Visible Identities, Visual Rhetoric:
The Self-Labeled Body as a Popular Platform for Political Persuasion

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This study examines how political T-shirts—i.e., those featuring printed images, symbols, or words that make explicit reference to electoral politics—are used by their wearers as identity labels for the purpose of advancing persuasive messages in the public sphere. Drawing upon 28 in-depth interviews with wearers, I consider how making one's political identity publicly visible with legible markers is conceptualized as a rhetorical act with the potential to challenge public perceptions of who "the people" out there really are. The discussion poses larger questions about how the visual expression of identity endemic to a wide variety of popular culture-related practices may be used by citizens to gain an empowering sense of participation in the sphere of "mainstream" political communication.

Introduction

According to a large body of scholarship, the boundaries between popular culture and politics are being increasingly blurred in contemporary times (Axford & Huggins, 2002; Corner & Pels, 2003; Dahlgren, 2009; Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994; Street, 1997). Alongside this shift in the political and cultural landscape, the definition of what constitutes meaningful political participation has been greatly expanding. In recent years, researchers exploring the politics-popular culture nexus have focused attention on a wide variety of citizen-level phenomena, from the interactive audiences of satirical political television (Jones, 2006) to the politically oriented uses of such social media platforms as Facebook (Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver, 2010) and Twitter (Wilson, 2011). At the same time, there has been growing scholarly interest in politically oriented consumer culture (e.g., Banet-Weiser & Lapsansky, 2008), a phenomenon that is closely linked to the intermeshing of popular media and politics, since both consumer commodities and media texts are now characteristic of a broader "image culture" (Jansson, 2002).

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A common theme running across much of this scholarship involves the issue of whether citizen-level engagement with spectacular, mediatized, and commercialized forms of politics offers promising new avenues of participation in the political process, or rather, represents a potentially worrisome trivialization or undermining of political participation. For instance, Banet-Weiser and Lapsanksy ambivalently question whether popular efforts to combine consumer culture and media marketing with civic activism (such as the famous RED campaign) "merely conflate consumerism with activism, confining social action within parameters that perpetuate some of the problems they claim to address" (2008, p. 1263). Taking a sharper critical perspective, Hearn (2012) lambastes the trend of "green" consumption-based activism promulgated by various commercial entities as wholly antithetical to the goals of the environmental movement. While the following study does not seek to challenge such cogent critiques, it does provide a more generally optimistic account of how everyday citizens may use certain forms of politically-themed popular culture to gain an empowering sense of participation in the contemporary political environment. By examining the particular phenomenon of political T-shirts from the perspective of those who wear them, I aim to build upon recent scholarship that has emphasized the potential for popular culture platforms to open up new spaces for everyday citizens to engage in meaningful political activity (e.g., Dahlgren, 2009; Jones, 2006).

More specifically, this study examines how political T-shirts—defined here as those featuring printed images, symbols, or words that make explicit reference to the formal electoral political arena—are deliberately used by their wearers as identity labels for the purpose of advancing persuasive messages in the public sphere.[2] Drawing upon 28 in-depth interviews with young adults who have worn such items, I consider how making one's political identity publicly visible with clear and legible markers is seen as transforming one's body into a visual rhetorical text that may have real political effects. By creating visibility for their political identities via this popular culture platform, the participants here see themselves as potentially challenging public perceptions of who "the people" out there really are, a reality-redefining gesture that they conceptualize as an efficacious form of political action. Although the nature of the effects produced by such public identity performances vary greatly in the minds of the participants, I use the term "persuasion" here to refer to any sort of potential attitude or behavioral change (however large or small) that may impact the outcome of elections. However, my goal is not to scientifically test whether or not this unique form of embodied visual rhetoric truly works upon audiences in the ways it is intended, but rather, to qualitatively explore the logics by which the wearers themselves understand their practices to be fulfilling a persuasive function within the electoral political realm. While the research focus rests squarely on the phenomenon of political T-shirts, I use my inquiry to pose larger questions about how projects of identity expression endemic to consumer culture and popular media fandom on the one hand,

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[2] While this limited definition of "political T-shirts" is used here for the sake of clarity, other definitions are also certainly possible. For instance, one may look beyond the realm of formal electoral politics to include T-shirts that make reference to any number of social movements (e.g., environmentalism, feminism, LGBT rights, etc.). In fact, whether a person considers a T-shirt to be "political" in nature may vary depending on his or her own subjective understanding of its meaning. However, the T-shirts discussed in this particular context all make clear and explicit reference to the U.S. electoral political system, and the participants whose first-hand accounts are featured here were recruited based upon their judgment of whether their T-shirts fit these specific criteria.

and projects of public communicative action on the other, are becoming increasingly entwined within post-industrial capitalist societies. I further emphasize how my approach, which draws its theoretical framework from studies of subaltern "grassroots" social movements that have historically focused on projects of public visibility, can enhance the study of citizen-level participation in mainstream electoral politics in the present context.

Popular Culture, Dress, Identity, and Grassroots Political Expression

The notion of using one's participatory engagement with popular culture as a means of identity expression is well-established in the sociological and media/cultural studies literature. For instance, Fiske (1989) emphasizes how people actively draw upon popular culture material (such as music, fashion, and television) to create spectacular expressions of their membership in youth subcultures or other subordinate communities (see also Hebdige, 1979). For Jenkins (2006), the interactive and creative practices that fans of popular culture enact through digital technology work to articulate cultural identities and form communities (and according to Jenkins' logic, may even serve as a model for collective political action). The field of scholarship focusing on the consumer culture of Western capitalism describes similar sorts of processes at work, but within a broader social context. Summarizing the insights of such sociologists of modernity as Giddens (1991), Slater explains that, in Western consumer capitalism, "we choose a self-identity from the shop-window of the pluralized social world; actions, experiences, and objects are all reflexively encountered as part of the need to construct and maintain self-identity" (1997, p. 85). In other words, the self must be continually produced through identity performances enabled by the purchase and display of popular culture artifacts.

While a wide range of popular consumption and media fandom practices may serve to express (as well as to self-reflexively construct) identity, the physical human body remains a central locus for this sort of performative activity in the contemporary context, particularly through practices of dress. As Crane (2000) notes, over the past hundred years, fashion has become more and more focused on lifestyle identity expression, as brand marketing has created "niches" for consumers to express themselves along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality (to name a few of the most important indices of identity). While printed T-shirts designed as legible identity labels may represent this trend in its most intensified form, adorning the body with visual markers of identity has, in fact, been a common cultural practice throughout human history. The anthropologists Roach and Eicher (1979), for example, describe a vast array of identification functions of personal adornment in different societies across the world. These functions include the public indication of social role, economic status, religious beliefs and values (as in Amish and Hasidic communities), and most significant for the present study, political affiliations. Indeed, the authors point to historical examples that can be considered precursors to the modern political T-shirt, such as differentially-placed beauty patches during the reign of Queen Anne in England—a patch on the right cheek indicated preference for the Whigs, the left cheek for the Tories, and both cheeks for a neutral position. While such accounts suggest the historical significance of marking political identities with visual labels, they do little to elucidate how these visual expressions may have been deliberately used as tools of political persuasion.

However, recent scholarship devoted to politically oriented dress practices offers a more vivid picture of how popular platforms of identity expression may interact with the public sphere, thus providing a useful framework for theorizing this constellation of issues more broadly. In particular, Parkins (2002) sketches the contours of such a framework in her account of the early 20th-century women's suffrage movement in the UK. She discusses how women who sought to gain the right to vote wore purple, white, and green—the official colors of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)—as a deliberate and recognizable public gesture that both worked to build a movement identity and allowed it to step onto the broader political stage: "Through the use of fashion and specific colors, the suffragettes forged a public identity for themselves and introduced themselves and their cause into the sphere of political communication" (ibid., p. 99). In other words, the identity expressions of the suffragettes, achieved via the display of fashion commodities as legible political markers, may have not only served to help construct the movement, but also to visually advocate its positions to the broader society. Parkins uses her case study of the WSPU to help model an expanded conception of public sphere participation that includes spectacular and expressive practices in addition to the deliberative dialogue privileged by Habermas (1989) and his followers—a move that is particularly productive for connecting political participation to a range of expressive activities related to popular culture.

It is important to note that Parkins' emphasis on the public visual appearance of the suffragettes via dress as a platform for participating in "the sphere of political communication" echoes certain ideas of 20th-century political philosophy—particularly those of Arendt and a number of her followers. For Arendt (1958), self-disclosing appearance in the public realm is the foundation for all political action. While her discussion of appearance-as-politics is not limited to such visual self-presentation practices as dress, she does note (in a clear parallel to the WSPU example) that the marked-out appearance of the sans culottes (i.e., the working class of the French Revolution) coincided with their being "admitted into the public realm," and thus "enter[ing] the scene of history" (ibid., p. 195). Arendt's political philosophy thus lays out a broad conceptual framework for understanding public visual displays—particularly those that are embodied and self-disclosing—as playing a role in an expanded notion of the public sphere. Indeed, the revival of Arendt's ideas since the 1990s has tended to embrace the stylistic, aesthetic, and performative aspects of her model of political action as potentially liberating for marginalized groups seeking to transform social and political conditions. For example, in an echo of Parkins' argument, Warner (2002) draws upon Arendt's concept of the public realm of appearances in his discussion of feminist and LGBT activism to challenge the Habermasian critical-rational model of political participation theory and suggest the potential political importance of visual expressivity (among other communicative modes). Following from this line of thought, we can begin to appreciate how identity performances enabled by citizens' active engagement with spectacular forms of popular culture (including, but not limited to dress) can be viewed as tools for participation—and perhaps even empowerment—in the broader political environment.

However, the precise ways in which these expressions of identity fashioned via popular culture platforms might actually work as effective political tools remains somewhat unclear from these accounts. While developing such a model is a primary goal of the present study of political T-shirts, empirical research on the visual rhetorical strategies of social movements helps us to move in such a direction. One notable example is Chaffee's global comparative study of protest street art. Conceptualizing street art as "low-technology mass communication in an age of high technology" (1993, p. 3), he considers the political

potential of a number of expressive popular culture platforms, including wall murals, graffiti, posters, signs, stickers, pins, and T-shirts. Chaffee argues that protest street art carries, in its very form of presentation, certain rhetorical connotations of authentic "grassroots" political sentiment, standing as a signpost of what is "really" going on: "[I]ts use is appealing especially to those who stress a collective consciousness and claim to speak for and represent the people" (ibid., p. 15).

Here, Chaffee touches upon a key idea within critical political theory. According to Laclau (1977, pp. 167–173), laying claim to "the people" by articulating who "they" are and what "they" believe is central to the hegemonic winning of power by dominant social groups. Laclau's theory also considers the progressive potential of de-articulation and re-articulation of "the people" by subaltern groups engaged in political struggle—an idea that has been enthusiastically taken up in critical/cultural media studies, particularly by Hall (1982). While much of this work focuses on the discourse of electronic popular media (especially television, in Hall's case) as a privileged site for articulating "the people," it is also important to examine other platforms of popular culture where claims to represent "the people" are particularly strong. Indeed, the protest street artworks documented by Chaffee have readily apparent connotations of "grassroots" authenticity, as they seemingly emerge spontaneously from everyday people operating outside of official systems of communication. When such popular culture forms are combined with a living, walking body, as in the case of T-shirts, buttons, or pins, the appeal to "grassroots" authenticity is particularly charged; i.e., the rhetorical political message being visually presented is concrete, owned, coming from a "real" person and not from a disembodied, professionalized elite. Such an authenticating appeal may be even more pronounced when embodied displays are coordinated into collective public action, articulating a counter-image of "the people" that may potentially challenge public perceptions of political reality. Thus, the formal qualities of these visual public displays of protest—particularly having to do with the intimate and embodied ways in which they are presented—make this sort of rhetorical strategy particularly useful for those claiming authentic representation of "the people" for political purposes.

Other research on the visual communication strategies of social movements helps to further orient us toward the present article's central contention that visually articulating identities constitutes a form of persuasive rhetoric. Szerszynski (2003), in his study of environmental activists who engage in public performance art, describes how their visual practices mark their bodies out from the general population in order to call public attention to alternative and eco-friendly styles of living. Goodnow (2006) likewise suggests that the visual articulation of political identities may serve as an efficacious rhetorical tool in the public sphere. She describes how the act of displaying a social movement symbol publicly (e.g., by wearing it on a button or T-shirt) not only identifies the wearer as a member of the movement, but also helps to increase awareness that the movement actually exists, creating publicity that may be instrumental in increasing membership.

This scenario outlined by Goodnow is, in fact, one example of how articulating identity with popular culture artifacts like self-labeling T-shirts may work as a form of political persuasion—here involving the strategic visibility efforts of a social movement identity that may be unknown to the general public. As the accounts of the political T-shirt wearers interviewed for this study demonstrate, however, other kinds of rhetorical messages can similarly be put forth by making political identities visible through

acts of self-labeling. While I have focused in this literature review on the visual rhetorical strategies of marginalized social movements—due in no small part to their historical reliance on inexpensive grassroots advertising methods like the wearing of buttons and T-shirts—the same ideas are applicable to the domain of mainstream electoral politics, as well.

The field of political communication, which generally studies the campaigns of elected officials, has typically ignored the kinds of grassroots strategies of persuasion discussed here. However, this study of political T-shirts helps to demonstrate how visual identity performances enabled via popular culture may indeed be relevant for the formal electoral realm, as well as for subaltern, identity-focused social movements. Certainly, bottom-up social movement rhetoric has unique properties that differentiate it from top-down electoral campaigning. While bearing in mind that the two should not simply be conflated, the discussion in this article explores how embodied strategies of visual public discourse familiar in a range of social movement-oriented contexts (Chaffee, 1993; Goodnow, 2006; Parkins, 2002; Szerszynski, 2003) are being adopted by citizens interested in influencing the outcome of mainstream elections. Thus, a primary contribution of this study is to expand the parameters of political communication scholarship by incorporating concepts from the study of social movements that have historically placed emphasis on the public articulation of social identities.

Method

In order to better understand how the self-labeled body is deliberately used for the purpose of politically oriented persuasion (among other uses), in-depth interviews were conducted in 2010 with 28 young adult Americans who have worn T-shirts related to mainstream U.S. electoral politics. Participants were recruited through email announcements sent to politically oriented campus organizations at seven major colleges in a metropolitan area in the northeastern United States. These organizations included College Republicans and College Democrats, various Tea Party groups, and the Black Student Union—a key group mobilizing students around the presidential election during the 2008 Obama candidacy. Anyone over the age of 18 who had worn a T-shirt making reference to the contemporary U.S. political arena was eligible to participate in the study (in addition, 26 wearers of T-shirts related to the LGBT and environmentalist movements were also interviewed as part of a broader research project, although their data is not included here because of the focus of the present analysis).

This purposive sampling strategy takes its inspiration from what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call "theoretical sampling," i.e., "choosing those whose testimony seems most likely to develop and test emerging ideas" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 107). There were, indeed, a number of reasons for selecting members of these particular groups for data collection. One was to include the perspectives of both those who wear political T-shirts referencing both right-wing viewpoints, and those who wear their left-wing counterparts. In addition, the recruitment focus on college campuses reflects an interest in sampling young people, a group that has historically embraced printed T-shirts as a popular fashion item (see Crane, 2000). Some participants who responded to the recruitment announcements were above college-age (up to 31 years old), and had been on the email lists of these campus-based organizations for various reasons relating to their political participation. The resulting sample of 28 American political T-shirt wearers thus included both college students as well as adults in their 20s and early 30s, all of whom were

involved to some extent in local organizations engaged in the political arena. This was not intended to be a statistically representative sample of the broader population of all people who wear political T-shirts, but rather, a strategically-chosen window into a much larger set of popular practices that could be useful for theory-building.

In semi-structured, conversational interviews, participants were asked to describe their experiences wearing political T-shirts, as well as their motivations for doing so. The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes each, and were conducted in a one-on-one, personal setting. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. The goal of these interviews was to qualitatively explore the full range of ways in which the practice of wearing political T-shirts is made meaningful for those who engage in it. Rather than introducing possible motivations, the interview schedule was deliberately kept open-ended and exploratory (e.g., "What do you see as your motivations for wearing your T-shirt?"; "Do you think that your T-shirt communicates anything to people who see it? If so, what?" etc.), so as to allow participants to tell their stories and articulate their ideas in their own terms. In keeping with the loose, conversational structure, the questioning moved in a unique direction for each interview and adapted to each participant's individual reflections and experiences (i.e., what Rubin and Rubin [1995] refer to as "responsive interviewing"). Many themes were touched upon over the course of the interviews, including using T-shirts to enhance bonds with like-minded others, as well as using them to reinforce one's own sense of political identity. However, due to the specific theoretical focus of this article, I limit the discussion below to a single prominent theme that arose unprompted in the interviews: the wearing of political T-shirts as a deliberately rhetorical act of self-labeling, making one's political identity visible for the purpose of persuasion. Indeed, this theme strongly resonates with the above-noted literature on the communication strategies of subaltern social movements, which has shown how grassroots projects of public visibility can function rhetorically in the public sphere. Reflecting this theoretical framework, the following discussion is intended to highlight how identity expression via popular culture engagement may be actively put to use by citizens as a way of gaining entry into the sphere of mainstream electoral politics.

Visual Self-Labeling as Political Rhetoric: Participants' Firsthand Accounts

When discussing motivations for wearing their political T-shirts, many participants emphasized not only the persuasive messages printed on the T-shirts themselves, but also the message-making potential of their bodies as they were labeled by these items. In these scenarios, the T-shirt functioned to publicize a key attribute of the wearer's political identity that would not have been obvious or visible otherwise, in order to make a point about the presence of that identity in a particular locale. As a mode of persuasive message-making, this can be best comprehended by thinking of the wearers as rhetorical "body-texts" (my own term), since aspects of the individual wearer's identity that are made visible by the T-shirt label combine with aspects of the wearer's identity that are already plainly visible (including certain physiological attributes, as well as physical presence in particularly area or community) to form a rhetorical whole. In other words, the persuasive message of the "body-text" can be defined as the hybrid effect achieved by juxtaposing the physical body of the wearer in public space with the T-shirt's visual markings of his or her identity.

For example, Matthew described how he wore his Obama shirt to send a message to his campus community that young people are, in fact, more interested in politics than is commonly believed. As Matthew explained:

> I wanted to show that young people were interested in politics too. So when I would go out to certain places, I would wear that shirt, and people would be like, "Oh, here's a college kid that actually cares about something."

Matthew's age as a visible attribute of his body thus combines with the T-shirt's label of his identity as a person who has a strong interest in the upcoming election in order to form a hybrid body-text message that is greater than the sum of its parts. By giving their identities visibility through the enhancement of textual labels, these participants saw themselves as making an impact on public perceptions of who exactly "the people" out there really are. The message being sent here is thus one that attempts to redefine the nature of reality itself for the onlooker, as opposed to one that attempts to explicitly persuade him or her in one direction or another. However, as noted above, articulating who "the people" are is an act with significant—if somewhat indeterminate—political consequences, since notions of what *is* precede notions of what should and should not be. In conducting my research, I found that how, exactly, these reality-redefining identity performances can become rhetorical in the formal electoral realm ranges considerably, as participants highlighted a number of different kinds of body-text appeals.

For instance, one major way that participants saw their T-shirt-labeled bodies as performing a persuasive function was by collectively depicting the popularity of a particular politician. Here, the specific rhetorical message printed on an individual T-shirt was less significant than the overall visual impact of multiple bodies publicly identifying themselves as being in support of the politician. Indeed, a number of participants who sought to campaign for an electoral candidate with their T-shirts described a desire to contribute to an overall collective image of the candidate's popularity amongst everyday people—a public spectacle that could potentially persuade others to get on the proverbial bandwagon. The logic here is that those who witnessed the collective representation of popularity would then be more likely to vote for the candidate because they sensed a broad social approval of him or her among their peers. As Patrick succinctly put it with regard to wearing his McCain T-shirt, "People are more likely to vote for someone if they see that there's a large number of people supporting them."

Anthony, president of his school's College Republicans, explained this line of reasoning in more detail when accounting for why he and his fellow club members wore McCain shirts to local campaign events:

> We want to make sure that people know the candidate has support in that area, and that's an important way to actually increase support for them. It's attractive to have a whole group of students going around wearing a T-shirt . . . people think to themselves "Oh, there's energy and youth support for the candidate." Generally, it does lead to at least people considering that candidate and his or her views.

Rachel, president of her school's College Democrats, articulated a similar logic when describing how she saw wearing pro-Obama shirts (see Figure 1) as helping her candidate's electoral chances:

> There's definitely this "part of a crowd" kind of mentality. When everybody's wearing the same thing, there's definitely this collective force. If they see that their candidate is popular, then they'll think "oh, well I should probably vote." They're not going to go out and waste their time to vote for somebody who's down. . . . So seeing everybody wearing something that supports the candidate kind of says "alright, yeah, this person has some support."

Figure 1. A Democratic pro-Obama T-shirt worn by an interview participant.
(Photo by the author.)

Stephanie, another Obama supporter, similarly remarked that "if people see a ton of people wearing these shirts, they get a positive feeling" that can then translate into a higher likelihood of voting for the candidate. As these examples from both young Democrats and Republicans demonstrate, depicting the popularity of candidates is a common way in which wearers of election-related T-shirts imagine themselves as contributing to that campaign's outreach efforts. In this context, they see their individual T-shirt displays as small pieces of a strategic collective visual representation of "Obama supporters" or "McCain supporters"; the more bodies who join them in announcing the widespread presence of this political identity by purchasing and wearing T-shirts, the more persuasive this articulation of "the people" will be (or so their logic goes, at least).

This concept of depicting the popularity of a politician for a public audience was also highlighted by some participants who wore their shirts to political events heavily covered by the media, such as debates or rallies. In these cases, T-shirt wearers sought to create a visual spectacle specifically for the cameras in order to affect perceptions about the politician's popularity in the minds of the viewing audience. Christopher, for example, explained that he wore a John Kerry shirt to a rally in 2004 to make such an impression for the cameras, "not me as an individual, but more a group dynamic . . . because so much of the media today is visual." In other words, he figured that, while his specific T-shirt may not receive media attention, his presence alongside many other wearers of similar shirts would create a visual spectacle of the candidate's popularity that would be appealing to television viewers. In this example, when the bodies of the T-shirt wearers were videotaped and transmitted, they came to collectively represent—as well as provide authenticating proof of—the widespread existence of a pro-Kerry constituency.

Ryan expressed a similar desire to depict the popularity of President Obama for mass media audiences when he described his plans to wear an Obama shirt to the then-approaching "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear," held by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert in Washington, DC, in 2010. Specifically, Ryan wanted to use this occasion to send a visual message to the nation at large that President Obama's popular support was still strong despite a number of political setbacks; he reasoned that, if many members of the crowd identified themselves as Obama supporters with T-shirts, then this would shape media coverage of the event and thus make an impact on broader public perceptions of Obama's popularity:

> Everything is based on how the media reports it . . . how are they going to describe it? Is this something where Obama things were everywhere? If it was true, they would note it. . . . If we get two hundred thousand people there with Obama shirts, that's just going to be part of the momentum you can build.

Again, the rhetorical value of depicting popularity was conceptualized in terms of creating a bandwagon effect where people become more likely to support what they perceive to already be popular. Like Christopher, Ryan saw the sartorial announcement of his political identity at a high-profile media

event to be one piece of a much larger group representation of this constituency, a mass-mediated image of "the people" that gains persuasive power as it multiplies in size.

Brandon, on the other hand, suggested that his lone televised presence at an Obama rally wearing a Republican T-shirt (see Figure 2) could have a similar effect on public perceptions, due to the mass media's extraordinary power to define political reality with a few choice images. As Brandon explained:

> [G]oing there and getting on TV lets everybody who is watching realize that all young people age 18 to 24 are not Obama supporters. There are some people that dislike Obama as much as others like him, and I think that needs to be put out there . . . because there are a lot of people that are my age that aren't happy with what's going on, but they just don't really have a voice.

Brandon's goal here was thus to provide television viewers with a representative image of Obama's unpopularity with the youth demographic that could counter the image of his popularity created by the youthful crowds of supporters at the rally. Importantly, the message Brandon was trying to send— i.e., that there are many young people in his community who do not, in fact, support Obama—was produced not merely by the graphics of the T-shirt itself, but by the visual juxtaposition of his body as a young person situated in a particular locale with the T-shirt's label of his political identity (as Republican and anti-Obama). In Brandon's view, having just one such body-text image transmitted to television audiences could make a difference in depicting the resonance of anti-Obama sentiment amongst young people, since media images have such a heightened role in articulating who the "the people" out there truly are. By visually announcing the presence of his identity at a rally, and then by having this announcement magnified and extended by mass media coverage, Brandon envisioned himself as altering public perceptions of reality in such a way as to encourage young viewers watching at home to follow his lead and jump on the proverbial anti-Obama bandwagon.

Figure 2. A Republican anti-Obama T-shirt worn by an interview participant.
(Photograph by the author.)

An additional type of rhetorical body-text message was described by a number of participants who noted that, when people wear political T-shirts out in public, they not only announce a particular identity, but also indicate their comfort and perhaps even courage in being open about this identity with others. Such individual demonstrations of bravery were imagined by some participants to be something akin to contagion, potentially encouraging others who might privately hold similar views to be more public about them, and thus become more active in pursuing related political objectives. This sort of body-text persuasion can, perhaps, be thought of as modeling a political identity, since the wearer makes a conspicuous public example of him or herself that others can then imitate. As Matthew explains, "When you see someone else wearing a shirt like that, I think it helps other people feel more comfortable . . . not only making political statements, but also supporting that specific cause that you're doing."

As a persuasion-minded motivation for wearing a T-shirt, modeling an identity at the individual level appeared to be of particular interest to those who saw themselves as being in the political minority in their respective areas, and who sensed that like-minded others might be reluctant to openly identify in this way. For example, William described how he sought to provide a model of being openly Republican on his heavily Democratic campus:

> I think in this current political climate, people would be afraid to sign up for [College Republicans] because they think people are going to hate them . . . that because they're conservative, they're somehow a bad person. So it's kind of like me going out there and being like, "Yeah, I'm proud to be a conservative and I'm proud to talk about it." If I'm out there doing it, people who maybe were nervous or didn't want to outwardly support a candidate in fear of retribution, or at least being thought of in a different light, might think, "Hey, if there's other people doing it then maybe it's okay for me to as well."

Although the ideological affiliation was reversed, Christopher expressed a very similar idea when he described why he wore his Democratic candidate shirts in the heavily Republican Southern state where he had formerly resided: "There are times when people may not be as willing to speak out as much, but maybe if they know somebody else will, they'll say, 'Well, this guy doesn't worry about it, then why should I?'" Like William, Christopher imagined that, if he used his T-shirt to publicly announce his minority political identity within a potentially hostile environment, then this display of courage could serve as a model for others to follow.

As the participants' responses indicate, the persuasive messages that body-texts can send both range considerably, and may draw their rhetorical force from different types of physical properties (i.e., the wearer's visible attributes, such as age, his or her location in a particular community, etc.), as well as varying numbers of bodies collectively identifying themselves with the same T-shirt label. The purpose of my highlighting some of the different applications of body-texts described by participants is not to create an exhaustive list of such strategies, but rather, to make the broader point that wearing political T-shirts can be a way for citizens to conceptualize their popular culture-enabled performances of political identity as empowering forms of visual rhetoric. The visual marking-out of political identities via popular dress practices can thus be understood as a form of public communicative action with a real (if indeterminate) potential impact, as it may affect broader perceptions about the presence of these identities and possibly influence public opinion.

In the scenarios detailed above, participants actively sought to make a public visual spectacle of themselves in the hopes of changing perceptions about who "the people" out there really were. However, the fact that this sort of rhetorical strategy was particularly common among participants who saw themselves as members of political minorities within their respective areas—whether coming from the right or the left—suggests that this practice may be most appealing to citizens who embrace an outsider role. Understanding this practice as a strategically rhetorical articulation of "the people" is therefore not meant to suggest that those who adopt it are necessarily interested in fashioning images of unity or consensus. Rather, by boldly confronting those around them with their marked-out difference, these citizens often appear to use their public expressions of identity as a form of protest. Thus, while this sort

of rhetorical practice operates according to a logic that resembles theories of articulation as developed by cultural studies figures like Laclau (1979), it is important to recognize that these articulations are typically conceived of as challenges to popular conceptions about the makeup of "the people." An interest in confrontation and protest therefore seems to greatly motivate those self-described outsiders who choose to press their popular culture-enabled performances of identity into the service of electoral political persuasion. This point may go some way to help account for why—and under what conditions—a self-disclosing rhetorical strategy commonly utilized in subaltern, identity-focused social movements may be adopted by citizens for campaigning efforts within the mainstream political arena.

Conclusion

Working under the assumption that representations of "the people" not only construct political reality, but also impact how people behave within it, the participants who described sending body-text messages saw themselves as being empowered to alter public perceptions in a way that could ultimately further their various political objectives. This theme of transforming bodies into legible political identities via textual self-labeling as a potentially efficacious rhetorical act resonates with a number of theoretical points made within political philosophy. In particular, it closely aligns with Laclau's (1979) notion of re-articulating who "the people" out there in the world truly are as a way of strategically altering public perceptions of political reality. Through making aspects of one's identity publicly conspicuous, one's self-labeled body can come to stand as a visual representation of broader political phenomena that may have the potential to move the public in various directions. Furthermore, the idea of the political potency of "mere" visibility in public via wearing T-shirts echoes Arendt's (1958) theory of self-disclosing appearance as a foundational act of political participation. In the context of the practices documented above, we can recognize how such self-disclosure not only announces one's presence on the political stage, but may also advertise one's political identity to others in the sense of strategically bringing their attention to its existence and salience. As noted earlier, scholars examining the rhetorical strategies of social movements, such as Parkins (2002), Goodnow (2006), and Szerszynski (2003), have argued that spreading awareness about a movement by visually marking out the bodies of members may be instrumental in increasing membership and putting forth its case to the public. Judging from the first-hand accounts of participants who sought to bring visibility to their political identities with T-shirts in order to impact the outcome of mainstream elections, this set of practices appears to be relevant for multiple levels of contemporary political activity—in particular, among those who seek to use their marked-out difference to challenge what they perceive as the status quo around them.

However, whether or not these body-text rhetorical political messages were effective in changing the minds of onlookers is rather indeterminate from the above accounts. While a number of participants—unprompted—described deliberately attempting to persuade members of the public in various directions via their visual self-labeling practices, they did not point to any specific evidence of their efforts actually working on audiences. Clearly, expressed intentions are not the same as effects. However, setting aside the true efficacy of body-text persuasion, the very fact that these politically-engaged citizens are intuitively aware of this visual rhetorical strategy—and deliberately use it to gain a sense of participation in the electoral political process—means that it deserves more serious attention from communication scholars. Indeed, the accounts of participants presented above suggest a re-conceptualization of the

adorned body as a visual medium for political persuasion that can contribute to a broadened understanding of how popular culture figures into contemporary grassroots strategies of political communication.

Of course, such T-shirt-based campaigning does not occur in isolation, but rather, it is part of a much broader set of practices of electoral political participation that also includes more traditional public outreach activities, such as making phone calls on behalf of candidates, handing out campaign literature, and the like. Indeed, the participants in this study, all involved to some extent in campus-based organizational efforts, noted engaging in these activities to varying degrees, as well as using their T-shirts to put forth body-text rhetorical messages in public. It is important, therefore, to recognize how making one's political identity visible as a rhetorical act constitutes one tool in a wide-ranging toolkit of practices that engaged citizens may draw upon to enter the public sphere and attempt to further their interests.

Bearing in mind how the body-based visual rhetorical strategy outlined here exists within a broader ecosystem of public outreach efforts, it is nonetheless important to tease out its unique contributions to the realm of political communication. In particular, we have seen how visible attributes of an individual may constitute a significant element of the overall rhetorical message he or she is attempting to send when wearing a political T-shirt, and moreover, how the image of the human body itself carries an inherent sense of authenticity that may contribute to the message's persuasive power. Putting a face to a political message may thus have a potential to affect others on a deeper level than merely circulating the message anonymously in various media formats, as it lends a sense of grounded and lived reality to whatever idea is being advanced. This point expands upon Chaffee's (1993) aforementioned argument that grassroots protest messages in the streets carry a sense of inherent authenticity that differentiates them in a positive sense from the top-down political communication flowing from elites. In the cases of individuals wearing such election-based political T-shirts as those discussed above, participants worked to supplement top-down electoral campaign communication with authenticating grassroots images of support, suggesting how citizens may draw upon the rhetorical force of their own embodied identities to informally contribute to more formally organized political outreach. However, considering the fact that formal campaign organizations produce and distribute many (but not all) of the sorts of electoral political T-shirts discussed here, these bottom-up and top-down communication strategies should be understood not as separate, but rather, as complexly intertwined. Future research may benefit from investigating the extent to which electoral political organizations are actively and deliberately incorporating the rhetoric of 'body-texts' into their strategic communication efforts, and how this complicates the notion of political speech via dress as a wholly grassroots-level phenomenon.

While the above discussion thus signals some of the unique attributes of self-labeling T-shirts and other physically embodied forms of identity performance for political communication, it also suggests how other individualized and participatory media platforms might have a similar capacity to fashion perception-challenging images of "the people" for persuasive purposes. In particular, recent research on young people's use of digital social networking sites—perhaps the primary popular culture phenomenon of our contemporary era—has emphasized similar themes of identity expression and performance. For instance, boyd describes how "a MySpace profile can be seen as a form of digital body where individuals must write themselves into being. Through profiles, teens can express salient aspects of their identity for others to

see and interpret" (2008, p. 129). However, what is less clear is how such digitally-enabled expressive practices might possibly relate to participation in the public sphere, particularly when such public articulations of identity take on a political character. While Jenkins (2006) both suggests that digital media-oriented fan communities may be paving a new road for collective political action and points to the circulation of online political satire videos as possible evidence, his discussion does not explicitly connect the concept of identity expression to participation in the political process. Future research exploring the use of popular social media platforms for participation in the political arena may therefore benefit from taking into consideration how expressions of political identity via the "digital body" may be conceptualized as rhetorical gestures that might potentially have real political effects. Indeed, by taking cues from scholarship on the political dimensions of dress, scholars can contribute to a broadened understanding of public sphere participation that includes the identity performances endemic to a wide variety of popular culture-related practices.

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