

Chapter 10

American People vs. Politicians: Group Vitality Achieved Through the Construction and Realignment of Political Cultural Identity in Online Comments About “Obamacare”

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ABSTRACT

*To study political identity construction, a thematic analysis is used to explore online reviews of the book *Beating Obamacare*. Themes that emerged construct four political identities relevant to the construction of Obamacare, the American public, President Obama and politicians, and those in opposition to Obamacare. The construction of these identities contributes to group vitality. This process is facilitated by the juxtaposition of the construction of the American public with those who oppose Obamacare versus politicians. Notably, this construction is accomplished with the near absence of reference to political party affiliation creating a realignment of political identity in a way that provides stronger group vitality than would be achieved across traditional partisan lines. This chapter has implications for understanding how identity is constructed online to demonstrate group vitality in ways that facilitate intracultural and intercultural communication.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) was signed into law on March 23, 2010. This controversial legislation has been received with mixed reviews and has been a lightning rod for political ideological debate and grandstanding from those espousing various political perspectives (e.g., Goldzwig, 2013; Johnston, Hillygus, & Bartels, 2014). In this way, the Affordable Care Act is more than a law; it provides a talking point that can help establish political alignment as evidenced by its politically loaded nickname ‘Obamacare’ that references, or rather attributes blame to, Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States (Hopper, 2015). As a construct used for political alignment, the way in which the Affordable Care Act is discussed can inform about current American political identities. This chapter exposes how communication about ACA constructs political identities. This construction process has high stakes because it facilitates the group vitality (Giles, 1978) of political groups within the American political system as they vie for power and compete to exist within the current American political climate.

BACKGROUND

The Social Construction of Political Identity

From a social construction approach (e.g., Gergen, 1991), identity is not viewed as a personal static aspect of self that is independent from others. Instead, identity is viewed as a product of collaborative communication processes (Mokros, 2003; Tracy, 2002; Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Much work has explored the ways in which identity- particularly related to cultural group memberships including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation- is a product of communication (e.g., Lee, 1996; Reyes, 2007; Shi & Babrow, 2007). Together the members of a cultural group work to create a shared cultural identity through communication. In other words, how cultural group members verbally and nonverbally communicate about their cultural group and about characteristics of their cultural group identity, amongst each other and with members of other groups, collaboratively constructs that group identity. This construction of identity occurs regardless of intent to express a particular identity. Furthermore, construction does not inherently and only involve the identity of one’s self. Rather, through communication, a person can not only attempt to construct their own identity but the identity of co-present and non-co-present others as well. Furthermore, communication by a single person does not in itself construct identity. Rather, it is the collaborative work of multiple people working together, more often than not outside of their awareness of doing

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