Political Identity Ownership: Symbolic Contests to Represent Members of the Public

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Abstract
This study develops the concept of identity ownership to explain how, in the course of electioneering, candidates perform their own identities to align with groups whose support they seek. We frame this from a communication perspective—media are increasingly central sites for constructing and conveying the identity of candidates and the groups of constituents they seek to represent. In developing this model, we seek to bring this identity-based framework more to the fore in communication research, as well as place communication at the center of studies of social identity. We argue that seeing political identities as dynamic and actively performed provides an opportunity to analyze communications based not only on their informational value but also on their identity value.

Keywords
elections, identity, political communication

On 14 July 2019, US president Donald Trump fired off a series of tweets directed at “the Squad,” four young progressive Democratic congresswomen of color. The president stated that it was

So interesting to see “Progressive” Democrat Congresswomen, who originally came from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe, the worst, most corrupt and inept anywhere in the world (if they even have a functioning government at all), now loudly . . . and viciously telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth, how our government is to be run. Why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came.\(^1\)

The president’s tweets came despite the fact that Minnesota congresswoman Ilhan Omar, New York City congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Detroit congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, and Massachusetts congresswoman Ayanna Pressley are all US citizens and all except Omar—a refugee from Somalia—were born in America. Subsequently, on 17 July, Trump took the stage at a Make America Great Again Rally in Greenville, North Carolina. Against the backdrop of nearly all White supporters, Trump condemned Omar for having anti-Israel and anti-Semitic views, after which a “send her back” chant ripped through the stadium. Condemnation of Trump’s tweets as racist came swiftly from Democrats, national pundits at legacy media organizations, and academics, who pointed out that telling people to “go back” to where they supposedly came from has long been a racist trope—it simultaneously questions a person’s origins, marks their difference, and establishes Whiteness as the norm. The president, however, doubled down, subsequently calling “this crowd” “communist” and stated that these congresswomen use “foul language” and espouse “racist hatred,” that “they hate our own Country,” and that “they are Anti-America.”

This 3-day episode reveals the many currents of identity that are central to contemporary American political life and the 2020 elections. They include implicit White racial appeals in elite rhetoric, the linking of racial identity to partisanship, and the drawing of racial and ethnic boundaries around legitimate political voice (Jardina, 2019). It also

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reveals the willing and enthusiastic embrace of the president and his rhetoric by partisans and backers of Trump.

In this short article, we synthesize various literatures in the fields of communication and political science to develop an analytical argument that elections are contests over what kind of person, and, by extension, what social groups, should lead the country (Smith, 2015). We frame this argument from a communication perspective: that political leaders and candidates use media to construct and convey their social identities, and therefore their political identities, and those of the groups of constituents they seek to represent, not just information about the policies they will pursue. We conceptualize this process as identity ownership, a complement to the well-documented idea of “issue ownership,” in which politicians align themselves with the issues their party is perceived as having unique competency to address (see Seeberg, 2017). Through campaign communications, candidates construct and perform prototypical group identities around partisan affiliations, racial and ethnic identities, genders, religious affiliations, and personal values and tastes. These performances simultaneously reinforce differentiation from out-groups marking each party as the “real” representatives of particular social groups (Sides et al., 2018).

Trump’s use of tweets and campaign rallies—echoed, amplified, contested, and condemned through multiple media platforms—to attack “the Squad” offers a particularly potent example of how identity ownership is performed during a presidential election cycle. Trump is signaling to American-born and Republican Whites that he is one of them, shares their values, and will represent them.

The Identity Basis of Political Life

The informational elements of democracy have long animated communication research. Scholars often study political communication through the lens of the Progressive Era ideal of the “information-based citizen” (Schudson, 1999), which provides a simultaneously normative and empirical understanding of democracy that is deeply embedded in public and academic thinking.

However, in recent years, some political scientists have advanced a new empirical understanding of democracy in primarily identity-based terms. This literature argues that perceived group membership comes prior to political attitudes and beliefs, and policy preferences. In Democracy for Realists, Achen and Bartels (2016) critique what they call the “folk theory” of American democracy wherein citizens seek out information about candidates and decide who best represents their policy preferences to make an informed vote choice. In contrast, their “group theory of democracy” places social identity and attachments at the core of democratic processes and conceptualizes partisanship as a meta-identity that contains and represents a number of different social groupings. For example, Liliana Mason (2018) demonstrates that the two main US political parties have come to represent distinctly different groups of people, what she calls “social sorting,” and citizens choose between them accordingly based on their own social identities:

Today, Democrats and Republicans have a lot more information about who their social and partisan enemies are, and have little reason to find common ground. They have become increasingly homogeneous parties, with Democrats now firmly aligned with identities such as liberal, secular, urban, low-income, Hispanic, and black. Republicans are now solidly conservative, middle-class or wealthy, rural, churchgoing, and white. These identities are increasingly aligned so that fewer identities affiliated with either party are also associated with the other side. (Mason, 2018, p. 26)

While the folk theory posits that people have stable and developed policy preferences, Achen and Bartels reveal how people bring their policy preferences in line with their understanding of what—particularly what groups—the parties stand for. It follows, then, that during the course of elections, candidates and parties seek to reinforce and ultimately mobilize these identities. As Green et al. (2002/2004) point out, over the course of an election, candidates frame politics in terms of a struggle between “us” and “them,” noting that when people reflect on their partisan attachments, they ask two questions: “What kinds of social groups come to mind when I think about Democrats, Republicans, and Independents? Which assemblage of groups (if any) best describes me?” (p. 8). As Achen and Bartels (2016) argue,

Political campaigns consist in large part of reminding voters of their partisan identities—“mobilizing” them to support their group at the polls. Formal communications by the groups and informal communication networks among group members also help citizens to understand how their identity groups connect to the candidates and parties. (p. 311)

From this perspective, the policy information that campaigns provide is secondary to how candidates and parties perform their partisanship and social identities for voters. Indeed, policy issues ranging from guns to abortion are actually identity issues in the sense of being linked to distinct social, and especially partisan, groups. Much of this emerging work builds from social identity theory, which details how social and cognitive processes and intergroup relations produce group formation and cohesion. As Turner and Tajfel (1979) argue, social identity hinges on

a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it. (p. 40)

According to social identity theory, individuals define themselves in relation to the groups to which they belong
(in-groups) and those that they do not (out-groups)—social categories people use to segment and classify social relations (Hornsey, 2008). Perceived group membership shapes self-concepts; people acquire norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes from the groups they perceive themselves to be members of (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). People understand and represent social groups as “prototypes” or “complex fuzzy sets of inter-related attributes (behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, customs, dress, and so forth) that capture similarities within groups and differences between groups” and tend to see others in terms of group categories rather than as individuals (a process labeled “depersonalization”; Jackson & Hogg, 2010, p. 750). Group prototypes “describe individual cognitive representations of group norms,” thus producing in-group normative beliefs and behaviors (Hogg & Reid, 2006, p. 11).

Importantly, according to the social identity literature, leaders make group identity salient in how they portray themselves. As Hogg (2004) argues about social identity and leadership more broadly,

In order to manage their prototypicality, leaders can talk up their own prototypicality and/or talk down aspects of their own behavior that are non-prototypical. They can identify deviants or marginal members in a manner that highlights their own prototypicality. . . . They can secure their own leadership position by viliifying contenders for leadership and casting [them] as non-prototypical. They can identify outgroups that are most favorable to their own prototypicality as relevant comparison groups—that is, they can manipulate the social-comparative frame and thus the prototype and their own prototypicality. They can engage in a discourse that raises or lowers group salience. For highly prototypical leaders, raising salience is advantageous because it provides them with the leadership benefits of high prototypicality. (p. 1247)

Social Identity Ownership in Political Communication

Building upon these social identity theories, we propose that much political communication can be seen as the performance of identity ownership. This notion of “ownership” draws from work in social identity literature (see Egan, 2013; Petrocik et al., 2003), which refers to the ways that voters perceive parties’ historical connections and unique competencies with regard to particular policy issues. Petrocik (1996) described issue ownership as “[a] reputation for policy and program interest, produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward problems, which leads voters to believe that one of the parties is more sincere and committed to do something” (p. 826) about issues like the economy, national security, abortion, or civil rights. To win elections, candidates strive to make elections turn on the issues their parties “own” by strategically making those issues salient for voters (see Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Egan, 2013; Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003).

We posit that candidates also engage in a communicative process of identity ownership. Candidates engage in communication that attempts to create the perception and remind voters that they, and their parties, best represent particular social groups. Identity ownership occurs when candidates or parties are perceived by voters as appropriate, credible “prototypes” of particular groups—as manifesting a good “fit” with a group’s characteristics, values, and norms. Candidates and parties seek to construct, maintain, and leverage identity ownership by portraying themselves as fitting with varied social groups’ characteristics, values, and norms (Hogg & Reid, 2006, p. 20). As in issue ownership, candidates also try to make elections turn on those group identities they can credibly claim to represent and turn out at the polls for competitive advantage through both in-group appeals and out-group criticism, such as Trump’s success in making White racial identity salient and linked to a clear vote choice in 2016 (Sides et al., 2018). And under some conditions, candidates and parties may also use these strategies to “trespass” on groups owned by other candidates/parties and incorporate those groups into their electoral coalition.

Prototypicality management likely looks different during primaries and general elections based on the need to mobilize different groups of voters. During primaries, candidates compete with in-partisan group members to represent electorally advantageous party coalitions, such as rural residents, gun owners, or evangelicals for Republicans, and urban White liberals, African Americans, or LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others) individuals for Democrats. During general elections, they strive to raise the salience of their own party and appeal across the spectrum of their party’s coalitions to get out the vote, while also competing over “cross-pressured” (Stone, 2017) identities (e.g., pro-life Democrats).

Social Identity and Democratic Elections

The dominant story to emerge in our field post-2016 tells of an epistemological crisis at the center of American democracy—a crisis fueled by misinformation, disinformation, Russian trolls and bots, and voter manipulation through the likes of Cambridge Analytica (e.g., Jamieson, 2018). Lost in all of this attention to the quality of election information, however, is the markedly clear story Donald Trump told about the 2016 election, and now about the 2020 election. Trump’s story was, and still is, about Whites who are losing their safety, security, and dominant place in society to Black, Brown, and even anti-American, others. And, his story is about how the Republican Party represents the right and true American people, while the Democratic Party and media are “enemies of the people” and full of people who should “go back” to where they supposedly came from.
Trump’s victory, and his continued appeal to a broad swath of White American voters, illustrates that elections in the United States, and likely elsewhere around the world, are about identity—race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and party, as well as other lines of social demarcation—more than policy. While social identities are considered in much research literature, they are often treated as structural variables to be discovered through surveys. Much survey work, for instance, treats social groupings as structural features of the social environment that individuals are born into or sort themselves within, not as historically, culturally, and socially constructed phenomena. By contrast, we see communication at the center of social, and by extension political, identity. Social groupings and divisions are constituted in and through communication and made durable through institutions such as parties. In other words, the identities that are consequential for politics are not structural givens, they are created over time by political and social actors and made salient at particular moments as an organizing basis of political life, especially by elites such as those vying for public office.

American politics and the politics of democracies around the world are fundamentally driven by debates over which sorts of people should be citizens, wield power, and be the rightful inheritors of nations. Conceptualizing elections in this way enables us to understand even surprising outcomes in more straightforward terms. Instead of suggesting that people were duped by the Trump campaign, domestic right-wing propaganda, or foreign meddling (though there is certainly credible evidence of this interference in the 2016 election), we posit something far simpler: that the Trump campaign thrived on the effective communication of identity ownership, particularly on making White racial identity—and its supposed opposites, like “the Squad”—salient and the basis for casting a vote for president.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. Available online at https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1150381394234941448?lang=en

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