ABSTRACT

ALISON MARTIN. Rhetoric of Identification and Division in America: How Donald Trump Won the 2016 Presidential Election. (Under the direction of Professors Barbara Bennett and Emily Winderman.)

The 2016 election was a turning point in American politics. Many were surprised that Donald Trump, who ran a wildly unconventional campaign, won the Electoral College. While some saw Trump as bigoted, racist, and incompetent, others saw him as a successful businessman who would Make America Great Again. One group, the Alt-Right, saw Trump's campaign as a push for a white nationalist agenda, and they came out of the shadows to celebrate his anti-immigration, anti-Establishment, and politically incorrect stances. The forwardness of Trump's prejudiced platform was shocking to many Americans, particularly those like myself on the Left, and we questioned how millions of people could approve of his unconstitutional and discriminatory policies. To determine how Trump, a historically unpopular candidate, was able to win the election, I examine Trump's Campaign Announcement speech and utilize texts from Alt-Right media as evidence of Trump's rhetorical success. Using Kenneth Burke's theory of rhetoric as identification and division, I show how Trump demonstrated to his audience, particularly members of the Alt-Right, that he was a candidate who had their best interests at heart. I discuss ways politically correct rhetoric on the Left, despite good intention, was counterproductive, further divided affiliative groups, and contributed to an antagonistic socio-political climate in America. I make suggestions for ways those in my affiliative network, White Woke Liberals, can bridge the partisan gap through use of narratives, empathy, and inclusive conversation practices that encourage Americans to work together rather than fight a culture war. I propose White Woke Liberals apply our multiculturalist values to conversation with our partisan counterparts. By using language that identifies with others rather than divides, we can broaden our affiliative network so that we may one day see each other as humans rather than ideological and cultural enemies.