Constituting Democracy at Every Turn of Talk:

Conversation Analytic Accounts of Political Town Halls

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Abstract

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Recent years have witnessed a slow but persistent erosion of the democratic governing of the U.S. Political scientists have identified several severe threats against the American democracy, including the spread of misinformation, the impact of negative partisanship, and the lack of political belonging for marginalized groups. While research on these threats abounds at the macro level, what remains under researched are the conduct of ordinary people as they navigate these issues and exercise civic rights.

From the micro-analytic perspective of Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorization Analysis, this dissertation examines the practices that ordinary citizens and U.S. Members of Congress (MOCs) use to navigate these issues. 50 recordings of town hall meetings were collected from social media pages of the MOCs’ offices from 24 US States with the majority being House Representatives and several Senators.

The dissertation addresses, on the one hand, how citizens navigate the following issues: introducing misinformation as part of one’s town hall contribution, (re)producing negative partisanship, and (re)producing exclusionary stances towards minoritized groups; and on the other, how MOCs respond to these issues. First, citizens assert epistemic superiority or appeal to rationality when bringing in factually unfounded information to town hall contributions. MOCs may choose to endorse, sidestep, or refute the misinformation when responding. Secondly,
citizens present irreconcilable alternatives, presuppose a zero-sum game, or ascribe categories of threats to the opposing party. MOCs can choose to neutralize or upgrade the negative partisanship and even initiate it on their own. Finally, citizens assign categories of immorality against minoritized groups or establish their own religious superiority for maintaining exclusionary stances. MOCs may disalign with such stances by offering contesting categories, redirecting the focus of discussion, or disaffiliating with the citizens’ exclusionary stance via a telling.

With the perspective of “motivated looking,” this dissertation is a continued effort in critically informed EMCA research and can be used to strengthen research on participatory democracy by its inherently emic approach. More importantly, findings from this dissertation can be adapted by organizations, teachers, and individuals to hold or facilitate more productive conversations around civic topics.
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余镌
Dedication

To you, me, and our anxieties.
Chapter 1: Introduction

It was 2008 when a dorky college student in China suddenly became intrigued by the idea of democracy. Surely it was not an unfamiliar word; after all, the concept itself was presented in prior courses on history and political science—a snooze fest at best at the time. But in 2008, something changed for that student—perhaps, after reading about the 1989 democratic movement led primarily by students, or learning about the lives of activists who drafted the democratic declaration in 2008. Whatever the leading cause was, the idea of democracy, often intriguingly discussed by others with cynicism and much restraint, started to become a topic of personal interest for that student (me) ever since. The notion that common people are able to push forward political change by voicing their concerns is a fundamentally inspiring one: to the college-aged me, it was encouraging and empowering.

Fast forward to the year 2016 that marks a peak of political upheaval in recent US political history. On a sleepless night in November, the American public witnessed the election of a populist billionaire as their 45th president, a result that shocked many. However, when examined on a global scale, this shocking turn of events in political governing is only one of many that are marked by divisiveness, partisanship, and polarization. As political historians remind us, political changes, such as the rise of political fundamentalism and the collapse of democracies, more often occur in a stepwise fashion (Snyder, 2017; Albright, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Based on historical events in other countries and regions, these scholars have collectively sounded the alarm that the US political system, built on democratic ideals and beliefs, might be among those that have been eroded in less visible areas and are slowly approaching the verge of collapse.
Facing political instability and polarization, civic participation has increased drastically as well, as evidenced in the Women’s March immediately following Trump’s inauguration in early 2017 and a number of other ensuing large-scale civic movements. From 2016 to 2018, donations made to activist or political organizations witnessed a historic rise. Most notably, among the civic undertakings to engage in political changes, are the increased efforts of citizens to engage directly with elected officials and political candidates and even to run for public office themselves. Such efforts, often with limited influence of the professional “middleman” including mainstream journalists and interviewers, create a range of opportunities for direct interaction between politicians and citizens. It is with the hope of documenting and articulating some of the interactional practices and expertise essential to these direct engagements that the current study is conceived.

**Statement of the Problem**

Democracy, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is “a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). The conception of the democratic regime dates back to the ancient Greeks. In *Republic*, Plato presents a few types of regimes discussed and debated by Socrates and his students: aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny, among which aristocracy is stated to be the best form of regime that relies on the governance by philosopher kings who are wise and just. Democracy, on the other hand, is a form of regime in which the common folk choose their ruling leaders in response to a failing oligarchy (Plato, 1992). Clearly, democracy has not been an all-around perfect solution to the problems of government since the start. As Churchill famously said, “democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been
tried from time to time” (Churchill, 1974). Despite its limitations, a democratic governing structure can be seen as a pragmatic outcome that affords ordinary citizens governing power through their voting rights and the promise of being represented by those elected. Within the specific context of the U.S. society, it must also be recognized that, while the American democracy remains one of the longest and lasting ones in the world, its conception was marked with violence and inequity, some of which remain our fundamental struggles today. The American democracy was founded as a form of democracy for the few—the white and/or elite and has remained as such in many ways for several hundreds of years.

Among the main tenets of democracy, from a macro, organizational perspective, constitutional democracy deals with the constitutional functioning of the democratic structure, whereas from a bottom-up, constitutive perspective, participatory democracy focuses on the common people’s direct engagement in democratic movements (Cunningham, 2001). With the working definition, one then wonders how exactly a democratic governing structure is created, operated within, and sustained in a given society. Levitsky and Ziblatt in their 2018 book How Democracies Die outlined two political norms, regarded as the “guardrails of democracy” (p. 97), without which the democratic governing structure would likely fail. Mutual tolerance between political opponents as well as institutional forbearance for which political entities exercise self-restraint and avoid actions that are within one’s legal rights but would harm the functioning of the existing system. While at the institutional and governing level these are the necessary conditions for the longevity of a democracy, they do not account for democracy from the perspectives of the people who create, constitute, consume, and sustain this very structure.

Following the line of direct, participatory democracy, political scientist Frank Bryan in his seminal research on the town meeting tradition in New England outlined what he considers
real democracy, which directly involves citizens’ participation as the basis for political decision making (Bryan, 2003). Based on attendance data collected from a multitude of town meetings over a few decades, the essential components of a real democracy, according to Bryan, are “the presence of citizens,” sufficient time for deliberation, and the requirement that “no cohort of society be excluded” (p. 255). While Bryan documented meticulous records of attendance and times of citizens’ verbal participation from town meetings, what is left un(der)-researched is the interactional organization of citizens’ contributions. In addition, two revealing findings that Bryan did document are issues related to the degree of civic participation as evidenced in the lack of attendance by citizens (e.g., on average 20% of registered voters attend town meetings) and the lack of active participation in these meetings (e.g., on average only 7% actually speak out) (p. 281).

The issue of civic participation is traced back to the U.S. educational system, in which civic education initially took priority when the country was founded but is no longer treated as an essential component (Rebell, 2018). As Rebell’s recent work shows, the U.S. education system, while letting other common school subjects take priority, has failed to produce citizens interested in learning about civics and in participating and protecting their democracy. As one shocking statistic shows, American voter participation is ranked 139th among all the world’s democracies (McCormick Tribune Foundation, 2007, cited in Rebell, 2018). It can be argued that citizens might not see these gatherings as effective outlets to address their issues and concerns, for reasons such as a sense of disenfranchisement because their expertise is not recognized, as well as the need to account for one’s legitimacy in having a say in the democracy. The long-term effect leads citizens to feel disheartened and cynical and lose faith in the institutional structure itself.
With the lack of civic participation as well as the current divisive political landscape, we as a society seem to have formed a “perfect storm” that threatens the stability of the democratic structure that we reside in and rely on. In the meantime, the increase of grassroot organizing in civic movements also gives us some hope about the crucial roles ordinary citizens can play in shaping the trajectory of the nation’s politics.

Concerned with how ordinary citizens engage with political topics and figures, this study seeks to specify the affordances of such interactional opportunities for both parties at political gatherings. Similar to other activities that members of the society engage in where context and actions mutually shape each other, this study follows the perspective that doing politics and democracy is also *talked into being* (Heritage & Clayman, 2010, italics added). Hence, in this study, I aim to document and examine the interactional practices used, on the one hand, by citizen participants to ask questions, express concerns, and seek changes and, on the other, by political figures to respond to questions, account for political actions, and explicate policies and visions.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to uncover, document, and specify the interactional practices employed by participants during town hall meetings at which they attempt to address political and social issues occurring at various levels in the United States. Taking the perspective of institutions as talked into being (Heritage & Clayman, 2010), this study is grounded on the belief that political town halls are one form of institutional discourse within which participants engage with each other politically and democratically. In light of the relative scarcity of research on how citizens and politicians manage such town hall meetings as a distinctive type of interactional event, this study seeks to address the following research questions.
**Research Questions**

At town halls where politicians and citizens gather to have direct exchanges, what interactional practices do politicians employ to manage this type of interactional event? What interactional practices do citizens employ?

**Definition of Terms**

For this study, I define *town halls* as those gatherings in which political figures make themselves available to meet with groups of citizens and address their questions and concerns. I will use *town halls* and *town meetings* interchangeably.

I consider *politicians* to include elected officials and lawmakers at local, state, or national levels as well as political candidates running for public offices at various levels. For this purpose, I will use *politicians* and *political figures* interchangeably.

I consider *citizens* as any and every one of those individuals who appear at these gatherings rather than from the perspective of their countries of origin or residence. I will use *citizens, citizen participants, citizen representatives, and constituents* interchangeably.

I consider *interactional practices* as the *in situ* combination and coordination of verbal, paralinguistic, physical, and environmental resources drawn by participants to implement courses of action (Schegloff, 2007) in the interaction. The approach of focusing on interactional resources in a variety of modalities goes along with Mondada (2016)’s invitation for researchers to continue investigating how multimodal resources are coordinated as ‘gestalts’ in talk-in-interaction that “go beyond the study of single ‘modalities’ coordinated with talk and to take into consideration the broader embodied and environmental organization of activities” (p. 334).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I review prior research conducted on parties engaged in various public-facing interactional events. Parties who are involved in these events include moderators of various sorts (such as interviewers, talk show hosts, meeting chairpersons), politicians, and ordinary citizens. In the three sections below, I first review research on interactional practices used by moderators on managing interactions with political figures and managing audience participation. I then review practices used by political figures who make appearances in broadcast interviews and debates, focusing on their interactional management of responding actions, in particular disaligning actions, as well as their management of audience alignment. Finally, I review practices used by ordinary people who appear as audience during public events or participants on broadcast shows, focusing on their ways of participation as well as issues related to their interactional legitimacy.

Moderator Practices

Much of the conversation and discourse analytic research on broadcast political communication so far has focused on how media professionals manage talk and conduct in various interactional events such as news interviews, talk show interviews, panel discussions, political debates, etc. As noted earlier, I use the term moderator to refer to journalists, interviewers, talk show hosts, as well as meeting chairpersons. In this section, I discuss prior research on moderator practices that are used to manage interactions with political figures and manage audience participation.

In broadcast news interviews, one of the main tasks of moderators is to uphold the institutional norm of neutralism when interviewing or questioning political figures (Greatbatch, 1986; Clayman, 1988; 1992b, 2002a; Clayman & Heritage 2002). Moderators, as summarized in
Heritage and Clayman (2010), maintain their neutralistic posture by adhering to the Q&A format to seek information from political figures on behalf of the public rather than inserting their own views. Similarly, as reviewed in Hutchby (2005), moderators refrain from providing third-turn evaluative responses or overlapping comments, when interviewees are providing a response, in order to achieve a neutralistic stance.

Besides the neutralistic stance, moderators also work with aspects and degrees of another institutional norm, namely adversarialness, when questioning politicians (Hutchby, 2011; Heritage & Clayman, 2010; Clayman & Fox, 2017). In the “aggressively disputatious” (p. 351) hybrid political interviews (HPIs) during which the moderator shifts between norms of interviews and arguments (Hutchby, 2011), the traditionally ‘neutral’ role of the moderator is not assumed, and practices such as third-position rejoinders and polar contrastives are used to be argumentative and ‘non-neutral’. In addition, as Clayman and Fox (2017) described, moderators shift between ‘hardball’ and ‘softball’ questions, relying on a number of modulation strategies to manage the degree of adversarialness towards interviewees: inserting adversarial viewpoints through supportive elaboration, endorsement, and factualistic grounds; advancing oppositional claims via adversarial conclusions; hardening or softening by inviting affirmation or rejection (e.g., is that true); hardening or softening by implying the level of difficulty to respond (e.g., what’s your response to that vs. lemme put it in very simple terms). As Heritage and Clayman (2010) astutely summarized, “significant reward awaits? those who can bring off this balancing act by maximizing adversarialness within the bounds of legitimacy represented by the neutralistic circle” (p. 228). In other words, it takes a great deal of expertise for moderators to maintain the posture of impartiality while still being able to serve as the tribune of the people when pursuing adequate responses from political figures (Clayman, 2002b, 2007).
It has also been documented that the moderators’ actions might veer off from the neutralistic-adversarial continuum in contexts such as celebrity talk show interviews where politicians also started to make regular appearances in recent years (Loeb, 2015, 2017). It has been found that interviewers adhere to a different set of norms, namely personalization (i.e., appearing personally invested; expressing personal views) and congeniality (i.e., creating a friendly environment; showcasing and flattering the guests) (Loeb, 2015). According to quantitative analysis done by Loeb (2017), the norm of personalization is manifested in the hosts’ increased amount of receipt tokens and their use of personal experiences, while the norm of congeniality is manifested through using praise towards the guests in initiating turns.

Besides journalists and talk show hosts, committee chairpersons of congressional meetings also serve as moderators who are responsible for managing the interaction with other politician participants. Raymond et al (2019) focus on the critical work of a committee chairperson during a US senate judiciary hearing and demonstrate that, despite an assumed impartial position, the chairperson can utilize the “interstitial” spaces (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1990, cited in Raymond et al, 2019) to allow for more floor time for statements from the party that they are politically aligned with. Given the important role of chairpersons as moderators, town hall meetings that are interactionally organized by a chairperson might present similar sets of issues that would be worth examining.

Apart from looking at how moderators manage interactions with political figures on public forums, there has also been a small number of studies that look at how moderators manage audience participation through organizing the turn-taking of multi-party meetings and reformulating audience utterances. At local town meetings, for instance, Mondada (2013) highlights the crucial work done by meeting chairs in carefully organizing speaker selection in
large-group meetings, where participants supposedly have equal rights to the floor. As she describes, meeting chairs rely on multimodal resources (gaze, pointing, “holding” gesture, etc.) to signal who the next speaker is to all those who attempt to self-select, queue the upcoming next speaker, and defend the selected speakership in argumentative environments (Mondada, 2013). On radio call-in shows, for example, show hosts have been found to syntactically restructure and reformulate participants’ emailed questions to fit with the ongoing topical agenda with prefatory statements such as here’s a related email (p. 214), as well as interpretive glosses of the question’s action or participant’s objective I think that’s a complaint or from someone who clearly doesn’t want the Euro (p. 216), all of which could potentially alter the ways in which audience questions are responded to (Thornborrow & Fitzgerald, 2002). Lee and Lin (2011) also found that radio show hosts in Hong Kong significantly tone down or underplay the critiques towards government officials from citizen callers by reformulating their questions in order to facilitate responding actions and secure a politically correct interactional context. Similar to what has been discussed above, despite an assumed neutral and impartial stance, the moderators’ interactional privilege of organizing turn-taking and reformulating participant utterances might lead to issues such as uneven participation and misrepresenting other participants.

To sum up, it seems that the moderators, no matter in what public or broadcast forum, are in charge of the interactional organization of various public events and responsible for, to a great extent, the trajectory and outcome of these events. The moderators’ ability to shift between being neutralistic and adversarial, and in particular their ability to legitimately conduct adversarial questioning, could pose great challenges to politician interviewees with regard to designing the most appropriate and adequate responses. The moderators’ ability to organize speaker selection at group meetings, as well as their ability to reformulate participant utterances, can create uneven
interactional opportunities and mitigate the impact of other participants’ contributions. Thus, during town halls where moderators play a role, it is worthwhile to examine their practices and the impact on the organization and outcome of the town hall interaction.

**Politician Practices**

Compared to work documenting moderator practices, prior research has focused considerably less on how political figures themselves operate interactionally within the context of broadcast and public events. The studies that did focus on politician practices mainly deal with how they manage their responding, especially disaligning, actions as well as how they manage audience alignment.

Bull (1994) devised a typology of questions in the interview context that helps distinguish types of replies—namely, replies, non-replies, and intermediate replies (e.g., in-part replies, implied replies). Although syntactic coding was used, the notion of intermediate replies highlights those responses whose action can only be determined by the context. Clayman and Heritage (2002) further developed this idea and described in detail how politicians rely on overt and covert maneuvers when practicing not being fully responsive. Degrees of resistance exhibited through politicians’ responses range from producing negatively resistant responses such as an explicit *I will not answer the question* (see also Ekström (2009) on *announced refusals to answer* by Swedish politicians) to designedly partial or incomplete responses. Politicians have been found, for example, to covertly work around the parameters of the question, such as producing a response that subtly shifts the topical agenda or one related to the topic without answering the question (Clayman & Heritage, 2002).

While responding, politicians sometimes rely on certain strategies to produce disaligning actions such as disagreements and topic shifts. Bull and Fetzer (2006) describe pronominal shifts
that are used by politicians during interviews as a strategy for equivocation, namely, “intentional use of imprecise language” (p. 7). For example, a politician could shift between I and we when referring to his contribution and his own point of view (it’s very much my own creation; I don’t agree at all) and his party or government as a whole (the proper modernized Labor Party that we have today; we should not be closed off) when carrying out actions such as critique or disagreement. Clayman (2010, 2013) and Rendle-Short (2007/2011) both looked at how politicians would use address terms, such as the first name of the interviewer to preface disaligning actions such as topic shifts and disagreements. The address terms are used to create and sustain an informal and friendly context as politicians avoid directly responding to accusations or aggressive questioning. Also, although occurring less frequently, Greatbatch (1986) found that politicians as interviewees can at times breach the normative Q&A format through agenda-shifting procedures to exercise some control over the topical agenda of the interview. These procedures include pre-answer agenda shifting mechanisms (i.e., projecting violative talk, producing violative talk, then producing the topic-relevant response) and post-answer agenda shifting mechanisms (i.e., producing a topic-relevant response, projecting violative talk, then establishing topical agenda for the violative talk) (Greatbatch, 1986).

Aside from managing their responding (and often disaligning) actions, Atkinson (1984) shows that politicians also seek audience alignment in situ during debates and political speeches. Such applause-generating practices include using names at recognizably completion points and three-part lists (i.e., producing speech segments such as in all places, at all times, in all things due to audience’s orientation to the ‘three-partedness’; see also Jefferson, 1990), contrasts (i.e., boasts about one’s own party and/or insults against the opposition), and turn re-completion (i.e., referring back to and summarize points just made) (Atkinson, 1984). Audience alignment, in
other words, is the product of careful interactional design and sequential management rather than an assumed feature prior to entering the debate arena. Also, from a multimodal perspective, Streeck (2008) looked at the use of one type of multimodal interactional resources, namely hand gestures, of political candidates during primary debates. He discussed four types of hand gestures common among democratic candidates (slicing, pointing, precision grip, and power grip) and demonstrates that candidates use changes in gestures to indicate ensuing changes in discourse structure as well. Based on this research, he argued that one persistent pointing gesture of one candidate, the finger wag, may have contributed to his lack of success as a candidate and his campaign’s early withdrawal, further noting the importance of studying all interactional resources made relevant by participants in this context.

In sum, although politicians on public forums such as interviews and debates are under considerable interactional constraints, they deploy a variety of strategies to manage responding actions, in particular disaligning ones, as well as obtain audience alignment. These findings serve as a useful basis for uncovering politician practices during town hall Q&As where they need to manage responding to citizen questions and concerns.

**Citizen Practices**

Similar to prior research on politician practices, studies that focus on how ordinary people participate in public forums remain scant as well, partly due to the fact that the interactional space and rights afforded to the “regular Joe” in such contexts remain limited. Livingstone and Lunt (1994), however, highlighted the shifting political landscape from elite to participatory arrangements on television shows and political debates, noting the increase in participatory broadcast programs. Additionally, they emphasize the significance of regular citizens’ participation in, and potential contribution to, the political processes by being a
meaningful part of the televised media. Given that research on direct exchanges between citizens and politicians remains extremely limited, there is considerable analytic space and value to explore platforms where “ordinary experiences are collected together as grounding for a decision” (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994, p. 33). So far, the main analytic issues in ordinary audience participation on public forums revolve around their ways of participation as well as their interactional legitimacy.

It comes as no surprise that ordinary people, in most cases audience members, manage their participation in public and televised events to a large extent through the use of laugh and applause to show affiliation and approval (Atkinson, 1984; Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986), as well as booing and derisive laugh to express disaffiliation with political figures (Clayman, 1992a, 1993). Among the few researchers who examined how ordinary citizens engaged with politicians directly on a public forum, Lorenzo-Dus (2011) explores how on Spanish audience participation TV shows many citizen interviewers rely on personal experiences in prefatory statements and can be more hostile than journalists toward political figures in questioning their abilities as political leaders. This is one of the few studies that looked into how regular citizens directly hold political figures accountable on a public, televised platform, much alike the town hall setting that the current study will attempt to examine.

One of the main tasks that ordinary participants have to manage on these public forums, given their limited interactional rights, is to establish their interactional legitimacy to talk (Hutchby, 2005; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Thornborrow, 2001, 2004). Hutchby (2005) demonstrated that audience participants during radio call-ins use “witnessing” moves when participating (p. 83), usually claiming some kind of first-hand knowledge, experience, or direct membership in the topics at hand, which then grant warranty to their ensuing talk. Similarly,
noting the relative anonymity of lay audience members even in audience participation shows, Thornborrow (2001) explores how the ‘regular folk’ self-valorizes and establishes their status and entitlement of talk by providing locally relevant information on their identity and experience prior to initiating their questions or challenges (see also Reddington et al, 2021, and Clemente, 2020, in the context of audience self-positioning during public talk Q&As). In an entirely different context, Hofstetter and Stokoe (2018) looked into how citizens resorted to descriptions of personal experiences and narratives of hardships to establish legitimacy and entitlement as they made requests to their local members of parliament.

Apart from appearing knowledgeable, ordinary citizen participants also secure their interactional legitimacy through establishing an ordinary stance on public forums. Livingston and Lunt (1994) argue for a different type of ‘lay’ vs. ‘expert’ dynamic made possible by the audience participation debate format. Whereas in other contexts, such as advice-giving shows, the ‘lay’ persons are often treated with a deficit perspective, in audience participation debate shows they are positioned as authentic, relevant, and in-depth (p. 102) as they share first-hand experience relevant to the current topic. As such, on these particular shows, it is the views of lay speakers with which studio audiences tend to affiliate rather than with expert opinions (Hutchby, 2005). Thornborrow (2014) also noted that, besides self-positioning as locally knowledgeable, audience on various media and social platforms position themselves as ordinary and relatable in order to legitimize their further participation.

Overall, despite the limited interactional opportunities afforded to ordinary citizens, they do manage to participate through laughter, applause, etc. during public-facing events. On platforms such as participation shows where they are given more opportunities to speak, it is still observed that ordinary citizens have to secure their interactional legitimacy by appearing as
knowledgeable in the topic on the one hand and authentic and relatable on the other. It is anticipated that these findings would also apply in the context of town hall meetings where ordinary citizens can speak directly with politicians.

**Summary of the Literature Review**

In this chapter, I reviewed prior research on interactional practices in public-facing events by participating entities including moderators (journalists, interviewers, talk show hosts, and meeting chairpersons), political figures, and ordinary audience members.

Findings from prior research suggest that moderators, such as interviewers, journalists, and meeting chairs, have the privilege to manage the interaction with politician participants shifting between institutional norms such as maintaining a neutralistic stance and modulating degrees of adversarialness in ‘serious’ interviewing contexts. Moderators also operate on the norms of personalization and congeniality when interviewing politicians on talk shows. Those in charge of large multi-party meetings are found to organize speaker selection among politicians and ordinary citizen participants. Also, moderators of audience participation shows have been found to reformulate participant contributions, which could potentially misrepresent ordinary citizen participants.

Political figures, as a second category of participants at public-facing events, have been found to use various strategies to manage being less-than-responsive or evasive towards interviewers by adjusting the degrees of resistance in their responses. In particular, they could mitigate disaligning responses such as disagreements via address terms and subtle pronominal shifts. When eliciting alignment from ordinary citizens at public events, politicians are found to use a few verbal strategies (e.g., lists and contrasts) coupled with embodied resources to invite audience applause.
Finally, although still faced with limited interactional space on public forums, ordinary participants are found to express their affiliation or disaffiliation towards political figures, usually as a collective, through means such as laughter and applause to show approval and booing and derisive laugh to show disaffiliation. Those who get the opportunity to question political figures on televised media are found to rely on more hostile means than journalists to hold politicians accountable. Even though ordinary citizens who manage to appear as speaking participants are afforded more interactional opportunities, they are still found to have to first establish their interactional legitimacy by appearing both knowledgeable and authentic in order to give warranty to their further participation.

While prior research has documented the interactional practices of these three types of participants on public forums, the interactions between political figures and ordinary citizens in one specific setting, namely town hall meetings, have received extremely limited analytic attention within the EMCA traditions and are thus worthy of further examination. Besides a continued impact from moderators on the interactional organization of town hall meetings where they are present, it is anticipated that politicians would face similar types of adversarial questions and issues and would need to respond to them in a cordial and effective manner when addressing the public. Also, similar to audience participation shows, it is anticipated that citizens would continue to face issues related to speaking rights and epistemic status that would require careful interactional calibrations. Thus, prior findings from various public-facing interactional events serve as the foundation for examining interactions at the town hall setting, and analysis of town hall interactions between political figures, citizens, (and moderators when appropriate) will contribute to the growing field of research on communicating with the public.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Site and Participants

The research site for this study involves various locations across the country where meetings between politicians and citizens occur, including but not limited to community centers, conference halls, public theaters, etc. While there is not a predefined physical setting, number of participants, or seating arrangements for such meetings, the space would typically allow the gathering of at least a small number of citizens and politicians with their staff, from a handful to a fully seated auditorium.

Typically, the politicians’ offices are responsible for the scheduling and organizing of these meetings, including getting the physical space set up as well as announcing and promoting the schedule and topics of events. Topics for these meetings can either be open-ended for the public to ask questions and express concerns or revolve around specific issues such as gun violence, immigration, and healthcare. The schedule of a town hall is announced to either the public or local residents in the district via social media sites and registered email addresses beforehand. Meeting types include in-person meetings, tele-town halls held over the phone or a web conferencing platform such as Zoom, and live streaming of in-person town halls through social media platforms such as Facebook. Given that the participation framework of a tele-town hall is significantly different from those held in person in areas such as turn allocation, I later also decided to exclude tele-townhalls and only focused on collecting recordings of in-person town halls.

The participants of these meetings are Members of the U.S. Congress and residents of their congressional districts. At times, the background of citizens may be more specifically targeted, such as resident representatives of a particular town or city, or student representatives.
from a specific congressional district or a university. Usually, the presence of a chairperson or moderator who would oversee the event and manage the Q&A component is also expected. Essential for this study is the Q&A component between politicians and citizen representatives during which the two parties engage in direct exchanges. To this end, I excluded meetings and components of meetings in which only speeches, presentations, or panel discussions among politicians are conducted.

**Data Collection**

As I became personally interested in the interactional work done during townhalls between politicians and citizens, I came across a non-profit organization The Townhall Project, which gathers information on the schedule and location details of townhalls held by U.S. local lawmakers, state senators, house representatives, and political candidates. As of the summer of 2020, this organization has come to build a network of volunteer researchers who are each assigned a small number of politicians in order to collect information on their scheduled townhall events. The volunteer researchers each week would submit their findings using an online submission form, and the results will become publicly accessible. I relied on this website to locate information on upcoming townhall events and subsequently attempted to locate and collect recordings made from these events. In addition, I relied on the summative reports compiled by the staff of The Townhall Project (The Townhall Project, 2019) to locate names of Members of Congress who held a large number of town hall meetings and subsequently reviewed their social media pages to locate meeting recordings that were made available.

After locating available recordings, I used a video-downloading software and browser add-ins to download the recordings made available on these sites to my personal computer. In total, the webpages of 96 events were located and documented and 50 recordings were
downloaded to make the final collection. The rest of the recordings were excluded in order to:
remove those with poor video or audio quality, maintain representation of both House
Representatives (45) and Senators (5), maintain representation of both Democrats (32) and
Republicans (18), maintain representation of a significant number of US States (24). The average
duration of each recorded event is 76 minutes, with the average duration of the Q&A segment
being 54 minutes and the average number of citizen questions being 13.

Data Analysis

After collecting the recordings, I used the Jeffersonian (2004) transcription conventions
as well as Mondada (2016)’s multimodal transcription conventions to transcribe these direct
exchanges, focusing on details of the interactions such as talk, gaze, hand gesture, body
movement, use of objects in the physical environment or digital environment such as
microphones—essentially any interactional resources made relevant and oriented to by the
participants themselves.

This study relies on two related methods for data analysis: conversation analysis (CA)
and membership categorization analysis (MCA), both of which find their original theoretical
roots in ethnomethodology. As a method that enables the “discovery, description, and analysis of
complex interactional phenomena as socially produced phenomena in their own right” (Psathas,
1995, p. 50), CA is a fitting method for this study given its rigorous examination of social
interaction through the analysis of its most minute details; more importantly, as I consider
political townhalls as a distinct type of institutional discourse, CA has proven to be a useful
method for studying the unique organization of institutional interactions that may come with pre-
defined turn-taking mechanisms (ten Have, 1999/2007). Since there seems to be a lack of
research on the interactional organization of political townhalls despite their critical societal
significance, I consider CA the most appropriate and rigorous method for looking at “the local interaction and its procedural infrastructure itself, in the general institutional arrangements, or in the institutionalized power of one category of participants over another” (ten Have, 1999/2007, p. 176). That is to say, CA is the most rigorous method for analyzing institutional procedures and norms as well as power dynamics among participants through the close examination of institutional talk. Particularly, as Heritage and Clayman (2010) make the distinction between “pure” CA research (CA research focusing on ordinary conversations) and institutional CA (CA research using “findings about the institution of talk as a means to analyze the operations of other social institutions in talk”) (p. 16, italics in original), I believe this study will benefit from employing institutional CA to uncover the unique set of “‘fingerprint’ of practices” (p. 18) that constitute this distinct type of institutional discourse. Specifically, to capture the “concerns and exigencies” (p. 16) of institutional talk, Heritage and Clayman outline its three basic elements, namely, goal orientations that are specifically related to participants’ institutional identities, special constraints on what is allowed by the tasks at hand, and inferential frameworks and procedures specific to the institutional contexts (p. 34). These elements also specify the directions of analysis for this study.

With shared foundational roots and theoretical underpinnings, MCA as its own distinctive research program goes hand-in-hand with CA as the other analytic approach of this study. Instead of focusing on the sequential organization of social interaction, the unique value and contribution of MCA lie in the fact that it enables the endogenous focus of Members’ invoking and treatment of identities, labels, and social categories as they engage in talk-in-interaction (Schegloff, 2007; Stokoe, 2012). Besides categorial work on individual references to personhood done within a local context, the potential contribution of MCA also lies in its usefulness in
examining how the underpinnings of larger, cultural values are invoked and put into action (Hester & Eglin, 1997). Houseley and Fitzgerald (2009) argue that, by ways of explicating how “populations and constituent identity groups are categorized, morally constituted and accounted for in practice” (p. 359), MCA is aptly fitting for “the sociological understanding of the normative regulation and norms-in-action” within specific political and cultural contexts in which participants are engaged. As participants for this study potentially engage in discussions about the government as an institutional structure as well as partisan and controversial topics during townhalls, I expect that MCA would be particularly useful for uncovering how the taken-for-granted membership categories, invoked at local levels and permeating the interactions (Houseley & Fitzgerald, 2017), constitute a key site of political life for all participants involved.

In addition, further development on MCA also connects to issues related to morality and looks at how it is routinely displayed and made publicly observable (Jayyusi, 1984). Jayyusi points out that moral judgements and values are “produced, displayed, pointed to in occasioned ways” (p. 17, italics in original). She further argues,

… if we wish to understand the organization of the moral order it is precisely the questions of how, in what way, and for what practical purposes are circumstances made out to the relevantly different or relevantly similar that are of analytic interest” (p. 18, italics in original).

Hence, what’s particularly fitting for this study is the ethnomethodological approach to morality as made explicit through Members’ categorization work. For example, categorizing someone as ‘sick’ in the courtroom could potentially relieve them from taking the moral and legal responsibilities of being ‘bad’ (p. 184). We thus see that with different membership categories and attributes come packaged the Members’ different moral judgements, values, and
expectations. Since such topics and discussions concerning morality-based judgements and values abound, MCA also becomes an appropriate and suitable analytical approach to adopt.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are two potential limitations anticipated of this study. First of all, the representativeness of the data might be limited to those political figures who are open to engage in direct exchanges with citizens. This might reduce the range of politician participants to only those who have been “on good terms” with their constituents, which might in turn yield a restricted depiction of the interactional patterns and dynamic between the participants. To address this issue, what can be argued is, instead of claiming to capture a generalizing description of how parties engage in political communication, this study seeks to systematically analyze the ones in which both parties align their courses of action.

Secondly, it is worth pointing out that some of the questions are fielded and “scripted” beforehand by the organizing party. For example, the organizing entity might send out a link beforehand to constituents to solicit questions and invite participation, leading to the questions generated being summarized, reformulated, and delivered by moderators. This, however, is exactly how this institutional context comes to be organized, and as such, its specific institutional norms and parameters deserve to be analyzed in their own right.
Chapter 4: Managing Misinformation

Believe in truth. To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle.

—Timothy Snyder, On Tyranny

Introduction

The crisis of mis/dis-information is considered a great threat to the American democracy and many other democracies around the world (Bennet and Livingston, 2018; Mckay and Tenove, 2020). Legal scholars who study conspiracy theories and extremist groups found that those who spread mis/dis-information succeed in doing so by indoctrinating people into a “crippled epistemology,” limiting the number and diversity of informational sources (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009; Ellsworth, 2019). While the notion of democratic deliberation is highly celebrated, deliberations that are exposed to sustained extremist and misinformed views lead to group polarization (Glaeser and Sunstein, 2009). Currently in the American society, there seems to be a kind of informational and epistemological divide on the basis of knowledge, source of information, and methods of reasoning that drive people apart.

The term misinformation is defined as “false content shared by a person who does not realize it is false or misleading” (Shu et al, 2020, p.2). According to Shu et al (2020), the distinction between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, lies in that both disinformation and malinformation attribute intent to the origin of its spread, while misinformation does not. Since interactional analysis generally stays away from attributing intent to participants, I adopt the term misinformation in this chapter and use it to refer to factually unfounded, scientifically disproved, logically unsound, or otherwise widely disputed information.
produced by some participants. In my data set, citizens bring in misinformation to address issues including largely the following: healthcare, climate change, telecommunication, and various work-in-progress legislations (e.g., reproductive health, immigration, voting rights). This chapter documents how such an informational and epistemological divide is constituted in naturally occurring institutional talk, and in particular, how citizens (CIT) legitimize and defend elements of misinformation in their town hall contributions and how Members of Congress (MOCs) respond to them. The criteria for selecting instances in which misinformation is present includes 1) some elements of information brought in by citizens is widely recognized as misinformation, misinformed perspectives, or even conspiracy theories or 2) the truthfulness or factuality of information shared is challenged by participants at the scene in some way.

The following analysis is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on citizen practices in legitimizing and defending elements of misinformation in their contribution while the second section addresses the MOCs’ practices in working with and responding to them. A total of 12 instances of town hall Q&A segments in which misinformation is identified have been collected. From these instances, I will showcase examples of citizens asserting epistemic superiority (3 excerpts) and appealing to rationality (3 excerpts) to legitimize and defend misinformation; then, I will show examples of how MOCs endorse misinformation (1 excerpt), sidestep misinformation (2 excerpts), and refute misinformation (2 excerpts). Following the analysis, I argue that the ways in which misinformation is treated by both citizens and politicians may undermine the town hall platform and ultimately the democratic value and norms.

Citizen Practices

In the institutional setting of town hall events, citizens commonly make legislative and policy requests to their MOCs or criticize the MOCs’ actions or stances on certain issues. Those
who introduce misinformation in the process of making requests or critiques are no exception.

As will be shown, citizens legitimize and defend elements of misinformation by asserting epistemic superiority and appealing to rationality. It must be noted that this chapter will not focus on citizens reciting or reading misinformation itself. Instead, the analysis will center around practices that sanction, legitimize, or defend elements of misinformation in some way.

**Asserting Epistemic Superiority**

When packaging misinformation into one’s verbal participation at town halls, citizens may deploy assertions of epistemic superiority (Heritage, 2012) to give legitimacy to the reported misinformation. Citizens’ epistemic assertions may appear prior to or after presenting the misinformation or after being challenged by other participants in some way. Such assertions may entail elements of inquiring and assessing the MOC’s epistemic status and inquiring and assessing other citizens’ epistemic status. Three examples will be presented here on citizens’ epistemic work.

The first excerpt features a citizen’s epistemic assertion as the preface (Sidnell, 2012) to his report on research in alternative medicine of which the MOC is, to him, ignorant. This excerpt is from a segment between a citizen (CIT10) and Angie Craig, a Member of the US House of Representatives from Minnesota. The issue at hand centers on healthcare, which the MOC discusses in an opening statement as an area of accomplishment, specifically in *healthcare and lowering the cost of prescription drugs*.

Excerpt 4.1 AngieCraig_MN_112319_InPerson_CIT10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>CIT10:</th>
<th>MOC:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>walks to front-Congressman, uh congresswoman.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>you uh seem to be interested in healthcare to a certain extent, have you ever heard the name Royal Raymond Rife? R-I-f-e,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>tsk- I have not.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As healthcare was one of the main accomplishments that the MOC reported earlier, CIT10 initiates his multi-unit turn by first assessing the MOC’s level of interest in healthcare-related issues, which he treats as mediocre at best, as evidenced by seem to be and to a certain extent (lines 02–03). With this, the citizen launches into his epistemic work that paves the way for introducing a multi-unit report on unverified medical research. First, he starts with an inquiry into the MOC’s epistemic status of a medical professional with have you ever heard (line 3). With announcing the full name and spelling out the last name, this inquiry is designed to elicit a negative response and preface his multi-unit report as new information. In addition, similar to story prefaches in ordinary conversations that facilitate participants launch multi-unit tellings (Sacks, 1992), the epistemic inquiry here, in the preface slot, paves the way for establishing an epistemic asymmetry between the two participants (Lerner, 1992; Ta, 2021) and for subsequently legitimizing the citizen’s telling, particularly when there is no longer a potential threat to checking its factuality or scientific soundness.

Moreover, upon the MOC’s direct, non-mitigated negative response I have not in line 04, the citizen first produces a recommendation for the MOC to look up the information before
proceeding with his telling, operating on the MOC’s K-status (Heritage, 2012) and formally placing himself in an epistemically superior position. Finally, the epistemic work in this case, namely the epistemic inquiry *have you ever heard* (lines 03–04), the K-assessment of the MOC *then you don’t know whatchu talking about* (lines 31–32), as well as the recommendation made to the MOC to *look that up* (line 06), lies in the heart of the citizen’s delivery of misinformation to the town hall floor. As soon as the MOC’s lack of knowledge is established, the citizen is licensed to proceed with unchallenged epistemic authority on the subject, creating a legitimate, protected interactional space for his report of unverified medical news.

The second excerpt showcases how a citizen establishes his epistemic superiority by interrogating other citizens’ levels of knowledge prior to introducing misinformation. The excerpt comes from a Q&A segment between CIT1 and a US House Representative Dean Phillips from Minnesota. CIT1’s main concern centers around a legislation commonly known as “HR1” or “For the People Act” being introduced by the House. This legislation aims to expand voting rights for Americans, which CIT1 understands to be giving non-citizens undeserved voting rights. Prior to the excerpt, CIT1 has just inquired whether MOC voted for HR1.

Excerpt 4.2 DeanPhillips_MN_030820_InPerson_CIT1

01 MOC: you’re correct. [it’s probably the most impor-
02 CIT1: {↓okay?
03 MOC: I consider it and its underlying legislation
to be the most important foundational change
05 that we should effect.
06 CIT1: ↓Okay? I’m just curious. Who here in the room
has actually read the text of any part of HR1
08 bill? *Turns and scans room*—very ↓many of you?
09 MOC: a ↓handful,
10 CIT1: ↓a handful. *Turns back*—okay, well, it’s a massive
document, that’s for sure. So I made it easy
12 on myself? And I just printed the first 20
After CIT1 receives an affirmative answer from MOC (line 1) as well as his account for the importance of this legislation’s most important foundational change (lines 3–5), CIT1 moves on to inquire, in lines 6–8, about the epistemic status of everyone at the scene who ... in the room regarding the legislation. The citizen’s epistemic work in this case can be examined from two aspects. First, this inquiry is again designed to prefer a negative response, as evidenced by actually read and any part of HR1 (lines 6–7), as well as the tagged-on, elliptical interrogative very many of you?. Koshik (2003) discusses a similar use of wh- questions used as challenges in confrontational contexts wherein the questions “convey a strong epistemic stance of the questioner” (p. 68). While in this case the citizen may not be involved in a direct confrontation, the question inquiring whether others in the room have knowledge of the bill designedly prefers a response that establishes other participants’ K- status and thus CIT1’s K+ status (Heritage, 2012) on the issue. Second, as the parameter of the citizen’s inquiry has now changed from a wh-question who here in the room to a yes/no question very many of you?, the response a handful transforms both the design (yes/no) and agenda of the question (eliciting an overwhelmingly negative response) (Stivers and Hayashi, 2010). It could be heard as both confirming CIT’s assumption to an extent (i.e., as expected, not many have read it) and bringing down her sole epistemic authority by just a hint (i.e., some attendees have also read it).

Sequentially, once again, this epistemic inquiry is placed prior to the participant launching into a multi-unit report on her findings from reading the legislative bill. Once her K+ status on the matter has been established, albeit in this case with a slight modulation that some attendees actually read it as well, the citizen is now equipped with the epistemic authority that
paves the way for her misinformed analysis of the bill (more on the citizen’s report in the
upcoming section).

The third excerpt shows a case of citizen’s epistemic work after being challenged. The
exchange occurs between a citizen and US House Representative Andy Kim from New Jersey.
Prior to the excerpt, CIT12 expressed concerns over a newly passed legislation that was designed
to, in her words, allow late-term abortions up to the ninth month and is absolutely inhumane and
absolutely horrible. After a response from the MOC citing a personal example and suggesting
“respecting the family,” CIT12 further pursues her course of action and continues to express her
concern.

Excerpt 4.3 AndyKim_NJ_021619_CIT12

01 CIT12: *takes mic from STF-* I lost a child full term,
02 I carried it to full delivery. And
03 I can’t even imagine somebody putting that
04 out there, a law to: ( ) abortions up
05 to the ninth month. How barbaric are the
06 people that are putting these- are putting
07 these ideas out there. Where are these
08 people coming from, and what is the purpose.
09 is it to sell the ↙body parts, to-
10 CITS: NO[:::/O:HHHH.
11 CIT12: → *DON’T SAY THAT- YOU DON’T KNOW. YOU DON’T
12 KNOW. Because there’s something behind it, for
13 this to be happening. There has to be a lot of
14 money being made within to do this, to a newborn.
15 CITS: *mild/scattered applause
16 STF: *runs to CIT13

In lines 7–8, the citizen inquires the MOC for more information on the identity and
objective of those who introduced the legislation where are these people coming from, and what
is the purpose. However, without waiting for a response, the line of inquiry rapidly falls to the
side of “crippled epistemology,” wherein the citizen quickly makes the leap from inquiring information about the legislation to suspecting a profit-driven motive to sell the body parts (line 9) without a shred of evidence. This logically unsound leap is responded to by multiple other attendees in a joint negative response hearable as a collective groan (line 10), to which she responds with repeating an explicit, emphatic K- assessment YOU DON’T KNOW (line 11).

Two points are worth noting on this citizen’s explicit K- other assessment YOU DON’T KNOW (line 11). First, it can be heard as contrasting with CIT12’s prior K+ self-claim and serves to reiterate her epistemic authority on this issue—she is in the know due to her first-hand experience while others do not (lines 1–2). Second and more importantly, as other attendees’ joint vocal complaint was in direct response to the citizen’s misinformed interpretation/suspicion to sell the body parts, this explicit claim of others’ lack of epistemic access serves to defend her conspiracy-leaning interpretation and allows for its factuality to go unaddressed. In summary, I hope to have shown through the above three examples that citizens’ assertions of epistemic superiority give legitimacy to the misinformation introduced at the town hall events by downgrading the recipients’ epistemic status and allowing the misinformation to go unaddressed.

Appealing to Rationality

Besides asserting superior epistemic status to legitimize the misinformation, citizens may deploy appeals to rationality to bolster and defend misinformation, often by repurposing truthful, valid, objective, neutral statements. This type of interactional practice is similar to what social psychologists describe as “artful paltering,” wherein truthful statements are used to mislead and even deceive (Rogers et al, 2017) (though note the disciplinary difference on attributing participant intention). Three examples will be presented below on how citizens bolster the reported misinformation.
The first example showcases a citizen defending her reported misinformation by supplementing it with claims of objectivity and neutrality. The excerpt is taken from an exchange between CIT12 and House Representative Josh Harder from California. The citizen has previously expressed her concern for a current lawsuit against, according to her, the violation of federal voter registration laws in California and has asked the MOC to hold those involved accountable. The MOC then invites her to elaborate on the issue citing his lack of familiarity, to which she responds with a factually untrue report (lines 3–8) and defends it by stating her neutral, objective stance.

Excerpt 4.4 JoshHarder_CA_052819_InPerson_CIT12

01 MOC: uh it’s not an issue that I’m all that familiar
02 with? But what- what’s wrong withuh with the-
03 CIT12: well they’ve got- heh forgive me I don’t have
04 the voter- exact numbers right here written
05 down but- looks down-but it’s over a million-
06 it’s a million and a half (. ) uh illegal (.)
07 voter registrations, they’ve got duplicate
08 votes, they’ve got- it’s [a mess.
09 CITIS: [no::: No:::
10 CIT12: → scans room-why [wouldn’t you want [.]<a valid
11 MOC: [folks, [folks,
12 CIT12: → election.> that’s all I’m asking for.
13 I’m not saying which way it’s gonna go.=
14 I just want it to be CO↑RRECT.
15 MOC: I- I hear you. well, thank you for your question.

CIT12 continues to elaborate on the problem as invited by MOC and produces a formulation of the problem: there has been a large number of illegal voter registrations. As the reported numbers \textit{(a million and a half illegal voter registrations)} and problems \textit{(duplicate votes)} receive challenges from other citizens (line 9), the citizen now faces the need to defend her claims. She moves to do so by appealing to neutrality and fairness (i.e., she wants a valid
election and does not take sides). In line 9, the other attendees cut in to refute CIT12’s untruthful report. However, this negative response is treated by CIT12 as a challenge to her motive rather than the report itself, as evidenced in her retort why wouldn’t you want a valid election in lines 10–11 directed at critiquing other attendees’ own motive. In addition, she restates her purpose for raising the issue in line 12 that’s all I’m asking for and line 14 I just want it to be correct— reformulating her sole agenda as objectively wanting a valid, correct election. The citizen also unequivocally states disinterest in saying which way it’s gonna go in line 13, establishing a neutral, non-partisan stance. Both claims of objectivity and neutrality serve to refute other participants’ challenge and shield the misinformation introduced from being addressed. The misinformation of “one and half million illegal voter registrations” now gets broadcast under the objective principle of “wanting valid and correct election results” to justify the citizen’s promotion of untruth.

The second example features a case of a citizen bolstering a misinformed perspective (i.e., climate change is not “manmade”) by repurposing a factually correct claim. This excerpt is taken from a Q&A segment between CIT8 and Representative Andy Kim from New Jersey (the same town hall event we encountered in excerpt 4.3). The citizen produces a two-minute multi-unit critique on politicians’ endorsement of renewable energy. Prior to the excerpt, he has just listed a few examples for why types of renewable energy such as wind and solar are harmful. While he states at the onset that he wanted to talk about renewable energy (data not shown), he ends his multi-unit contribution by questioning the MOC’s belief in climate change and the feasibility of measures on reverting its course, citing a misinformed perspective on the main cause of climate change.

Excerpt 4.5 AndyKim_NJ_021619_InPerson_CIT8
CIT8: so, uh I know that Senator Booker is a co-sponsor of the new green deal, the new green deal, and I see that you believe in climate change.

I believe climate change is real too. I’m not a denier. But I believe that earth’s climate has changed for millions of years. Are you one of those people that feel that man can control the temperature? and what—how much money should we spend per degree of temperature that we lower the temperature.

MOC: *steps forward*

uh your name, sir?

Several aspects of the citizen’s work on bolstering the misinformed perspective of denying climate change from repurposing a scientifically valid statement are worth considering here. First, while the citizen seems to join the MOC in the belief in climate change I believe climate change is real too (line 6), he also subsequently moves to claim that I’m not a denier (line 7), presenting himself as belonging in the same science-believing category as the MOC and firmly distinguishing himself from the category of climate change deniers. In addition, the grammatical structure of the citizen’s denial I’m not a denier but… is reminiscent of discourse research on the denial of racism that is often accompanied by blatant offenses that the denial precedes (van Dijk, 1992). While a different context, I’m not a denier but… similarly prefaces and creates the interactional license for the ensuing perspective earth’s climate has changed for millions of years, a perspective often cited exactly by deniers arguing against legislative actions and policy changes. Even more crucially, the perspective earth’s climate has changed for millions of years, which by itself is a scientifically valid statement, is repurposed here to contrast
with the MOC’s belief in climate change and do the ‘dirty work’ of misinformation. By cherry picking one’s facts, the citizen manages to reformulate and redefine the truth on climate change and remove the human impact on climate change from consideration. We observe that the citizen frames objective truth (climate change science) as a matter of personal opinion and belief (I believe in climate change too), creates the space for presenting an erroneous perspective disguised as scientific, and increases its spread.

In the next example, we observe a peculiar case that features a citizen claiming and employing what appears to be a scientific method to bolster a misinformed critique. Same as Excerpt 4.2, this excerpt also comes from an exchange between CIT1 and Rep. Dean Phillips on the issue of HR1 For the People Act. We observe in this case the citizen’s peculiar, misinformed “textual analysis” of the legislation, which also results in a misinformed interpretation.

Excerpt 4.6 DeanPhillips_MN_030820_InPerson_CIT1

01    CIT1:    and anyway, I use the highlighter as I was
02        reading that document? and I have to say,
03        I’m quite concerned with what I read in black
04        →    and white. so it’s really important that people
05        go in and dig into the words, instead of hearing
06        summaries, hearing about other people’s opinions.
07        because you don’t get what to expect, you only
08        get what to inspect with your own eyes.
09        that’s my motto in life.
10    MOC:    >that’s a good one.<
11    CIT1:    ↑anyway, examples of where I was quite (.)
12        displeased to do-
13    MOC:    Nina just because a lot of people are going to
14        wanna ask questions. is there a question in here?
15    CIT1:    yes, there is. and you said it’s a listening
16        session. Citizenship is a (.) very legal
17        important thing to be when you’re allowed to vote
18        →    in this country. I counted the word citizen used
19        only six times when I read the first 20 pages.
and even then, it was only when democrats were referring to how the constitution reads right now. then you go back and read the changes that the Democrats wanna have. Picks up paper and I ↑ couldn’t believe it. you

never see the word citizen in the critical places of that act. instead with my tallies, I counted the word individual or individuals 130 times. the word people, 2 times. voters 13 times. registrant 4 times. applicants 16 times. the constitution?

MOC: [so Nina-]
CIT1: [to allow] ↓ anybody who breathes to vote?
MOC: Nina I- I- I > do want to listen to as many of you here today,< we’ve got about an [hour,

The citizen’s main course of action, as previously indicated, is to express concerns over the new legislation allegedly giving non-citizens undeserved voting rights. There are two main parts of her appealing to rationality that support her misinformed critique that the new legislation is watering down the constitution to allow anybody who breathes to vote (lines 30–33). The first part, seen in lines 4–9, highlights the citizen’s principle of relying only on direct observation, as evidenced by her instruction for others to go in and dig into the words rather than hearing summaries and other people’s opinions followed by an idiom with a contrastive stress emphasizing the importance to inspect issues on one’s own. The citizen’s claim of scientific objectivity thus far is also responded to with a positive assessment by the MOC (line 10). After the “method statement,” the citizen now moves on to her “research findings.” In the second part, she reports tallies of key words in the bill (lines 18–19, 24–29). Put simply, the citizen’s findings amount to the following: in the pages reviewed, the word “citizen” is rarely used and a few other words in the same class are, such as “individual(s)” and “applicants.”
The narrow belief in solely what one can directly observe, while valid in some general sense, essentially boils down to “seeing is believing”—a rudimentary and flawed way of perceiving and knowing. The seemingly objective tallies, while may be accurate, are taken out of context without considering how a legislative bill is structured and written, the purpose of the bill, or legally valid meaning of the text. Both taken together constitute a misinformed method of interpretation, and more importantly, yield misinformation for the citizen (and other attendees) that Congress is actively attempting to give voting rights to ineligible individuals. This excerpt manifests a dangerous “crippled epistemology” once again in that the citizen is committed to a flawed way of knowing, an out-of-context understanding and false interpretation of a bill, and a strong belief in the rationality and validity of both.

The preceding subsection presented a set of cases wherein citizens appeal to rationality to bolster and defend misinformation, through repurposing valid, truthful, or objective statements in some way, hereby justifying misinformation and misinformed perspectives. In summary, both types of citizen practices discussed in this section, namely asserting epistemic superiority and appealing to rationality, consistently create legitimacy, support, and defense for the misinformation they introduce to the town hall floor.

**Politician Practices**

Thus far, I have presented examples showcasing how citizen legitimize and defend the misinformation brought to the town hall floor, that is, by asserting epistemic superiority and appealing to rationality. We now move to the other party of these interactional events by focusing on how MOCs work with and respond to this type of citizen contributions. At town hall events, MOCs generally orient toward respecting everyone’s perspective and designing responses to individual questions/statements for the overhearing attendees (Heritage, 1985). In
the following analysis, I discuss a range of MOC practices when encountering misinformation, specifically, endorsing misinformation, sidestepping misinformation, and refuting misinformation.

**Endorsing Misinformation**

In my data set, only one case is found wherein the MOC explicitly endorses a citizen’s misinformed contribution. The excerpt is from a Q&A segment between CIT17 and House Representative John Carter from Texas. Thus far, a number of citizens already voiced their concerns over immigration issues on the country’s southern border and that, according to them, House Democrats are the ones to blame for increased illegal immigration close to their homes. CIT17 follows up to support these claims (also see Green, 2016 for town hall participants’ “tag-team” questions in which citizens follow up on previous questions). We join the participants as CIT17 continues to explain Democrats’ inaction on the southern border with a notion largely similar to that of “the New World Order,” a documented conspiracy theory according to the Anti-Defamation League.

Excerpt 4.7 JohnCarter_TX_052819_InPerson_CIT17

01 CIT17: and that’s why Pelosi ain’t gonna do anything
02 and a:ll other her cronies up there,
03 *alternating gaze between CITS & MOC-
04 they want one world or:der,
05 they want at least one thi:rd of the population
06 o’ the world go:ne. if not half. they don’t
07 want no borders. if (.) Clinton had gotten in,
08 we would not have a border (.) points down-this
09 day.=we would not points down-recogni:ze our
10 nation. [and it’s not- ]
11 MOC: →[an’ I’m against] the one world order,
12 [I promise you.]
13 CIT17: [that’s right. ] you better believe it,
14 if by- that’s what it all boils down to be.
According to the citizen, the reason for their border problems is that the Democrats, namely House Democrats represented by Nancy Pelosi and all other her cronies up there (line 02), want one world order (line 04), which entails radical world population reduction by a third if not half (lines 5–6) and no border control (lines 08–09), as well as a target timeline of 2030 (lines 15–17). The MOC’s endorsement of the citizen’s contribution, as we observe, is done first through validating the misinformation and then committing to action based on the referenced misinformation. During the first segment in lines 11–12, he tags on to explicitly state his stance on the issue an’ I’m against the one world order (line 11) and reaffirms and commits to this stance in line 12 I promise you. Besides confirming his stance, the full repetition of the term with the definitive article the one world order (note CIT17 does not use ‘the’ previously) serves to confirm its existence, known status, and even validity to the citizen herself and the rest of the attendees. In the second segment of MOC response in lines 21–22, he reassures the citizen that the Democrats won’t get it done, partially repeating CIT17’s prior allegation they were hoping to have it all done (line 20) and promising resistance from his end (we’ll fight them in line 22). In the segment in lines 21–22, the MOC continues to validate the content of misinformation on the Democrats’ alleged plan, treating it as a real danger to fight against. The MOC also commits to
the constituents at the scene that he will be a part of an alliance (note the ‘we’) to go against the
plan. Overall, despite the brevity of his responses, the MOC’s full endorsement of citizen’s
misinformed contribution not only provides an official platform for the spread of misinformation
on the opposing party’s agenda but also rallies the attendees to oppose the other party based on
the misinformation.

**Sidestepping Misinformation**

Besides endorsing misinformation elements in citizen’s contribution, MOCs are more
commonly found to sidestep the misinformation by 1) claiming a K- status (Heritage, 2012) on
the specifics and a willingness to learn more and 2) refocusing the ensuing response on a related
but different topic that may have larger common ground or potentially a wider impact (also see
the practice of “going general” in answering yes/no questions at public-facing webinars by
Waring et al, 2018). Two examples on MOCs sidestepping will be presented below.

The first example showcases an MOC claiming a K- status and then refocusing the
response from a citizen-reported, unverified issue (large number of illegal voter registrations) to
a general issue that impact many Americans (difficulty in voting). This excerpt is from the same
Q&A exchange in Excerpt 4.4 between CIT12 and Representative Josh Harder on the voter
registration issues brought up by CIT12. Immediately prior to the excerpt, MOC started his
response by asking other attendees to *be civil and let everyone have a chance to ask their
question*. Afterwards, although it is unclear from the video source if there were other disruptive
movements, CIT12 nonetheless holds both arms out with exasperation and walks off without
acknowledging MOC again (lines 01–02 below).

Excerpt 4.8 JoshHarder_CA_052819_CIT12

01 CIT12: *to CITS, arms out-*{(why are you staring).
02 walks off
MOC: uh I don’t necessarily agree that we have (.).
the voter registration problem (you )?

→κ. although it’s an issue that I’m not
particularly familiar with?=so I’m happy to
→refocus look it up? but I do think we can agree on
something that I think is a core ↓principle?

which is it is way too hard to vote in America.

a:nd we need to restore faith back to our
democratic (. ) values, uh and the democratic
process.=that legitimacy: has been lost.

The MOC’s response is structured in two parts: first conceding to a K- position and then
pivoting to discuss a different issue. Though CIT12 has already quickly walked away from the
microphone and off camera, the MOC continues to address her by first making clear his stance
on the reported problem, claiming an epistemically inferior position, and then offering to learn
more (lines 04–07). His stance so far is mitigatingly challenging I don’t necessarily agree (line
3) and he also concedes to a K- status on the reported problem with I’m not particularly familiar
with (line 05) and expressing willingness to know more—happy to look it up (lines 06–07).

Without dwelling further on the reported issue, the MOC now makes the shift into the
difficulties that Americans experience with voting. He deploys the re-focusing ‘but’ (Choe and
Reddington, 2020) and formulates the prospective issue as something that I think is a core
principle that we, hearable as addressing all attendees, can find common ground on (lines 7-8).
After foreshadowing how other participants can understand the upcoming issue something we
can agree on, he then describes it as it is way too hard to vote in America (line 9), an extreme
case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) suggesting the out-of-ordinary level of difficulty in voting as
well as its common occurrence and wide impact in America. In this excerpt, we observe that
while the MOC does briefly challenge the citizen’s unverified information, he concedes to a K-
position and then quickly uses the larger topic on voting made relevant by the citizen as a
springboard to launch into a widely recognized issue. The misinformation in this case, namely the alleged *one million and half illegal voter registrations*, is practically unaddressed while the MOC shifts his response to discuss a relevant, common problem in which the attendees might find more common ground.

Similarly, the next excerpt is an example of the MOC sidestepping the misinformation by first claiming his K-status and then refocusing from a controversial, unverified issue (claim of vaccines as one of two causes of chronic illnesses) to a topically relevant, verifiable issue (harmful environmental contaminants). The excerpt is taken from a Q&A between CIT2 and House Representative Mike Levin from California. CIT2 is concerned with two causes of chronic illnesses, one being herbicide *Glyphosate* and the other being vaccines. Prior to the excerpt, CIT2 does not discuss any issues on the topic of herbicide and only goes to great lengths about research on fraudulent vaccines. CIT2 ends her contribution by requesting that the MOC to join the legislative effort of investigating the vaccines.

Excerpt 4.9 MikeLevin_CA_110419_InPerson_CIT2

01 CIT2: I’m wondering if you’d be willing to help
02 congressman William Posey, who was in
03 the congress and spoken about this before, have
04 him help him subpoena Dr. William Thompson
05 of the CDC, who is a whistleblower, and having
06 him subpoenaed before Congress to testify
07 to the fraudulent vaccines studies at the CDC.
08 MOC: facing CIT2 to the corner of the room-wul-
09 what I will (.) offer to you is this?=our
10 \rightarrow k. staff is here?-faces and gestures left
11 be happy tuh turns back to CIT2-look into it?
12 u:h I: don’t know enough about uh that particular
13 gentleman, >nor do I know about those studies, uh
14 to offer an opinion one way or the other?<
15 =I can tell you that I did- uh my wife and I made
16 th’ decision to ↓vaccinate our children?
uh and that’s a decision that I (.) firmly believe in?=strongly believe in?=
→refocus turns to face CITS-I also believe that there are a lot of harmful environmental (. turns to CIT2-
contaminants out there that I’m deeply concerned about,-turns to CITS-and I’m (.) highly worried about this administration abdicating any responsibility around environmental protection.

CITS: yep?

In this excerpt, we observe that the MOC avoids challenging the reported vaccine issue by claiming a lack of knowledge on the specific matter, disclosing his family’s decision on vaccination as a personal matter, and then moving the response into exclusively addressing the other concern from the citizen.

In lines 08–09, the MOC initiates his response with an offer to learn more about the information offline (lines 08–09) and a claim of K-status in a restrictive way on that particular gentleman and those studies (lines 12–13) as a basis for declining to respond to the fraudulent vaccine investigation in any way—to offer an opinion one way or the other (line 14). Then in line 15, the MOC moves to quickly address the concern over vaccines, making clear his own personal belief and framing the issue of vaccination as a matter of personal decision (lines 12–18). He first produces a disclosure with I can tell you (line 15) and formulates it as a personal, family matter my wife and I made th’ decision (lines 15–16). He then qualifies the degree to which he is committed to this decision, stating it two times in a latch I firmly believe in?=strongly believe in? (lines 17–18), characterizing it once again as a personal decision but making clear his firm stance to the citizen.

With the vaccine issue touched on and responded to briefly, the MOC now pivots away from this focus, using both embodied and verbal resources to make a rapid shift from vaccines to
environmental contaminants. Note in line 19, he swiftly latches on the start of his refocusing work to a just-finished TCU and at the same time turns to face the rest of the attendees, orienting to addressing the entire group. The refocusing is then completed in a stepwise fashion. First, he utters I also believe (line 19), marking the upcoming response as relevant but disjunctive from the prior topic (Waring, 2013). He briefly turns to CIT2 and characterizes the herbicide that she brought up within a category a lot of harmful environmental contaminants out there (line 20), broadening the scope of his response and shifting from the vaccine issue to the environmental issue. In the next step, he turns right back to address other attendees (line 22) and qualifies his worry as highly over the recent actions that the Trump administration has taken against environmental protection, pivoting from only discussing the issue on contaminants to a list of policy changes that negatively impact the environment. The MOC’s refocusing work is now done as he spends the next three minutes exclusively on the new matter.

In the above excerpts then, we observe that the MOCs quite methodically manage to avoid directly addressing the misinformation elements by first claiming a lack of knowledge on the specific matter (e.g., the individual or studies referenced), a willingness to learn more (e.g., happy to look into it), and then shifting the response to address a larger, more impactful issue. While the MOCs achieve to topicalize and comment on issues that may legitimately impact the wider audience, setting aside the misinformation as merely matters to be looked into further offline or as debatable personal opinions and choices gives it undue credence and allows the misinformation itself to be broadcast at the town hall unchallenged and normalized.

**Refuting Misinformation**

Besides endorsing and sidestepping misinformation, some MOCs do in fact refute the misinformation heard on the town hall floor. We will observe in the following two cases how
MOCs manage the work of refutation. The first excerpt comes from the same town hall event hosted by Representative Dean Phillips featured in Excerpt 4.6. Previously, CIT10’s contribution focused on two claims: 1) Democrats are being paid for by billionaire George Soros who practically controls the election, a widely known conspiracy theory; and 2) top Democrats such as Senator Chuck Schumer are not held accountable for partisan actions. The MOC addresses the second issue first (data not shown) and then moves to respond to the first issue.

Excerpt 4.10 DeanPhillips_MN_030820_CIT10

01 MOC: on the first subject of George Soros?
02 CIT10: yes.
03 MOC: shaking head tsk I’m speechless.
04 CITS: hhh
05 MOC: this, my friend, shakes head
06 is the problem. I will respond tuh anything
07 That’s evidence based, I will call it like
08 I see it? I will acknowledge things that
09 affect me,=that hurt me, I will acknowledge
10 → my own mistakes? .h but you’re just wrong.
11 CITS: *applause ->
12 CIT10: *what is wrong.
13 MOC: → what you just said, about George Soros,
14 CITS: ->*
15 MOC: giving- giving-* giving me money, buying our
16 elections,=undermining democracy, look at it.
17 shaking head-(1.0) tsk it’s wrong.=
18 CIT10: =I ↑think you got the wrong source.
19 CITS: [hhhh
20 MOC: [nods-mkay- nods I respect-
21 → y’know what sir, light nod I respect your
22 perspective? but I don’t agree with it.
23 and- and I- all I ask is that you do the same
24 thing that I'll do after this town hall meeting,=
25 look at some other perspectives.
In responding to the citizen’s allegation about Democrats including MOC himself, the MOC’s rebuttal comes in two segments. He first directly rebuts that the citizen is wrong. He starts with being speechless (line 03) and identifies the citizen’s allegation as an exemplification of the problem (lines 05–06). The MOC then positions himself as being open and humble (e.g., I will acknowledge my own mistakes) as well as objective (e.g., anything that’s evidence based, call it like I see it). He then continues with explicitly characterizing the citizen as just wrong (line 10). When challenged with what is wrong (line 12), the MOC directly references the citizen’s prior allegation (lines 15–16), moving from the alleged activity giving me money, to its immediate implication buying our election, and then the larger significance undermine our democracy. Notably, while the MOC does explicitly characterize the citizen’s misinformed allegation as flat-out wrong, he only hints at its lack of evidence (I will respond to anything that’s evidence based in lines 06–07) without challenging the citizen on his lack of evidence. Interestingly, it is the misinformed citizen who manages to directly question the MOC’s use of evidence I think you got the wrong source in line 18.

The second aspect of MOC’s responding action to the citizen’s “George Soros issue” involves acknowledging his contribution and openly disagreeing with it (lines 21–22). While he does directly contrast the I respect your perspective with I don’t agree with it, he formulates the misinformation cited as your perspective that should be treated with respect. While MOC does straightforwardly disagree with it, this part of his responding action confuses a widely spread untruth with a personal perspective that should be treated with respect and sanctions the prior dangerous spread of misinformation as warranted expression of personal opinions.

The next excerpt features the MOC refuting a citizen’s misinformed perspective from both the angles of rejecting the misinformation as well as reinforcing the principle of engaging in
civic discourse. This excerpt comes from the Q&A segment on renewable energy and climate change between Rep. Andy Kim and CIT8, the same one featured in Excerpt 4.5. Immediately prior to this excerpt, the citizen claims that I believe in climate change too. I’m not a denier. But I believe that earth’s climate has changed for millions of years, a perspective from the discourse of climate change deniers. We observe below how the MOC manages to respond to this misinformed perspective.

Excerpt 4.11 AndyKim_NJ_021619_InPerson_CIT8

01  CIT8: are you one of those people
02       that feel that man (. ) can control the
03       temperature? =and what- how much money
04       should we spend per degree of temperature
05       that we lower the temperature.
06       *how much.=how many dollars.*
07  MOC: *steps forward* *
08       uh your name, sir?
((lines omitted; MOC first addresses citizen’s concerns on sources of energy))
09  MOC: so it’s about trying to
10       find uh the right way in which we build it
11 →1 out. now what I will say and I’ll be very
12       (. ) upfront with you on this front,
13       I do believe in climate change=
14       and I do believe that people have been a
15       cause (. ) of climate change.
16  CIT: *applause/cheering*
17  CIT8?: ( saying?)
18  MOC: in terms of- in terms
19       of the issues that we’re dealing with,
20       I do believe that that the uh the, from the
21       Industrial Revolution on and we can- you can
22       track this just in terms of pollution and
23       carbon output, uh that yes. we have been
24       the primary change for the changes,
25       and rapid changes that we’ve seen in our
26       environment in recent decades.
27       I do believe that. I do believe that. and-
As mentioned before, the MOC’s refutation of the citizen’s perspective on climate change comes in two installments, each addressing a distinct aspect. The first installment (lines 11–27) addresses the citizen’s misinformed perspective on the cause of rapid climate change via emphatic belief statements that directly counter the citizen’s perspective. As the reader may recall in Excerpt 4.5 in which the citizen redefines the truth on climate change (essentially, from what one may commonly understand as the belief in climate change to “climate change means the climate has been changing for millions of years”), the MOC resists and directly reverses this re-definition by specifying what his belief actually entails—*I do believe in climate change=and I do believe that people have been a cause of climate change* (lines 13–14). Then, he continues with a third emphatic belief statement in lines 20–26, further specifying his evidence on people’s
direct impact pollution and carbon output (lines 22–23) as well as providing the temporal ranges—from the Industrial Revolution on (lines 20–21) and rapid changes in recent decades (lines 25–26), both of which reject the validity of the citizen’s timeframe millions of years.

Having refuted the citizen’s specific perspective, the MOC offers to host another town hall dedicated to climate changes issues (lines 29–34) and then moves to the second installment, claiming scientific consensus on the matter and issuing a call that people should be working from a common foundation of facts (lines 39–40). He first clarifies that there is a lot of scientific consensus on this issue (lines 37–38) and then emphasizes that working from a common foundation of facts allows people to be able to operate (lines 40–41). This emphatic stance, hearable as a critique of the citizen not operating on facts, is then quickly mitigated by the MOC latching on to claim a lack of epistemic authority not as someone who’s a climate scientist though (lines 41–42) and avoiding singling out the citizen himself as the target of critique there’s more all of us need to learn on this (line 45). We observe in this case that the MOC’s response attends to the citizen’s prior contribution in two layers: one specifically on countering the misinformed perspective (whether people are the primary reason for rapid climate change) and the other one, more broadly, on reinforcing the basic principle of engaging in civic debate (we should agree to and operate on scientific consensus and facts).

This subsection, as I hope to have demonstrated, showcases how the MOCs manage to refute the misinformation introduced by citizens. We observe that the MOCs generally treat it as a delicate matter by showing respect for citizen’s perspective while making sure to issue direct disagreement. The MOC may also attend to not only the specific untruthful perspective but also the general principle by which citizens engage in civic debate. This section on politician practices as a whole presents a range of cases in which MOCs respond to misinformation.
brought in by citizens via endorsing, sidestepping, or refuting. Generally, there seems to be a tendency of not dwelling on the factuality or sources of information brought in by the citizens and instead focusing on the larger issues that the misinformation may entail.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In this chapter, I took on the notion of “informational and epistemological divide” and demonstrated how citizens and public officials constitute this divide when interacting with each other at public events. In particular, I have shown how citizens bring in misinformation by asserting epistemic superiority and appealing to rationality. They assert epistemic superiority by establishing other parties’ lack of knowledge on an issue, thus paving the way for the ensuing misinformation or defending it after the fact. Citizens also appeal to rationality by repurposing valid, truthful, or objective statements to legitimize and defend misinformation.

In the case of politicians, MOCs generally orient to treating everyone’s perspective with respect and designing responses for the wider audience. This chapter demonstrates three practices that MOCs may deploy to respond to citizens whose contribution involves elements of misinformation, i.e., endorsing, sidestepping, and refuting. As shown, MOCs are found to fully endorse citizens’ misinformed contribution by validating its existence and vowing to carry out action. MOCs who sidestep citizens’ misinformation are found to first concede to a K- status on the specific matter and then pivot to a related but different topic that may have a wide impact. Those MOCs who refute citizens’ misinformed contribution are found to either directly but respectfully disagree with the citizen or attend to both specific and general issues in the citizen’s contribution.

From the citizen perspective, one concerning phenomenon is made clear from the exhibits of “crippled epistemology” in various ways. As the first analytic section has shown,
certain citizens not only broadcast misinformation, and promote misinformed methods of reasoning, but more importantly, they trust such information so wholeheartedly as to orchestrate interactional moves to legitimize and justify it. This is an alarming, dangerous pattern of behavior, particularly on a platform wherein citizens exercise their rights in and responsibilities to the democratic structure. As citizens attribute objective truth to personal beliefs, confuse facts with personal opinions, and even commit to nonsensical methods of reasoning, the fulfillment of one’s democratic responsibilities in these cases is thus undermined and the significance of the town hall platform diminished. Not only that, the citizen contribution is weaponized to further spread misinformation, potentially corrupting other attendees, inducing fear, and promoting demagoguery.

In the case of the Members of Congress, a similar issue is found with the ways in which responses to misinformation are designed. As I hope to have shown, MOC’s approach to misinformation in general is a practical one—many cases of misinformation (9 out of 12 instances) remain un(der)-addressed and those who spread misinformation are generally acknowledged and shown respect. This tendency again makes the town hall platform and its attendees fall prey to misinformation more easily. Treating misinformation as exercising freedom of expression and democratic dissent is not an exhibit of reasonable pluralism with “a diversity of opposing irreconcilable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines” (Rawls, 2005, p.2). “Both-siding” it when one side is definitively invalid and false corrupts public discourse and erodes democratic norms by which the people govern.

The misinformation crisis is not a new challenge by any means, but it has exacerbated to a whole new level in the past few years where information with varying degrees of verifiability abounds. Addressing this crisis and remediating the informational divide will prove essential for
the health of the nation. Each of us in our roles, whatever they may be, has a civic duty for being responsible for our sources of information, developing our critical thinking skills, and resolutely exposing misinformation when we see it.
Chapter 5: Managing Negative Partisanship

Distinctions between parties help make democracy work by presenting citizens with meaningful choices. Yet when parties divide both lawmakers and society into two unalterably opposed camps that view each other as enemies, they can undermine social cohesion and political stability. Democracy is put at risk.

—Suzanne Mettler & Robert C. Lieberman, Four Threats

Introduction

One of the fundamental norms of a functioning democracy is the notion of mutual toleration of one’s political opponents, particularly for their legitimacy of existence, right to compete, and right to govern (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In recent years, however, increasing negative partisanship is shown to have become a strong destabilizing factor in the American democracy wherein political opponents allow polarizing partisan rivalry to override democratic governance (Mettler & Lieberman, 2020). While those interested in the theoretical concept of partisanship view it as “regulated adversarialism” amongst competing parties and “a highly principled mode of activity” (White & Ypi, 2016, p.3), negative partisanship in practice is defined as the phenomenon of individuals exhibiting a high level of hatred and animosity towards another party or construing their own identity through aligning against another party (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018; Lelkes, 2021). The decrease in mutual toleration of political rivals, according to Mettler and Lieberman (2020), is manifested through phenomena such as partisan loyalty overriding political responsibility, partisan polarization overtaking policy work, and partisan competition trumping bipartisan compromise. To the ordinary reader, even more worrisome is the series of warning signs observed by political scientists to identify those political elites with authoritarian tendencies, one of which is “deny[ing] the legitimacy of opponents”
(Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, p. 21). It seems that negative partisanship not only leads to political inaction and legislative gridlock but, more crucially, the backsliding of democratic governance itself.

While we may wish to believe that such negative partisanship is practiced only by professional political players, unfortunately, the worsening division on the basis of political affiliation also manifests itself in ordinary people’s lives including, in particular, people’s political participation. With the backdrop of heightening partisan divide, politicians and ordinary citizens become active players in producing, reinforcing, and perpetuating negative partisanship. This chapter documents how both citizens and Members of Congress (MOCs) manage the partisan divide in town hall interactions. A total of 38 cases were collected of the participants producing the partisan divide, usually in the form of complaining about the other party or contrasting the two parties in some way. The notion of negative partisanship is produced by the citizens in 36 cases, which is not surprising given that the MOCs mainly occupy the second position and produce responding turns. In the 2 remaining cases where the citizens do not produce partisanship-implicative turns, the MOC invokes negative partisanship of their own accord.

The following analysis is divided into two main sections. The first section focuses on citizen practices in (re)producing negative partisanship, including presenting irreconcilable alternatives (2 excerpts), presupposing a zero-sum game (2 excerpts), and ascribing categories of threat (2 excerpts). The second section focuses on how MOC practices manage negative partisanship in responding to citizen contributions, including neutralizing (2 cases), upgrading (2 cases), and initiating (1 case). Following the analysis, I argue that the lack of mutual tolerance is harmful for democratic governance and that both citizens and politicians should consider steering
away from such negative partisan rivalry to focus on issues and policies that truly impact ordinary citizens’ lives.

**Citizen Practices**

As increasing partisan divide is prominently featured in the current political landscape, interactions at town hall meetings, understandably, might center on issues related to attacking, confronting, or blaming the opposing party. Citizens’ participation is no exception. As I will show in this subsection, practices by which citizens produce and reinforce negative partisanship include presenting irreconcilable alternatives, presupposing a zero-sum game between the two parties, and ascribing threatening categories to those in the opposing party. Central to these practices is the manifestation of a strong lack of tolerance for the opposing party.

*Presenting Irreconcilable Alternatives*

One of the ways in which negative partisanship is produced by citizens is through presenting two conflicting, irreconcilable alternatives for the MOC to choose from, be it between one’s allegiance to their party and nation, or between one’s loyalty to their party and constituents. Citizens (re)produce the negative partisan divide by creating a pre-supposed animosity and intolerance between two allegiances (e.g., party vs. nation/constituents) that are not necessarily so. These alternatives are presented as irreconcilable to the citizens—as we observe that they make the MOCs accountable for a choice between the two. The following cases also show that these “accountability questions” are particularly challenging as they restrict the recipient to choosing one alternative only and hold them accountable for their choice. Note that “accountability” here refers to “political accountability” where politicians are held responsible by constituents for political work rather than what EMCA scholars consider “accountability,”
namely, the recognizability and describability of social actions by members with shared methods of sense making (Heritage & Clayman, 2010, p.11).

The first excerpt below comes from an exchange between a citizen (CIT15) and Republican House Representative Ben Cline from Virginia. The citizen inquires about MOC’s stance on the President along with the Republican Party and the U.S. Constitution.

Excerpt 5.1 BenCline_VA_031919_CIT15

01 CIT15: okay uh first of all, thank you for being here.
02 MOC: sure. [where are you from,
03 CIT15: we look forward to having you uh in
04 Shenandoah county.
05 MOC: great. I’ll be there soon.
06 CITS: heheh
07 CIT15: good. um, question ↓ for you? there are many of us
08 that feel that Trump is a clear and present danger (.)
09 to our nation. um I know most people in this room
don’t feel that way, but there are many of us
11 → that do. so:: my question for you i:s are there any:
12 redlines you can envision where: you would
13 break with supporting (.) President Trump and
14 your party, versus supporting the Constitution um
15 and the fabric of the United States.
16 MOC: well, I will always follow the Constitution.=
17 I swore it in my oath. ((continues))

In this instance, the citizen presents to the MOC two conflicting alternatives between one’s allegiance to one’s political party and to the nation’s fundamental law. The first step that the citizen takes involves clarifying his own political stance as opposing many others in attendance in the preface slot (lines 07–11). The citizen’s political stance-taking is done through formulating his view on Donald Trump as a clear and present danger to our nation (lines 08–09) and as representing many of us (lines 07 and 10) against most people in this room (line 09). His stance-taking in the question preface slot signals that the upcoming question likely entails an
adversarial position towards the MOC. As the citizen resumes his questioning *so my question for you is* (line 11), a stark dichotomy of the MOC’s party affiliation and allegiance to the Constitution of the United States is then established. The citizen first invites the MOC to consider possible *redline* scenarios wherein he would give up supporting the President and *your party* (lines 12–13), which is then contrasted with *supporting the Constitution* (line 14), the fundamental nature of which is described as the *fabric* of the nation (line 15). Although the *redlines* are what the MOC is asked to *envision* (line 12) and thus hypothetical, the citizen creates such scenarios based on the pre-supposition that the MOC’s party affiliation stands in opposition to his allegiance to the country. In short, the citizen first establishes two opposing views in the room: one that supports Trump and one that opposes him; then, he invites the MOC to hypothesize scenarios in which he is compelled to choose between supporting the President and his party and supporting the fundamental law of the country. As such, the citizen manages to create a dichotomy of “your side versus my side,” in this case being “your president and party” vs. “the country’s Constitution,” which produces negative partisanship by delegitimizing the MOC with opposing political views as un-American while implicitly construing one’s own political affiliation as the sole representative of patriotism.

The next excerpt is taken from a longer exchange between an Oklahoma citizen CIT9 and former Democratic House Representative Kendra Horn. Prior to the excerpt, the citizen made two comments, one on *democratic leadership mourning the death of terrorists on Twitter* and the other to correct the MOC on her prior descriptions of the three branches of government, displaying in both comments a strong adversarial stance towards the MOC. The citizen now moves to first preface her questions with the political affiliations of both her and her husband
before questioning the MOC’s vote on the House’s impeachment proceedings against Donald Trump.

Excerpt 5.2 KendraHorn_OK_011120_CIT9

01 CIT9: so my thing is, I’m a former independent, I voted
02 for Barack Obama twice. I voted for President Trump
03 in 2016 and I’ll vote for President Trump in 2020,
04 my husband is a 280% disabled combat veteran from
05 Iraq? he completely supports everything that the
06 President has done. so my question for you is um (.)
07 the overwhelming majority of your constituents don’t
08 support impeachment, yet you voted for it. I recall
09 you standing in all white with Nancy Pelosi and
10 the squad in protest o’ President Trump during his
11 → inauguration. my questions are, why are you
12 working for Nancy Pelosi instead of your constituents
13 n’ Oklahomans and considering you voted yes for
14 the President’s impeachment- your president’s
15 impeachment, do you consider him a criminal
16 or a traitor to America. thank you.
17 MOC: so let me- let me address uh several of those things,
18 first of all, ((continues))

In this excerpt, the citizen presents to the MOC two irreconcilable alternatives built on partisan differences between working with one’s party and working for one’s own constituents who may largely align with the opposing party. The citizen posits the MOC’s allegiance as against her constituents by first contrasting her vote on impeachment and the preference of the overwhelming majority of the constituents (lines 06–08) and then recalling that the MOC stood together with prominent Democrats to publicly protest the President (lines 08–11). Given that the MOC voted for the impeachment proceedings and is reported to have stood together with Democrats, the citizen then creates a contrast between “working for your party” and “working for your own constituents”—accusing the MOC with why are you (line 11), treating this contrast
as an existing phenomenon, and contrasting working for Nancy Pelosi and your constituents n’ Oklahomans (lines 12–13). The citizen pre-supposes that the MOC’s alliance with the Democratic leadership in the House and her work representing the people of Oklahoma, who are reportedly aligned with the Republican Party, are mutually exclusive and the MOC must be accountable for choosing where her allegiance lies. Besides a strong adversarial stance toward the MOC, the citizen also displays an understanding that the two opposing parties are in such intolerance toward each other that it makes it impossible for a representative from one party to work with citizens from the opposing party.

The above examples illustrate how the citizens create irreconcilable alternatives between one’s party and nation or between one’s party and constituents. Heinemann (2008) describes one kind of “questions of accountability,” namely yes/no questions which are designed to signal a strong predisposition of the speaker (e.g., does it matter?) and narrows the responding slot for the respondent where the confirming answer alternative (e.g., yes) makes the respondent in disagreement with the speaker, and the disconfirming answer forces the respondent to backpedal on prior actions or take back prior stances. As demonstrated above, citizens in these cases also present an “unanswerable” interrogative in which the question recipient is presented with two answer alternatives from which they must choose one, as the recipient is put in a sequential environment in which “there is no adequate way for the recipient to respond” (Heinemann, 2008, p. 69). The examples also demonstrate the moral and political implications of this type of citizen question as designed to compel the politician to either change their political stance or backpedal from prior political actions. The citizens exhibit a lack of mutual tolerance through questioning the MOC’s loyalty to the country or constituents, essentially characterizing the MOC’s politically different stance or action as treasonous. Crucially, to the citizens, “different” entails
“opposite.” It is through this lack of mutual tolerance for the “opposing” party, as realized each time in citizens’ question design, that negative partisanship is reinforced and perpetuated.

**Presupposing A Zero-Sum Game**

Along with presenting irreconcilable alternatives, citizens also produce negative partisanship in interaction through presupposing a zero-sum game between their own party and the opposing party. In other words, to these participants, the gain of one party always amounts to the loss of the other. As will be shown in the next two excerpts, when speaking to a MOC whose political affiliation is similar to one’s own, citizens may portray the two political sides in stark contrast—usually with the opposing party being depicted as aggressive and ferocious and one’s own party as passive and weak. These contrasts illustrate the citizens’ strong animosity and lack of tolerance for the opposing party as they perceive the opposition’s success as their own loss, displaying a strong negative partisan stance.

The excerpt below is taken from a longer exchange between a Louisiana resident (CIT8) and Republican House Representative Steve Scalise. After expressing concerns about Congress focusing too much on the presidential impeachment proceedings and not on the business of the country, CIT8 was on his way to ask a second question but reported to MOC that he was drawing a blank. The MOC then proceeds to respond to his first question (which we will see more of in the next section on politician practices). We join the participants as CIT8 immediately follows up with his second question after MOC finishes responding to the first. The focus here is the citizen’s depiction of the two parties.

Excerpt 5.3 SteveScalise_LA_101419_CIT8

```
01  CIT8: =okay. I did think of my other question, and that is
02        that um it appears, okay? I know you guys are all
03        working hard. but it appears a lot of times,
04    →  Republicans are not pushing back as hard as the
```
Democrats are pushing on other issues.

*and so it- (syl syl syl syl)*

CITS: *applause *-->*

CIT8: I- I- a lot of times I think to myself come on guys?
=come on guys? get out there- come on- waitin’ for
you to do something=it appears (.) that there isn’t.=
now a lot of things you said this morning gives
me uh a little more hope (.) in tha(h)- and um
[to your syl]

MOC: [ you’re not] gonna see a lot of that on mainstream media. ((continues))

This excerpt showcases a citizen affiliated with the Republican Party making a comparison between the two parties on the basis of which side “pushes harder.” The citizen manages the delicate work of portraying one’s own party in a less-than-positive light with an epistemically downgraded it appears (line 02) and an inserted, epistemically upgraded positive assessment I know you guys are all working hard (lines 02–03). Then, resuming the main business with but (Choe & Reddington, 2020), he prefaces the critique-implicative comparison with a now upgraded it appears a lot of times (line 03). Within lines 04–05, the citizen portrays the efforts of the Republican Party as pushing back, conveying that the party is in a defensive position against the Democrats’ aggression (i.e., pushing on other issues). With acknowledgement and affiliation for other citizens as evidenced in their applause (line 07), the citizen further criticizes the Republicans for failing to meet his expectations to get out there or do something (lines 08–10). To the citizen then, the Democrats’ success in pushing for political action implies the Republicans’ inaction and failure, exemplifying negative partisanship in which win-win scenarios are out of the question.

The next excerpt comes from an exchange between a Washington citizen (CIT1) and Democratic House Representative Adam Smith. CIT1 expresses his disappointment in the
NDAA (National Defense Authorization Act) chaired by the MOC that had recently passed in
the House. The citizen is critical towards the Democrats for having made many compromises
while they negotiated the bill. Here we focus on how the citizen creates a stark contrast between
Republicans and Democrats to the MOC.

Excerpt 5.4 AdamSmith_WA_012520_CIT1

01 CIT1: "okay so- is this thing on?"
02 ((lines omitted when MOC/CITS help adjust mic))
03 ‘okay so (. ) a coalition of moves paper up close-
04 thirty-one progressive organizations
05 called the NDAA a near complete capitulation.
06 Representative Ro Khanna and Bernie Sanders
07 called it a bill of astonishing (. ) moral (. )
08 cowardice. gazing toward MOC even s-
09 Republicans are reportedly gleefully surprised
10 at how much (we) compromised away.
11 holding arms up I- I- arms lower I’ve spoken with
12 you n’ I- {I appreciate your openness,
13 and you see- you get- you get it.-hands extended}
14 lowers head- but in the end you seem tuh ‘ve
15 compromised almost everything away as far as
16 the antiwar (. ) uh amendments went, I- I mean the
17 → Dems get control of the House and they just (. )
18 give in, Republicans are adamant, (0.2)
19 the Dems are not adamant, the Dems
20 give in. and even on thee uh looks down
21 the issue of brings paper up close uh pare-
22 paid parental lea:ve, according to representative
23 Kevin Kramer that’s- Republicans uh
24 Ivanka Trump wanted- Republicans
25 [(       )]-
26 MOC: steps forward-[that is] completely wrong and
27 absolutely nonsense. ‘mean here is the part where
28 you and I part company on this (Don), ((continues))
The stark contrast between the Democrats and Republicans is created by first comparing their responses to the bill and then contrasting assessments of the two parties. Regarding assessing the bill, the citizen directly cites severe critique from renowned Democrats astonishing moral cowardice (lines 06–07) and indirectly reports Republicans’ celebration of the bill’s failure reportedly gleefully surprised (line 09). Recall in the previous excerpt that the citizen treats the other party’s gain as one’s own loss; similarly, the citizen here perceives one’s own compromises during negotiations of the bill as the opposition’s win. In addition, the citizen also contrasts his assessments of the two parties as adamant and give in (lines 17–20). The citizen’s formulation of the MOC’s action as the chair of the bill in the end you seem tuh ‘ve compromised almost everything away (lines 14–15) paves the way for the assessment of Democrats just give in and are not adamant despite having gained control of the House (lines 17–19), as contrasted with the Republicans being adamant (line 18). To the citizen then, not only are compromises made during a bipartisan negotiation not acceptable, being unyielding and rigid (i.e., adamant) is an expected quality in conducting legislative work.

In this subsection, the citizens depict the opposing party as aggressive and adamant while one’s own party as passive and concessive. Though it may be counterintuitive that citizens would portray one’s own party in a negative light, it can be argued that negative partisanship is manifested through these presupposed zero-sum game scenarios—citizens position one’s own party as defensive against the aggression of the opposition and treat the opposition’s gain automatically as one’s own failure and loss, which suggests both a sense of victimhood for one’s own party and little tolerance for political compromises or bipartisan wins.
Ascribing Categories of Threat

Besides presenting irreconcilable alternatives between the MOC’s allegiances (to their party and the nation or constituents) and presupposing a zero-sum game between the two opposing parties, citizens also (re)produce negative partisanship by attributing threatening categorical labels when describing the opposing party. Jayuusi (1984) observes that “categorizations can be made to function at once as inferences, descriptions and judgements” (p. 45). In other words, participants’ ascription of a categorical label to a certain group is directly tied to the commonly shared category-bound attributes, activities, and moral judgements. As will be seen in the following excerpts, citizens deploy labels such as “socialist” and “AOC” to claim a sense of victimhood caused by the opposing party. As evidence of negative partisanship in interaction, the impending grave danger of these categories is produced by the citizens themselves in each instance and recognized and endorsed by the other attendees and the MOCs.

The first excerpt comes from an exchange between an Iowa citizen (CIT1) and former Republican House Representative Steve King. CIT1’s main course of action is to compliment the MOC on his courage in not abandoning the cause of the conservatives. The citizen then defends the MOC from being criticized as a racist. The focus here is on the citizen’s ascription of the socialist category to the opposing party.

Excerpt 5.5 SteveKing_IA_081419_CIT1

```
01 CIT1: I’ve never seen any indication that you are a
02 racist? but that’s being used as a: as a- a- weapon
03 against you=because you recognize- as you just
04 stated in your summation, you recognize the-
05 unbelievable gains that- that uh the Judeo-Christian
06 uh in western uh civiliz- the western thought, (syl
07 syl syl) brought to the (.) entire world. and (0.2) an’
08 an’ particularly the American experiment. and- the-
09 → you recognize that the left, the socialist
```
influences in aca- in modern academia particularly. they’re trying to destroy that in our youth, uh any memory of that? just like the Soviets used to do? >you know, they would just erase things from history, < you recognize that? and you understand, and the rest of us should understand that >anybody that doesn’t remember history is doomed to repeat it, < WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT TO TO RELIVE THE LAST 6000 YEARS. so THANK you.

MOC: *thank you.* heheh appreciate it. leans forward, 

CITS: *applause

MOC: hand reaches out* 

CITS: -*

MOC: hahahaha $well I don’t think I need to comment.=I-

I like what I heard.$ so I’ll go- I’ll go back to your question sir?-points forward

The citizen’s use of the “left” and “socialist” labels in this excerpt, as situated in the larger project of praising and defending the MOC, serves to highlight the impending dangers created by the opposition that the MOC reportedly identified. The citizen first provides a counter argument to those who criticized the MOC as racist by formulating his action as recognizing the unbelievable gains of the Judeo-Christian tradition (lines 05–06) and its importance to western civilization and the entire world (lines 06–07). This importance, according to the citizen, is being purposefully eliminated by those on the left who espouse the socialist ideology (line 11) which is especially prevalent in the higher education system (line 10). Furthermore, the citizen formulates the danger of the ongoing socialist influences from a historical perspective. He compares them to the Soviets who were known to erase things from history (lines 13–14) and warns the attendees of the danger of history repeating itself (lines 15–16), which is acknowledged by both the MOC and other attendees. In short, in defense of the MOC against the
“racist” critique, the citizen ascribes the threatening and dangerous “left” and “socialist”
categories to the opposing party.

The next excerpt comes from a Virginia citizen (CIT5) and Republican House
Representative Ben Cline (same event as in Excerpt 5.1). In two questions, CIT5 expresses his
corns about a socialist movement on the country’s college campuses as well as the then new
members of the U.S. Congress (e.g., Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar). Here the focus is
on the citizen’s use of categorical labels “socialist,” “AOC,” and “Muslim.”

Excerpt 5.6 BenCline_VA_031919_CIT5

01 MOC: uh yes sir.-points
02 CIT5: (syl syl syl)? um clears throat
03 there’s a lot of chatter going on about- u:m on
04 campuses throughout the country about a
05 → socialist ↓ movement, a:nd ‘was wondering is that
06 m- ey: real threat to america ‘r is that more of a
07 red herring just to disturb (.). thee conflicts of
08 uh people’s opinions.
09 MOC: I- I wish that the threat of socialism was u:h
10 (0.2) in theory rather than a reality? but when
11 ((75 lines omitted from MOC response))
12 and uh so (.). we need tuh (.). do our best to try and
13 break through that u:h bubble that exists on the
14 campuses.
15 CIT5: (follow up on it-) what about the new blood
16 → that’s coming in now.=like (.). AOC n’ (0.2) people
17 like her who are of that ilk, uh along- as well
18 as y’know some of thee uh the Muslim interests
19 that are- (.). being there in congress as well.
20 MOC: well? u:m (1.0) I- I think that u:h (.). my colleagues
21 (.). have been ejected by their constituents and have
22 every right to: share their opinions (.). on (.). policy,
23 no matter $how misguided they are.$ ((continues))
The citizen in this excerpt similarly ascribes to the opposing party several threatening categorical labels in the service of negative partisanship. The citizen opens his contribution by inquiring about a lot of chatter... about a socialist movement that is reportedly prevalent across the country’s campuses (lines 03–05). He then offers two candidate formulations of this movement inviting MOC’s confirmation, one being a real threat to America that poses real danger and the other red herring that is designed to mislead (lines 06–08). At this point, while the existence of the socialist movement has yet to be confirmed, the citizen already limits the audience’s understanding to only two possibilities—either it is designed to mislead, or there is a real threat to the country.

With the MOC’s upgraded confirmation the threat of socialism (lines 09–10) elaborated though his experience of censorship when attending a liberal college as a conservative student (data not shown), the citizen builds on his prior query regarding the “threat” and then invokes “AOC” and “Muslim” as categorical labels that continue to portray the opposing party in a negative light (lines 15–18). The invocation of these labels continues from the first part of his inquiry as he moves from addressing a widespread problem on campuses to problematizing the composition of new congressional personnel. Using the initials of then newly elected House representative “AOC” and the religious background of other new congresspersons, the citizen ascribes to congresspersons like “AOC” and those with “Muslim” backgrounds a main attribute of representing only those who align with their political or religious views. Similar to the prior MOC response, the MOC continues to acknowledge the citizen’s concern by formulating the opposing party as misguided despite their elected status (lines 20–23). To the citizen then, the opposition is thus formulated through these categorical labels with the attributes of harming its youth as well as representing views and interests antagonistic to his own.
In short, the citizens in this section deploy categorical labels such as “Socialist” and “AOC” to portray the opposing party in a dangerous light and construct a sense of victimhood and danger, which is acknowledged by the MOCs and/or other attendees.

To sum up, citizens produce negative partisanship through presenting two conflicting, irreconcilable alternatives for the MOC to choose from, be it between one’s allegiance to their party and nation, or between one’s loyalty to their party and constituents. Citizens also produce negative partisanship in interaction through presupposing a zero-sum game between their own party and the opposing party, in which win-win scenarios are impossible and the success of one assumes the failure of the other. Finally, citizens also ascribe categories of threat to the opposing party, such as “socialist,” which again exemplifies an extreme level of intolerance for the opposition.

**Politician Practices**

In the previous section, I discussed practices that citizens deploy in (re)producing negative partisanship in their town hall contributions, including presenting irreconcilable alternatives to the MOC between their party and constituents/country, presupposing a zero-sum game between the two opposing parties, or ascribing threatening categories to those in the opposing party. We now shift gears to examine how MOCs manage negative partisanship in either responding to citizen contributions through neutralizing and upgrading negative partisanship or initiating it on their own.

**Neutralizing Negative Partisanship**

To respond to citizen contributions that (re)produce negative partisanship, MOCs can choose to neutralize the negative partisan issue by establishing a common ground for the attendees can align on and reframe the issues at hand as non-partisan. Excerpt 5.7 below features
Democratic House Representative Dean Phillips and CIT1 from Minnesota. Previously, CIT1 interjects while MOC expresses disappointment in the US’s departure from the Paris Accords and accuses him of having neglected to note President Trump’s accomplishment in climate-related issues, citing Trump’s trillion tree initiative. CIT1 treats MOC’s ongoing statement on climate change as a partisan critique and stands up for the president against the perceived criticism. This excerpt features the MOC’s response to CIT1 and the focus here is on how the MOC neutralizes the negative partisanship by establishing a common ground for attendees who may hold different political views.

Excerpt 5.7 DeanPhillips_MN_030820_CIT6

01 CIT1: [↑why don’t you talk about the one ↓trillion
02 ↑tree <initiative> which Trump approved the United States to be in at the world economic [(SYL SYL).
03 CITS: [(SYL SYL)
04 [stay quiet.
05 MOC: [hold on, ↓everybody, ↓everybody, um-
06 CIT1: [↑that’s what (syl syl)
07 MOC: [um, >first of all< ↓Nina, everybody. okay I’m gonna talk about the trees. okay? I would love to see as many as (a) trillion trees. ‘think it’s wonderful.
08 what I just said though, is I’m very disappointed that the leader of our country chose to remove us from the single table around the world that is *trying to
09 solve the problem. shakes head-period. (0.5) and-
10 this goes back to- this goes back to what I said about the problem solvers* caucus. now you don’t wi:n.
11 CITS: *applause->
12 MOC: -->>*
13 you don’t win by avoiding people. you wi:n by sitting at the table with them, and negotiating and listening and doing something about it.
14 CITS: *applause
15 MOC: completely (antithetical) with my principle and I
(think just about)* everybody in our district. hh so

MOC: that’s my point on that.=if we’re not gonna sit at

→ the table, >n’ by the way? ↑the United States,

shouldn’t just sit at the table? we should be leading.

CIT?: yes?

MOC: this is what our country is about,=leading the world,

using our principles and values, using conservation.

conservatism. to conserve the world, to protect it for

future generations. this is biblical.=it’s spiritual.=

it’s human. that’s what we need to do. I’m not talking

politics. I’m talking principle. and that’s how

we’re gonna get it done.=the United States alone

cannot do it. we’re doing better than most countries.

we have to find a way to inspire India.=we have to

find a way to inspire China. we have to identify

how developing nations in the world are gonna

make this very difficult transition that’s gonna

be very costly. but the alternative, the alternative

is not one I want to consider. and if that doesn’t

unify every single one of us I do not know what

will. (0.2)-lowers mic, walks toward podium

CITS: applause

In this excerpt, the MOC neutralizes the citizen’s partisan comment by creating a
common stance for attendees to align on. Previously, the MOC responds to CIT6’s question on
climate change by claiming that we alone cannot solve it, which is why I’m so dismayed that we
are the only one not at the international table right now. As this is heard by CIT1 as a critique of
the president, the MOC restates his critique centering on the fact that the president has removed
the US from the international alliance of combating climate change. Continuing with the “sitting
at the table” metaphor, the MOC now moves the response forward and rallies the audience on a
common ground (lines 28–46). In lines 27–28, the move towards establishing a common ground
is initiated through abandoning an if-clause and inserting an additive and digressive n’ by the
way (Lee, 2020), steering the response away from the critique to which the MOC does not return. In the following lines, there are several intertwined moves by which the MOC manages to establish the common ground and shift away from the partisan debate. The first move involves rallying attendees around the identity of the US, particularly its leading role and superior capacity in the world—not only should the US be a part of the effort, but it should also be leading the effort (line 31) and helping other nations (lines 38–43). The pronoun “we” is used throughout when discussing the superior capacity of the US to other countries (lines 38–42), including those attendees who may disagree politically as part of the unity. The second move deals with reframing the issue as a fundamental one rather than a political one—that the issue of combating climate change is biblical, spiritual, human, and about principle (lines 34–36), which trumps any political differences that may exist and again invites agreement and alignment. The third move deals with redefining a political keyword “conservatism” to skirt around differences (lines 32–34). While tapping into the divergent political beliefs that the citizen may have (i.e., liberalism versus conservatism), the MOC redefines it by highlighting its commonality with the issue at hand and connecting its value of conservation to the values of environmental protection. In short, the MOC in this excerpt neutralizes the citizen’s partisan issue by first moving away from continuing to address the issue and then going into length to establish a common ground of being Americans and humans for the attendees.

The next excerpt comes from an exchange between CIT15 from Virginia and Republican House Representative Ben Cline, the same as Excerpt 5.1 in this chapter. As discussed in the previous section, the citizen inquires where MOC’s allegiance lies and poses two options that likely would stand in opposition to each other—the President along with the Republican Party or the country’s Constitution. It is evident that CIT15’s question produces negative partisanship as
he treats the president along with the Republican Party as potentially unconstitutional and illegitimate. While the MOC first confirms his allegiance to the Constitution, here we focus on how the MOC neutralizes the potential partisan debate by first reframing President Trump’s actions and then reformulating the MOC’s own role and priorities.

Excerpt 5.8 BenCline_VA_031919_CIT15

01 MOC: ((continues)) so don’t worry about- the Constitution will continue to be my guidepost.=Um- the President
02 → is (1.0) definitely stirring things up in Washington,
03 he has challenged the status quo. he has asked
04 questions that haven’t been asked (.) before and
05 haven’t asked in a long time? and forcing us to
06 reevaluate how (. ) the federal government got (.)
07 to this broken state that it is in, cuz it is broken.
08 → um I wasn’t sent to Washington to: uh to uh-
09 to go along? I was sent to try and fix the things
10 that are broken with Washington.
11 I wasn’t sent to: to follow any one person.=
12 I was sent to listen to my constituents.
13 you all sent me to Washington, and you’re the ones
14 who I’m going to represent. each and every day.
15 so um I can only say that uh (1.0) steps back
16 follow me on all of the various social media,
17 learn (. ) about the work I’m doing, the stances (.)
18 I’m taking on the position- on the issues, doing my
19 best to represent you and your views. uh as a
20 collective group of voters in the sixth district.
21 um so I’ll continue to do that with your input,
22 if you disagree with something the President’s
23 doing, tell me. because uh it’s important for me to
24 hear it. do you agree with something the President’s
25 → doing? tell me. I don’t agree with anybody
26 100% of the time, President Trump, my wife,-
27 1 and 2 RH fingers in LH palm
28 CITS: hehehe
29 MOC: there doesn’t- there isn’t anybody I agree with
30 100% of the time.
31 CITS: (he’s )
In this excerpt, the MOC neutralizes the citizen’s partisan concern (choosing the party and president or the country) by first reframing the president’s actions and then redefining his role and priority in Congress. In terms of reframing the president’s actions, the MOC reframes the citizen’s prior characterization of present danger to the country (data shown in prior subsection) as merely stirring things up and challenged the status quo (lines 3–4). While acknowledging the president’s action as unusual with a concessive definitely (line 03), the MOC’s reframing of the president’s action focuses on painting him in a largely positive light—asking questions that have not been asked before and forcing us to reevaluate how the deferral government got to this broken state (lines 05–08). To the MOC then, neutralizing the citizen’s partisan concern so far centers around reframing and thus indirectly delegitimizing his characterization of the president.

The next part of the MOC’s responding action serves to neutralize the citizen’s turn, particularly the component regarding being held accountable for choosing between two difficult options: his party/the president or the country (see Excerpt 5.1). He negates the citizen’s understanding of him going along and following one person (lines 10, 12) and emphasizes his responsibility of fixing what is not working in the Capitol (line 10–11). In addition, he evades making a choice between being accountable to the party and the country by formulating his responsibilities to the constituents (lines 14–15) and circumventing addressing the either-or query from the citizen with a humorous personal principle that he does not agree with anyone all the time (lines 26–27). With these two moves of neutralizing citizen concerns, the MOC
successfully skirts around the issue of having to make a choice between his party and the country.

In short, in this subsection, we observe that the MOCs can neutralize the citizens’ partisan concerns by establishing a common ground for the attendees or reframing the issues at hand.

**Upgrading Negative Partisanship**

Along with neutralizing negative partisanship, MOCs are also found to upgrade citizens’ partisan contributions by further attributing blame to the opposing party. The first excerpt below is taken from the same exchange in Excerpt 5.4 between Louisiana citizen (CIT8) and Republican Representative Steve Scalise. We go back slightly in time and join the participants when MOC responds to CIT8’s endorsement of President Trump and complaint of being *appalled at what’s going on in the House of Representatives and all of its bullshit* (data not shown), along with his request of bringing back the message *cut out the crap and do the business of the country* (lines 01–02). As this complaint is directed as the Democrat-led House of Representatives, the CIT’s complaint is partisanship-focused, attributing the not *doing* the *business of the country* to the Democrats in the House. The MOC in this instance upgrades the citizen’s partisan complaint by acknowledging and further attributing the blame of inaction to the Democratic leadership of the House.

Excerpt 5.9 SteveScalise_LA_101419_CIT8

| 01 | CIT8: | ((continues)) but the message is, *cut out* (.) the |
| 02 | CIT8: | *crap* and do the business of this country. um the |
| 03 | CIT8: | second thing that I’d like for you to uh carry back |
| 04 | CIT8: | and I he:h °am drawing a blank.° um is that um- he:h |
| 05 | MOC: | *smiling, arm extended*-well on the first- |
| 06 | MOC: | I’ll let you gather [(.)] your thoughts. |
| 07 | CIT8: | [okay,] |
on the first one, I pointed out a number of things that are very bipartisan that Congress could be doing that have come out (. ) of some of the committees uh that focus on issues that I hear about, = that a lot of people hear about, uh clearly (. ) on drug pricing, I’ve laid out (. ) a number of things that Congress has already started to take action on that, Speaker Pelosi (. ) for whatever reason won’t bring to the floor? surprise billing, we continue to hear problems on that? it’s a solvable problem? that the committee (. ) of jurisdiction passed out of committee unanimously to address surprise billing= meaning when you go to a hospital, uh ((continues on medical billing issue))

In this excerpt, the MOC responds to the citizen’s complaint about congressional inaction through highlighting his own bipartisan work and laying the blame on the opposing party, thus acknowledging and upgrading the citizen’s partisan complaint. The MOC first moves to immediately distinguish his own work from the work of Congress, contrasting I pointed out a number of things that are very bipartisan with Congress could be doing (lines 08–10). The responsiveness and importance of his work is then formulated as issues that I hear about= that a lot of people hear about (lines 11–12). In addition, the MOC also initiates an example issue of drug pricing, highlighting his own accomplishment of having laid out a number of things that Congress has already started to take action on (lines 13–14). Before delving into more details on the issue (which was not part of the citizen’s query), this accomplishment is contrasted with the blame of inaction from the Democratic leadership of the House, namely Speaker Pelosi for whatever reason won’t bring to the floor (lines 15–16), citing an unknown and thus illegitimate reason and directly attributing the blame to the Democrats. So far into the response, we observe that in the face of the citizen’s defense of the President and complaint against the Democrat-led
House of Representatives, the MOC distinguishes his own work as praise-worthy and explicitly attributes the blame of inaction to the opposing party, thus acknowledging and upgrading the citizen’s partisan concerns.

The next excerpt is taken from an exchange between a Texas resident (CIT11) and Republican House Representative John Carter. Similar to the previous excerpt, the citizen’s complaint is also focused on congressional inaction, attributing it to the lengthy and costly congressional investigation of the President (lines 05–06) and blaming it solely on the Democrats with they are calling for another congressional investigation (lines 07–08). The MOC here upgrades the citizen’s partisan concerns also by further attributing the blame of inaction to the opposing party.

Excerpt 5.10 JohnCarter_TX_052819_CIT11

01 CIT11: stands up-Bill (syl) from (syl syl) here, uh I guess
02 *I'm gonna address thee uh elephant in the roo:m.*
03 STF: *approaches with mic -> *
04 °(syl syl syl)°
05 CIT11: two years $33 million spent on an investigation of
06 Trump- the Trump administration uh Trump (.)
07 election, now they’re calling for another
08 congressional investigation. when and how is it
09 gonna e(h)nd.-nodding
10 (0.2)
11 CIT?:: heheheh (wonder) the Demo[crats gonna-
12 MOC: [I wish if I have uh- a
13 crystal ball I’ll let you know, but I don’t have one-=
14 there is the saying in the law, probably a few
15 lawyers (are out) here, that any idiot with a prize
16 of a filing fee and directions to the courthouse, can
17 file a lawsuit. well that’s kind of a way it is in
18 Congress.=anybody- idiot can get their hands on a
19 microphone, can start on an investigation .h in the
20 United States Congress. and that’s what we- this
21 thing is like a never ending (.) thing that doesn’t
seem to (syl) gonna stop. index finger points forward- which you should be concerned about, as American citizens. we’ve got that done, it’s gonna keep going until (.) he’s reelected. but the bottom line is >we should be concerned about the fact< we’re not doing the things we need to do;

CIT?: no.

MOC: cuz we’re spending too dang much time trying over and over and over- the Democrats just get a shot at the President.

CIT?: no.

MOC: if they would leave him alone and go back to work, we have a lot of issues especially in the area of our southern border, that are our crisis issues, that they’re not even recognizing=they’re so busy (. ) going °after the pres-° the <elected President of the United States.> that’s what we oughtta be worried about. we can’t fix the crazy people.-points toward CIT, shaking head

° hhh°

In this excerpt, the MOC acknowledges and upgrades the citizen’s partisan complaint in several distinct moves. He first provides an account *I wish if I have a crystal ball* (lines 12–13) for not directly answering the citizen’s question *when and how is it gonna end* (lines 08–09), indirectly suggesting that he is not accountable for the citizen’s complaint. Then, with the idiomatic expression in the legal profession on *idiot* as he reports in lines 15–17, the MOC likens those leading the investigation in Congress to *anybody- idiot can get their hands on a microphone* (lines 18–19). Kitzinger (2000) describes the use of idiomatic expressions being used in affiliative environments as difficult to resist or challenge. We observe a similar move here as the MOC aligns with the citizen and compares his congressional colleagues conducting a national investigation to those who file lawsuits purely for selfish and monetary gains.

Additionally, the MOC explicitly formulates the attendees’ identity as *American citizens* (lines
23–24), warning that you should be concerned about (line 23). This move effectively upgrades the partisan issue (the opposing party conducting a costly investigation) to a national, patriotic issue and essentially treats the opposing party as un-American. Finally, the MOC directly attributes the Democrats’ investigation as the reason for Congress to not address other issues at hand. According to the MOC, the Democrats are not back to work (line 33) due to trying to repeatedly get a shot at the President (line 30). This move redefines the opposing party’s political work, in this case holding the executive branch accountable, as merely vengeful, partisan acts that put other important issues on hold. In short, the MOC not only acknowledges the citizen’s partisan complaint, but also furthers and upgrades it to discredit the opposing party as unpatriotic. In this sub-section, we observe that MOCs might upgrade the citizens’ partisan complaints by further attributing the blame to the opposing party and discrediting the opposing party’s work.

**Initiating Negative Partisanship**

Besides neutralizing or upgrading partisanship-focused citizen turns, MOCs may also initiate negative partisanship of their own accord even when the citizen contributions are concerned with non-partisan focused issues entirely. The following excerpt is one such instance. Excerpt 5.11 features an exchange between Republican House John Curtis from Utah and CIT5. While the citizen’s question is only concerned with holding the MOC accountable to his Republican Party for its principles (lines 02–03), the MOC’s response is concerned with his upholding of said principles by complying with the investigation orchestrated by the opposing party. He launches his response by first invoking negative partisanship.

Excerpt 5.11 JohnCurtis_UT_022920_CIT5

01 CIT5: u:h the Utah State Republican party platform states.
02 reading-we demand honesty, integrity, morality,
and accountability of our public officials.

we will work to expose and stop corruption.

looking down- what specific things have you done
(0.2) to demand honesty, integrity, morality, and the
accountability of our (. ) very highest public officials.

and to expose and stop corruption at the very
highest levels of federal government.

so first of all, let me say that um I believe for all
of us,=this begins with ourselves? I’m not perfect,
but I try to hold myself to that standard,
first and foremost? uh second, I think uh
heheh uh I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say
under a democratic leadership in the House, every
conceivable (. ) thought of- shoulder tilt, looks up
dreamed of hh way to investigate and poke the
president has been done. and I’ve not stood in the
way of any of that,=matter of fact u:m supported the
Muller investigation, uh you know that? w-
encouraged people to be- to hold judgment back
until that came out, u:m and I- I think that u:m
people who do not like our president um
frequently (. ) expect >to be honest< too much of
Congress? our job is oversight? your job is to select
who it is. right? >and I think a lot of times< those
who oppose the president want to put their burden
on us.-points at self and I don’t think that’s right.
um I think that it’s been a mistake (. ) for those who
oppose President Trump for four years to concentrate
on trying to destroy him? instead of trying to pick
a candidate that could beat him. and I think-
I think they’ll pay a price for that, quite frankly.
My question was, what specifically have you done.
[to demand-
I told you. I supported the Muller investigation,

The MOC initiates negative partisanship as part of his response to the citizen’s question concerned with how the MOC has upheld the Republican Party’s principles. As the citizen’s
question directly addresses the MOC asking for detailed actions *what specific things have you done* (line 05), the MOC’s main responsibility in the following responding slot is to enumerate actions that can be considered instances of him upholding said principles. The MOC attempts to accomplish this through identifying *supporting the Muller investigation* (see line 36) as such an instance. However, as identifying this instance creates the possibility of being understood as aligning with the opposing party, the MOC makes an effort to address this potential issue with (re)affirming his partisan stance against the Democrats both prior to and after providing the answer starting with *I’ve not stood in the way of any of that* (lines 18–22). Prior to providing the answer, the MOC prefaces it with a partisan characterization of the opposing party’s investigation as their relentless poke and attack on the president (lines 14–18). Post providing the answer of supporting the investigation, the MOC returns to partisan characterizations, again attributing the congressional investigation to people *who do not like our president* (line 23). This effort is also reformulated as *trying to destroy him* (line 31) and attributed to partisan reasons that the opposition cannot *pick a candidate that could beat him* (line 31–32). While the MOC seems to be on his way to sidestep the citizen’s question (see Chapter 4 MOCs’ practice of sidestepping misinformation) focusing on partisan complaints, the citizen recognizes the ill-fittedness of the MOC’s partisanship-focused response and restates his question to ask for the MOC’s specific actions (lines 33–34). In short, we observe in this case that the MOC initiates a partisan complaint on his own accord in response to a non-partisanship-focused citizen question. It is also clear at least in this case that steering the response towards negative partisanship may not effectively assist the MOC in evading responding to the citizen question.

To sum up, in this section, we observe that in response to partisanship-focused citizen contributions, MOCs can choose to neutralize the partisan debate by establishing a common
ground that the attendees can align on and reframe the issues at hand as non-partisan.

Alternatively, MOCs are also found to further the partisan divide invoked by citizens through attributing the blame to the opposing party. When the citizen contributions are not concerned with negative partisanship, MOCs can also invoke negative partisanship of their own accord. These practices demonstrate the power that the MOCs hold in the responding slot: at each choice point, the MOCs have an important part to play in either defusing or reinforcing such partisan intolerance.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This chapter focuses on examining how the notion of negative partisanship, as part of the current political reality, is produced and reinforced at town hall interactions. The above analysis documents that negative partisanship is (re)produced by citizens through several means: presenting irreconcilable alternatives whereby the citizens hold the politicians accountable for choosing between their party and the constituents or nation; presupposing a zero-sum game wherein the action and success of one party automatically mean the inaction and lack of success of the opposing party; ascribing categories such as “socialist” to the opposing party to create a sense of danger and threat. Politicians respond to partisanship-focused turns by neutralizing the issue through establishing a common ground that the citizens can align on or reformulating the issues at hand to steer away from the issue. Politicians are also found to upgrade negative partisanship by further attributing the blame to the opposing party or upgrading the severity of the issue. At times, politicians may also initiate negative partisanship of their own accord in response to non-partisan queries.

As mentioned earlier, political differences and competition within reasonable range provide ordinary people with meaningful choices, which is expected and healthy for
representative democracy. Extreme rivalry as exemplified in negative partisanship, however, reduces political work and civic participation to mere attacks, critique, or confrontation, as illustrated in the excerpts above. For both the citizens and Members of Congress, shifting away from partisan rivalry to topics that impact ordinary citizens’ life would be more optimal use of the town hall events and participation opportunities. Only by recognizing the legitimacy of the political opponents and eliminating partisan intolerance, can we achieve the goals of democratic deliberation and civic renewal (Levine, 2015).
Chapter 6: Managing Exclusion

Fascist attitudes take hold when there are no social anchors and when the perception grows that everybody lies, steals, and cares only about him- or herself. That is when the yearning is felt for a strong hand to protect against the evil “other”—whether Jew, Muslim, black, so-called redneck, or so-called elite.

—Madeleine Albright, Fascism: A Warning

Introduction

Historically, exclusion based on social categories (e.g., religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, levels of physical and mental abilities) has been a recurring phenomenon in different parts of the world (Arendt, 1966; Parker, 2015). In the past two centuries of US history alone, multiple social groups have at some point been the target of exclusionary actions, which is done through both legal means to remove people’s civil liberties and rights (e.g., the Chinese Exclusion Act in the 19th century) and discursive means to construct people as undesirable, undeserving, and not belonging in the political process (Nielson, 2012; Parker, 2015; Mettler & Lieberman, 2020). In the rising intolerance for various “other-ed” social groups in the US today, political scientists warn us that democracy is under attack and fascist politics may prevail (Albright, 2018; Mettler & Lieberman, 2020; Stanley, 2020).

Outside the realm of legal mechanisms, the politics of exclusion is accomplished through the language of exclusion, according to critical discourse analysts and ethnomethodologists (Jayyusi, 1984; Van Dijk, 2006; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Wodak, 2008, 2020). A longstanding theme of critical discourse analysis research has been identifying means of discursive exclusion such as portraying those undesired individuals and groups as the morally inferior “other” and a threat to one’s own values and beliefs (Van Dijk, 2006). From the
perspective of ethnomethodology, the interwovenness of membership categorical labels (e.g., mommy) and the embedded inferences and expectations (e.g., picking up her crying baby as expected from a maternal caregiver) makes it a versatile approach for the research of morality in everyday actions (Sacks, 1992; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009). Particularly, the judgement of morality and (ir)rationality on the basis of membership categories is crucial in the discursive making of those who do not belong, such as ‘the criminal’ (morally inferior) and ‘the insane’ (rationally incapable) (Jayyusi, 1984). Past research on the language of exclusion largely focused on exclusionary moves by institutional entities such as governments, courts, and news media, while research on ordinary people’s language of exclusion has been scant (though see for example Sue et al, 2007; Whitehead, 2013; Tadic, 2023). In this chapter, I further address the gap in the literature and look at how, on the one hand, ordinary citizens accomplish the work of exclusion of others in their political participation and, on the other, how MOCs respond to citizens’ exclusionary stance and/or call for action. I adopt the perspective of exclusion as a form of discriminatory practice, which entails those discursive means that “problematize, marginalize, … or otherwise limit the human rights of ethnic/religious/minority out-groups” (Wodak, 2008, p. 55). A total of 22 cases were collected of the participants’ managing the notion of exclusion of another social group in some way.

Similar with prior chapters, the analysis section is further divided into two main subsections. The first subsection documents citizen exclusionary practices, including assigning category of immorality (2 cases) and establishing religious superiority (2 cases). The second subsection documents MOC practices in responding to citizen contributions: contesting the category (2 cases), redirecting the focus (3 cases), and disaffiliating with a telling (2 cases). I conclude the chapter by cautioning that, while the language of exclusion can seem innocuous, in
the context of expressing concerns and mobilizing change at town hall meetings, it may result in actual political actions of exclusion.

**Citizen Practices**

**Assigning Category of Immorality**

As reviewed above, the issue of morality figures heavily in citizens’ exclusionary practices toward the “other-ed” social categories. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through producing the “other” as somehow morally inferior, be it taking advantage of undeserved social benefits, unlawfully occupying properties that righteously belong to citizens, or creating undue chaos for local residents.

The first example below comes from an exchange between CIT7 and House Representative Phil Roe from Tennessee. The citizen (via a written-in question) asks the MOC for policies and actions against “illegals.”

**Excerpt 6.1 PhilRoe_TN_041519_CIT7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Citizen (CIT7)</th>
<th>MOC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>STF picks up card and reads-um, what</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>can be done to stop illegals from getting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>taxpayer funded benefits such as SNAP,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>education, etcetera.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>tsk- well, here’s- this is- this is where I’m</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>probably gonna differ with some people.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>tsk- our educators are not policemen. they got</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>kids to educate. ((continues stating that it is not the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>teachers’ job to identify undocumented immigrants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>and that the root of the cause is an unsecured border))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With *what can be done to stop* in lines 02–03, the citizen asks the MOC for specific solutions to what the citizen treats as an already existing problem: benefits funded by taxpayers such as SNAP and education are being taken advantage of. The citizen labels the culprit of this problem as *illegals* (line 02), who not only break the law by being present in the country, but also
take advantage of a system that they do not contribute to (contrary to taxpayer in line 03) or qualify to benefit from. Note, however, legal research has long disputed this perspective by showing that undocumented individuals do pay taxes in the US (see for example Lipman, 2006 and Gee et al, 2016). In addition, these individuals in question are also treated as a group with the plural -s, making it clear that this problem is a systemic one committed by an entire group defined by their unlawful nature. The citizen’s membership categorial work can be further understood from the perspective that, while their question separates the category illegal and attribute getting benefits (i.e., illegals do not deserve benefits), it also simultaneously enforces the citizen’s request to stop illegals as a legitimate categorial predicate. Despite its brevity, the citizen’s question nonetheless constitutes the act of exclusion via the following: introducing another social group as unlawful and morally illegitimate, portraying them as undeservingly having taken advantage of societal benefits, and most importantly, requesting political actions be taken against them.

The next excerpt is taken from an exchange between House Representative John Carter from Texas and CIT12 on the topic of migrants crossing the country’s southern border. The citizen expresses her fear and concerns towards migrants who not only come over here … from the border (line 09) but also cause all kinds of ruckus (lines 14–15).

Excerpt 6.2 JohnCarter_TX_052819_CIT17

01 STF: holding mic-°I will hold-°
02 CIT12: okay. I’m (syl syl syl) from Holland, Texas,
03 MOC: hah.
04 CIT12: → yes. I live in the country. A:nd. .HH
05 there’s a lot of people that live in the
06 country in Texas, as you well know.
07 MOC: yes ma’am.=
08 CIT12: → =and we are afraid of the people coming over
09 here in the- from the border. ↓now I have a
property that’s right next door to ours.
and it’s been vacant for 15 to 20 years. and
we’re- I’m afraid that some (. ) migrant is
going to come in there and squat. and you
can’t get squatters out. and cause all kinds
of ruckus in our (. ) little part of the (. ) world.
and I want to know, you said at the
beginning, that you would not try to do
anything on immigration because of Pelosi
was being all- [(          )]
MOC: [no ma’am.] I said Nancy Pelosi
won’t take anything on immigration on the
floor of the House,
((continues stating issues at Congress))

Similar to the previous excerpt, this citizen is also concerned with the population of undocumented immigrants. Her exclusionary stance is accomplished through attributing several distinct actions to the group in question. These individuals are first introduced as people coming over here ... from the border (lines 08–09), which is contrasted with those in-group members introduced just prior, namely a lot of people that live in the country in Texas (lines 05–06) as well as a locally subsequent (Schegloff, 1996) we (line 08). The two groups are connected solely by fear, as the citizen states that the in-group members are afraid of (line 08) the out-group members. Additionally, as the citizen moves from we (line 08) to I (line 09), her fear is further elaborated to include a new dimension: the migrants are now said to potentially squat in a next-door vacant property (lines 10–13) and cause all kinds of ruckus (lines 14–15). Furthermore, given that state law generally dictates that squatters are entitled to limited property rights after a long period of continued occupancy (see for example “Adverse Possession” in Tex. Civ. Prac. & Rem. Code Ann. § 16.021, 1985), the citizen formulates her exaggerated, inaccurate understanding of the legal statute you can’t get squatters out to further legitimatize her
exclusionary stance, as she would allegedly be caught in a scenario of co-existing with undesirable, morally inferior people. Finally, the citizen returns to the in-group description our little part of the world (line 15) which the migrants are allegedly going to occupy and destroy. Thus, the citizen’s act of exclusion is done not only through attributing to the migrants several distinct, morally reprehensible actions, it is also done through contrasting the in-group members (property owners in an idyllic world) and the out-group members (unlawful squatters creating chaos for local residents). In these two examples, citizens designate morally inferior categorial descriptions towards the undocumented immigrant social group. What has been revealed in the use of “the immoral category” is how citizens display in real time their perceived social norms, identities, and relationships (Houseley & Fitzgerald, 2009) and call to action the political change they aim to incur.

**Establishing Religious Superiority**

Besides resorting to categorial labels based on judgements of morality in determining the undeserving, unbelonging status of others, citizens also establish the superiority of their religious liberty in order to justify an exclusionary stance towards others, in this case gender minorities.

In the next example, we observe an excerpt from an exchange between CIT20 from Utah and House Representative John Curtis focusing on the Equal Rights Act (ERA), which at the time of this meeting was being debated in Congress. The ERA as a work-in-progress legislation protects gender equality which supposedly would give more equal rights to women and LGBTQA+ communities. The citizen here expresses concerns about his own religious liberty being impacted as a result of the potential passing of the ERA.

Excerpt 6.3 JohnCurtis_UT_022920_CIT20

01 MOC: ((continues)) okay, we’re equal, but we’re different. and- and to- and figuring out how
we define that is- is what (. ) is ahead of us.

CIT20: so here’s my- my concern. it’s apparent that the gender movement and I’m dis- I’m distinguishing (. ) people from a movement. ‘kay? um the movement is - is latching on to the ERA and pushing it hard. article after article I’ve read (. ) indicates that there(’s a) real push in this. so at some point, if it passes, I can see a ninth circuit

judge uh determining that my religion is a hate group. and not allowing me to practice my religion. that’s deeply concerning to me. 

do: I uh (0.5) hence my concern about your votes, uh I see where you’re coming from, but I’m conc:ned that (. ) we’re buying into really old language that was first proposed in the 20s, and then reintroduced in the 70s. and it’s a trap. and we just got to be awake. °that’s my concern-°

so I join you in your concern, I do. I’ve spoken about religious uh liberty and religious freedom, h as it relates to uh rights of the LGBT community, ((continues))

Before making relevant his religious freedom as the main factor for opposing the ERA, the citizen first identifies the gender movement (line 05) as a main agent in pushing forward the ERA (line 08) and specifically distinguishes between the movement and people behind it (line 06), thus circumventing the discussion of who the people are, namely, those who might benefit from greater gender equality such as women and LGBTQ+ individuals. The citizen’s concern here is a simple one: the passing of the ERA means that he will no longer be allowed to practice his religion (lines 11–14). While his concern seems to only advocate for his own rights, the citizen’s exclusionary stance is implicitly but unequivocally delivered in the following ways. First, to the citizen, one potential outcome of greater gender equality is that his religion will be
federally designated a hate group status (lines 12–13), revealing the reality of his religion as likely misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic, and perhaps even more so should there be a higher level of equality due to the new legislation. In addition, another concerning outcome of the ERA’s passing is that the citizen fears losing his freedom to practice his religion (lines 13–14). Again, though the concern on the surface is regarding the loss of his own religious freedom, this potential loss is due to those historically marginalized groups gaining more rights and equality. The citizen creates an opposition between others’ legitimate rights and his religious freedom. Thus, for as long as his religious freedom is unhindered, greater equality for gender minorities cannot prevail. Establishing the superiority of his religious freedom to anyone else’s freedom allows the citizen to avoid arguing explicitly for the merits of exclusion while enabling him to justify an exclusionary stance towards sexual and gender minorities. Finally, it must be noted that the citizen connects this expression of concern to his issue about the MOC’s votes (line 15), suggesting that citizens utilize the platform of town hall meetings as one for swaying politician action and incurring change, including even those that are based on misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic beliefs.

Similar with the prior excerpt, Excerpt 6.4 features CIT7 from California who also expresses views against gender equality to US House Representative Josh Hader on the basis of religious beliefs. This excerpt, like Excerpt 6.3, is also taken from a longer exchange wherein the citizen builds several multi-unit turns. Here we focus again on how the citizen makes relevant religious liberty as part of her argument.

Excerpt 6.4 JoshHarder_CA_052819_CIT7

01 CIT7: ((continues)) now I called your uh
02 offices and asked that you pplease vote no on
03 H.R.5. that’s the national (. ) basically push
04 for this entire thing. hh um a:nd I just said,
it does not provide quality for all and the greater citizens, uh it takes away freedom of deeply held beliefs and religious beliefs and traditional family. so I got an email from you, tsk- stating that uh greater liberty is a sacred right in this country, and every American should be able to practice their faith without interference.

where is that in section six. when men are able to compete in women’s sports. is that in section nine when men have access to bathrooms, locker rooms, dressing rooms. where is that in section five, when we’re to teach K through 12, and universities gender fluidity. so my question is, when you wrote to me, you said more unites us than divides us. this is very difficult situation and very divisive.

This segment of the citizen’s multi-unit contribution focuses on what she perceives to be one of the potential negative consequences of H.R.5, a federal legislation that prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender identity, sexual orientation, etc., as she upgrades from the concern for a potential legislation in California (data not shown) to a federal one: the national push for this entire thing (lines 03–04). The reasoning for her opposition, as she describes, is that this legislation for greater gender equality decreases the educational quality and religious freedom for what she considers the society’s majority the greater citizens (lines 06–07) which are also composed of those from traditional family (line 08), namely those from heteronormative family settings. It is thus clear that the citizen advocates for the religious liberty of those belonging to the heteronormative majority at the expense of those in the minority who may
benefit from greater gender equality enabled by new legislation. Additionally, the citizen further elaborates on her critique of the legislation by quoting a prior MOC response and citing several sections from the legislation (lines 09–20). The exclusionary stance towards non-heteronormative individuals is made clear through creating a contrast between the MOC’s promise of *every American’s sacred* religious freedom (lines 10–11) and how it is undermined as a result of greater freedom for transgender persons (e.g., *men competing in women’s sports* and *having access to bathrooms* in lines 14–18) and greater understanding of gender fluidity by students of all ages (e.g., *K through 12 and universities* in lines 19–20). In short, similar to the previous citizen’s concern, by portraying one’s own religious liberty as always sacred, the citizen attempts to mobilize changes in the MOC’s legislative decisions. Also similar is that the practice of establishing one’s own religious superiority justifies blocking greater gender equality and continued exclusionary and discriminatory practices against gender minorities.

As discussed in this section, citizens convey exclusionary stances towards undocumented immigrants through construing them via the immoral categorial labels—that they are unlawful, illegal, undeserving of social benefits. Citizens also convey exclusionary stances towards gender minorities by constructing their own religious liberty as sacrosanct and superior and, as a result of greater equality for gender minorities, being undermined and threatened. Citizens justify exclusionary stances towards those from minority social groups with these discursive moves and attempt to curtail legislations aimed at granting more rights and greater equality to these minority groups.

**Politician Practices**

In the previous section, I discussed two practices by which citizens express exclusionary stances toward another social group, whether it is construing the other with the immoral category
or resorting to one’s own religious beliefs as the omni-superior device that trumps others’ rights and beliefs. We now turn our attention to practices from the MOCs when given the responsibility of responding to citizens who hold exclusionary views. I present three practices by which MOCs navigate this responding slot: offering a contesting categorial label, redirecting the focus of the issue, and disaffiliating with the citizen via a telling.

**Contesting the Category**

To those citizens who may have portrayed other social groups with categorial labels based on judgements of morality (e.g., “illegals” for undocumented migrants), MOCs can contest such labels with new categorial labels and attributes without directly refuting the citizens’ exclusionary perspectives.

In Excerpt 6.5, US House Representative Cindy Axne from Iowa responds to CIT14’s critique on not agreeing to a prior meeting request regarding border security. Prior to the excerpt, CIT14 already expressed dissatisfaction with the MOC by “exposing” that she used a flood issue in the district as an excuse not to agree to a meeting. Note that here the “other” is described as “an illegal alien” who allegedly committed murder. (Here I use “→” to highlight the CIT’s exclusion-implicative turn and “→” to mark MOC’s contesting categorial work.)

**Excerpt 6.5 CindyAxne_IA_051319_CIT14**

01 CIT14: I- watched what you’ve been doing .hh and
02 you’re not working on the flood but I still don’t
03 have a meeting set up to talk about .hh u:h
04 → Sarah Root being killed by an illegal alien?
05 and we (. ) wanted to discuss border security?=so
06 I’m (. ) again requesting a meeting.
07 ((lines omitted; MOC responds about working on the flood issue))
08 CIT?: Racist GO HOME.
09 CITS: applause
10 MOC: smiling, ((pointing toward CIT14))-I know-
11 I know- “→”that’s another incorrect statement.
um but as a matter of fact? in addition to working on the floods? you know, we all wanna make sure that we’ve got an opportunity? uh for folks in this country, and we recently just passed uh you know, thee uh-thee-let me get the name straight on it here? ((looks down)) uhm if I can find it? for-I don’t have it with me.< but we basically just-you know, we recently just passed a bill to help our dreamers um and our temporary protected status uh workers have an opportunity to stay here and contribute back [to our society as they currently are? 

In this exchange, the MOC contests the citizen’s categorial label illegal alien (line 04) against undocumented persons with dreamers (line 21), temporary protected status workers (lines 21–22), as well as attributes of contribute back to our society as they currently are (lines 23–24). Several aspects are of note here regarding the participants’ use of membership descriptions. First, while the killing described by the citizen may have in fact happened, the citizen is by no means trying to address the killing as an isolated incident, as evidenced in her using the killing as a basis to discuss border security (line 05) which is designed against a group of people who encroach on border security, according to her. The MOC treats the citizen’s request as such as well, which is also evidenced in escalating the issue to a plurality of people, starting from folks in this country (line 15). Relatedly, other attendees in the audience also treat the citizen’s request and complaint as against a social group rather than a single individual, which is evidenced in the loud claim Racist GO HOME (line 08) and others’ ensuing applause (line 09). We see in this excerpt that the MOC does not directly address the individual incident that may seem to be the focus of the citizen’s request and instead “goes categorial” as the citizen
does. While the citizen keys her exclusionary stance with a categorial label *illegal alien* and associated attribute *killing*, the MOC’s new, contesting categorial labels and attributes serve to oppose both the label and its associated inferences and attributes. In other words, had the MOC gone along with the label *illegal alien* and only opposed the attribute of *killing* (i.e., not all illegal aliens kill Americans), she would not have expressed her opposing stance to the full extent (i.e., undocumented persons are not illegals and killers).

In Excerpt 6.6 below, the staff (STF) and host of the meeting reads an audience written-in question to House Representative Steven Horsford from Nevada. The question expresses the stance against immigrants who may be undocumented and, in their view, who may encroach on healthcare resources made possible by Medicare for All once it becomes a real legislation.

Excerpt 6.6 StevenHorsford_NV_042319_CIT10

01 STF: Okay, we got a few more minutes.
02 ((holds up paper)) do you agree with Medicare for All.
03 → and who will pay for it. will illegal immigrants
04 also be entitled to Medicare for All?
05 MOC: so I am for universal healthcare. what does that mean-
06 that means I believe, fundamentally, that healthcare
07 → is a right not a privilege. and that everyone deserves
08 access to uh affordable quality of care. and
09 Medicare for All is one proposal that we are (.)
10 debating in order to get to the goal of universal healthcare
11 → for every single person. That's what I'm for.
12 CIT: scattered applause
13 MOC: I’m also for protecting the healthcare that people
14 have right now.
15 CITS: all right. Mm-

In this relatively brief exchange, the MOC addresses two parts of the citizen’s question: one on whether he agrees with Medicare for All and if he thinks illegal immigrants are entitled to it. Once again, the citizen’s exclusionary stance is manifested through a judgement of morality
based on the lawfulness of immigration status. The MOC’s contesting categorial work is done a bit differently from the prior excerpt. While in Excerpt 6.5, the MOC offers a differing and opposing description toward the same group of individuals, the MOC in this excerpt expands the categorial description to include everyone (line 07) and then emphatically every single person (line 11). Put differently, the MOC in Excerpt 6.5 opposes the citizen’s exclusionary membership ascriptions by offering a new set of ascriptions, whereas the MOC in Excerpt 6.6 does so through an all-inclusive categorial label by which all persons should have the same rights and access to healthcare.

### Redirecting the Focus

Besides contesting categorial labels and attributes against citizens’ exclusionary stance, MOCs also redirect the focus of their response without directly confronting the citizens’ perspectives. Let’s first briefly revisit Excerpt 6.1. Previously, I discussed that CIT7 portrays undocumented immigrants as “illegals” who undeservingly take advantage of social benefits.

Excerpt 6.1 PhilRoe_TN_041519_CIT7

```
01   CIT7:   ((STF picks up card and reads)) um,
02   →     what can be done to stop illegals from getting
03       taxpayer funded benefits such as SNAP,
04       education, etcetera.
05   MOC:   →     tsk- well, here’s- this is- this is where I’m
06       probably gonna differ with some people.
07       tsk- our educators are not policemen. they got
08       kids to educate. ((continues stating that it is not
09       teachers’ job to identify undocumented immigrants
10       and that the root of the cause is an unsecured border))
```

In his response, the MOC starts with what seems like a disaffiliative response in lines 05–06 with a prospective indexical this. He then moves to address the issue of teachers’ responsibilities in identifying and reporting undocumented immigrants (lines 07–08), which,
while remotely relevant to CIT7’s question about educational resources, does not in fact address anything related to his perspective on whether undocumented immigrants deserve to get “taxpayer-funded benefits” including SNAP. We observe here a straightforward case of the MOC redirecting the focus of his response and not addressing the citizen’s exclusion-focused issue.

Similarly, in the next excerpt, when responding to CIT6’s opposing stance towards using sanctuary cities to protect undocumented individuals, US House Representative Josh Hader also moves away from addressing “paying for illegals” and focuses on the role of law enforcement in the community.

Excerpt 6.7 JoshHarder_CA_052819_CIT6

01 CIT6: now here’s a question for you. sanctuary city.
02 just found out that (Pica) has now become a sanctuary city. I don’t know if you all know this, very disappointing for me. now I don’t know where you stand with Mr. Newsome
06 [because he wants to have (us) pay (.) for
07 CIT? [boo.
08 CIT6: \(\rightarrow\) illegal immigrants to come in. and pay for their sh-
09 pay for their medical up to age 25. where you stand on that and where you stand with Newsome.
11 MOC: yeah. thank you for the question. I’m not familiar with the second (.) proposal.=I think that’s something that happens in the state? but I’ll talk about being a sanctuary state, which is, I think we should let (.)
14 \(\rightarrow\) our local law enforcement do the job that they’re hired and trained to do. that’s to keep our community safe. and, I think if you talked to (Pat Woodrow), the- the sheriff in San Joaquin County, what he’ll tell you is we barely have enough resources to deal with the folks that need to be dealt with on a day to day basis. and homelessness, which I’m happy to talk more about, we can spend ages talking about that. ((continues))
To the citizen’s exclusionary stance towards *illegal immigrants* (line 02) who are now protected in areas being designated as sanctuary cities and who now may enjoy medical coverage due to proposals introduced by Governor Newsome (lines 08–09), the MOC first concedes by acknowledging his K-status (Heritage, 2012) on the issue (recall also in Chapter 4 one MOC practice of conceding to a K-status when responding to misinformation) as being an issue at the state level rather than federal level (lines 11–13). The MOC now moves to comment on the notion of sanctuary state (line 14) and makes relevant the role of law enforcement in managing community safety (lines 14–15). Without addressing his own view of the merits of this policy, he steers the response toward the role of law enforcement and the lack of resources for their current workload, which indirectly suggests that there are more urgent issues to handle for law enforcement than directly handling the alleged illegal immigration problem concerning the citizen. We observe in this example that the MOC disaffiliates with the citizen’s exclusionary stance by disaligning with their preferred course of action, meaning that the MOC comments on a remotely relevant aspect of the issue without providing a type-confirming response (Raymond, 2003) or directly going against the citizen’s stance in any way.

In the next excerpt, CIT9 from Wisconsin follows up on prior discussions in the same town hall meeting about the border wall under the Trump administration. Note that, while dismissing the idea of building the border wall, CIT9’s overall stance towards undocumented immigrants is still one of an exclusionary tone—referring to the migrants as “they” and approximating them with the drug kingpin El Chapo. Representative Bryan Steil also builds upon prior responses to others when responding to CIT9.

Excerpt 6.8 BryanSteil_WI_020119_CIT9

01 CIT9: this- this wall is a ludicrous idea. they’re either going
02 to go over the top or they’re going to go under.
99

As a number of participants in the same meeting already inquired about the border wall from various perspectives, the MOC picks up the discussion again with a resumptive so (line 08) (Bolden, 2009). Without addressing the various concerns about the lack of feasibility of the border wall enumerated by the citizen, the MOC mildly acknowledges the citizen’s contribution I appreciate the thought (line 09) while also pointing out the lack of newsworthiness of the query we were starting to cover this point pretty clearly (line 08). Signaling the repetition from prior responses what I want to go back to is (lines 10–11), the MOC reiterates his perspective regarding the technical feasibility as it’s a piece of the puzzle (line 11) as well as the parameters of the topic on feasibility with first an upgrade and then a downgrade: I view that as an important piece of the puzzle, but it’s a piece (lines 13–14). This recalibration of the issue’s importance serves as a springboard for the MOC to move to and there’s other areas (line 14), which brings to focus a holistic view on the issue at hand without dwelling on the citizen’s specific concerns. The MOC thus circumvents having to address issues such as whether

03 → if you remember El Chapo was in prison, they dug a
04 mile tunnel, put a motorcycle in it came out right
05 underneath his cell. and he drove right out. they got
06 more time- more time to dig these tunnels than you
07 guys got money to build walls.
08 MOC: so we were starting to cover this point pretty clearly.
09 but- but- but I appreciate- I appreciate the thought.
10 and I do think that it’s- it’s in- what I want to go
11 → back to is it’s- it’s a piece of the puzzle. and so I
12 → agree it’s not- I mean, we can have that debate.
13 → but I think it’s- I view that as an important piece of
14 → the puzzle, but it’s a piece. and there’s other areas.
15 → and so the technology of securing our southern border
16 is a piece, manpower, that’s kind of- the helicopter
17 example, manpower technology combined. and again,
18 I think it’s a lot of listening to the experts of the Department
19 of Homeland Security, and having those conversations,
20 work on the easy pieces first.
undocumented immigrants would actually dig a tunnel like El Chapo did, thus bypassing the responsibility of confronting the citizen’s exclusionary stance in some way. To sum up, the MOCs can redirect the focus of issue by steering the response towards another relevant aspect without directly addressing the citizens’ concerns that stem from an exclusionary stance.

**Disaffiliating with A Telling**

In addition to resorting to contesting categories and redirecting the topical focus, MOCs also rely on tellings to disaffiliate with CITs’ exclusionary perspectives. In the cases where anti-immigration sentiments are expressed, the MOCs often use tellings on their own border visits as part of their responses.

Excerpt 6.9 comes from a much longer exchange between CIT12 and US House Representative Dean Phillips from Minnesota. Prior to the excerpt, CIT12 started by expressing concerns over the growing expenses for higher education in the US and, relatedly, that the lack of affordability facilitates the “displacement and replacement” of low-skilled workers in the US with those coming from abroad on an H1-B visa. Note that the H1-B visa is an employer-sponsored non-immigration visa based on specialized skills, according to the US Citizens and Immigration Services (USCIS).

Excerpt 6.9 DeanPhilips_MN_030820_CIT12

01 MOC: should have that chance. and if we want to see
02 our paychecks grow, our businesses expand, and our
03 country thrive? we have to be a welcoming country
04 to immigrants, because other countries are doing it
05 better than we are now.
06 CIT?: applause
07 MOC: And if America is going to be the leader in the
08 free world? we better get to it fast. and to that end,
09 → I’m really pleased to let you know that (.). after
10 I went to McAllen, Texas, and saw what was
11 happening at our border, some things that every
12 Democrat knows is happening. and some things
that every Republican knows is happening. = I saw with my own eyes. and I saw them with the eyes of my colleagues, Democrats, Republicans, and we sat down that night at a hotel in McAllen, Texas. We reflected on our day, and we all shed tears because of what we saw. it was a combination of what we saw. horrific treatment of human beings, but not because the people th- th- that and (who were in custody) they were bad people because they were (out of) resource. and I saw a lot of extraordinarily humane people. opening their arms to people walking across the river. and young mothers and children. = I saw humanity at its very best, and I saw it at its very worst. so we sat down at night, we shed tears, = we resolved we’re gonna try to do something.

As the citizen builds a several-minute-long contribution, the MOC also designs a very extensive response to address several key aspects in her query, one of which is the notion of high-skilled H1-B visa holders replacing low-skilled US workers. The MOC’s perspective towards immigrants is an inclusive one—to him, the US should be like other developed countries and be welcoming to immigrants (lines 01–05). Designed to support the perspective on welcoming immigrants and thus disaffiliate with the citizen’s anti-immigrant stance, the MOC describes his recent visit to the southern border in Texas starting with a preface I’m really pleased to let you know (lines 09–10). First of all, the outcome of the visit turns out to be a bipartisan and emotional one, as both Democrats and Republicans (line 15) all shed tears (line 17) for what they saw during the day (which was during the time when undocumented immigrant children were separated from their caregivers and put in cages), bringing to focus the imagery of MOCs shedding tears for witnessing cruelty rather than immigrants displacing Americans. Additionally, the continued description of details about the border visit, including humane people opening their arms to people across the river (lines 22–24) and young mothers and children (lines 24–
25), further substantiates the resolution of *try[ing] to do something* (lines 27–28) and the notion of *be[ing] a welcoming country to immigrants* (lines 03–04). What the MOC manages to do here is, again, the work of disaffiliating with the citizen’s anti-immigrant stance through a personal storytelling, but more importantly, doing so without directly discrediting or confronting the citizen.

The final excerpt comes from US House Representative Mike Levin from California and CIT11. Prior to the excerpt, CIT11 expressed the view that, when it comes to issues on immigration reform, only amnesty is considered with little border enforcement, suggesting that the current immigration policy disproportionately favors “letting people in” to “keeping people out,” which conveys an exclusionary stance towards those coming in across the border.

Excerpt 6.10 MikeLevin_CA_110419_CIT11

01 MOC: thank you for the question. so:- if you go back
02 to McCain, Kennedy, that was the last time we
03 got close.
04 ((continues with history review of policy; lines omitted))
05 and most recently, it has become way too
06 → politicized. ((points at self))- I have been to
07 → the border. I’ve been down there,=I’ve seen the
08 → port of entry at the port of Santa Ysidro.=I will
tell you what I saw with my own eyes. I saw a
09 → lot of people trying very hard to do the right thing.
10 → to do a good job. at thee Customs and Border
11 (saw) a very different situation, where people
12 → that were coming, m- mm- virtually all of them
13 → that are coming with no problem whatsoever.
14 → with 95,000 people a day going back and
15 → forth. virtually all of them no problem
16 → whatsoever.=in fact many of them have the
17 → equivalent of TSA Pre.=you know, I get TSA
18 → Pre at the airport? >they’re here for business,
19 → they’re here for tourism, whatever it may be,<
20 → and they come (. ) often. and regularly. then
21 → there’s that 1%, which are (. ) they do present
23 a greater challenge? and they are a question.
24 no determination is made uh on site as to
25 the validity (. ) of their claim for asylum or
26 for any other reason. if they’re uh- if they have
27 \( \rightarrow \) a criminal background, they’re gone. they are
28 \( \rightarrow \) sent (. ) right back. but if they’re genuinely
29 \( \rightarrow \) seeking asylum, if they’re here uh because
30 they’re fighting some sort of political
31 persecution or uh fear (. ) of violence,
32 or whatever thee- thee case may be, legitimately,
33 back in their home country, uh then they are
34 detained. and I saw where they are detained.
35 \( \rightarrow \) I think it’s incredibly important that we treat
36 \( \rightarrow \) everybo\( \uparrow \)dy (. ) humanely. that’s my first
37 [(.) principle. you gotta treat people
38 CITS: [applause
39 MOC: with dignity and respect.

While in the previous excerpt, the MOC uses a border visit story to disaffiliate with the
citizen’s stance against high-skilled immigrants, the MOC in this excerpt indirectly challenges
the citizen’s anti-immigrant stance with a telling on his border visit focusing on establishing the
normal-ness and orderliness at the border. The MOC first describes the details of what one might
see at a regular US border, with virtually all of them that are coming with no problem
whatsoever (lines 13–14 and lines 16–17), highlighting that border-crossing is largely a highly
regulated, law-abiding practice. In addition, this practice is as normal as TSA Pre (line 18) as the
vast majority of those who come into the country are here for legitimate purposes such as
tourism and business (lines 19–20), again highlighting that most of these immigrants are lawful
and by extension, create no cause for concern contrary to what the citizen may believe. As the
normal-ness of the border-crossing immigrants has been established, the MOC then moves on to
the small minority of people who may not be eligible for asylum as they are sent right back or
gone (lines 27–28) as well as genuine asylum seekers (lines 29–34). As we have witnessed, the
MOC takes great care in responding to the citizen: not directly addressing the citizen’s concern for the excess of amnesty and insufficient border enforcement while diffusing it with various details at the border to establish the normal-ness of immigration.

In short, this section surveys several MOC practices in responding to citizens’ exclusionary stances towards other social groups, particularly immigrant groups of some kind. MOCs are found to oppose citizens’ categorial labels and attributes with contesting ones, redirect the focus of the issue to another relevant aspect, and use a telling of a border visit to disaffiliate with the citizen’s stance. It is worth noting that the MOCs generally pays particular attention to not directly confronting the citizen’s exclusionary stance in any way.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This chapter focuses on how town hall participants deal with the notion of political exclusion as yet another divisive component of democratic governing today, in addition to the notions of misinformation and negative partisanship discussed in the previous two chapters. Citizens convey exclusionary stances towards undocumented immigrants by assigning them the immoral categorial labels and attributes. They also justify exclusionary perspectives towards gender minorities by establishing the superiority of their own religious liberty. MOCs respond to citizens’ exclusionary contributions in the following ways: 1) offering contesting categorial labels and attributes; 2) redirecting focus of the issue to another relevant aspect, and 3) disaffiliating with the citizen via a telling of the MOC’s relevant personal experience.

As mentioned in the introduction, the politics of exclusion is done through the language of exclusion. While the language of exclusion can seem to express legitimate concerns, in the context of voicing concerns to public officials to mobilize change at town hall meetings, it may result in actual political actions of exclusion. By the same token, political solidarities (Scholz,
2008) must first be expressed through the language of solidarity. In the current state of the country, the status of belonging for various minority groups not only remains in question but more critically, continues to be undermined and threatened by actions such as the ones described in this chapter. Those concerned with every person’s civic liberties, political belonging, and the health of democracy must maintain a level of vigilance and seek to question those actions, macro or micro, that aim to undermine these liberties.
Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.

—John Dewey, Democracy and Education

Introduction

This project was conceived in the thick of Donald Trump’s term as the 45th U.S. President, when there continued to be yet another outrageous Tweet or comment every day from Trump, and the American society watched the slow but persistent erosion of the democratic governing power, the attacks on civil rights, and the decreasing hope for the nation. The Insurrection on January 6, 2021, marks a watershed moment in the downturn of the U.S. as one of the few lasting democracies in the world. As the world watched in incredulous horror, violent mobs of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol to protest Trump’s failed re-election. Suffice it to say, the anxieties about the anti-democratic trends in the country were stronger than ever across the country. Personally, the January 6th event also marked the beginning of a long depressive episode, as I was brought to question the value and usefulness of this project amidst the potential collapse of American democracy as we knew it. For a long time, I questioned: why bother at all, if we are going to end up in the hands of those anti-women, anti-immigrant, anti-minority white supremacists? If I went into the proposal stage of this project with a concerned
but still hopeful prospect, the process of analyzing the data, as clouded by the larger sociopolitical landscape, made it much bleaker. I observed in the data alarming content areas addressed by town hall attendees, some of which align with those described by political scientists as the ultimate destabilizing factors against the democratic structure itself.

Though limited in certain ways by its interactional structure (i.e., primarily one questioning turn and one responding turn), town hall meetings still remain one of the few important sites at which ordinary people can engage with their congressional representatives and exercise civic rights and perform civic duties. As we established that the country is facing several threats against its democratic governance, it is important to view how such threats are manifested through ordinary people’s political participation and how those elected to public offices choose to address them. Interactions at town halls thus present a perfect research site for observing how participants of these interactions topicalize and respond to issues of concerns.

As mentioned earlier, three of the major threats against democracy are addressed in this dissertation: the crisis of misinformation, the impact of extreme partisanship, and the lack of political belonging of marginalized groups (Mettler & Lieberman, 2020). The preceding chapters analyzed interactions between constituents and Members of the U.S. Congress on managing misinformation, negative partisanship, and exclusion. In this concluding chapter, I will present a summary of the major findings of this dissertation and discuss the methodological and practical implications for future research and advocacy work.

**Summary of the Findings**

Each analysis chapter of this study examines one set of practices by citizens and Members of Congress (MOC) in managing one specific issue. Chapter 4 deals with instances in which citizens bring in misinformation to the town hall floor. I define misinformation as
factually unfounded, scientifically disproved, logically unsound, or otherwise widely disputed information. It is found that citizens assert epistemic superiority or appeal to rationality when bringing in factually unfounded information as basis for their concerns or complaints. MOCs, on the other hand, are found to endorse, sidestep, or refute the misinformation when responding to citizens.

As shown in the excerpts, when bringing misinformation to one’s town hall inquiries, citizens treat building the legitimacy of their contribution as a major interactional task to accomplish and make considerable efforts asserting their epistemic primacy on the topics or issues at hand. The assertion of epistemic superiority could appear at the preface part of one’s contribution (e.g., Excerpt 4.1 have you ever heard of… to elicit the confirmation of the MOC’s lack of knowledge) and/or after a multi-unit turn elaborating on a misinformed perspective (e.g., Excerpt 4.3 YOU DON’T KNOW). Apart from the MOCs who are the de facto recipients, these assertions can also be directed at other audience members (e.g., Excerpt 4.2 who here in the room has read the text…). Besides building legitimacy of one’s turns, citizens also bolster misinformation by appealing to rationality. For example, citizens may deploy statements of objectivity and rationality in such a way as to defend misinformation (e.g., Excerpt 4.5 I believe climate change is real too and Excerpt 4.6 it’s really important that people go in and dig into the words rather than hearing summaries). Despite the citizens’ lack of scientifically sound or factually correct information, what is important to note here is that those who take it upon themselves to fight against misinformation are in fact tasked to fight against both the misinformation and the sophisticated interactional practices used to legitimate or defend such information, which the MOCs may or may not be fully equipped or prepared to accomplish as we observed in the second part of the analysis in Chapter 4.
Besides endorsing misinformation, the MOCs are found to sidestep or refute the misinformation brought in by citizens. In general, it seems that MOCs treat responding to citizens’ misinformation as a rather delicate matter. Those who choose not to address the misinformation will first concede to an epistemically inferior position (e.g., Excerpt 4.9 be happy to look into it? I don’t know enough about that particular gentleman) and then pivot the focus to a related yet different issue to address more elaborately without getting into any potential disputes about the factuality of the citizens’ contribution. MOCs use the practice of sidestepping to address a more widely recognized or impactful issue while at the same time evading the possibility of directly confronting the misinformation or the citizen. When it comes to refuting misinformation, it is also handled with great care. For example, while MOCs may challenge the truthfulness of the citizens’ statements, it is found that such challenges can be so soft as to confuse what is an untruth versus an individual’s personal perspective. Similarly, though decidedly refuting untruth about climate change, a MOC can also end with there’s more I need to learn. There’s more all of us need to learn (Excerpt 4.11), which mitigates the potential critique of the citizen.

On the one hand, this chapter illustrates the sophisticated, elaborate work carried out to legitimize or defend misinformation at a public forum, shedding light on the task facing those responsible for fighting against misinformation—that of both confronting the misinformation itself and picking apart the assertions of epistemics or rationality accompanying it. On the other hand, this chapter questions the responsibility of public officials when presented with misinformation. Although there are competing demands at the town hall event to attend to (e.g., appealing to diverse political stances, not singling out any person or group), public officials have
a critical role in stopping the continued spread of misinformation by not endorsing or sidestepping it as well as the important responsibility of refuting it when possible.

Chapter 5 documents practices by which participants manage negative partisanship, which is defined as demonstrating hatred towards or aligning against another party (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018; Lelkes, 2021). Due to the increasing partisan divide, citizens are found to present irreconcilable alternatives, presuppose a zero-sum game, or ascribe categories of threat to the opposing party. MOCs are found to neutralize or upgrade the partisanship-implicative turns and even initiate negative partisanship on their own.

With the growing partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans, ordinary citizens can be observed to align themselves along partisan lines. When participating at town halls, citizens may choose to produce negative partisanship by presenting conflicting and irreconcilable alternatives to the MOCs, restricting the interactional space in such a way as to “force” the MOC to choose between two allegiances (e.g., country vs. party). For example, in Excerpt 5.1, the citizen inquires whether the MOC would choose President Trump and the Republican Party over the allegiance to the U.S. Constitution. Interactionally, the animosity of the two alternatives is produced through an unanswerable question that narrows the respondent’s possible courses of action. I argue that negative partisanship is perpetuated each time such questions are produced. Likewise, citizens may also portray bipartisan win-wins as impossible outcomes and that the opposing party’s win necessitates one’s own party’s loss, hence creating a “zero-sum game.” For example, a citizen may criticize their own party through contrasting the two as Republicans are adamant, the Dems are not adamant, the Dems give in (Excerpt 5.4). Finally, citizens may also ascribe categories of threat toward the opposing party by using labels such as “socialist” and “Muslim.”
MOCs are found to deal with negative partisanship by neutralizing or upgrading it, or even initiating it on their own. Those who neutralize negative partisanship contributions are found to rally attendees around shared identities as Americans and highlighting commonalities between different ideologies. Negative partisanship can also be neutralized by reframing the issues at hand and skirting around any partisan debate. At times, MOCs are also found to upgrade citizens’ partisan contributions. This can be done through portraying oneself as “bipartisan” (e.g., *I pointed out a number of things that are very bipartisan that Congress could be doing*) while at the same time attributing blame to the opposing party (e.g., *Speaker Pelosi for whatever reason won’t bring to the floor*). Observed very occasionally, MOCs can also initiate a partisanship-focused response even if the citizen query is directed at other topics. Given the choices of defusing or enforcing negative partisanship, I argue that the MOCs hold a great deal of power during these responding slots in the interaction.

Chapter 6 examines interaction segments wherein citizens employ the language of exclusion against minoritized groups by assigning them categories of immorality or establish their own religious superiority as basis for maintaining exclusionary stances. Members of Congress when responding to citizens may offer contesting categories to citizen-introduced categories, redirect the focus of discussion, or disaffiliate with the citizens’ exclusionary stance via a telling. The notion of exclusion is understood as any form of discriminatory practice, which includes those discursive means that “problematic, marginalize, exclude, or otherwise limit the human rights of ethnic/religious/minority out-groups” (Wodak, 2008, p. 55).

Citizens may convey exclusionary stance towards minoritized groups by interactionally assigning them the category of immorality—that the “other” social group is morally inferior somehow. For example, undocumented persons or migrants are categorized as “illegals” who
take away undeserved social benefits or occupy properties that belong to locals. In addition, citizens assert the superiority of their religion as the basis for delegitimizing the rights of gender minorities. The “other” group is portrayed as a threat to the citizens’ own religion(s) and family value(s) and thus their attempt at gaining more equal rights, to the citizens, must be undermined and diminished.

On the other hand, MOCs again have an array of options when responding to citizens’ exclusionary stance. For an exclusionary label such as “illegals,” for example, MOCs can choose to offer a contesting stance with labels such as our dreamers and our temporary protected status uh workers (Excerpt 6.5) and every single person (Excerpt 6.6). With such labels, the MOCs manage to indirectly contest the associated membership attributes and the citizens’ queries as a whole. We also observe that MOCs can choose not to directly address the citizens’ complaints by redirecting the focus of the discussion. For example, complaints against “illegal immigrants” can be redirected to the role of law enforcement or educators. This practice is similar with the “sidestepping” practice in Chapter 4 by which the MOCs choose to address a different, related, but more widely recognized issue and designedly not address the focus of the complaint at hand (i.e., illegal immigrants). If the practice of redirecting the focus serves to disalign with the citizens while still maintaining a somewhat affiliative stance, the MOCs’ practice of disaffiliating with a telling is then a way to demonstrate a divergent perspective from the citizens in a delicate but clear manner. In response to complaints about immigrants and border security, MOCs are found to use a story of their own recent border visits to illustrate the normalcy and humanity at the country’s border, diffuse the complaints, and not directly confront the citizens.

Finally, the reader may wonder whether there may be instances in which one single interactional segment could present an interwoveness of more than one “theme” addressed in
this dissertation project. For example, a Jewish citizen could protest the exclusion they face from the President and members of the Republican Party while the MOC responds to attribute blame to the Democrats (data not shown); a citizen challenging climate science could question the Democrats’ proposed measures to reverse climate change (data shown partially in Chapter 4). It is exactly due to such complexity and interwovenness that I strived to dissect and analyze the interactional practices clearly.

**Methodological Implications**

From a methodological perspective, findings of this study make contributions to the following areas of research, including, in particular, critically informed EMCA research and participatory democracy research.

This study is a continuation of the recent trends of “motivated looking” (Talmy, 2023) in EMCA research. For several years, a number of researchers have started paying special attention to prevalent social issues such as racial justice, DEI, and how these issues become relevant in day-to-day interactions (see for example, the work of those in the group of EMCA for Racial Justice, Rawls and Duck’s 2020 book on tacit racism, and the 2024 edited volume from Waring and Tadic on critical conversation analysis). To address these challenging issues, it is required that researchers put on an additional “critically informed” lens and not immediately assume or ascribe “normalcy” to what is in interactional data (see for example, Kitzinger’s 2005 article on heteronormativity in interaction). A critical lens enabled this study to effectively examine macro social issues made relevant in the micro details of interactions at town hall events as participants conducted micro-politics (Keel & Mondada, 2017). Issues such as misinformation and partisanship, as made relevant and responded to by participants themselves, come to “life” as we
observe, line by line and second by second, how they are prefaced, supported, debated, or agreed on in the sequential details.

Given the potential dissonance between the positionality of the researcher and the notion of EMCA’s methodological “indifference” (Garfinkel, 2002), it is also helpful to address the researcher’s positionality during data analysis so as to not sweep these methodological questions under the analytical rug as our “dirty secrets” or black boxes (Moriss, 2016; Talmy, 2023). Those who do “pure CA” may insist that taking on a critical perspective equals a departure and even betrayal to the EMCA commitment of methodological indifference where the researcher maintains a sense of analytical integrity by refraining from inserting their own stance and judgement in the analysis process. However, from its inception, EMCA also maintained a fundamentally democratic perspective and an orientation towards social justice, e.g., how transgender persons produced their gender identities in day-to-day activities and how youngsters of racial minorities shared their members’ knowledge of producing certain identities in encounters with the police (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, 1992). By the same token, this study did not shy away from maintaining a “motivated” perspective in that evidence for misinformation, partisanship, and exclusion are specifically traced in details of the interaction and the practices for producing them are uncovered in the process. Additionally, this project also demonstrates that qualitative or mix-methods social science research may benefit from suspending the notion of “neutrality” when needed. For example, those who work in settings that involve issues related to social inequity may find themselves having to engage with discriminatory practices, both systematic and discursive. It would be helpful in such instances to not stick to a rigid understanding of “neutrality” but revise one’s research protocols so as to also address or mediate
these inequities in some way. One of the values of this project is that it demonstrates when a researcher may benefit from moving away from a top-down, prescriptive notion of “neutrality.”

Outside of EMCA work, this study also sheds light on how EMCA research can collaborate with and contribute to participatory democracy research. CA has started paying attention to participatory democratic conversations (see for example, Townsend’s 2009 article on a New England town meeting, Green’s 2016 dissertation on congressional town hall events, and Magnusson’s 2020 article on young people’s civic participation). Since there has been a decline in research on participatory democracy in recent years (Hilmer, 2010), this study contributes to the revival of this line of inquiry and the re-specification of civic studies (Levine & Soltan, 2014). Additionally, despite various studies that evaluate the effectiveness of deliberative practices (Ryfe, 2006; The Kettering Foundation, 2008), current research on participatory democracy still maintains a more “top-down” approach: analyzing the discourse structures or adopting the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) as a formative assessment scheme (Steiner et al, 2005). This study demonstrates the value of a “bottom-up” analytic approach to examine citizens’ and MOCs’ interactional practices as produced in situ. Going forward, a similar “bottom-up” approach can strengthen the analysis of the intervention measures that aim to increase the effectiveness of civic conversations.

**Practical Implications**

From a practical viewpoint, findings from this study help inform practices in the following domains: designing interactions at public-facing events, civic discourses in various educational settings, as well as democratic conversations in daily life.

First, findings of this study can be offered to nonprofit organizations (such as Everyday Democracy in Hartford, Connecticut, which works with communities to have more effective
deliberative conversations) and political offices to motivate change in both citizen and politician practices. At different levels of the government and in our local communities, public-facing meetings are regularly held to facilitate ordinary citizens’ civic expression. This study illustrates the potential of CA’s micro-analytic approach in examining, designing, and revising interactional practices, which can help individuals and organizations become more effective in their objectives. Similarly, when addressing citizen concerns, public officials, local and national alike, can adopt this approach in analyzing and improving the impact of their responses (and even outreach).

Furthermore, the relevance of this study is particularly salient to those working in various educational settings, be it K-12 classrooms, college lecture halls, or ESL classrooms. I recall in the summer of 2020, a colleague teaching environmental law at a public college in New York State came to me concerned about a student’s complaints. Due to the use of New York Times articles as part of the course readings, the student deemed the course curriculum to be unfairly critical of the Trump Administration’s actions on environmental issues and made public complaints regarding the course on online discussion forums. The colleague thus shouldered the task of mediating the ideological and political differences between the students, while having to hold back her own view on the issue. Regardless of the subjects taught, educators in different learning settings are often tasked to address divergent and often divisive perspectives and bear the brunt of the work facilitating civic conversations amongst learners, which can be a very taxing experience in addition to the main task of teaching. Much like the researcher’s positionality, teachers’ own positionality also becomes a members’ issue that must be resolved in real time. Needless to say, the divisive times we are in place a strong burden on teachers.
On the one hand, findings from this study can help teachers manage this task more effectively. Similar with the tasks of MOCs, teachers are accountable for mediating potentially controversial topics in the classrooms. Teachers can choose to adopt practices such as redirecting the focus and reframing the discussions into what concerns most students or redirect the discussion to a related and more widely recognized aspect. To delicately disalign with another perspective, teachers can introduce a telling of personal experience on the same issue; to contest the categories attributed to an opposing perspective, teachers can offer a new set of categories and attributes. If faced with misinformation, teachers can also choose to refute it, adopting a delicate approach as some of the MOCs do in the data. On the other hand, the findings of this study can be adopted to develop curriculum aimed at training students to become more analytical of one another’s interactional practices when having civic conversations. As the findings have demonstrated, sophisticated sequential design could accompany interactional content based on misinformation. Teachers who are concerned with reversing the impact of misinformation, for example, can facilitate student discussions countering misinformation.

Outside of professional settings, ordinary citizens also have opportunities to have democratic conversations in one’s daily life. John Dewey’s quote at the beginning of this chapter highlights that the notion of democracy is much more than how levels of governments conduct the business of democratic governing; importantly, it is the attention and care that the ordinary citizens give to each other that carry the heaviest weight and have the biggest impact. As we hear our friends’ and families’ misinformed perspectives on public health, as we observe our communities’ sparse appearances at the local polling stations on Election Day, as we encounter casual, offhanded, anti-LGBTQA+ remarks, we must recognize that each encounter presents an opportunity similar to that given to MOCs—each of us has the democratic responsibility to
address it. In addition to the potential of being used as part of one’s interactional toolbox, this dissertation demonstrates the usefulness of taking on an emic approach when seeing notions of misinformation, negative partisanship, or exclusion as ordinary conduct to better understand and address them; that being able to first see the perspectives of others in conversation, no matter how divergent they may be, presents the first step towards mutual understanding.

Coda

We have all heard Michelle Obama’s encouraging words “when they go low, we go high” when encountering hatred and animosity. As I conclude this dissertation, my renewed understanding of these words is not that the democracy-minded people will avoid those with diverse and even opposing perspectives; instead, it is that we endorse a rational, practical, and proactive approach when we extend a welcoming hand to those who fell prey to crippled epistemology and divisive political propaganda. It is that we embrace each other’s diverse identities and meaningfully engage with each other in a graceful, caring, and positive manner. This approach of “care” echoes Rawls’ ideal of political liberalism by which citizens of varying “religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines” can nevertheless cooperate as “free and equal citizen” (Rawls, 2005, p. 4). In a similar vein, as renowned legal scholar Johan van der Walt reminds us, social change does not (only) come from violent, revolutionary actions; rather, the goal of sustaining liberal democracy is better accomplished by ordinary people’s ordinary actions and by giving each other “the gift of time,” particularly during such challenging, anxiety-inducing times. He writes,

“When one begins to realize that ordinary time turns on a gift that liberal minded people give one another on a daily basis, and very often give one another under difficult circumstances, one also begins to grasp that regular time is not just
ordinary time. It is then that one also begins to realize that nothing needs to be done to make time extraordinary” (Van der Walt, 2019, p.146).
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Appendix: Transcription Conventions

(Adapted from Jefferson, 2004 and Mondada, 2016)

. (period) falling intonation.

? (question mark) rising intonation.

, (comma) continuing intonation.

- (hyphen) abrupt cut-off.

:: (colon(s)) prolonging of sound.

word (underlining) stress.

Word The more underlining, the greater the stress.

WORD (caps) loud speech.

◦word◦ (degree symbols) quiet speech.

↑word (upward arrow) raised pitch.

↓word (downward arrow) lowered pitch.

>word< (more than and less than) quicker speech.

<word> (less than & more than) slowed speech.

$word$ (dollar signs) smiley voice.

#word# (number signs) squeaky voice.

hh (series of h’s) aspiration or laughter.

.hh (h’s preceded by period) inhalation.

[ ] (lined-up brackets) beginning and ending of

[ ] simultaneous or overlapping speech.

= (equal sign) latch or contiguous utterances of the same speaker.
(2.4) (number in parentheses) length of a silence in 10ths of a second.

(.) (period in parentheses) micro-pause, 0.2 second or less.

() (empty parentheses) non-transcribable segment of talk.

((gazing toward the ceiling)) non-speech activity or transcriptionist comment.

(double parentheses, italics)

{((words))-words} (curly brackets and dash) dash to indicate co-occurrence of nonverbal behavior and verbal elements; curly brackets to mark the beginning and ending of such co-occurrence when necessary. ~ in place of dash to indicate the beginning of talk in the midst of nonverbal conduct.