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Professor Tenure-Line

Communication Arts and Sciences

Title of your research project.

Hoodies, Tattoos, and a Veggie Tray: Burkean Identification and the Fetterman Senate Campaign

Description of research. Please provide a few sentences that explain the question and the methods employed in this research project.

In November 2022, Democratic Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman successfully defeated Republican celebrity doctor Dr. Mehmet Oz to become Pennsylvania's junior Senator, taking retiring Republican Pat Toomey's open seat. Fetterman was a unique candidate for a number of reasons: At 6'9 with tattoos and donning his signature hoodie and shorts, he didn't look or dress like a typical politician, and just before the spring primary election, he suffered a stroke, which, while not damaging his cognitive abilities, resulted in a hearing disability. Through a rhetorical analysis of Fetterman's social media campaign, I argue that Fetterman's success in the Pennsylvania Senate race was largely due to his use of Burkean identification. I suggest that Pennsylvanians identified with his casual style, meaningful tattoos, and his use of humor via social media, which often involved the use of dissociation, painting his opponent as an outsider from New Jersey who did not understand Pennsylvania or its residents. This paper suggests that future candidates may consider focusing on Burkean identification and its strategies of common ground and dissociation, particularly through humor, in their campaigns.

Did this project include Penn State students as researchers?

No

If yes to the above question, please state where it was published.

In progress

What problem do you address with your research?

How the Fetterman campaign used Identification in their social media campaigns in order to win the election.