

Study shows the social benefits of political incorrectness

September 5, 2019 | by Laura Counts

New Berkeley Haas research sheds light on the psychology of politically incorrect speech—and why it's so effective



When Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez refers to immigrant detention centers as “concentration camps,” or President Trump calls immigrants “illegals,” they may take some heat for being politically incorrect. But using politically incorrect speech brings some benefits: It’s a powerful way to appear authentic.

Researchers at UC Berkeley’s Haas School of Business found that adding even a single politically incorrect word or phrase in place of a politically correct one—“illegal” versus “undocumented” immigrants, for example—makes people view a speaker as more authentic and less likely to be swayed by others.

“The cost of political incorrectness is that the speaker seems less warm, but they also appear less strategic and more ‘real,’” says Asst. Prof. Juliana Schroeder (<https://haas.berkeley.edu/faculty/schroeder-juliana/>), co-author of the paper, which includes nine experiments with almost 5,000 people and is forthcoming in (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-46162-001>) *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. “The result may be that people may feel less hesitant in following politically incorrect leaders because they appear more committed to their beliefs.”

Cuts across party lines

Although politically correct speech is more often defended by liberals and derided by conservatives, the researchers also found there’s nothing inherently partisan about the concept. In fact, conservatives are just as likely to be offended by politically incorrect speech when it’s used to describe groups they care about, such as evangelicals or poor whites.

“Political incorrectness is frequently applied toward groups that liberals tend to feel more sympathy towards, such as immigrants or LGBTQ individuals, so liberals tend to view it negatively and conservatives tend to think it’s authentic,” says Berkeley Haas PhD candidate Michael Rosenblum (<https://haas.berkeley.edu/bibs/about-us/people/#michaelrosenblum>), the lead author of the paper (the third co-author is Francesca Gino of Harvard Business School (<https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/profile.aspx?facId=271812>)). “But we found that the opposite can be true when such language is applied to groups that conservatives feel sympathy for—like using words such as ‘bible thumper’ or ‘redneck’.”

The researchers asked participants of all ideological backgrounds how they would define political correctness. The definition that emerged was “using language or behavior to seem sensitive to others’ feelings, especially those others who seem disadvantaged.” In order to study the phenomenon across the political spectrum, they focused on politically incorrect **labels**, such as “illegal immigrants,” rather than political **opinions**, such as “illegal immigrants are destroying America.”

That allowed them to gauge people’s reactions when just a single word or phrase was changed in otherwise identical statements. They found that most people, whether they identified as moderate liberals or conservatives, viewed politically incorrect statements as more authentic. They also thought they could better predict politically incorrect speakers’ other opinions, believing in their conviction.

The illusion of being easily influenced

In one field experiment, the researchers found that using politically correct language gives the illusion that the speaker can be more easily influenced. They asked 500 pre-screened pairs of people to have an online debate on a topic they disagreed on: funding for historically black churches. (The topic was selected because it had a roughly 50/50 split for and against in a pilot survey; no significant difference in support and opposition across political ideology; and involved both a racial minority and religious beliefs.) Before the conversation, one partner was instructed to either use politically correct or incorrect language in making their points.

Afterwards, people believed they had better persuaded the politically correct partners than the politically incorrect partners. Their partners, however, reported being equally persuaded, whether they were using PC or politically incorrect language. “There was a perception that PC speakers were more persuadable, though in reality they weren’t,” Rosenblum said.

Although President Trump’s wildly politically incorrect statements seem to make him more popular in certain circles, copycat politicians should take heed. The researchers found that politically incorrect statements make a person appear significantly colder, and because they appear more convinced of their beliefs, they may also appear less willing to engage in crucial political dialogue.

View the full study:

Tell it like it is: When politically incorrect language promotes authenticity
(<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-46162-001>)

(forthcoming in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*)

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