THE ONGOING IDENTITY APPEAL OF THE BIRTHING MOVEMENT

Layperson Summary

Today, it can be argued that it is easier to define who doesn’t qualify as an American rather than who does qualify as American. Amplified by the events of September 11, 2001, a significant portion of Americans express intolerance of difference. On November 4, 2008, United States voters made history by electing the first African American male to office, President Barack Obama. In a country that is haunted by its less than perfect history of race relations, the acceptance of a president that was not a white male seemed to be a step in the right direction. Although the majority of Americans embraced the change that President Obama represented, there were some who resented this racially inclusive change to the Executive Branch.

The Birthing Movement originated during this time by raising concerns about Obama’s citizenship status. Despite presenting his birth certificate to doubters, Birthers still question the authenticity of the documents, as he is finishing out his second term as president. Ideologies, or mental frameworks, that the Birthers are characterized by are important to our political climate because ideologies greatly influence what Americans believe are most important and who they will vote for due to these beliefs. Far from an isolated short-term movement, Birthers have continued to make their mark on American political culture. It is crucial for the American public to understand the differing viewpoints surrounding candidates in order to make an educated vote. Movements such as the Birther Movement contribute negatively to our discursive climate and can become camouflage, or a cover, for deeper racially charged sentiments.
This study will perform a longitudinal study that follows the evolution and progression of the Birther Movement, as well as the discourse surrounding it from 2008 to today in order to investigate and unearth the racial undertones embedded in its rhetoric and texts. It will investigate which actors have stood at the forefront of this narrative as well as explore why such a radical concept has endured for so long, despite the fact that legal arguments have shut down the case against Birthers. By examining the Birther Movement through the lens of symbolic convergence theory (SCT) in which an explanation for a group’s identity is offered, I will argue that the Birther Movement is a racially charged political movement that negatively contributes to the American discursive climate.

In order to gather the information to effectively study the Birther Movement and its corresponding practices, this study will employ a case study method. I will use case studies that demonstrate the Birther Movement’s persuasive strategies. As part of the case study method, I will also examine media artifacts such as broadcast news reports and articles. These will be used to compare the information learned to studies of the general population’s perception of Birthers. Combining all of these documents should provide me sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the Birther Movement relies on elements of SCT to recruit and maintain its membership. I expect this case study method will explain not only why the Birther Movement developed but what such movements mean for political and racial deliberation.