillendirmek ve sosyal değişimi teşvik etmek için kullanılabilir (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2018). 2016 Amerika Birleşik Devletleri başkanlık seçimleri ve Birleşik Krallık'ın Avrupa Birliği'nden ayrılma oylamasını karakterize eden siyasi argümanlar, post-truth siyasetin öne çıkan örnekleri olarak kabul edilmektedir. Petros Iosifidis and Mark Wheeler'a (2018) göre post-truth siyaset çoğunlukla sahte haberlere, istatistiklerin uygunsuz kullanımına dayalıdır ve gerçeklerden çok duygulara hitap etmektedir.

Duyguların gerçek bilgilere ve somut, nesnel verilere baskın gelmesi, post-truth siyasetin en belirleyici özelliğidir. Post-truth siyasette dil, belirli duygusal tepkileri ortaya çıkarmak için kullanılmakta, bu amaçla belirli tutkulu, kışkırtıcı ve tartışmalı ifadeler seçilmektedir. Post-truth siyaset ile çevrimiçi duygusal olarak yüklü siyasi söylemin kasıtlı olarak yayılması ve siyasi tartışmalarda çıkar elde etmek amacıyla uydurma, çarpıtılmış bilgilerin paylaşılması yakından ilişkili kavramlar olmakla birlikte, bu tür siyasi iletişimin birincil amacı, gerçekleri değil, inanılabilir gerçeklik algıları yaymaktır (Salgado, 2018).

Bu tezde post-truth siyaset, siyasetçilerin gelişmiş medya ve iletişim teknolojilerinin etkisinde hedeflerine ulaşmak için uyguladığı, ağırlıklı olarak insanlarda duygu uyandırmaya, retorik taktikler kullanarak gerçekleri çarpıtmaya, dezenformasyon ve komplo teorileri yaymaya yönelik, gerçeklerin çok daha az öneminin olduğu bir siyasi iletişim stratejisi olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bu bağlamda

dijital alanda topluluk duygusu yaratmak, insanların duygularını harekete geçirmek ve manipüle etmek, dijital alanda topluluk duygusu yaratmak, karizmatik lider tasviri yaratmak, dezenformasyona başvurmak, gerçekleri çarpıtmak ve komplo teorileri yaymak tezin üçüncü bölümündeki analiz için post-truth siyaset uygulaması olarak belirlenmiştir.

Tezin üçüncü bölümü Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez'in 2020 seçim kampanyası ve kampanya web sitesi post-truth siyaset çerçevesinde analiz edilmiştir. Analiz, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez'in 2020 Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ara seçimleri kampanyası sırasında ve kampanya web sitesinde post-truth siyasete başvurduğunu göstermektedir. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez'in kampanya web sitesi, seçmenlerin kendi popülist hareketiyle özdeşleşmesini kolaylaştıran, topluluk hissiyatını geliştirmeyi amaçlayan ve onu karizmatik bir lider olarak tasvir eden birçok unsur içermektedir. Bunlar, adının kısaltmasını benimsemesi, seçmenlerinin video klipleri ve karizmasını besleyen ve "halk" ile olan ilişkisini gösteren bibliyografik metin gibi unsurlardır. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez'in seçmenleriyle doğrudan iletişim kanalları kurma konusundaki istekliliği, web sitesinden de anlaşılmaktadır.

Öte yandan, medya görünümleri analizi, bir dergide pahalı giysiler giyerek eylemlerinin savunduğunu iddia ettiği değerlerle çeliştiğini ve siyasi davranışında post-truth bir duruma işaret ettiğini göstermektedir. Eleştirmenlere olaya ilişkin verdiği *Twitter* yanıtında, eleştirilmesinin temel nedenine yanıt vermek yerine yanıltıcı retorik argümanlar kullanmaktadır. *Twitch* platformunda gerçekleştirdiği yayın ile, canlı olarak çevrimiçi bir oyun oynayarak çok sayıda insana ulaşmayı ve onlarla iletişim kurmayı, kendilerini onunla özdeşleştirmelerini sağlamayı ve bir topluluk duygusu geliştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. *YouTube* platformunda paylaştığı seçim kampanyası videosunda ise kendisini çözüm olarak sunduğu bir kriz algısı oluşturmayı

amaçlamakta ve kendini karizmatik bir lider olarak gösterirken, aynı zamanda insanların topluluk hissine de hitap etmektedir.

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