

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND TWITTER

KELCIE GUNS
SPRING 2018

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in English and Journalism
with honors in English

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of political discourse, partisan language, and gendered language in the media, specifically focusing on the social media platform Twitter. Language can be used to persuade, manipulate, and alter the public's perception of events and people. Twitter is a new phenomenon that changes and provides new examples of political discourse every day. Within the past few years, the political functions of this social media site have increased drastically, being used by government officials to disseminate information in a unique and unprecedented way. Findings reveal the serious implications of these language choices on the public, and the way that specific tweets can incite political movements.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Scott Smith for working with me on this project. Without his guidance and expertise, I would not have been able to complete my thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Xiaoye You for being my honors adviser and assisting me throughout my college career. Thank you to Schreyer Honors College for providing me with an invaluable education. I would like to thank my family and friends for encouraging me to focus on my passions and supporting me in all aspects of my life. Thank you to all of my professors at Penn State over these past four years for inspiring me, enlightening me, and encouraging me to accomplish things I never thought were possible.

Chapter 1

Introduction

For many people, the 2016 U.S. presidential election sparked an increased interest in media, politics, and journalism, especially concerning the ways that the public reacts to certain methods and styles of language. However, this issue has been relevant since long before the election. The creation of the Internet spawned an entirely new source for people to get their news. This innovation has created new platforms for people to share ideas, disseminate information, and voice their opinions. Due to the politically charged nature of the modern media, language and rhetoric have changed immensely in the past few years alone. The media is constantly changing and adapting faster than it is possible to keep up with. In an era of search engine optimization and Googling news to access information as quickly as possible, people are seeking more immediate ways to become informed. This means that news outlets are adapting to fulfill this need with more catchy headlines, more succinct articles containing less information, and social media to entice people to engage with their content.

Examining the origin of the word *media* provides some insight into its role in society. The Oxford English Dictionary defines media as “the main means of mass communication, *esp.* newspapers, radio, and television, regarded collectively; the reporters, journalists, etc., working for organizations engaged in such communication.” However, looking into its origins demonstrates that it is the plural form of *medium*. Medium is derived from the Latin word for the middle, center, or midst. The medium, therefore, is the middle piece between the information and the receiver of that information. It is the channel through which the

information is communicated. Social media then, is the conglomeration of all these transmitters and receivers of information contained within one website or app. The traditional media, such as a newspaper or television network, has always had a clear distinction between the messenger (the news network), the message (the visual broadcast or text article), and the receiver of the information (the public). It was clear that the media *was* a medium, a channel for information to pass through. But this is no longer how people get their news. With the introduction of Twitter, Facebook, and other social media sites, news can be shared immediately and in a more concise, compact manner. This creates more engagement within the sites as people can comment, like, and share posts freely. These social media platforms complicate the previously clear distinctions between messenger, message, and receiver that were set in place by traditional media. In some cases, the public can also become the messenger. The roles are often completely reversed. A person may be the first to tweet about breaking news in their town, which is then seen and picked up by a reporter from a news outlet who covers the story. In this way, the public becomes the messenger and the news network becomes the receiver. Any individual with a social media account can compose a status, tweet, or other message that potentially spreads misinformation, since the creation of these posts is not regulated. There are no gatekeepers on social media as there would be in television or print news. On a television news broadcast, the producers and anchors create the content and it is entirely controlled and edited by the employees of that particular news company. On social media, however, sources and information are not fact-checked for authenticity. There are options to report posts for spam, harassment, or hate speech, but other than these conditions, the vast majority of messages in the online space remain unregulated.

Social media in particular has skyrocketed to success within the past few years, and is still rapidly growing in popularity. Twitter, created in 2006, has an estimated 330 million users as of 2018, making it one of most popular social media sites (Statista). Aside from simply being popular, Twitter has become a platform for celebrities, activists, and politicians to disseminate their messages to the hundreds, thousands, or millions of people that choose to follow them. Users compose original tweets, meaning that the words of their messages are completely their own. Within the limits of this 280-character memo, however, users can include links to outside sources, infographics, and images along with the plain text. The previous 140-character limit for tweets was replaced in November 2017 with a 280-character limit, providing a bit more space for words, but not much. The idea behind Twitter is to communicate brief ideas quickly and efficiently. Expanding the character limit any more will start to edge away from the concise purpose of the platform.

Another option in using the Twitter interface is retweeting. This essentially means that if a user likes or agrees with another user's tweet, he or she can copy and paste the tweet to his or her own account, with full credit to the original account from which the message was tweeted. If a user does not wish to retweet a message, he or she can simply "like" it, as indicated by a red heart icon. People can also use the "reply" function or the "quote tweet" function to sound off on certain topics. The reply function allows a user to simply issue a direct reply to the person who posted the original tweet, which is then public for all others on the site to view as well. The "quote tweet" function works as a way to reference another tweet when typing out your own idea to modify or amend the original poster's tweet. Twitter users follow their friends, favorite celebrities, politicians, news outlets, companies, and more. It seems that every business is required to have a Twitter account in order to be successful in this Internet era. Every company

from Wendy's to Habitat for Humanity has an active Twitter account, to promote its products, cause, or ideology. There are very few limits to what a company's tweets can market to the public, because so many options are available on the platform. Twitter even uses certain algorithms to suggest posts and people to users based on what they have already liked, which is another marketing strategy. But this selective exposure to only certain messages that a particular user agrees with has the potential to be detrimental. By confirming an individual's pre-existing notions and not challenging this person to view an issue from a different perspective, it essentially creates even more of a divide between people on opposite sides of the political spectrum (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 445).

One of the most crucial components of Twitter is the hashtag. Users can type the pound symbol (#) at the end of a tweet to tag their posts with a specific topic, filtering all posts with the same hashtag into one group. This effectively creates an organized way to search for topics and buzzwords that are "trending" at any point in time. For example, if a breaking story occurs, users can search the hashtag relevant to that breaking story and find all posts filed under that same topic. There is also a way to choose the filter for "top" posts, with the most attention and interaction, meaning that these tweets have the most likes and retweets. Or, the filter can be changed to "most recent," which allows users to seek out the most recent tweets sorted under this hashtag, regardless of their popularity or status. When Twitter began in 2006, hashtags did not exist. The hashtag was actually created and implemented in 2007 by Chris Messina, a Google designer (Edwards). The fact that the hashtag was invented and suggested by a user rather than a developer at Twitter's headquarters proves that the lines between creator and audience become blurred on social media. Messina has a background as a designer and developer, but he had the idea for the hashtag completely separate from any ties with Twitter. This illustrates how any

member of the public can make contributions in the realm of social media, dismantling the roles of messenger and receiver. Despite the fact that hashtags were not originally a part of Twitter, they have often become the impetus for certain social movements in recent years by uniting groups of people to come together for a specific cause or goal. All of these functions on Twitter come together to make up the platform as a whole. Developers are constantly adding new features to improve the site and increase its popularity, leading to its successful penetration into mass media and society.

Chapter 2

Twitter's Effect on Politics

The current U.S. president, Donald Trump, has become infamous for his frequent Twitter use and his interaction with other prominent people through the site. This is one of the first times that social media has played such an active role in the political process, especially concerning the specific language choices and words that Trump tweets out to his followers. One of these tweets from July 29, 2016, specifically targets his opponent in the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton, but contains a few glaring spelling errors that are difficult to overlook. The words “loose” and “instincts,” are misspelled, depleting some of Trump’s credibility as a candidate in the presidential election at this point.



Figure 1. Trump's tweet addressing Clinton Jul. 26, 2016

It might be easy to overlook these simple spelling errors that occurred as the result of a finger pressing the wrong electronic key on a phone. But if deeper issues are considered here, it does seem concerning that the president of a country does not spell-check his own tweets before

sending them out for millions of people to read on the Internet. Twitter's writing environment is more informal and forgiving than traditional text media, and even digital news sites, because social media is still commonly regarded as a less serious platform for news and has not reached the same level of respect as traditional media. Social media itself does not promote the importance of proper grammar, spelling, or sentence structure. While this does not necessarily indicate the deterioration of the English language altogether, it definitely contributes to a change of values in the way that our society communicates.

More importantly, this is simply one of hundreds of examples of Trump's name-calling tactics on Twitter. He frequently uses insulting remarks to offend his competitors and those who disagree with him. This certainly becomes an issue in political diplomacy, when Trump makes personal attacks on the leaders of other countries like Teresa May and Kim Jong-un. This level of personal interaction between leaders has never before been so open to the public. Now that Twitter displays this communication for millions of people to view, it becomes easier to draw one's own opinions about politics and certain leaders, choosing sides based on the rhetoric contained within these messages. The option to send a direct message to someone, or to put an @ symbol before a name to address someone personally in a tweet, facilitates insults and direct attacks rather than civil discussion. There is no moderator or ambassador to regulate the messages being sent between country leaders, as there would be in a debate or more formal method of communication, such as a telephone conversation or even e-mail.

One of the other key issues is the very nature of Twitter's 280-character (previously 140) word limit, which does not promote thoughtful, detailed discussion. "At its core, Twitter is a messaging service allowing users (who can remain anonymous) to tweet out information, or opinions, or whatever, in 140-character bursts. For many critics, that DNA makes Twitter

antithetical to sophisticated, thoughtful political conversation” (Sanders). Social media, especially Twitter, affects the language of political discourse by changing interpersonal interactions. Tweeting something from behind a screen is incredibly different than having a face-to-face conversation, which is what Sanders hints at. The art of civilized debate and thoughtful conversation is destroyed by the concise and immediate function of sending off a short tweet without thinking it through or reading it over.

President Trump’s tweets provide another look into the way that social media affects political discourse. This is a groundbreaking time for media, as many of these platforms are so new. Twitter has only existed for twelve years, and just recently has it been used so abundantly in politics. Never before have major news media outlets covered stories entirely dedicated to tweets. Yet now, a nightly news broadcast on any given day is likely to cover something controversial that Trump has tweeted. Not until this presidency has this been the norm. By analyzing specific tweets, we can start to comprehend how this language is impacting us.

There has been much speculation in the news lately about whether Russian bots played a role in Trump’s success in the 2016 election. A Twitter “bot” is technically any automated account that sends out pre-programmed messages. However, this term has been redefined in a political context recently, suggesting that bots are owned and operated by Russian state operatives with the sole purpose of subverting American political debates and slanting favor toward a certain candidate over another. Additionally, there are Twitter accounts that exist as “cyborgs,” meaning that they are either recognized as a “bot-assisted human or a human-assisted bot” (Haustein 232). Therefore, humans create these “cyborg” bots and use them for specific, targeted purposes. According to Haustein, these types of Twitter accounts can be used for benevolent reasons, such as tweeting out earthquake warnings in Japan. However, there are also

ways to use these accounts to manipulate people and spread misinformation for personal gain. Research has proven that many of the online users who wrote messages endorsing Trump leading up to the 2016 election were actually not real people, but rather identities manufactured by “unseen groups” (Ferrara). In fact, one in every five election-related tweets from Sept. 16 to Oct. 21, 2016, was generated by computer software programs called ‘social bots’” (Ferrara). Even more alarming is the fact that human users on social media find it very difficult to discern the real accounts from fake ‘bot’ accounts. These bot accounts were able to produce constant content and gather thousands of followers during the course of the presidential race. About 10.5 percent of Twitter accounts have been proven to be bots, and 16 percent of all Twitter accounts have been found to “exhibit a high degree of automation” (Haustein 233). The purpose of creating these bots was to spread false information and incite partisan antagonism among Twitter users leading up to the 2016 election. According to Ferrara, “retweeting bots’ content without first verifying its accuracy can have real consequences, including spreading rumors, conspiracy theories or misinformation.” Again, this relates to the fact that social media does not have the gatekeepers or moderators of traditional media sources. Twitter was not able to keep up with identifying and deleting the accounts of bots quickly enough to prevent the spread of this misinformation, and it ended up having a huge impact on other Twitter users who consumed this information and retweeted it.

On the other hand, if used properly by real reporters, social media has the power to create more credibility for news outlets. Viewers and readers are more likely to trust a news source if the reporter is honest about his or her methodology. “The immediacy and networked nature of social media could open the process of campaign reporting to more eyes” (Lawrence 98). Here, Lawrence suggests that social media can increase transparency in reporting, because the public

can clearly view the processes that reporters carry out while covering a story, which builds the reporter's (and his or her employer's) credibility. However, this potential beneficial use of social media is restricted to journalists. Political leaders do not tweet with the same honesty, since their accounts are usually carefully monitored and managed by employees. On a related note, corporations donate large sums of money to political campaigns in order to push certain agendas, and these resources are then used to create a public persona of a political candidate. "Enormous resources are devoted by the campaigns to managing and manipulating public perceptions, and the press has traditionally been positioned both as the best potential check on those efforts and as a target and conveyor of them" (Lawrence 93). Lawrence asserts that it is better to trust reporters and the media, since their sole objective is to tell the truth. Politicians use marketing tactics to sway public opinion, not only to support certain issues, but also to sell their own personalities. Due to the "enormous resources" devoted to developing positive public views of politicians, it is hard to recognize the messages that they distribute on social media platforms as their own true beliefs. Furthermore, on social media platforms like Twitter, there is no clear division between marketing and information. Both advertisements and facts are offered up in the same format and style in tweets, making the distinction between them more ambiguous than ever before. Within the realm of television news, there is a clear divide between the news segment and the jump to commercials, indicating the separation between the two. In print media, this is even more obvious, with text articles separated from advertisements within specific pages. It is still relatively simple to recognize a tweet that is an advertisement, but there are subtle ways that politicians and other authority figures are able to endorse people and products for their own personal reasons, and not for the purpose of providing information and services to the public.

In addition to these subtle marketing tactics, Twitter also provides a space for political candidates to interact, often in destructive ways. Specifically, “studies indicate the frequent use of message content that attacks the policy or character of opposing candidates” (Parmelee 167). This style of attacking opposing candidates is unique to Twitter’s interface, through certain functions that it contains. Parmelee discusses the specific frameworks that go into crafting a politician’s tweets. The framing theory asserts that the politician diverts audience attention away from certain issues while highlighting others, in an effort to create a certain portrait of who he or she is as a candidate (which may not be completely accurate). Many different aspects make up this framework during the process of creating it in each stage. These stages are as follows: the writer of the message, the message itself, the receiver, and the culture. According to Parmelee, the writers in charge of composing these tweets select frames that fit their “already-established perceptions” of the political candidate and his politics. They tend to ignore frames that do not fit in with these perceptions. Thus, the perspective and bias of the original writer of the message is crucial, because this provides the basis of the entire message. The message itself is the most important aspect of this framework. The message can trigger either a positive or negative reaction within its audience, and the way that the message is worded plays a huge role in its success or failure in resonating with the people receiving this message. The process of priming, “a technique in which a receiver’s perceptions and memories are activated through visual or verbal stimulation” is also essential in understanding how the message impacts its audience (Parmelee 170). Priming affects the way that the receiver interprets the message, and influences their emotional reaction to it. For example, one particular study proved that college students disliked political advertisements since the issues addressed in these ads only applied to an older

generation of voters (Parmelee 170). This priming made the students buy into the assumption that politicians ignore the younger age group of voters.

The symbols contained within a message, either visually or verbally, have been proven to influence voter opinion. “Tweets, too, may be framed with words or phrases that trigger positive or negative emotions in followers based on symbolism or other factors” (Parmelee 170). Most of the tweets that Parmelee studied within one campaign timeframe focused on one of seven topics and its corresponding framework: the campaign trail, a personal tweet, candidate ideology, opponent-focused, call to action, endorsements, or other (Parmelee 178). Studies done on these tweet frameworks examine the tone, content, formality, and interactivity of the politicians and their tweets. Parmelee specifically focuses on the case of the 2010 Florida governor election, where the framework of media validation was used heavily among candidates (Parmelee 191). The media validation framework is evident when a politician uses a news source to substantiate his or her own argument or platform. In this case, candidates used newspaper endorsements to prove their superiority in the gubernatorial race. All five main governor candidates and all ten candidates in the senatorial election, with the exception of one, used media validation within their tweets during the 2010 election season. One such candidate, Alex Sink, was the primary Democratic candidate for the governor’s seat. He tweeted: “It’s officially a sweep: 16-0! Every major newspaper has endorsed me from Pensacola to Miami.” After this statement, he included a clickable link to his own campaign website embedded within the tweet. By framing his credibility and authority as a candidate within the context of media endorsements, Sink is trying to communicate to voters that he is qualified, and the endorsements are his “evidence” to back that fact up. The addition of his own campaign website into the tweet provides a way for Twitter users to learn more about his political platform, after learning about his popularity among the

major newspapers of Florida. Parmelee notes that these media endorsement tweets spanned all political parties and genders of the candidates— both women and men, Democrats and Republicans, all used this framework within their tweets. Additionally, “media endorsement tweets included links to the news media websites that gave the endorsements. This tactic provided proof of the candidate’s claim of support, as well as a way to learn more about what the media outlet considered to be the candidate’s positive attributes” (Parmelee 191). Therefore, each candidate is using the media’s influence to convince voters that a reputable source authorizes him or her as the best candidate, so voters should agree with this, too, and offer their own support. By using these tactics specifically on Twitter, the candidates are employing a more direct way to engage voters by using outside sources as proof, instead of simply assuming that voters will draw their own conclusions from the media. These political candidates are offering the appearance of real sources as evidence of support, when in reality the sources are self-selected. The articles being tweeted out to the public are assessed and evaluated by the candidate himself, which demonstrates the dangers of selective exposure and self-advertising within information sharing on Twitter.

Furthermore, Internet groups and discussions between people on platforms like Twitter tend to remain centered in like-minded spheres. It is less likely for people with different political opinions to interact on these sites than it is for people with similar viewpoints from the same political spheres to have a dialogue. Thus, their opinions and beliefs are reinforced rather than challenged. Is this dismantling the art of political debate? Are people simply becoming more entrenched in their own perspectives as a result of interacting with others, rather than questioning their own beliefs? The answer is complicated: yes and no. In a 2009 study conducted by Wojcieszak and Mutz, the results revealed that online groups focused on hobbies or general

entertainment were more likely to contribute to cross-cutting political discourse than political, ethnic, or civil online groups or chat rooms (Wojcieszak and Mutz 48). This is due to the fact that people in these online discussion groups dedicated to politics most likely already have the same viewpoints and religious beliefs, whereas groups centered on hobbies or leisure activities draw people from all different realms of politics with contrasting viewpoints. However, “Online groups may facilitate exposure to opinions beyond the confines of participants’ immediate associations” (Wojcieszak and Mutz 42). So, these groups do have the potential to expose people to viewpoints that differ from their own, yet it is more likely that they will be confined to like-minded spaces. This concept can be applied to Twitter, as users are more likely to “follow” other people who post ideas that they agree with. Also, as mentioned in the introduction, users are often prompted to engage with people and statements that align with their own views based on algorithms that examine their likes and interactions.

In terms of political discourse specifically, “the Internet has increased the amount and the availability of political content, thus instigating a debate as to the quality of the newly surfaced online discourse” (Wojcieszak and Mutz 41). In other words, the Internet has allowed for new political content to be created and more information to be shared, but the quality of this content is questionable, especially on social media sites like Twitter. For example, on the day of the presidential election in 2016, an account masquerading as CNN composed a tweet about the exit polls that day, citing Trump at 55 percent, Clinton at 39 percent, and Johnson at 6 percent (Rogers). This tweet was shared thousands of times, but it was not based on any factual proof. Plenty of other hoax accounts on Twitter were active on the day of the election, tweeting about “rigged” voting machines, election workers being fired, and incorrect dates (Rogers). Unsuspecting users retweeted all of this information, effectively spreading “fake news” to their

own followers and continuing the cycle of distributing incorrect information. In this way, Wojcieszak and Mutz are correct in their assertion that information on the Internet, especially on social media, is not always to be trusted. When misinformation circulates so rapidly without any regulations, as was the case with Russian bot Twitter accounts during the 2016 election cycle, the public's right to the truth is at stake. Without moderators to control content on Twitter, there is no indication of fact versus fiction. Journalists' role is to tell the truth. This is less clear when the motives of users on social media get involved, because they are not employed journalists and therefore do not have the same motives or morality. The public deserves to know if the sources they receive information from are trustworthy, but Twitter's platform is problematic in proving this trustworthiness. The facts must be verified, and they must come from an authenticated source, but the lack of moderation and restriction on Twitter blurs the line between fact and misinformation.

Chapter 3

Partisan Language in the Media

Traditionally, a partisan is someone who earnestly supports a certain cause or political party. Partisan language, then, refers to the words and phrases that this partisan person would use to communicate their ideas. Historically, the word *partisan* has had an “unfavorable” connotation, due to the blindly fanatical and prejudiced nature of many political partisans (Oxford English Dictionary). In modern times, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the word partisan as: “of, relating to, or characteristic of a partisan; supporting a cause, party, or person, esp. zealously or blindly; one-sided, prejudiced.” The divisive nature of modern politics encourages the notion of partisanship and “choosing sides,” especially when it comes to political candidates and their platforms. “Partisanship is based on beliefs about what and who the party stand for, identification with the causes it promotes and sharing the values that guides the party’s decision-making processes” (Lilleker 61). Thus, people tend to align with political parties that share their pre-existing beliefs. This affirms their identification with the organization and reflects their partisanship.

The idea of “political tribalism” in America exemplifies the severe consequences of partisan language and how this ripple effect from online discourse affects real life political contexts and policymaking. Amy Chua argues that humans are inherently tribal and as such, must belong to groups. European and East Asian countries are primarily ethnic nations, in which the nation is mostly comprised of one ethnic group in the overwhelming majority, and this majority dictates the national language and dominant culture (Chua 11). As such, China is

comprised of Chinese people who speak Chinese, Germany is comprised of German people who speak German, and so on. Thus, in many parts of the world, the groups that matter most to humans are based on ethnic, religious, regional, sectarian, or clan values (Chua 1). Yet in America, due to the fact that many ethnic subgroups make up the U.S. population, these primal values are hardly considered. Instead, Americans focus on “ideological battles” such as capitalism vs. communism, democracy vs. authoritarianism, and others (Chua 2). It makes sense then that Americans would turn to tribalism when faced with domestic conflict as well. Chua cites racism in America as one of the main examples of political tribalism, because studies show that white Americans are anxious about becoming less of the majority while black Americans do not believe their country has the potential to ever achieve true racial equality. “One group’s claims to feeling threatened and voiceless are often met by another group’s derision because it discounts their own feelings of persecution– but such is political tribalism” (Chua 9). In modern America, partisan language contributes to this political tribalism by creating a deeper divide between groups with different perspectives, and creating intolerance and hatred. Similarly, platforms like Twitter do not promote learning or education about groups that differ from one’s own due to in-groups and selective exposure theory. Chua’s argument about the prevalence of political tribalism focuses on the present, but is grounded in a historical time frame of major political events. In addition to her ideas about domestic conflict, Chua also argues that America’s foreign policy has been negatively affected by political tribalism. She believes that “our failure” in Iraq and other countries was due to a pattern of ignorance of the tribes within the countries that the U.S. was interacting with (Chua 95). Because U.S. leaders remained unaware of certain ethnic, tribal, and clan identities in the region, officials believed that democratization was the solution to conflict, which ultimately failed. Chua goes on to cite examples of the same

ignorance in U.S. foreign policy, such as the Vietnam War and Afghanistan. “If we don’t want to be perpetually caught off guard, fighting unwinnable wars, the United States has to come to grips with political tribalism abroad. And if we want to save our nation we need to come to grips with its growing power at home” (Chua 13). Therefore, she believes that the solution to overcoming this political tribalism and its implications is knowledge and understanding. By “coming to grips” with this concept, she argues that American political leaders should recognize political tribalism abroad and domestically in order to ease interactions between different cultures and groups, creating better solutions.

Although Chua’s findings on political tribalism have only been developed very recently, the partisan language that contributes to political tribalism has been prevalent since the 1990s. A study conducted by Matthew Gentzkow of Stanford University, Jesse M. Shapiro of Brown University, and Matt Taddy of the University of Chicago proves that this is true. The study examined data from Congressional speech from 1873 to 2009, exhibiting a strong overall increase in divisive partisan language over time. Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Taddy define partisan language as “the ease with which an observer could infer a congressperson’s party from a fixed amount of speech” (Gentzkow 1). Essentially, the political language can be branded as partisan if it is obvious whether the person speaking leans politically left or right. The study indicates that partisan language was relatively low and continued at a steady rate from 1873 to the early 1990s. Then, it skyrocketed in the following years (Gentzkow 16). This is important to note because the study specifically focuses on members of Congress. These lawmakers are the people voting on bills that affect the entire country, and they have started using divisive political language within the past two decades at a dramatically increased rate. This has the potential to decrease productivity within Congress, since members from opposite political parties are less likely to

agree on legislative decisions. It also requires more compromise on both sides, since using contrasting language is more likely to alienate the opposing political party.

This is not only significant in terms of legislation, but also in terms of the public's view of elected officials. According to the study, "Experiments and surveys show that partisan framing can have large effects on public opinion, and language is one of the most basic determinants of group identity" (Gentzkow 2). This refers back to the original definition of partisanship, a key point being identification with a particular group and its members. Therefore, public opinion is hugely influenced by the way that political language is framed, depending on which words are chosen. Taxes, immigration, crime, and religion are the topics that show the biggest jump in partisan language in recent years (Gentzkow 4). Could focus groups and polls be to blame? According to the study, all political parties use these as tools to identify the specific language choices that resonate with voters. The expansion of these polls and focus groups causes a greater political divide within society, as they are often used to confirm what voters already want to hear.

Gentzkow's study also reveals an important trend in political polarization. "Language is also one of the most fundamental cues of group identity, with differences in language or accent producing own-group preferences even in infants and young children... That the two political camps in the US increasingly speak different languages may contribute to the striking increase in inter-party hostility evident in recent years" (Gentzkow 26). From a psychological standpoint, humans tend to identify with the people who are most like them. Even as children, this fact holds true, and language plays a large role in this group unity and feeling of belonging. The study proves that the two main political parties in the United States are communicating using very

different language, citing this as the reason for so much hostility between them and inability to compromise within recent years.

While the definitive reasons for this drastic increase in partisan language remain unclear, the authors of the study speculate that Republican Newt Gingrich's takeover of Congress in 1994 may have contributed to it. Gingrich's consultant Frank Lutz was a pioneer in political marketing at the time, coining phrases like "death tax" and "climate change" to enact new policies and persuade public opinion (Gentzkow 4). The study also notes this time period is marked by significant changes in the media, like television cable-news stations, live broadcasts of political affairs on C-SPAN, and the rise of the twenty-four hour news cycle (Gentzkow 4). While not mentioned in the study, the introduction of the Internet in 1990 and its rise in popularity throughout the late '90s also played a key role in this partisan language increase. As previously discussed, online discussion groups usually facilitate selective exposure and encourage like-minded groups of people to connect and interact. The Internet became a place for political discussion, creating a different platform for debates and arguments that had not been available until now. This online discourse as opposed to previous face-to-face discussion may have contributed to the drastic increase in partisan language that Gentzkow notes in his study. The Internet certainly continues to create this divide today, especially via social media networks like Twitter, which promote name-calling and personal attacks. These types of interactions promote an increase in partisan language choices, similar to the Congressional speech patterns seen in Gentzkow's study.

Furthermore, many of the political messages transmitted to the public are continuously altered to reflect the views of people in positions of authority. "Political communication, as already noted, is largely *mediated* communication, transmitted through the print and electronic

media. The media alter the message, in their roles as reporters of and commentators on it” (McNair 29-30). McNair points out here that political communication is often transmitted via the media, after it has been put through a series of filters and people who modify it, annotate it, and comment on it. In this way, the public is not receiving direct political messages, but instead, modified versions of these messages depending on which media outlets they prefer to consume and engage with.

In order to take a closer look at partisan language, we can turn to specific examples in the media that have been crafted to fit a liberal or a conservative mindset. One example is the term “gun safety” versus “gun control.” With the growing number of school shootings and gun violence within the past few decades, this has certainly been a popular topic in the media. Depending on which of these phrases is used by the media outlet relaying the information, the context can be perceived in a different way. What does “gun safety” imply? The word safety, which originates from a blend of both Latin and French, is defined as “the state of being protected from or guarded against hurt or injury; freedom from danger” (Oxford English Dictionary). This word has a generally positive connotation, and does not stir up feelings of anxiety, danger, or fear. On the other hand, “gun control” is more powerful, definitive, and precise. It emphasizes the harm that guns can cause, and pushes for stricter regulations because of that harm.

A search of “gun control” in the New York Times archival database brings up 70,566 results, while “gun safety” brings up 27,459 results. Traditionally perceived as a more liberal-minded news source, it would make sense that the New York Times has more results under “gun control,” using a more definitive word to illustrate the importance and urgency of this issue that left-leaning politicians want to crack down on. Meanwhile, the term “gun safety” implies that

guns should still be available to the public and used just as frequently, but that regulations and safety measures need to be put in place to prevent future tragedies. For example, in the 2016 election, Hillary Clinton represented the Democratic Party and supported a ban on assault weapons and the expansion of background checks for individuals with documented mental health problems. Trump called for concealed-carry permits in all 50 states, and stricter sentences for felons caught with firearms. These are two very different agendas. The left seeks to prevent and *control* this issue proactively by restricting the amount of guns circulated and by ensuring that they are not in the hands of the wrong people. The right, however, offers an opposing view and suggests that the problem lies in safety. They argue that concealed carry laws would protect people and give them the right to defend themselves against potential attackers in any public place. This is one reason why there is such a divide between the simple phrases “gun control” versus “gun safety,” and why it is important that media outlets use nonpartisan language to inform the public.

Partisan language is not a new phenomenon by any means, because this topic goes back many decades into America’s political history. One such example is George Orwell’s 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language,” in which Orwell discusses political “euphemisms” (Orwell). Among these euphemisms that Orwell mentions is the fact that Northerners referred to the Civil War as the “War of Rebellion,” while Southerners called it the “War for Southern Independence.” Each side clearly has a political agenda, and this is an early example of partisan language being used to further a group’s mission or belief. However, things have changed since 1946 to indicate a massive increase in partisan language that has not been seen up until this point: “...the magnitude of the differences, the deliberate strategic choices that seem to underlie them, and the expanding role of consultants, focus groups, and polls suggest that what we see

today might represent a consequential change” (Gentzkow 2). Despite the fact that partisan language has always existed, it has become increasingly pervasive in American media.

There are so many examples of partisan language that the list could continue indefinitely, ranging from taxes to education to immigration. Every political party uses language differently to describe the same issues. What does this mean rhetorically, in the way that these issues are being distributed to the public and the way that the public then processes this? The media plays a large role in the way that political information is received. Before the media, the concept of partisan language only applied to actual politicians and policymakers, when they would make speeches or issue public announcements. Now, partisan language has expanded to include every platform of rapidly growing media and is evident in most media outlets. Despite journalists’ attempts at being objective, there is no possible way to eliminate all bias. For example, a tweet from CNN might refer to a violent gun tragedy as a “mass shooting,” while a representative from Fox News might label the same incident “an act of radical terrorism.” These two phrases suggest very different points of view. The more liberal news outlet is highlighting the fact that this incident was spurred by gun violence, thus suggesting a need for gun control and legislation reform. The more conservative news outlet is focusing on the person who committed the crime, and in turn traces this back to a need for stricter immigration laws. Both media outlets, reporting on the same event, use specific language choices to either persuade the reader or confirm their pre-existing biases. These biases in the reader create a lack of tolerance for other viewpoints as well as a stubborn voting mentality that relies on personal opinion rather than fact (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 445). As demonstrated by Chua’s findings, this lack of tolerance for other perspectives and opinions contributes to political tribalism. Once a person becomes entrenched within the

particular beliefs of a political party, he or she tends to remain aligned with that group or “tribe” to avoid discrimination by other members of the group.

The study done by Gentzkow used a machine to construct an algorithm that would predict which party a congressional representative belonged to based on his or her speech in televised debates. Algorithms like this one can be used in a variety of different contexts, not only pertaining to speech but also to text, especially on social media platforms. This same algorithm that Gentzkow used, if adapted for text instead of speech, could most likely also predict the political party of a certain Twitter user simply by analyzing their language.

What impact does this partisan language have on the public, the consumers of this media? To answer this question, we can examine a psychological term called selective exposure theory, also known as confirmation bias. Selective exposure theory is defined as “any systemic bias in audience composition for a given medium or message, as well as any systemic bias in selected messages that diverges from the composition of accessible messages” (Knobloch-Westerwick 3). Essentially, selective exposure theory postulates that people will seek out the news that is already slanted toward their internal biases. It is a basic human tendency to avoid any sort of cognitive dissonance. Human beings seek out ideas and opinions that are close to their own in order to avoid this discomfort. “Individuals prefer information aligned with pre-existing attitudes” (Knobloch-Westerwick 6). Selective exposure theory affects decision-making in this context, especially when it comes time to vote in elections. If a person has chosen to exclusively watch CNN, only follows Democratic politicians on Twitter, and deletes all of their Republican Facebook friends so that those posts do not show up in their feed, this person will be much more likely to vote for a Democratic candidate due to the news that they have selected and the way that they have chosen to receive this information. The creation of so many social media sites

aggravates this problem. In the past, there were only two or three major news outlets from which people received their information via television. Now, the Internet has allowed for a vast spectrum of media, ranging from right-wing white supremacist groups to socialists. Depending on which of these media outlets one chooses, their political decisions will be based on the information they are receiving, with the implicit bias included. According to a study by Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Jingbo Meng of Ohio State University, selective exposure theory can have serious implications on voters: “Selective intake may indeed play a large role for increased polarization in the electorate and reduced mutual acceptance of political views in an era of unprecedented media outlets quantity” (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 445). This study indicates that selecting only certain media outlets that align with one’s political views can reduce that person’s tolerance of any viewpoints that differ from his or her own. The polarization between political parties grows, and contributes to a political divide among media channels too. In order to appeal to a particular audience, media outlets must compete for viewership. It is difficult for these news outlets to remain relevant and in-demand without catering to one audience over another, and thus becoming partisan. In addition, the increased number of media outlets due to the Internet “has also led to unprecedented competition among the channels, which may have hampered the information quality overall” (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 446). Therefore, intense competition among these media companies has created a general ideal of economic stability and viewership or readership over the quality of the reporting.

Examining the exact words and phrases of partisan language illuminates some of the issues that divide political parties. Something that Republicans call “tax reform” might be labeled “tax breaks for the wealthy” by Democrats. The word reform, which comes from the French word *réforme*, is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the action or process of

making changes in an institution, organization, or aspect of social or political life, so as to remove errors, abuses, or other hindrances to proper performance.” This word has generally positive connotations, and it emphasizes the constructive changes that conservatives wish to make concerning taxes. So, “tax reform” sounds excellent to a person who’s tuning into the nightly broadcast, but what happens when they change the channel to a liberal media outlet? The very same tax plan, referred to as a “reform” just moments before, is now being criticized as a way to “give tax breaks to the wealthy.” This does not sound appealing to a hard-working, middle class citizen. This is why language is so important– it can alter someone’s view of proposed legislation with the change of a simple phrase, especially if the person is not very informed on the subject matter. According to Lilleker, many aspects of political discourse affect citizens, whether consciously or subconsciously. He asserts that the visual and textual rhetoric, slogans, themes, and Twitter updates all contribute to the effectiveness of a campaign (Lilleker 87).

A relatively new term, “coded language,” describes the way that a political speaker uses language to convey their agenda or views without explicitly stating them. This concept is also commonly referred to as “dog-whistle politics” (Vega). It is often used in the context of making someone’s statements “politically correct” at face value, while really appealing to a xenophobic or racist group. However, this is not its sole purpose– coded language can be used in other ways as well. It is important to note that liberal media often uses this term, less so than conservatives. “Coded language describes phrases that are targeted so often at a specific group of people or idea that eventually the circumstances of a phrase's use are blended into the phrase's meaning” (Lopez). This means that, over time, these phrases become part of the vernacular used to marginalize a certain group of people. But, because this language becomes so ingrained into

political discussions, it becomes hard to shake. Vega argues that politicians, specifically Donald Trump, often use the term “inner city” within dialogue to describe people of color. Despite the fact that not all people of color live in crime-riddled city neighborhoods, and white people can be included in the “inner city” description as well, the coded language suggests that the phrase is used in this context “to trigger negative images of people of color” (Vega). However, dog-whistle politics are not explicitly confined to the Republican Party. Hillary Clinton uses a different strategy in her approach, yet the same concept applies. Clinton often uses phrases like “implicit bias” and “systemic racism” in debates and speeches. When addressing conservative voters, she is more likely to use the phrase “implicit bias” instead of racism, in order to make this concept “easier for more conservative voters to accept, since it stems from subconscious prejudices that people are unaware they have” (Vega). Essentially, this means that she manipulates her speech patterns to mimic the words that she believes her audience wants to hear.

Other examples of coded language include the words thug, urban, inner city, radical Islam, illegal immigrant, middle class, religious freedom, and “bossy” or “shrill” to describe powerful women. (Lopez). Coded language can be embedded in political language like public statements or speeches, but it is especially evident on Twitter and social media platforms. For example, if a reporter or a prominent Twitter user addresses the actions of a black criminal by calling him a “thug,” this has racist undertones because it implies the stereotype that all black people are criminals due to their race. It’s a subtext that isn’t meant to be visible unless examined very closely. “Generally, coded language is used against a group or idea that threatens traditional power structures, which in America are predominantly white, male, heterosexual, and Christian. These terms are commonly used against people of color, ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ people, and religious groups—right now, particularly, Muslims.” (Lopez). Here, Lopez implies

that coded language has historical roots due to the fact that America has a traditionally white male power structure. It becomes a problem when coded language is adopted by the public as an accepted method of communication. “Coded language, then, allows politicians, media, and members of the public to tap into bigoted ideas while denying that's what they're doing” (Lopez). This becomes an issue because not everyone is aware of such language strategies, and people who listen to or read these messages that contain subtle stereotypes are at risk of subconsciously adopting these ideas.

Chapter 4

Case Studies of Political Discourse on Twitter

This section will analyze specific examples of political discourse and the way that social media has altered it in the past few years alone. In order to narrow the focus, this section will focus specifically on the period from the 2016 presidential campaign through the present in 2018. Examples include tweets composed by political leaders and popular political media personalities from both liberal and conservative viewpoints, to demonstrate partisan language and political discourse within both parties.

Elizabeth Warren, Democratic senator from Massachusetts, was silenced by Republican senators while she was giving a critical speech of Republican attorney general nominee Jeff Sessions. The senators had invoked the uncommon Rule XIX, which forbids any senator from demeaning another senator. When confronted about his choice to call this rule into action, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell defended the controversial use of the little-known rule. “Senator Warren was giving a lengthy speech,” he said. “She had appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted” (Wang). McConnell’s use of passive voice in this statement functions as a way to deflect blame from himself back onto Warren. He was the one giving the warning; he was the one giving the explanation, yet she is the subject of each sentence. Each phrase positions Warren as the subject, effectively obscuring McConnell’s role in the matter as one of the senators who silenced her. McConnell’s defense and the language that he used in this particular case became a battle cry for

Warren’s supporters. Warren’s supporters flipped the meaning of McConnell’s words to her favor, using the fact that she persisted as a positive attribute rather than a negative one. They began to celebrate her persistence, and manipulated McConnell’s words against him. The connotation of the phrase “Nevertheless, she persisted” in the original context implied disobedience and a lack of respect for rules. Warren’s supporters chose to rally behind this phrase instead, changing the connotation to imply that Warren is a feminist icon for standing up to her male colleagues and persisting in the face of adversity. According to the Washington Post, “#ShePersisted, #LetLizSpeak and “Silencing Elizabeth Warren” were among Twitter’s top trending topics in the United States by Wednesday morning” (Wang).



Figure 2. Women's March in Park City, Utah on Jan. 20, 2018. Photo credit: Tommaso Boddi



Figure 3. Women's March in London, UK in 2017. Photo credit: Steve Parkins

These hashtags and phrases were then used as rallying cries during the women's marches that took place in cities across the United States and around the world. This is a clear example of the far-reaching abilities of Twitter— it can incite political change by mobilizing a group of people into a united force. Although this group of people may have been assembled by virtual means, the result is something much more tangible and real, with people coming together and physically showing their support in person, not just online. Twitter has become a springboard for social justice movements like this one. As previously mentioned, hashtags provide Twitter users with a way to search subgroups of topics that are related to each other. Any user who clicks on the hashtag “#Trump,” for example, will be led to a database of every public tweet that was created with “#Trump.” “Hashtags can simultaneously act as a topic-marker, their most commonly recognized role, and also possess the linguistic versatility to construe more interpersonal and structural meanings” (Zappavigna 288). Zappavigna argues that hashtags are a linguistic innovation that can create entirely new meanings for certain words and phrases. She believes that hashtags, when used as a searchable function on Twitter, afford a new kind of social bonding in a virtual space. Thus, hashtags create a community based on shared interest, as demonstrated by Warren's supporters and the women who participated in the Women's March. However, a community of shared interest is not always the outcome. In the example used previously with #Trump, people tweeting about the president may either have very positive or very negative things to say about him.

Hillary Clinton tweeted her support of Warren, using the original quote from McConnell and then adding, “So must we all.” This powerful tweet was seen by millions, and rallied even more support for Warren. Clinton also made use of the embedded video function within her tweet, including the original video from Warren's speech to enhance her own rallying cry in

support of Warren and also inform her audience in case they were unaware of the incident she was referring to. In this way, Twitter is used as a way to educate her audience of followers and to make them aware of a certain issue. Instead of just opinions and personal statements, there is an information-sharing component of the platform, which is beneficial in some cases. It can be a valid source of news, as long as users are aware of the sources where they are getting their news from on Twitter.



Figure 4. Clinton's tweet supporting Warren, Feb. 8 2017

This incident, and many others like it, bring up the issue of gendered language in politics. Women face a “double-bind” in politics. If they mimic the same leadership styles as men, they are negatively criticized for being too masculine. However, if a woman leader conforms to the societal expectations of “femininity,” she is just as likely to be criticized for being weak and incapable (McNair 514). Hillary Clinton was criticized for her active role as first lady before even running for office in 2016. As Bill Clinton’s wife and first lady in 1993, she worked to reform the US healthcare system and, at the time, her linguistic style was not seen as feminine.

Thus, she presented herself as more feminine in other ways, like her clothing and hairstyle, in order to be accepted by the public. She has been criticized for her “toughness,” a trait that would often be praised in a male politician. Since this quality is inconsistent with gender norms, and her hard-hitting policies do not come across as feminine, she was generally rejected for her actions and behaviors. Clinton’s laugh even became a topic of debate while she was running for office in 2007. Media outlets called it a “cackle,” a word with negative connotations, comparing her to fictional witch characters. The word cackle is also gendered; typically, a man’s laugh would never be referred to as a cackle. These harmful comparisons, consumed repeatedly over time by the public, have the potential to deeply affect Clinton’s campaign. Even something as small as this had the potential to make people see Clinton in a different light – especially after five major political news programs picked up the story.

As Trump’s Democratic opponent in the 2016 election, Clinton was portrayed much differently in the media due to the fact that she is a woman. Women candidates are judged much more harshly than men simply based on their gender, especially in terms of their behavior and speech. For example, Clinton is often “attacked for her lack of femininity” (Dittmar). Clinton is often labeled “shrill” during debates and public speeches. This shrillness can be attributed to the way that she speaks, attempting to assume an authoritative voice by lowering it an octave. “No aspect of her oratory is beyond derision– her laugh is branded ‘the Clinton cackle’, and her speech derided as shouting, screaming and shrieking – inartfully substituting volume for expression” (Reynolds 2). Would her speaking techniques be regarded differently if she were a man? Hardly any mention is made of male candidates’ voices, pitch levels, or speech patterns, yet they certainly “shriek” and “shout” just as much as Clinton does during heated debates. While males are criticized for certain things they say, at least they are being acknowledged for

the meaning of their words and not simply the tone of their speech. “Clinton has become a threat to the gender expectations of people in power the world over,” which is reflected in the way that citizens react to her speech as “threatening” (Reynolds 3).

When the media characterizes women harshly, it diminishes their success. “Clinton’s refusal to conform to gender norms in her appearance and behavior resulted in a particularly brutal media attack on both her character and her gender” (Ritchie 104). Yet, while the media also poked fun at Trump’s appearance, mannerisms, and other characteristics, this did not seem to harm his chances of garnering support. Clinton publicly apologized for her email scandals on various occasions, and Trump also issued a public apology for his lewd comments about women, yet was not sincere in his speech. His monotone voice and robotic movements caused many people to criticize him even further. In a statement he issued on the Saturday following this, he earned even more criticism. “He described the controversy that upended the Republican Party for most of Friday as a mere ‘distraction,’ and said that his vulgar remarks captured on the tape were nothing compared with the way Bill and Hillary Clinton had mistreated women” (Haberman).

Male politicians generally use anger as a dominant emotion and employ fighting language to convey their points, while female politicians may be more likely to incorporate references to family, lifestyle, and imply that they are the right candidate based on trustworthiness or other traits (Cohn). According to a survey from Pew Research Center, people viewed female political leaders as “more compassionate, organized and honest than men,” but viewed male politicians as “more ambitious and decisive” than women (Cohn). This is, in part, due to their rhetorical choices, both in speech and in written word via platforms like Twitter.

Other examples of political rhetoric on Twitter can be found in many of President Trump’s tweets. Twitter as a method of communication has provided an unprecedented level of

interaction between the president and the public. Each of Trump's tweets can be analyzed as an individual text, considering the entire package of the tweet itself. This package is made up of the image that is used as an avatar, the text of the tweet itself (including its specific word choices and punctuation) and the ultimate message contained within it. Instead of choosing a typical presidential portrait, Trump chose a personal image that depicts him with an intimidating scowl. As president, he continued to use his own personal Twitter account instead of taking over the traditional POTUS account. Both of these facts indicate that he is holding onto his previous reputation as a reality star before becoming president. This retention of his previous identity as an intimidating public figure, famous for real estate development and a popular television show, affects his credibility and reputation as president. Traditionally, a president adopts the POTUS account and would use a professional headshot photo as the Twitter account's avatar. However, there has only been one president who previously had a Twitter account (since Twitter was created in 2006 and Bush did not have a POTUS Twitter account before Obama) so perhaps Trump is simply setting a new precedent. Yet, it may still come across as unprofessional in the presidential setting, especially when interacting with diplomats and leaders from other countries online. His unusual Twitter tactics have certainly drawn attention from the media, as well as many other politicians. Trump's tweet about the Women's March on Jan. 20, 2018 starts out with a rhetorical appeal to pathos, mentioning the "beautiful weather" and "our great country," on a "perfect day." The first main clause seems unrelated to the actual topic of the tweet, which is meant to celebrate the success of Women's Marches across the country. The weather is not pertinent to the success of the marches, and is not relevant to the rest of the tweet, either. He uses the glittering generality of America as a "great country" to portray the patriotic, American-dream focused attitude of his campaign.

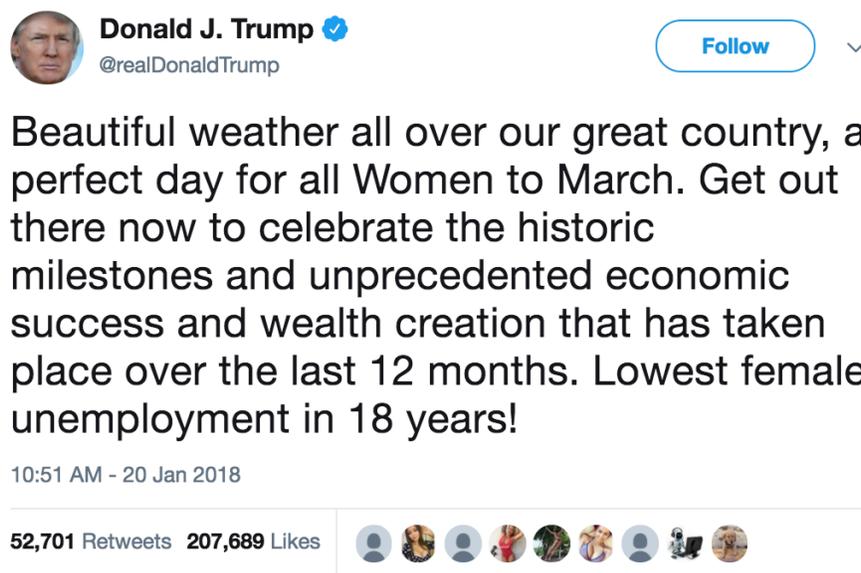


Figure 5. President Trump's tweet from Jan. 20, 2018

The call to action in the second sentence to “get out there now” encourages women to participate in the marches, despite the fact that he does not recognize or acknowledge their true purpose. The disconnect between his idea of the marches and what the women are actually protesting is indicated in this tweet and reflects negatively on his qualities as a leader, implying that he does not have a connection with this large sector of the public. His acknowledgement of the marches as a way to “celebrate historic milestones and unprecedented economic success” is very misleading. This is not what the Women’s Marches were created for. Instead, they were actually held nationally and globally as a way to advocate for women’s rights, healthcare reform, reproductive rights, and related topics (CBS). Many of the marchers even had signs that protested Trump’s presidency, based on his statements regarding women. Many of the women “not only supported women's rights, but also denounced Mr. Trump's views on issues including immigration, abortion and LGBT rights” (CBS). While Trump is praising the women for marching in celebration, in reality, they were actually marching in protest of his own beliefs and

actions. Trump's tweet then moves on to diminish the women in these marches and instead focus on his own perceived success, citing the lowest female unemployment rate in eighteen years as a personal accomplishment. Trump writes that this "economic success and wealth creation" has occurred in the past twelve months, effectively bestowing full credit to himself since this twelve months represents part of the timeframe for his presidency thus far. Even the punctuation within the tweet illustrates Trump's rhetorical tactics. He ends the tweet with an exclamation mark after mentioning the "lowest female unemployment rate in 18 years!" The exclamation point is an unnecessary choice, so why does he use it? The exclamation point highlights and exaggerates his status as the benefactor of these social and economic changes for women. It serves to underscore the bragging nature of the tweet, taking credit for economic success while completely ignoring the true purpose of these marches. These rhetorical choices appeal to Trump's supporters, depicting him as the reason for America's success and providing the public with evidence that gives them reason to back him. This disconnect between reality and a leader's skewed depiction of actual events has the potential to be harmful, and it is certainly misinforming.

It is also important to examine prominent media figures' tweets for evidence of partisan language, coded language, and examples of their bias. President Trump is certainly not alone in his deployment of the Twitter platform. Two of these prominent media figures, Rachel Maddow and Ben Shapiro, represent opposite sides of the political spectrum, to the point of being extremely liberal and extremely conservative, respectively. Maddow is an author and television host on MSNBC with strong liberal viewpoints. Shapiro is a conservative political commentator, columnist, author, and radio talk show host.

One of Maddow's tweets, criticizing Trump, proves that she uses partisan language in her messages to the public. She resorts to name-calling by referring to Trump as a xenophobe, and

tells him to grow up, emphasizing her view of him as a child. Her use of four question marks, where just one would have sufficed, signals her exasperation and creates a hyperbolic effect. She is clearly passionate about supporting Islamic people and defending them against stereotypes and hatred, but she uses the same tactic of being a “bully” to attack Trump. She does not back up her statement with any facts or statistics either, which may have been a more suitable way to prove her point. Twitter has functions available for including links to articles, informative graphics, and charts, but these are often overlooked when typing out a tweet based on personal belief. Twitter does not facilitate an intelligent dialogue that includes facts and statistics, but rather a back-and-forth of personal attacks because this is the most convenient and popular option on the site.



Figure 6. Maddow's tweet criticizing Trump, Dec. 11 2017

Maddow’s style of tweeting and the overall appearance of her messages differ from Trump’s, despite sharing certain characteristics. She uses a close-up headshot photo, professional and distinct, in which she is actually smiling and looks inviting to her audience. The “MSNBC” next to her name in the title of her account and the verified blue check mark both grant her some additional credibility. The blue check mark next to someone’s name, meaning that they are

“verified” on Twitter, indicates that a celebrity or public figure’s account is real, in order to reduce the number of fake celebrity accounts being created and the risk of people believing they are real. This is a way to establish the authenticity of the person’s identity. Maddow’s Twitter persona is very different than Trump’s intimidating scowl. Yet, her last sentence, “Grow up Mr. President!” almost seems like something the president himself might tweet, based on past examples of his tweets addressing leaders of other nations and using name-calling tactics. This exemplifies the fact that neither political side can be heralded as the gold standard for political diplomacy or decorum. There are plenty of examples of both Democrats and Republicans using personal attacks and name-calling rather than informed, intelligent discourse. While criticizing Trump, she also imitates his own style and therefore makes herself appear hypocritical, which harms her own credibility.

On the other hand, Ben Shapiro’s personal catchphrase, “facts don’t care about your feelings,” sums up his political philosophy. In response to Clinton’s tweet about the Las Vegas shooting, he calls her “ignorant, irrelevant, and exploitative.” Like Maddow, he resorts to name-calling against a major political opponent in order to draw attention away from the NRA, the organization that Clinton is criticizing. In comparison to Trump and Maddow’s avatar photos, Shapiro’s is slightly different. As discussed, Trump uses a photo of himself with an intimidating scowl, and Maddow uses her professional MSNBC headshot of her smiling. Shapiro’s image falls somewhere in between these two extremes. His photo shows him wearing a plain button-down shirt and looking down at his phone, rather than smiling or looking at the camera. His choice to display a civilian appearance may be a way to make himself more accessible and relatable to the public, in order for them to identify with his statements and beliefs. The fact that he is looking down at his phone is a nod to his job as a communicator, indicating that he is

always connected and “plugged in” to the news that is currently trending. This also makes him seem younger and more in tune with the millennial generation, which is notorious for its technology use and media consumption.



Figure 7. Shapiro's use of the "quote tweet" function, Oct. 2 2017

The three words he uses, “ignorant, irrelevant, and exploitative,” draw on alliteration to express his point. It is succinct, clear, and to the point. The words increase in their power as they progress. By calling her statement ignorant, he is implying that Clinton is unaware of gun laws that already exist. He seeks to discredit her authority by specifically using the word “ignorant.” The next word in the sequence, “irrelevant,” claims that her statement does not apply to the case at hand. Why does Shapiro use this word against her? He is possibly referring to the fact that he does not think her call for stricter gun laws is appropriate at this time, but it may also hold meaning on a deeper level. He may be calling Clinton herself irrelevant as a politician, alluding to the fact that she lost the 2016 presidential election to Trump and thus her opinions do not

matter. If he is referring to Clinton herself as irrelevant, he is dismissing her entirely, which is a very effective rhetorical strategy to disarm an opponent. He is essentially refusing to acknowledge her as a credible source because he sees her as insignificant. The final word in his tweet, “exploitative,” is the most powerful and accusatory of the three. Shapiro implies that Clinton is using the victims of the Las Vegas shooting to further her political agenda. This word suggests that she has not given the survivors and families of the victims enough time to grieve, criticizing her immediate response to the tragedy as a way to call for legislative reform. Liberals tend to believe that using examples like this to make calls to action for gun reform are acceptable or even necessary, while conservatives argue that supporting the survivors and allowing them time to grieve is the most effective way to help. This further emphasizes the political divide that language can create, especially in tragic situations.

Examining the etymology of the word “exploit” reveals that it comes from the post-classical Latin word *explectare*, meaning “to enjoy the revenue from a fund or office” (Oxford English Dictionary). Thus, the word exploit holds very powerful connotations. To accuse someone of exploitation is to accuse them of benefitting from someone else’s loss. Although it no longer refers exclusively to money, it still holds strong implications for the person it refers to. This tweet can either be taken as a personal attack on Clinton, or as an intelligent critical commentary. It might just be his personal opinion masquerading as an intelligent critique, using erudite words to do so. Instead of simply saying “Hillary Clinton knows nothing about gun laws and is using the victims of this shooting for her own gain,” his opinion comes across as more powerful because of his word choice and sentence structure.

Clinton’s first tweet in the thread sympathized with the families of the victims of the Las Vegas shooting, and then followed up with two additional tweets with a clear political message

about gun control. She implies that the death count would have been higher had the shooter used a silencer, which “the NRA wants to make easier to get.” Here, she uses pathos and logos to appeal to her audience and persuade them that stricter gun laws are necessary. Shapiro, however, believes that Clinton is dismissing the appropriate time for grieving and criticizes her follow-up tweets for being too political. He is trying to garner support from conservatives with this attack on Clinton because he knows that they will agree with his statement, whether they actually believe that she is exploiting the victims for political gain or just want to protect the NRA and their own second amendment rights.

Additionally, he uses the “quote tweet” function in this case to completely transform Clinton’s original tweet. This function allows a Twitter user to post someone else’s tweet to his or her own profile, while adding new personal text above the original. In this way, the user can reframe the entire argument of the original tweet, and in some cases, even appropriate another’s ideas. The presentation of a quoted tweet itself is an indication of how people will view it. Shapiro’s words are seen first, since they appear above the original tweet by Clinton. His words are written in a larger, bold font while the original tweet is minimized. By manipulating her words and overwriting her statement with his own, it effectively erases the original purpose of her tweet and transforms it into useful evidence to support his political beliefs.

Twitter’s user interface promotes rapid media consumption, information sharing on a huge scale, and substantial user interaction. However, it also easily becomes a space for uncivilized political discourse. Prominent figures in the media, as well as world leaders, are drawn into this discussion due to the ways that they use certain rhetoric in their Tweets for the purpose of manipulation or persuasion. The appearance and packaging of Tweets as individual messages with unique avatars, texts, and embedded files creates a new way of circulating

political candidates' and leaders' intentions and beliefs. Accordingly, it is crucial to consider the implications this has on voting, policymaking, and societal values. Twitter provides a completely new way of interacting in political discussions within an online context, contributing to public perceptions of political leaders and politics in general.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The implications that political discourse has on American citizens are far-reaching and characterized by many different facets. Yet, all of these language issues extend much further than simply presidential elections. The media affects the way that people receive information daily. Since media is such an integral part of our lives, it has become an unavoidable necessity. It is nearly impossible to avoid being bombarded by articles on Facebook, Twitter, and other sites every time we unlock our iPhones. All of these factors determine how we use media platforms to receive information and engage with each other, continually altering our notion of language and how it is used.

Twitter, as a platform, facilitates partisan language and even leads to personal attacks. This behavior is enabled by the retweet, quote tweet, direct reply, and hashtag functions. Instead of harboring a space for civil discussion and debate, Twitter instead allows users to resort to name-calling tactics and partisan language to influence their thousands or millions of followers. This is not isolated to one particular political group, as prominent figures from both liberal and conservative backgrounds resort to such tactics.

On Twitter, there is no moderator, as there would be in a debate, and only loose guidelines are provided for users to adhere to. While the simplicity and freedom of this online space has the potential to incite positive change and spread awareness, it can also be used to create harmful dialogues and spread misinformation. All of these factors continue to contribute to the political divide in our country at this point in history, and the chasm just keeps growing

wider. The divisive language used by politicians and the media adds to the public's negative perceptions of anyone who disagrees with their own personal beliefs. Social media sites like Twitter create polarizing spaces that either unite or divide groups of people, yet it is too early to tell what effect this will ultimately have on society since this is such a new phenomenon, constantly changing and being reshaped. For now, Twitter remains a hugely popular social media site accessed daily by millions of people. The incorporation of new technologies and platforms into our society shapes our culture by providing a wide variety of voices with a means to disseminate messages to large numbers of people. This unprecedented scale of information sharing and unique style of communication will undoubtedly prove to be a turning point in history. New social media platforms like Twitter will continue to accelerate growing partisanship within the U.S. and prompt further discussions about what it means to live in an increasingly divided society.

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EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University
B. A. English
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EXPERIENCE

Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center
Communications Intern

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2017–2018

- Wrote articles and took photos for event coverage articles, published in Penn State Today
- Compiled research, edited website content, used Constant Contact to create newsletters
- Created promotional materials utilizing Adobe Photoshop and stock images on Shutterstock

New Jersey Family Magazine
Editorial Intern

Summit, NJ
May–August 2016

- Fact-checked and proofread articles for print magazine; transcribed interviews for editor
- Wrote articles for print magazine and digital magazine; built articles online with text and graphics
- Researched local events and locations; sent emails requesting permission to use information

Panorama
Vice President and Editor, panoramapsu.com

University Park, PA
2015–present

- Plan weekly all-staff meetings, brainstorm sessions, strict editing process and meet biweekly deadlines
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La Vie, the Penn State Yearbook
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- Create page layouts and meet with graphic designer to create design concept
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