JD Vance: The Man, The Meme, The Bipartisan Paradox

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JD Vance is no longer just a politician – he has become a meme. His face, digitally warped and endlessly repurposed, has become a viral canvas for both critics and supporters. In an era where politics is experienced through pixels rather than policies, Vance has entered the same strange digital purgatory occupied by figures like Donald Trump, Elon Musk, Joe Biden, and Kamala Harris before him. But there's something different this time. Unlike the predictable partisan divisions that shaped previous political meme wars, Vance's memefication is more fluid, more contradictory, and ultimately more revealing about the current state of political culture.

What does it mean when a politician's identity is forged not in traditional media but through an avalanche of ironic, conflicting, and sometimes humiliating internet jokes? Vance's case is not simply a matter of online trolling but a cultural shift where political engagement is increasingly mediated through humour, absurdity, and digital manipulation. His transformation into a meme is not just a form of mockery but a reflection of the uneasy relationship between politics, technology, and voter detachment. The internet is no longer just where political discourse happens, but it is where political reality is created.

Vance's meme phenomenon is striking not just for its virality but for its bipartisan appeal. Typically, when politicians are ridiculed online, it follows a clear partisan logic: liberals mock conservatives, conservatives mock liberals and the memes serve as a form of digital warfare. But Vance's memefication doesn't fit neatly into this framework. His detractors on the left have predictably used memes to paint him as a bumbling, awkward, and insincere figure, however, what is more surprising is how many conservatives have participated in spreading these same memes, sometimes mockingly, sometimes with genuine appreciation. The memes themselves reflect this ideological contradiction. Some depict him as a cartoonish, chubby-faced baby, infantilising him in a way reminiscent of the memes that circulated about Trump's alleged cognitive decline. Others take the opposite approach, turning him into a hyper-masculine "Chad" figure, an ironic celebration of his perceived strength and loyalty to Trump.

The same meme can be used to both mock and endorse him, making it unclear whether Vance is the subject of ridicule or admiration. This ambiguity is part of what makes his memefication so significant. Unlike Trump, who was memed into both an authoritarian villain and an anti-establishment hero, or Biden, who oscillates between "Sleepy Joe" and "Dark Brandon", Vance's meme identity is more slippery. He is neither fully celebrated nor fully ridiculed. Instead, he is transformed into a malleable, ever-changing digital persona that defies clear political categorisation.

The rise of Vance's meme persona is not just an internet joke; it is a symptom of a deeper shift in how people engage with politics. In an era of widespread political disengagement, where trust in institutions is at an all-time low, memes offer an easy and accessible form of participation. Unlike voting, attending rallies, or even reading policy proposals, sharing a meme requires no effort but still provides a sense of involvement in the political process.

This trend is not new. We saw it with the rise of "Bernie Sanders in mittens", a meme that turned a moment of political irrelevance into viral gold. We saw it with "Dark MAGA" a movement that transformed Trump's post-presidency narrative into a digital rebellion. And we saw it with Kamala Harris, whose forced, exaggerated laugh became a shorthand for scepticism about her authenticity. In each of these cases, memes became a primary way for the public to engage with political figures, often reducing them to caricatures in the process. Yet, Elon Musk's declaration, "I am become meme" captures the essence of how digital culture reshapes public figures. Borrowing

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from the famous Oppenheimer quote, Musk's statement reflects a self-awareness of how both internet personalities and politicians are no longer just actors in the public sphere but are instead shaped, distorted, and endlessly repurposed by online communities.

What makes Vance's case different is that his memeification is happening before he has fully cemented his place in the national political consciousness. He is not a former president like Trump or a sitting one like Biden. He is not a high-profile vice president like Harris, or a tech billionaire like Musk. His memeification is happening in real-time, shaping his political identity before he has had the chance to define it himself. In this sense, his meme persona is not just a reaction to his political actions, but it is actively constructing his political image. His identity is no longer solely under his control but is dictated by the trends and flow of internet culture. Thus, understanding that to exist in the digital age is to be memeified, you need to embrace the chaos, rather than resist it, which becomes a political strategy in itself, as seen in Harris' campaign.

Vance's transformation into a meme is not just the result of grassroots internet culture but also the product of platform algorithms that thrive on engagement. Social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram prioritise content that generates high interaction, and memes, particularly those that provoke strong reactions, fit this model perfectly. The more people engage with a meme, the more it spreads. This creates a self-reinforcing loop in which Vance's image is continuously reshaped, distorted, and repurposed, ensuring that his digital persona remains in flux. This algorithmic process has played a crucial role in past political meme trends. The rapid spread of the "Ted Cruz is the Zodiac Killer" meme, for example, was fuelled by the same engagement-driven algorithms that are now amplifying Vance's face. Similarly, the transformation of Joe Biden's "Dark Brandon" meme from ironic mockery to a full-fledged Democratic marketing campaign was made possible by the viral mechanisms of social media.

But the Vance meme phenomenon is different in one key way: it lacks a clear message. For example, Trump's memes, whether positive or negative, were always about his larger-than-life persona. Vance, on the other hand, is caught in an ambiguous space where his memes do not neatly translate into a political identity. This lack of clarity is precisely what keeps his memefication alive. Because his image is so fluid, it can be endlessly reshaped, ensuring his continued presence in the digital consciousness.

The rise of JD Vance as a meme is not just about him but a broader transformation of political engagement in the digital age. When a politician's public identity is defined primarily through memes, it raises fundamental questions about the nature of political discourse itself. First, it makes political identity more unstable. In a traditional media landscape, politicians carefully craft their public image through speeches, interviews, and policy positions. In the meme-driven internet era, that control is lost. Vance's public persona is no longer solely shaped by what he says or does but shaped by an army of anonymous internet users who remix, distort, and repurpose his image in ways he cannot control.

Second, it complicates political critique. If the same meme can be used both to ridicule and to celebrate a politician, what does it actually mean? Memes blur the line between mockery and endorsement, making it harder to determine whether they are actually damaging or inadvertently reinforcing a politician's brand. Vance's case is particularly illustrative of this phenomenon, as his memes circulate widely on both the left and the right without a clear narrative emerging. Thirdly, memeification contributes to the trivialisation of politics. While memes can be a powerful tool for political engagement, they can also reduce complex issues to oversimplified jokes. Vance's memefication, while entertaining, risks turning him into a spectacle rather than a subject of serious political analysis. If voters primarily experience politics through memes, what happens to substantive discussions about policy, governance, and ideology?

Vance's case represents the culmination of a trend that has been building for years: the transformation of politics into a spectacle where engagement is measured not by votes or policy discussions but by clicks, shares, and digital distortions. As meme-driven politics continues to evolve, we are left with a political landscape where virality is as important as viability, and where a politician's fate may rest not in their speeches or policies, but in the hands of the internet's endless cycle of digital reinterpretation.

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Mihaela-Georgiana Mihăilescu is a PhD researcher at the University of Bath focused on internet politics, with a particular interest in political memes and the role of meme creators in shaping public discourse. Her work explores the intersection of digital culture and political engagement, uncovering how memes serve as tools for influence, narrative-building, and fostering online communities.