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A Rhetorical Study of Twitter Discourse about
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Barrett

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Episode 5: Findings, Plus a Look at Events Following Confirmation

Lauren Durham
University of Dayton

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Lauren:

Well, we did it, the last episode. Thank you for following along as we examine Twitter discourse about Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Amy Coney Barrett. Hopefully, you were able to see how Tweets can be more than just Tweets. They give insight into a certain moment in time and can be studied in the context of academia. Together, we've looked at how Ginsburg's icon status held up over time, and maybe even grew after her passing. Barrett's existence threatened Ginsburg's legacy, even though Barrett herself was not well-known to Americans. With the help of Trump and McConnell, Barrett triumphed over the fear, anger and unprecedented times to be Ginsburg's replacement.

Lauren:

Our categories of Tweets help decipher the ways in which this happened through emergent themes in the content. In this podcast, we've talked a lot about legacy. What is a legacy? How is a legacy created? How is it shaped by others? It's been made clear through the data that Ginsburg left behind a legacy that Barrett threatened. Whether she successfully made a dent in the personal legacy of RBG, that's your call. Barrett did, however, change the fabric of the Supreme Court. And as Americans, we've seen the impacts over the past year and a half.

Lauren:

Hi, there! I'm Lauren. And lately, I've been reading Tweets. Profound, I know, for a 22 year old to pay attention to social media. I'm aware. And it's true, most everyone reads Tweets from time to time. But lately, I've been reading Tweets a little differently. I've combined some of my passions, writing, following current events, and using social media, to study the discourse around two of the most talked about and perhaps influential women of the past year and a half, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Amy Coney Barrett. The two women different in fundamental ways and share a common thread, the Supreme Court. After the passing of Ginsburg on September 18th, 2020, Amy Coney Barrett became her replacement in a record six weeks.

Lauren:

The time period was filled with anxiety, fear and uncertainty as the United States battled a raging pandemic and a violently polarized election scene. Some mourned the loss of Ginsburg while others awaited her younger, more conservative replacement. The tensions were high. And what do people do about it? They tweeted. In this podcast, I'll break down my study of Tweets from the six week time period between Ginsburg's death and Barrett's nomination. Together, we will examine the contextual ways in which the two women are connected through the examination of thousands of tweets. Let's go.

Lauren:

On September 20, 2020, Kamala Harris tweeted, "During her confirmation hearing, Justice Ginsburg said, 'The right to choose was essential to women's equality.' We already know where Judge Barrett stands on a woman's right to choose. Her writings made it clear. It would be a disgrace to appoint her to Justice Ginsburg's seat." On September 1, 2021, only a little over 10 months after Barrett's confirmation, SB8 was enacted in Texas. Nicknamed The Heartbeat Bill, SB8 is one of the most extreme abortion bans in the US. The law blocks nearly all abortions as soon as any cardiac activity can be detected, which is usually around six weeks of pregnancy or about two weeks after a missed period. Most women don't know they're pregnant at this point.

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Lauren:

Anyone can challenge or report someone they suspect had an abortion with the plaintiff receiving a minimum \$10,000 bounty if the defendant is found guilty. And other states are following suit. Lawmakers in Oklahoma, Florida, and Ohio are sponsoring bills modeled after the one in Texas. On March 3, 2022, the Supreme Court ruled that Kentucky's Republican Attorney General may step in to defend a state ban on a common abortion procedure, allowing the case to continue in lower federal courts. At the center of these legal developments is the state of Mississippi. On December 1, 2021, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case in Mississippi that seeks to ban most abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy.

Lauren:

According to a report last year by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that about 95 of abortions in the US in 2019 took place by 15 weeks of gestation. Essentially, the court's decision to hear this case threatens to undo nearly a half a century of abortion rights given to women from Roe v. Wade. With a majority conservative bench six to three, pro-choice advocates all over the country fear the worst. The Supreme Court is expected to issue a ruling in June of 2022. Given the timeline of events in conjunction with Barrett joining the bench, perhaps some of the Twitter users who processed the moment or feared the worst about women's rights at the start of the shift were onto something.

Speaker 2:

Katie Watson, an attorney and bioethicist at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine says, "There's only so much you can read into Barrett's past judicial record, but you don't really have to."

Katie Watson:

I think the best evidence of her position on Roe versus Wade is that President Trump has said he will only appoint Justices who are committed to reversing Roe, and there's no reason not to believe him.

Lauren:

In just a few months, we could be living through yet another historical moment, one that would cause pro-life advocates to rejoice and pro-choice groups to fear the future for women everywhere. And then something else happened.

President Biden:

Today, as we watch freedom and liberty under attack abroad, I'm here to fulfill my responsibilities under the Constitution to preserve freedom and liberty here in the United States of America. And it's my honor to introduce to the country a daughter of former public school teachers, a proven consensus builder, an accomplished lawyer, a distinguished jurist on one of the nation's most prestigious courts. My nominee for the United States Supreme Court is Judge Ketanji Jackson.

Lauren:

On February 25th, 2022, a new woman entered the Supreme Court conversation. Ketanji Brown Jackson was selected as Biden's replacement for Justice Breyer, who announced he will retire at the end of this term. Confirmations are underway now. They begin March 21 with the final vote planned to be on April 8. If confirmed, she'll be the first Black woman to serve on the United States Supreme Court.

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Ketanji Brown Jackson:

Thank you very much, Mr. President. I am truly humbled by the extraordinary honor of this nomination, and I am especially grateful for the care that you have taken in discharging your constitutional duty in service of our democracy with all that is going on in the world today.

Lauren:

Brown Jackson, age 51, currently sits on DC's Federal Appellate Court. She grew up in the Miami area and is a Harvard graduate. Brown Jackson previously clerked for Justice Breyer and served as a federal public defender in Washington, an experience that is fitting, given Biden's commitment to putting more public defenders on the federal bench. She was also a Commissioner on the US Sentencing Commission and served on the Federal District Court in DC as an appointee of President Barack Obama before Biden elevated her to the DC Circuit last year. If I were to continue my study, I'd shift the focus to look at tweets comparing Barrett and Brown Jackson. Biden's strategic choice could be argued as a continuation of the legacy of Ginsburg.

Lauren:

She's a progressive woman with years of experience. To further a legacy built upon the quest for equality and opportunity, Brown Jackson will make history as a Black woman. Just a brief twitter scroll on the night of her nomination revealed similar patterns. Barrett's career in ideology was immediately compared to Brown Jackson's. Even Tucker Carlson stoked the fire by demanding to know Brown Jackson's LSAT scores, which people pointed out hadn't been a topic of conversation around Barrett or even Justice Kavanaugh before they were confirmed. An opinion piece from USA Today published on March 22nd, 2022 titled "Ketanji Brown Jackson getting the respect that Amy Coney Barrett was denied" discusses just that, the observed differences between the two women and their Senate hearings.

Lauren:

Author Jonathan Turley states, "I do not agree with some objections to Jackson, like her alleged support of critical race theory, her advocacy for clients, or her work as a judicial clerk. There are other issues that need to be addressed, including what could be the ultimate issue for confirmation. In the Barrett confirmation, some democratic members not only demanded Barrett tell them how she was likely to vote on pending cases, they also declared they'd vote against her purely for holding a conservative judicial philosophy." So we know that these conversations of comparison are happening. Essentially, the development of the past year and a half are not only in progress, but they're a continuation of what began when Ginsburg passed. Everything I've discussed has been connected to her death in some way or another, which may just further justify her legacy that much more.

Lauren:

I went to sincerely thank the Honors Program at the University of Dayton for their guidance and support throughout this project. I also want to thank my mentor, Dr. Patrick Thomas, for his expertise, constant encouragement and patience throughout this project. The voice actors, my family, friends and classmates also deserve recognition. They brought the data to life with their lively readings, and I'm so grateful for that. Lastly, I want to thank you as listeners. It's been so fun to share my findings with you in this format. I hope you learned a little something about writing studies, qualitative coding, or even just about the judicial system and Twitter. In the words of Ginsburg, I leave you with this.

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Ruth Bader Ginsburg:

I would just like people to think of me as a judge who did the best she could with whatever limited talent I have to keep our country true to what makes it a great nation, and to make things a little better than they might have been if I hadn't than that.