The MAGA Playbook of Othering: Finding Solutions

Dehumanizing, scapegoating and inciting aggression against out-groups are the MAGA Right's strategy for gaining and consolidating power.

This has been true for years, but now this strategy is succeeding to the point where it threatens the very functioning of democracy.

This "us versus them" strategy manifests most clearly in the use of "hot button" issues that define and defame out-groups. While many in academia have explored "othering," much must still be understood about how pervasive its effects are and with which segments of voters. Just as important is the practical necessity to develop methods to combat and discredit this strategy.

Innovating for the Public Good: R&D for Democracy is developing programs and practices to address othering and expose and discredit those who use it to gain political power. Several preliminary research projects have advanced our understanding of othering. The next step will be extensive quantitative and qualitative data gathering to deliver breakthrough insights to better understand othering as a social and psychological phenomenon. We will also conduct a three-dimensional view of the audiences who are most susceptible to its influence and, more importantly, explore how to address and neutralize the political power of othering. Subject matter experts in behavioral science, social psychology and political science, among others, will participate in the work and program experimentation.

The work is designed to be actionable, not academic. *Changes in attitudes, opinions and electoral impact will be used to measure shifts over time and determine the efficacy of various programmatic approaches. The results of this effort will be shared widely.*

Research Goals

This research approach is designed to identify strategic messaging to combat the pervasive practice of othering in American politics. Previous rounds of research, as found in this presentation deck, have helped pinpoint the audiences that are most open to othering tactics and the type of othering appeals that are most effective in reaching those audiences.

Prior research also has demonstrated that an alarming percentage of people believe they are losing power in our country today. This makes them vulnerable to othering appeals that exploit those perceptions and blame specific groups for their loss of power.

Many voters are especially susceptible to othering messages that target transgender people on religion/culture, immigrants on economic resources and Black people on crime. Power dynamics — and their perception — play an important role. Not unexpectedly, older, white, conservative men are more susceptible to othering than other groups. As an example, voters of color largely reject explicitly racist othering appeals, but they remain open to othering that speaks to traditional family values and gender roles. Additionally, findings on the role of women overall are quite sobering.

*While some demographic groups may be more susceptible to this demagoguery, prior research has alarmingly found **these appeals resonate to some degree across all demographic groups.***

Two effective strategies have emerged that require additional testing and understanding: (1) a strong moral stance condemning politicians for their fearmongering and efforts to distract us from their failures; and (2) a message rooted in our national value of freedom, underscoring our collective fight toward freedom for all.

The next phase of the research will test these promising responses to identify which specific messages are most effective at countering different types of othering appeals and with whom. To do so, we propose conducting qualitative and quantitative research and an experimental test of video stimuli.

Qualitative Research: In-depth Interviews

The first phase includes completing 30 individual in-depth interviews among voters who are susceptible to certain types of othering appeals. There are three types of voters:

1. **Othering Resistors:** Individuals who reject othering views toward different groups.
2. **Open to Othering:** Those who show occasional or moderate tendencies toward othering.
3. **Othering Hardliners:** People with strong and consistent othering beliefs across a range of groups.

To ensure that the interviews reflect the attitudinal and demographic profile of the segments of the electorate that is partly open to othering appeals, we will use the segmentation analysis from the last round of othering research to inform the recruiting criteria.

These conversations would give us a nuanced understanding of what makes certain othering tactics more compelling than others as well as the best strategies to respond to and, hopefully, inoculate against those appeals. The structure of these interviews would include exposing participants to videos of people engaging in othering as well as those reacting and responding against it. This would be followed by questions to understand opinions and reactions to those videos. Insights from these interviews will help us refine the promising anti-othering messages that emerged from our previous othering research before we test them in the quantitative phase of the research.

This phase of the research would take 5–6 weeks from start to finish.

Quantitative Research: National Online Survey

Following the in-depth interviews, a national online survey of 2,500 registered voters will be conducted. The survey instrument would be roughly divided into three key sections:

1. Demographic questions and key baseline measurements on othering (including questions that can be used in a segmentation analysis).
2. An experiment in which respondents are randomly assigned to a pairing of two videos that speak for and against othering appeals on immigrants and economic resources; transgender people and religion/culture; Black people and crime; and the roles of women. Each respondent will be exposed to one of these three types of othering appeals and one video that aims to counter othering tactics.
3. Assessments of the impact of these videos using a variety of metrics and identify which responses are most effective at inoculating against othering tactics by, in part, re-asking baseline measurement questions.

This phase of the research would take 5–6 weeks.

Experimental Test: Swayable

To further explore the comparative strength of anti-othering messaging, we propose testing three to five videos with distinct anti-othering approaches. These videos would be compared against each other and against a control group to measure their relative impact and any potential backlash. Each respondent would see one of the videos and complete a very short survey with key baseline othering measures along with some standard demographic and political questions. Our plan would be to have approximately 1,000 respondents per video plus 1,000 for the control. If there are three videos to test, for example, that would result in 4,000 respondents in total. We have found Democratic strategists and elected officials to be highly engaged by results from similar experiments, particularly related to the "lift" adopting each narrative provides on opinions about elected leaders.

The experiment would include three treatments (1,000 respondents per condition).

Conclusion

The importance of this work cannot be overstated. This project will have benefits over many years, if not decades. The ability of our country's democracy to not only survive but also thrive with an increasingly diverse population depends on it.