

Politically Correct or Partisan Crusade?:

An Analysis of How PC Language Affects the National Political Dialogue

Zoe Moore

University of North Georgia

The United States of America in 2016 is more politically divided than ever. The most recent election cycle, which entailed an overly drawn out and frustrating campaign for both political parties, featured candidates who were generally more disliked- even by members of their own party- than liked. It is evident that biases between Democrats and Republicans are becoming more solidified by the day, and the consequences of this division on the country as a whole will only continue to worsen. Among the many sources of disagreement between the two parties is the idea of “political correctness,” or the use of particular language that attempts to avoid offending members of minority groups. The highly emotional debate over politically correct language is symptomatic of the deeply entrenched bias between the two major political parties in American society. While politically correct language may not be the perfect solution, individuals on both sides must make a conscious effort to use language that is both respectful of others’ differences and representative of their true opinions, working to bridge the political divide with every sentence.

Merriam Webster defines “politically correct” as “conforming to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters of sex or race) should be eliminated” (“Politically Correct”). The term is generally applied to language regarding racial and ethnic minorities, women, and homosexuals. Partially because members of these groups are more likely to hold liberal beliefs, this ideal is also more commonly held in a positive light by the Democratic party. Republicans, on the other hand, are on the whole less diverse, and are therefore more likely to regard political correctness as a form of restriction, an infringement on their freedom of speech. Depending on who is employing the term in any given instance, being “politically correct” can either be connoted as a praise-worthy goal, or a ridiculous plague.

Perhaps the most significant reason this term is so polarizing is because of the language used within the term itself; its usage is highly politicized, and because “political” is part of the phrase, it stands to reason that those who use it intend to make a point about the political qualities of the speech or doctrine in question. It is a testimony to the current state of American politics that to be political is to be divisive. The second component, “correct,” is perhaps even more troublesome. It suggests, even insists, that there is a right way to say things, do things, and even think things. In the spirit of open, educated political debate, attempting to be “correct” can only be detrimental to the conversation. Those who wear the term with pride are explicitly claiming that their way of thought is superior, and those who use it derogatorily are discrediting an entire school of thought wholesale, without stopping to merit or even analyze individual points with which they may agree.

The origin of the term “politically correct” appears to be up for debate, as few sources agree entirely on the term’s coinage. One factor that is generally agreed upon, however, is that the term has always been employed with contempt. Many trace it back to the 1940s and 50s, when Stalin was in power in the Soviet Union. Evidently,

“the term ‘politically correct’ was used disparagingly to refer to someone whose loyalty to the CP line overrode compassion and led to bad politics. It was used by Socialists against Communists, and was meant to separate out Socialists... from dogmatic Communists who would advocate and defend party positions regardless of their moral substance” (Kohl, 1992).

Given this history, it is unsurprising that the modern usage in the United States is so polarizing as well. Tsehelska asserts that “Politically correct speech became a matter of hot debate in the 1980s, when many native speakers of English became sensitive to biased terms and phrases that

exist in the language,” primarily due to the resurgence of feminism during that time (2006, p. 20). The term in its current connotation continued to be popularized in the 1990s; perhaps the first usage of this new wave of “politically correct” in professional writing came in the October 1990 article from *The New York Times*, “The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct.” In this article, which discusses the state of liberal education in America, Bernstein asserts that political correctness refers to the liberal “view that Western civilization is inherently unfair to minorities, women and homosexuals,” and that by allowing university faculty to teach as though this belief is “right,” there is an overwhelming pressure for students with other viewpoints to conform (Bernstein, 1990). Whether or not that influence is inherently negative, the linguistic trend of politically correct language has certainly infiltrated the practices and teachings of American universities for the past quarter of a century.

It is here that the crux of the debate around political correctness lies: the media consistently accuses university faculty of imposing their liberal ideologies on students across the country. Ideally, college is the time when young adults are free to explore themselves; they are permitted to make mistakes, try new things, find their passion, and search for a career path that best fits their strengths. As such, universities are typically regarded as the hot bed of American progressivism, a breeding ground for fresh ideas, political protests, and, ultimately, systemic change. The field of linguistics is no different; words commonly associated with the generation currently coming of age in the nation’s colleges are slowly permeating the national vocabulary, with words like “bae” and “turnt” being added to the dictionary each year. Because universities tend to lean more liberal, conservative parents and members of the community are concerned that their children are being indoctrinated with left-leaning ideas that will then be adopted into the mainstream language. This concern is heightened by the notion that politically correct

language may be subtly interwoven into lectures, assignments, and even daily conversation, thus furthering the imposition of liberal ideals on the next generation.

Research from *The Washington Post* shows that, even more than their students, college professors are far more likely to self-identify as liberals than as conservatives, a trend that has increased drastically in the last three decades (Ingraham, 2016). In 2014, roughly sixty percent of college professors considered themselves liberals, and nearly thirty percent identified as moderate. This effectively translates to liberals in university faculties outnumbering their conservative colleagues five to one (Ingraham, 2016). However, the statistics for college students is closer to forty percent liberal, forty percent moderate, and twenty percent conservative. Additionally, surveys show only a nine percent increase in the number of students who described themselves as liberal between their freshman and senior years of college (Ingraham, 2016). So although liberal beliefs, and politically correct speech, tend to dominate collegiate discussions, “fears that universities will indoctrinate your children and turn them into a bunch of bearded Marxist automatons are probably unfounded” (Ingraham, 2016).

So while it is clear that the liberal leanings of university faculty are unlikely to be detrimental to American college students, their research into politically correct speech shows that this type of careful consideration of terminology may be beneficial overall. MacLennan defines political correctness as “the language of those groups who have been, especially since the sixties, endeavoring to achieve in full the promise of citizenship” (1997). In these groups, he includes “gays, women, blacks, and lately the physically and mentally handicapped and the mentally ill” (MacLennan, 1997). He insists that their aims are merely to “be treated with respect and as part of this they have asked that we change our language behavior so as to recognize their humanity. Nothing more, nothing less” (MacLennan, 1997). He then goes on to equivocate political

correctness with courtesy, illustrating what he sees as the intention behind this much-debated trend. While MacLennan clearly supports the ideals behind political correctness, saying “it is important that people... in America strive to be more politically correct,” he also critiques the society that has made it necessary (1997). “It is only when we have a society which organizes itself along egalitarian lines that we will achieve the kind of world sought by those who support emergent political correctness” (MacLennan, 1997).

Tsehelska takes a strong stance off the bat in her article, asserting that “The importance of teaching EFL students politically correct English is no longer argued” (2006). While politically correct language is obviously still up for debate, the context of her piece shows that Tsehelska, as an educator, simply believes that it is crucial that non-native English speakers be taught to avoid offensive or demeaning terms. English language learners (ELLs) may not be accustomed to countries as ethnically diverse as the United States, and it is therefore essential that these students be made “aware of the importance of efforts towards inclusiveness and acceptance of diverse lifestyles and ethnicities in English-speaking cultures,” especially in the academic and business arenas (Tsehelska, 2006). She asserts that “politically correct English can be an interesting and useful subject of study for the ESL or EFL classroom,” and goes on to outline possible lessons and discussion topics which ELL teachers may employ in their classrooms. In this way, politically correct speech is not enforcing a particular ideology on students, but providing them with a means to interact successfully in a diverse new population.

On both sides of the aisle, emotions run high when debating this issue. Liberal-minded writers and academics seeking to defend, or even champion, the use of politically correct speech are not immune to over-dramatization, and Scott is no exception when she declares, “the entire enterprise of the university has come under attack, and with it that aspect that intellectuals most

value and that the humanities most typically represent: a critical, skeptical approach” (Scott, 1991). She continues on to claim that “the production of knowledge is a political enterprise,” and that language tends to reflect the political climate of its users as well. Scott calls attention to the debate over political correctness as symptomatic of the right’s bid to draw the public’s attention away from the much larger issues in today’s university system. She points to the Reagan-Bush administration as having started the movement within their own party to “neutralize the space of ideological and cultural nonconformity by discrediting it,” thereby asserting that those who insist on discussing political correctness are ultimately aiming to dismantle the public’s trust in and respect for college professors and their work (Scott, 1991).

While at first glance it would appear that being mindful with one’s terminology in reference to others can only be positive, there is merit to the argument against political correctness as well. Many regard the tendency to utilize politically correct speech as a travesty, and even a form of censorship that should not be perpetrated by America’s institutions of higher learning. Conservatives often voice concerns that the emotional aspects of politically correct speech inhibit the ability of individuals from both sides to establish an open line of candid communication. As Loury states, “genuine moral discourse on difficult social issues can become impossible when the risks of upsetting some portion of one's audience are too great” (1994). Even more concerning, there are indications that due to the pressure to utilize politically correct speech, many people, including students, may be so cautious of overstepping verbal boundaries that they misrepresent themselves. Van Boven suggests that, “In particular, the desire to appear politically correct, and to avoid being seen as racist, sexist, or culturally insensitive, can lead people to espouse publicly [sic] support for politically correct issues, such as support for affirmative action, despite privately held doubts” (2000, p. 267). One survey indicated that

students overestimated their peers' support for affirmative action, because their daily discourse with their fellow students misrepresented their privately-held beliefs (Van Boven, 2000, p. 267). While it is important to be considerate and mindful when discussing controversial issues with one's peers, concealing one's true opinions can only obstruct the overall effort of honest public discourse.

The usage of political correctness can also vary depending on the group; for example, when students were surveyed regarding the racial makeup of their social group, their answers failed to accurately represent their actual behaviors. White students tended to respond that they socialized with more members of other races, while in reality, friend groups remained fairly segregated by race (Mack et al., 1997, p. 267). Additionally, while several racial groups felt comfortable criticizing white students, the only racial group which reported any bias towards black students were Asians. The study concluded that "political correctness is masking attitudes towards Black students, while allowing students to be more honest in their expression of uncomfortable feelings about Whites" (Mack et al., 1997, p. 267).

Another unintended consequence of politically correct speech is the advent of new forms of bias. "One of the most striking results of the social sanctioning of prejudice has been the development of more subtle forms of prejudice expression that seem more 'politically correct'" (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005, p. 75). Barreto and Ellemers' study showed that while openly sexist views from fifty years ago elicited hostility from female participants, the same women were less likely to recognize modern examples of sexism as being prejudiced, and therefore failed to challenge these statements (2005, p. 75). Because of politically correct speech, newer forms of sexism have become harder to detect, as well as harder to prevent. These "modern forms of prejudice may prove perilous" if they aren't recognized (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005, p. 75).



A recent article in *The Atlantic* describes a culture of political correctness that has morphed into one of “*vindictive protectiveness*. It is creating a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Those who do not conform to others’ insistence on the usage of politically correct language are often viciously reprimanded. Part of this way of thinking involves subverting factual reality with an emotional one; the idea of something being “offensive” no longer means that it personally upsets someone’s subjective emotions. Instead, as Lukianoff and Haidt explain, “it is, rather, a public charge that the speaker has done something objectively wrong. It is a demand that the speaker apologize or be punished” (2015). In today’s increasingly individualized America, the prevailing attitude is that everyone has the “right not to be offended” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). It may be in part due to the preeminence of politically correct speech that “the thin argument ‘I’m offended’ becomes an unbeatable trump card,” and “emotional reasoning is now accepted as evidence” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). While it is important to stand up for the rights of minorities, Americans walk a dangerous line when they begin to generate real legal battles around perceived slights and purely emotional reactions.

For individuals on both sides of the political aisle in America, politically correct speech is a polarizing topic that has become a staple in the ongoing debate between conservative media and the liberal-leaning higher education system. What began as a derogatory slur by the Communist Party under Stalin reemerged as a subtle attack by conservatives in the United States on the liberal tendency to police perceived offensive language. The term has since been reclaimed by liberals to mean the use of terms which are respectful of others’ differences, an ideal which they champion. The resurgence of “political correctness” in the 1990s is emblematic of the greater schism that has become ever-more entrenched in the last few decades, ultimately

resulting in the hostile and stubborn political climate of today. While there is no easy solution to this polarization, it is imperative that members of both political parties work to cut through the high emotional stigma surrounding political discourse in order to hold a productive dialogue. Being respectful and courteous to others, as the liberals encourage, is paramount, but little will be accomplished unless everyone feels safe expressing their true opinions, as the conservatives point out. Politically correct speech does have some merit, but both sides must be willing to cease debating such trivial issues and truly listen to one another, if the country as a whole is ever going to move into a more accepting and tolerant future.

## References

- Barreto, M., & Ellemers, N. (2005). The Perils of Political Correctness: Men's and Women's Responses to Old-Fashioned and Modern Sexist Views. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 68(1), 75-88. Retrieved December 13, 2016.
- Bernstein, R. (1990, October 28). Ideas & Trends; The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct. *The New York Times*. Retrieved December 13, 2016.
- Ingraham, C. (2016, January 11). The Dramatic Shift Among College Professors That's Hurting Students' Education. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved December 13, 2016.
- Kohl, H. (1992, June). Uncommon Differences: On Political Correctness, Core Curriculum and Democracy in Education. *The Lion and The Unicorn*, 16(1), 1-16. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from Project Muse.
- Loury, G. C. (1994, October 1). Self-Censorship in Public Discourse: A Theory of "Political Correctness" and Related Phenomena. *Rationality and Society*, 6(4). Retrieved December 13, 2016, from SAGE Journals.
- Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2015, September). The Coddling of the American Mind. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved December 13, 2016.
- Mack, D. E., Tucker, T. W., Archuleta, R., DeGroot, G., Hernandez, A. H., & Cha, S. O. (1997, October). Interethnic Relations on Campus: Can't We All Get Along? *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 25(4), 256-268. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from Wiley Online Library.
- MacLennan, G. (1997, March). Political Correctness (and courtesy) in Australia. *Monthly Review*, 48(10), 33-43. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from ProQuest.
- Politically Correct [Def. 1]. (2016). In *Merriam Webster*. Retrieved December 13, 2016.

Scott, J. W. (1991, November/December). The Campaign Against Political

Correctness. *Change*,23(6). Retrieved December 13, 2016, from Academic Search

Complete.

Tsehelska, M. (2006). Teaching Politically Correct Languages. *English Teaching Forum*,44(1),

20-23. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from ERIC.

Van Boven, L. (2000). Pluralistic Ignorance and Political Correctness: The Case of Affirmative

Action. *Political Psychology*,21(2), 267-367. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from Wiley

Online Library.