Trump Goes to Tulsa on Juneteenth: Placing the Study of Identity, Social Groups, and Power at the Center of Political Communication Research

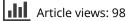Daniel Kreiss, Regina G. Lawrence & Shannon C. McGregor

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Trump Goes to Tulsa on Juneteenth: Placing the Study of Identity, Social Groups, and Power at the Center of Political Communication Research

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ABSTRACT

The increase in elites' use of racial appeals has compelled some scholars of political communication to tell a more comprehensive story about political identity in the United States and elsewhere around the world . This occurred alongside the field of communication's , and subfield of political communication's , longstanding failures to develop a racial analytic – a clear reflection of the field's overwhelming whiteness. In this forum essay, we contextualize and review some strains of new literature on identity in political communication, with a focus especially on the U.S. context and the intersection of race and political power. Our aim is to call attention to what we see as an emerging approach to centering power, identity, and social groups in the field. These works are diverse theoretically and methodologically, and their authors may or may not recognize themselves as doing work in political communication at all. But we see tremendous value in what they share analytically, substantively, and normatively, and aim to mark the emergence and – we hope – flourishing of this work.

On June 10th, 2020, then President Donald Trump announced that he would hold a campaign rally on June 19th in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Juneteenth, as it is known, commemorates the ending of slavery in the United States; Tulsa is the site of one of the most violent white-on-Black massacres in American history (Brophy, 2003). Although after vociferous criticism the campaign moved Trump's event from that symbolically resonant day, it did take place the day after. However, the hurried change of date arguably did not silence the message sent by the original announcement: A presidency buttressed by, and a reelection campaign trading upon, thinly-veiled appeals to centuries-old notions of white supremacy.

More recently, Trump continued to sound white supremacist themes. At a rally in New Hampshire in late December 2023, for example, the presumptive GOP nominee told his supporters that immigrants "pouring into the country" from "all over the world" are "poisoning the blood of our country" (Pellish & Contorno, 2023), language directly reminiscent of Nazi propaganda.

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Since 2016, Trump's racial appeals compelled some scholars of political communication to tell a more comprehensive story about political identity in the United States and elsewhere around the world (Coles & Lane, 2023). This comes in the face of the field of communication's (Chakravartty et al., 2018), and subfield of political communication's (Freelon et al., 2023), longstanding failures to develop a racial analytic, no doubt a reflection of the field's overwhelming whiteness.

In this essay, we contextualize and review some strains of new literature on identity in political communication, with a focus especially on the U.S. context and the intersection of race and political power. Our aim is to call attention to what we see as an emerging approach to centering power, identity, and social groups in the field. These works are diverse theoretically and methodologically, and their authors may or may not recognize themselves as doing work in political communication at all. But we see tremendous value in what they share analytically, substantively, and normatively, and aim to mark the emergence and – we hope – flourishing of this work.

Our focus on the U.S. in no way implies that identity generally, or race and ethnicity specifically, is a distinctly American problem. It decidedly is not. Globally, many influential theories of race situate it in ideas of social distinction giving rise to and embedded in global systems (Chakravartty & Da Silva, 2012; Da Silva, 2007) including economic systems (McMillan Cottom, 2020; Ralph & Singhal, 2019). More narrowly, it is impossible to understand the rise of far-right parties and politics in many European countries without accounting for the construction of national, white, and Christian identities to mobilize in opposition to immigration (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2016; Wirz et al., 2018; and see; Cassell, 2023 for comparative understandings of social distinction in South America and Europe) – to say nothing of European imperial legacies of colonialism premised on the construction of racial hierarchies (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020; Wekker, 2016). Our focus is on the U.S. both because we know this literature best, and because the shock of Trump's 2016 victory and continuing political power has created for many (especially white) scholars the context, and impetus, for conceptual innovation and reaching beyond the borders of established theory in the field.

The Post-2016 Moment for Political Identity in the Field

In the U.S., scholars working in political science and political communication now generally agree that it is impossible to understand Trump's presidential campaigns, and the contemporary Republican Party, without some reference to white racial resentment and white identity politics (Jardina, 2019). The field was slow to recognize the central role of race and ethnicity, and identity more generally, to politics and political communication, ironically despite decades of work about the centrality of race in American politics (e.g.: Hutchings & Valentino, 2004). Post-2016 works such as Sides, Tessler, and Vavreck's (2019) *Identity Crisis* showed how social and partisan identities explain the outcome of Trump's victory more than other variables such as ideology and economics. Working through the lens of political identity, Mason (2018) detailed how partisanship has become a "mega-identity" that aligns with socially sorted racial and ethnic, religious, geographic, and class identities. These works contribute further to the case made by Achen and Bartels (2016) that information drives election outcomes far

less than identity. Stout (2020), meanwhile, demonstrates how racial identity appeals are powerful mobilization tools, especially for racial and ethnic minority groups (which widens the electorate in pro-democratic ways). And, while these works have focused on the United States, identity is likely a central variable across many democracies riven by conflicts over immigration and identitarian ethno-nationalist backlash (Klinger et al., 2023).

Despite its considerable importance as a foundation from which to build, the rich vein of U.S. political science literature largely did not focus on political *communication*. These scholars reference appeals that make identity salient and the role of campaigns and interest groups in that dynamic, but as a whole this work did not examine media and communication in depth (though Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Kellstedt, 2003 are prominent exceptions). For example, classic works of political communication have analyzed topics such as racial attitudes and racially biased media coverage, alongside similar issues (e.g. Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino et al., 2004; see also Dixon et al., 2019). Other classic works have analyzed how race, identity, media, and belief structures interact to continue to fuel racism in the U.S (Gandy, 1998).

But communication is central to the ways identity is created, evoked, activated, and made politically meaningful and actionable – as outlined in a recent special issue of *Political Communication* edited by Stewart Coles and Dane Lane (2023). Earlier efforts in this direction showed that "racial cues" in political ads may overwhelm policy information, evoking anti-Black backlash among white voters (Berinsky et al., 2020); that campaign rhetoric primed people to think about Barack Obama's race, fomenting racist attitudes (Luttig & Callaghan, 2016); and that white voters operate in a logic of "new racism" where Black candidates are viewed more favorably if they properly signal their association with whites (Porter & Wood, 2016). More recent works show us how identity is not just an independent variable; it is a social and political construct, and understanding how it is constructed and evoked and how it evolves necessitates analyzing communication. For example, Grover and Kuo (2023) destabilize race as a static category or demographic variable, showing how social movements engage in active cultural work that defines the very ideas of racial identities themselves, as well as the political potential for cross-racial solidarities (Kuo & Jackson, 2023). And, communication about identity is textured by power. Stephens-Dougan (2020), for example, shows how candidate communication works to reassure voters from dominant groups (in the U.S., especially moderate and conservative whites) that they will not challenge racial status hierarchies. Indeed, as this and other work shows, communication about identity is central to maintaining – and challenging – political and social power (Perry, 2023).

These scholars' work can help us better understand how identity appeals are impactful and are premised upon historically articulated racial and social structures. Our own modest contribution to is to argue that the evocation of white identity on display in Trump's election campaigns must be understood in terms of the communicative work it requires – a dynamic we call "political identity ownership" (Kreiss et al., 2020). Politicians use media – for example, the visual affordances and communicative control offered by social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram – not only to convey their policy positions, but to perform their own particular identities and appeal to the social groups they and their parties seek to represent and mobilize. And, in the case of white identity politics, politicians such as Trump use identity ownership to make white identities salient and politically actionable in

defense of a racial status hierarchy (for an empirical test of our ideas around the proto-typicality of candidates, see Lane, Moxley, et al., 2023).

In the years since we published this work, a number of scholars have developed these ideas and related insights. For example, Zárate et al. (2023) show how Spanish-language campaign appeals can enable candidates to "signal closeness to Hispanics" and Larrosa-Fuentes (2022) offers a nuanced and critical empirical study of the ways Clinton sought to appeal to Latinos during the 2016 presidential election through constructions of "good immigrants." Soto-Vásquez and Gonzalez (2022) show how media narratives "discipline and capture" Latinx voters. Lane, Hansia, et al. (2023) show how political and social identities intersect and structure engagement in politics (see also Lane et al., 2022). Wells and Friedland (2023) analyze how identity-based claims are enrolled in attempts at recognition and strategic *misrecognition* in the service of political power. Woods et al. (2023) show how politicians deploy rival conceptions of national identity in the attempt to construct the legitimate "people" and especially to mobilize dominant groups in the course of elections – including a racially and ethnically exclusionist "people" on the right. Coles and Pasek (2020) show how group prototypicality leads to the active erasure of Black women.

Centering Power in Studies of Identity, Groups, and Political Communication

Despite new theorizing and empirical work, in many veins of this literature (our works included) often curiously absent are the voices of scholars who have shown how politics throughout much of U.S. political history has essentially always been white identity politics, with devastating consequences for people of color. The most-cited work on identity in politics within our field has in effect edited out many of the citation trails, research questions, and insights that motivated scholars who have been working on questions of race and ethnicity for decades. This is part of a pattern of what the authors of "#CommunicationSoWhite" argue is the "persistent ghettoization of race-related panels and discussions on conference program agendas; and the greater visibility of white scholars' work on race and inequality" (Ng et al., 2020, p. 255). The subfield of political communication is not alone. Many syllabi in communication theory across the field have centered the work of white scholars while ignoring critical theories of race (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020). Mukherjee (2020) argues forcefully that a "disgraceful white boys' club" dominates communication research – which lingers at least in part because scholars too often disregard race and racism in the field's own intellectual history. In the critical wing of the field, scholars have shown how the power of representation intersects with identity (Griffin & Meyer, 2018; see also the edited volume *Interrogating the Communicative Power of Whiteness* by McIntosh, Moon & Nakayama, 2018).

This general lack of engagement with historical and critical bodies of literature not only erases history, it means we lose opportunities to enrich our empirical work. In the U.S. context, accounting more clearly for power means that today's political polarization needs to be more clearly historically contextualized against the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, and white ascriptive hierarchies in the United States (Smith, 1993), including white backlash over immigration driven in part through media coverage (Abrajano and Hajnal, 2015). The Reconstruction period in American history is seldom mentioned in classic works in the field, nor is its violent overthrow (Du Bois, 2017). It is seldom remarked upon in studies of American political communication that the outline of today's partisan politics took shape

after the 1964 passage of the Civil Rights Act spurred waves of white Southern Democrats to leave the party and unite behind "racist Republicans," a shift embraced later by Nixon and Reagan in their implicit and explicit racialized campaign appeals that stoked white anxieties around "law and order" (Marable, 2007, p. 80).

In light of this historical grounding, we can see Donald Trump's appeals to white identity not as an anomaly, but part of the trajectory of the contemporary U.S. Republican Party since the 1950s, and even more an indelible part of the country's long racial history. For example, McRae's *Mothers of Massive Resistance* (2018) details the role white women actively played in fomenting grassroots resistance to racial equality and demonstrating the role women played in supporting white supremacist movements and developing national conservative organizations. This organized racial backlash is endemic to the U.S. As Anderson's (2016) *White Rage* shows, over the course of American history, whenever Black Americans made gains in social power, there has been strong backlash of white anger and resentment. Hooker (2009) has shown how white elites and moderates routinely decry Black struggles for equality on the grounds that they are polarizing, a threat to the (unequal) solidarity of the nation (see also Kreiss & McGregor, 2024 in the context of polarization research in our field). Peck's (2019) *Fox Populism* is essential reading for understanding the network's role in constructing white identity since the 1990s. Costley White (2018) traces the history of the Tea Party movement since 2009, showing how the press was not only culpable but instrumental in amplifying and legitimizing the movement's carefully crafted brand of white outrage. Ott and Dickinson (2019, p. x) bring these insights into the Trump era, showing how the president's rhetorical appeals are deeply rooted in "an aesthetic of white rage, a rhetorical style animated largely by fears and anxieties about the decentering of White masculinity."

Work on white supremacist rhetoric around Blackness should inform any serious consideration of white identity (Griffin, 2014, 2015), especially as the former administration (and current Republican presidential frontrunner) evoked George H.W. Bush's Willie-Horton-style ads with blatantly racist appeals (Béland, 2020). But again, racial appeals are not new, nor are they uncommon. C. McIlwain and Caliendo (2011) argue that a focus on extreme cases of racially abhorrent appeals in political communication – like the Willie Horton ads – obscures the myriad ways politicians more routinely make explicit or implicit appeals to whites (see also C. D. Mcilwain, 2007). Recent work also shows how politicians strategically use justifications when they engage in appeals to racist whites, enabling them to avoid sanctions from others (Thompson & Busby, 2023). Stoking anger among white voters can make racism salient and actionable (Banks, 2014) and politicians often weild marginalized identity invocation in these appeals (Coe & Griffin, 2020). Epistemologically, racial structures underlie the very notion of "post-truth" that has captured so much attention since 2016 (Mejia et al., 2018).

Being attentive to power means also being attuned to *counter* power aimed at dismantling racialized social structures. There is a stunning array of new work at the intersection of identity, social movements, and media especially centered on movements for racial justice, including Kuo (2018), Richardson (2019), Williams Fayne and Richardson (2023), Jackson and Foucault Welles (2015), Jackson et al. (2020), Clark (2015, 2019), Freelon et al. (2016, 2018) and Freelon et al. (2020). Danielle K. Brown and Rachel Mourão have led several projects examining news media coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement that shed light on the convergence of identity, justice, and news frames (Kilgo & Mourão, 2019; Kilgo et al., 2019; Mourão et al., 2018). Meanwhile, Lane, Coles, and Saleem (2019) show that cuing dominant group identities in the context of social movements can shape support for

that movement – specifically in the context of whites seeing white speakers in relation to Black Lives Matter, a dynamic that lays bare dominant in-group psychological processes. Taken together, these studies entwine a clear normative perspective – commitments to political equality and social justice – with an analysis of power and counterpower wielded in the context of social and symbolic action.

In the field of mis/disinformation studies, meanwhile, scholars show how identity is entwined with informational power. Reddi et al. (2023) show how "identity propaganda" draws on racial structures to delegitimize threats to hierarchical racial social orders. Others have documented how weaponized speech targets political leaders who are members of racial and ethnic minorities (Borah et al., 2022). Nguyễn et al. (2023) show the racial dynamics of disinformation in diasporic Vietnamese communities in the U.S. We are particularly struck by important veins of new literature that analyze how disinformation is embedded in the narratives of professional journalists and entertainment programs – potentially even more communicatively harmful of social groups as the strategic, targeted campaigns more commonly studied by disinformation scholars. For example, Müller et al. (2023) show how racial and ethnic minorities in Germany are stigmatized in news media coverage – if they are from countries that are less wealthy and culturally distant, and implicitly if they are Islamic or are associated with refugee groups. Hawkins et al. (2022) show how the cultivation of racial stereotypes of Middle Easterners in entertainment programs leads to mistaken beliefs about terrorism, and Harbin (2023) demonstrates audience backlash to competitive reality shows that highlight Black contestants' "narratives of racial duty."

Conclusion

We see many promising paths in the field at the current moment, but we still believe there is considerable work to be done on the relationship of power and identity in political communication, especially at the center of the field. Too often, scholars at the center of our field wield concepts and design studies that abstract away from very real social distinctions and political power. Ironically, the field of political communication, like political science (see Jardina & Piston, 2023), tends to treat racial power and social inequality in deeply apolitical ways. Andre Brock argues that "social science and communication research that attempts to preserve a color-blind perspective on online endeavors by normalizing Whiteness and othering everyone else" is highly problematic (Brock, 2012, p. 546). While Brock was writing in the context of studies of digital sociality, the insight applies more broadly. Blackness has always been a politicized identity (Dawson, 1995; Johnson, 2003), and so has whiteness – although that has rarely been acknowledged in our field (Painter, 2010).

Moving forward as a field means developing a clear "racial analytic" (Chakravartty et al., 2018) for our research, and bringing identity and inequality, as well as information, to the fore in our attempts to understand political communication and democracy. To do so, at the very least scholars must treat identities and power structures as *central* empirical dynamics in political communication – not as a specialized side topic reserved for certain sub-fields. Doing so means merging the critical and social science research paradigms we outlined to foreground questions especially of racial group power (see Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2020) – which is a foundational axis of political life in countries around the world as an

outgrowth of western imperialism and colonialism (Hooker, 2014; Jardina & Piston, 2023; Jones, 2023). It also compels our field to ground empirical research within a normative commitment to a multi-racial democracy.

Taken together, we see the works cited here as a clear trajectory for the field. The broader melding of critical understandings of power with empirical research will not only produce better social science – it will give us a fuller and more accurate accounting of threats to our tenuously and incompletely achieved multi-racial democracies.

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