Mobilizing Voters with Violent Metaphors

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Abstract

How do personality traits condition the effects of campaign messages meant to mobilize voters? With two nationally-representative U.S. survey experiments, I show that common violent metaphors mobilize or demobilize voters depending on their traits. Violent metaphors increase the mobilizing impact of motivations to participate among aggressive individuals but decrease that impact among low-aggression people. For example, the language mobilizes strong partisans with aggressive personalities but demobilizes strong partisans low in aggression. This heterogeneity showcases the nuanced power of metaphors in campaigns, reaffirms the importance of personality in political behavior, and reveals the hidden role of aggression in non-violent political behavior for the first time. In practice, the net effects of violent metaphors can be positive, negative, or null depending on average traits in an audience.

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Every fight consists of two parts. (1) The few individuals who are actively engaged at the center and (2) the audience that is irresistibly attracted to the scene.


**Introduction**

Election campaigns work to get supporters to the polls and persuade the few voters who haven’t decided. Political messaging plays a big role in these efforts across a variety of communication platforms: TV and internet ads, candidate speeches, campaign emails and phone calls, and door-to-door canvassing. But the messages that mobilize one kind of supporter may be ineffective or even counter-productive with another. Learning how different types of supporters respond to messages is therefore critical to any campaign’s success. So how do personality traits condition the mobilizing effects of campaign messages?

Recent political participation studies reveal the power of campaign messages and the influence of core personality traits, illuminating the psychology behind political action. Message content can mobilize or demobilize participation depending on tone and timing (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Krupnikov, 2011; Lau et al., 1999), emphasis on social costs of abstention or benefits of action (Gerber, Green, & Larimer, 2008), and emotions evoked by message styles (Brader 2006; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen 2000; Valentino et al. 2011). Likewise, personality traits distinguish citizens who are more or less likely to participate in politics, with more action found among extraverted citizens, for example (Gerber et al. 2013; Mondak et al. 2010). But only two studies experimentally test the *interaction* between messages and traits – whether the mobilizing effects of campaign appeals depend on the personality traits of the audience (Gerber et al. 2013; Weinschenk & Panagopoulos 2014).
This article tests the mobilizing effects of messages that incorporate mild violent metaphors (e.g. “fight”) regularly heard on the campaign trail, with theoretical and empirical attention to the personality trait of aggression that distinguishes citizens for whom violent language resonates most and least. I expect aggressive people will respond with enthusiasm to violent metaphors because they tend to find violent entertainment appealing in general (Bushman 1996, 1998). In contrast, citizens low in trait aggression will find this language off-putting and anxiety-producing, even in its mild forms. Given how political emotions alter the impact of predispositions on political judgment (e.g. Brader 2006), I look for violent metaphors to reinforce the impact of voting motivations like partisan strength and external efficacy in aggressive citizens, but to weaken the motivations in low-aggression people.

To test these expectations, I fielded two nationally representative U.S. survey experiments during the 2010 midterm election campaigns, randomly assigning participants to read short campaign ad content with mild violent metaphors (e.g. “fight hard”) or non-violent synonyms (e.g. “work hard”). Results closely match expectations. Thus, violent metaphors mobilize some citizens but demobilize others based on trait aggression levels.

This work shows the mobilizing power of metaphors and their dependence on personality traits for resonance, advancing interactive participation frameworks in current research (Gerber et al. 2013; Mondak et al. 2010; Weinschenk & Panagopoulos 2014). Moreover, these studies focus on trait aggression, a new personality factor in political science. In so doing, this work highlights the surprising impact of common campaign message styles and reveals the hidden role of aggression in non-violent political behavior. Finally, I provide advice for practitioners seeking to predict the net effects of violent metaphors depending on average traits in an audience.

**Violent Metaphors in Political Campaigns**
Candidates on the campaign trail often frame messages with mild violent metaphors. They promise to ‘fight’ for their constituents, declare ‘war’ on national problems, denounce ‘attacks’ by unscrupulous opponents, and exhort citizens to join in the ‘battle.’ The language may arise naturally, reflecting conflicts at the heart of politics (Pitney, 2000) or the traits of leaders who use them (Winter, 1987), but violent metaphors may also proffer electoral advantage as a mobilizing force.

Violent political metaphors are figures of speech that cast non-violent campaigning and governing in violent terms, that portray leaders or groups as combatants, that depict political objects (e.g. legislation, money) as weapons, or that describe sites of politics (e.g. Congress) as places of violence.² Scholars have previously conceptualized violent metaphors as one kind of strategic news frame, but not as a distinct conceptual force in political behavior. Strategic frames in news promote cynicism and depress participation (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), especially among citizens with low propensity to participate (Valentino et al. 2001). Only one study isolated the voting effects of violent metaphors in an analysis limited by small samples (Valentino et al., 2001). They speculate that war language distracts from issue content, especially among the less-engaged. Here, I treat violent metaphors as its own conceptual category with different mechanisms and consequences for political behavior.

Violent campaign metaphors are often paired with calls for action. For example, during the 2010 midterm election campaign, President Barack Obama rallied students at the University of Wisconsin with a speech using a dozen violent metaphors, like “I am going to get out there and fight as hard as I can – and I know you are too.” He concluded:

Get out there and fight for it. I need your help, Madison. We need you to commit to vote. …We need you to knock on doors. We need you to talk to neighbors. We

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² Here, I elide the distinctions between similes, metaphors, and other figurative-comparative language.
need you to make phone calls. We need you to bring energy and passion and commitment. Because if we do, … we will not just win this election – we are going to restore our economy, we are going to rebuild the middle class. We will reclaim the American Dream for this generation (9/28/10, emphasis added).

Two years earlier, Senator John McCain ended his presidential nomination acceptance speech, laden with dozens of violent metaphors, with a similar call to Republicans: “Fight with me. Fight with me. Fight for what’s right for our country. Fight for the ideals and character of a free people. Fight for our children’s future. Fight for justice and opportunity for all. …Stand up, stand up, stand up, and fight” (9/4/08, emphasis added).

Given the frequent use of violent metaphors in campaigns, we might reasonably infer that campaigns view the language as a means to improve their electoral chances. But whether (and how) violent metaphors serve this purpose remains to be seen.

**Divergent Reactions to Violent Metaphors**

Political participation levels are a function of electoral structure and conditions, individual resources, mobilization by elites and peers, psychological engagement in politics (e.g. Burns et al., 2001; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995). Violent metaphors fit into this mix as mobilization efforts that interact with psychological engagement, a connection I explain below.

Metaphors actively shape how people make social judgments (see Landau et al. 2010 for a review). They help people “understand and communicate abstract and elusive ideas” by reference to more concrete objects and processes (p. 1046, Landau et al. 2010). And they generally increase attention and interest in persuasive arguments, motivating more systematic processing, especially among people interested in the metaphorical domain (Johnson and Taylor
Political metaphors are important frames structuring political attitudes (Bougher, 2012; Hartman, 2012; Johnson & Taylor, 1981; Lau & Schlesinger, 2005; Schlesinger & Lau, 2000), but no studies test their impact on political action.

As with other violent media, individuals react differently to violent words differently depending on their own aggressive traits (see Anderson et al. 2003; Kalmoe 2014). I expect violent campaign metaphors to appeal to people with aggressive personalities who enjoy other violent representations (e.g. entertainment), who tend to seek out violent content, and who respond to it with a mix of enthusiasm, anger, and aggressive behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bushman 1995, 1996, 1998; Caprara et al., 1983; Felsten & Hill, 1999; Marshall & Brown, 2006). In contrast, low-aggression individuals tend to avoid violent content and may therefore be turned off by violent metaphors. In this group, exposure to violent content can produce anxiety and repulsion, known as aggression-anxiety (e.g. Anderson & Ford 1986; Bushman 1996; Carnagey et al. 2007; Moise-Titus 1999).

These relationships point to two potential routes for violent campaign metaphors to have effects on electoral participation. In the first, violent metaphors mobilize electoral participation among trait-aggressive citizens, attracting interest and focusing attention on the content of mobilizing messages. This language casts electoral politics as aggressive conflict, which aggressive people are likely to find appealing. Conversely, violent metaphors would be uninteresting or even off-putting for citizens low in trait aggression. This is similar to other studies on the congruence of messages and personality traits, though these works address neither

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3 These differing approaches to conflict are similar to Mutz and Reeves’ (2005) study of incivility effects on political trust. In that study, “conflict avoidance” moderated effects of incivility exposure, with lower trust seen only in people averse to interpersonal conflict. Conflict avoidance was measured similarly to the verbal aggression subscale of trait aggression here, so the two constructs are related.
violent metaphors nor aggression (e.g. Gerber et al. 2013; Kam & Simas 2010; Lavine et al. 2000; Weinschenk & Panagopoulos 2014).

An alternative route focuses on how violent metaphors might evoke distinct emotional responses, thereby altering the impact of predispositions for participation. Emotions serve as signals about the surrounding environment and encourage adaptive responses by promoting habitual responses or by motivating a search for new approaches (Marcus et al. 2000). In politics, enthusiasm reinforces habits and predispositions while anxiety weakens them (Brader 2006; Marcus et al. 2000). Anger functions much like enthusiasm by reducing deliberation (Huddy et al. 2007) and increasing habit-based judgments (Brader & Valentino 2007).4

In this way, violent metaphors would condition the impact of participation motives on campaign behavior through similar affective mechanisms, dependent on trait aggression. Violent metaphors reinforce participatory motives of high-aggression citizens but weaken them for those low in trait aggression. In other words, exposure to mild violent metaphors will make motivations to participate a stronger factor predicting electoral participation for high-aggression citizens but a weaker factor for low-aggression citizens.

I focus on two kinds of participatory motives: strength of partisan attachment and external efficacy. Party identification strength routinely predicts higher levels of participation (e.g. Rosenstone & Hansen 1996; Verba et al. 1995). Citizens with stronger attachments are likely to perceive higher stakes in elections, and those who view elections as instruments of democracy and who believe candidates care about them are more likely to participate than those more distrustful (e.g. Niemi et al. 1991; Rosenstone & Hansen 1996; Burns et al. 2001). Thus,

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4 Past research finds mixed results for direct emotional effects on participation (Brader 2006; Marcus et al. 2000; Valentino et al. 2011), which does not yield clear expectations in this context.
for example, these psychological foundations suggest that violent metaphors will *mobilize* strong partisans with aggressive personalities but *demobilize* strong partisans who aren’t aggressive.

Notably, these predictions align closely with patterns found in recent experiments on violent metaphors and partisan polarization in issue attitudes (Author cite). In those studies, exposure to violent metaphors increased the weight of partisanship among aggressive citizens but decreased it among low-aggression people, leading to more polarization among aggressive people and less polarization among those who find conflict aversive. Similar differential effects, if found here, would extend the relationships from mass issue attitudes to mass political action.

**Other Personality Frameworks for Campaign Mobilization**

Only two prior articles experimentally test mobilizing appeals conditioned by personality traits. Gerber and colleagues (2013) and Weinschenk and Panagopoulos (2014) each employ the Big Five framework, which posits five core dimensions of personality: openness, emotional stability, extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Observational studies show mixed relationships between Big Five traits and participation, but extraversion has consistently been linked to more action (e.g. Mondak et al., 2010). With survey- and field-experiments, Gerber and colleagues find that messages stressing the social costs of non-participation are especially strong vote mobilizers for citizens scoring high on openness who had no other eligible voters living in their home. Weinschenk and Panagopoulos employ a survey experiment design to find that campaign negativity is demobilizing for more agreeable individuals but mobilizing for more extraverted individuals across a variety of campaign behaviors.

Trait aggression is conceptually distinct from each of the Big Five traits, but it overlaps empirically with multiple Big Five dimensions, loading most strongly and negatively on agreeableness and emotional stability, and negatively on extraversion and conscientiousness to a
lesser extent (Bettencourt et al. 2006; Sharpe & Desai, 2001; Tremblay & Ewart, 2005). However, these correlations are about the same size as those between the independent Big Five traits themselves. The observational effects of agreeableness and emotional stability on political participation tend to be null or mixed (Gerber et al., 2013; Mondak et al., 2010).

Evidence from Two Nationally Representative Experiments

To test the conditional effects of violent campaign metaphors on electoral participation, I designed and fielded two nationally representative Internet survey experiments during the 2010 midterm campaigns. Both studies began with items measuring political and social predispositions, including trait aggression and participation motivations, followed by text-based campaign ads for unidentified U.S. House candidates. Participation intentions were assessed shortly after the randomized treatments. In Study 1, subjects viewed one campaign message. In Study 2, subjects viewed two ads for competing candidates, with violent metaphors used by neither candidate, by one candidate or the other, or by both candidates. The designs and results are similar, so I present them together.

Data for Study 1 were collected through Knowledge Networks (now GfK) from July 29 through August 10, 2010, with 512 U.S. general population adults participating (267 men, 245 women; 78% non-Hispanic White; ages: 18 to 91 years, Mean = 47.3, SD = 16.3). Study 2 was also conducted through Knowledge Networks (KN) with 412 U.S. general population adults (207 men, 205 women) between July 2 and July 20, 2010 (77% non-Hispanic White; ages: 18 to 94 years, Mean = 48.6, SD = 16.8). Completion rate among invited panelists was 55% in Study 1 and 68% in Study 2.

Probability-based Internet samples are more representative than phone surveys, even after weighting, and they have less random error and satisficing (Chang & Krosnick, 2009). The
online format also allowed subjects to complete the survey at a time and place of their choosing, which means subjects were exposed to treatments in the same environments where they receive real political messages. In sum, the quality of the sample and the study design provide reasonable grounds for generalizing the experimental findings to the national adult population.

**Operationalizing Violent Campaign Metaphors**

To simulate exposure to violent political metaphors, participants in Study 1 were presented with text from an ostensible TV advertisement for a U.S. House candidate, which contained several mild violent metaphors or non-violent synonyms, randomly assigned. The candidate was not identified by name or party. Texts are presented in Appendix A with bolded words indicating differences across treatments. The text for both versions was drawn from high-profile, real-world speeches but is unlikely to be recognized. The text is non-partisan and the design is realistic, reflecting common political language that is used interchangeably.

In Study 2, participants were presented with text from two ostensible television advertisements for U.S. House candidates, representing both competitors in the race. Each subject read a violent or non-violent ad for Candidate A, and then read a violent or non-violent ad for Candidate B, both randomly assigned. Exposure to violent metaphors is coded 0 when neither message had violent metaphors and is coded 1 when one or both messages had violent metaphors. Alternative coding counting the number of violent ads viewed (i.e. 0, 1, 2) produces similar results (see Online Appendix, Table A5). As in Study 1, both candidates express broad platitudes rather than divisive issue positions, and neither candidate is identified by name or party. Ads in both studies include mobilizing appeals encouraging electoral participation.5

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5 Although care was taken to choose common equivalent language, there may be doubts that the non-violent version lacks comparable strength or “energy”. Study 1 included a 5-point candidate trait evaluation of “forcefulness.” A bivariate OLS regression of violent and non-violent treatment conditions predicting perceived forcefulness of the.
Measuring Participation Intentions

The focus of this study is on voting participation in particular, but I also present results for non-voting participation. Prior studies sometimes find differences in the ingredients driving voting and non-voting participation (Valentino et al. 2011), but I have no a priori expectations for differences regarding voter turnout intentions and other kinds of campaign activity.

Both studies measured midterm voter turnout intention with five-point response scales ranging from “very unlikely” to “very likely”, coded 0 to 1, plus an ineligible option excluded from analysis (Study 1: Mean = .82, SD = .28, N = 499; Study 2: Mean = .80, SD = .30, N = 401). Study 1 included one five-point non-voting participation item that combined the activities of volunteering time and contributing financially to a campaign, coded 0 to 1 (Mean = .24, SD = .27, N = 505). Study 2 included the volunteer/contribute item plus four more activities—posting a yard sign, attending a rally, persuading others who to vote for, and talking about politics in general—which were summed in a 0-1 index (Alpha = .88, Mean = .34, SD = .23, N = 401). Question wording is presented in the Online Appendix; Table A7 there presents models for individual non-voting participation items disaggregated from the index, with similar results.

Participation intentions provide a valid and practical measurement strategy for assessing communication effects on political behavior. Voting intentions before the election strongly predict self-reported voting behavior after the election (Achen and Blais 2010), the predictors for intended and reported behavior are similar in kind and effect size (Achen and Blais 2010), and studying intentions focuses on the psychological processes motivating behavior (Hillygus 2005).

Measuring Trait Aggression

candidate showed no difference ($b = -.01, SE = .02, p = .55, n = 512$). Treatment interactions with trait aggression were similarly non-significant on this outcome ($p > .10$).
Trait aggression is measured with the short form of the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ; Bryant & Smith 2001; Buss and Perry 1992). The BPAQ is the most widely used self-report measure in aggression research, validated as a predictor of aggression and its antecedents in the lab and real life (see Bushman and Wells 1998), and as a moderator of media violence effects (e.g. Bushman 1995). The BPAQ short form used here (BPAQ-SF; 12 items) exhibits excellent psychometric properties that surpass the original BPAQ including internal reliability, test-retest and over-time stability, and convergent and discriminant validity (Bryant and Smith 2001; Harris 1997).

Trait aggression items are presented in the Online Appendix. The order of items in both studies was randomized. For each, subjects were asked to indicate whether the statement is true or false for them on a 6-point scale. The summed responses create reliable indices coded from 0 to 1 (Study 1: $\alpha = .91$; $Mean = .27$; $SD = .19$; Study 2: $\alpha = .92$; $Mean = .28$; $SD = .21$). Figure A2 in the Online Appendix presents trait aggression histograms for both studies. The data collections here are unique in that they measure the important psychological trait of aggressive personality in nationally representative U.S. adult samples for the first time.

**Measuring Participation Motives**

Participation motivations are measured in two ways. In the Online Appendix (Table A4), I estimate partisan strength and external efficacy as moderators in separate models, producing substantively and statistically similar results. In the main text, I combine partisan strength and external efficacy in a single index since both constructs appear to operate empirically in the same way, as would be expected conceptually.

Study 1 includes partisan strength and one external efficacy item on electoral responsiveness. Study 2 has partisan strength and two external efficacy items. In addition to the
electoral responsiveness question, subjects were also asked if officials care about people like them. Party strength items are 4-point folded scales, and the efficacy items have 5-point agree-disagree response options. In both studies, the combined motivation index was rescaled between 0 and 1 (Study 1: Mean = .53, SD = .22, N = 512; Study 2: Mean = .46, SD = .19, N = 412).

As in experiments on political emotions and on priming (e.g. Brader & Valentino 2007; Iyengar & Kinder 1987), the key test is whether the treatment alters coefficients for motivation predicting participation, and whether that effect differs for low-versus high-aggression people.

**Results: Voting Participation**

To review, I expect to see one of two routes to violent metaphor effects: either direct effects of violent metaphors on participation depending on levels of trait aggression or more nuanced effects that alter the impact of participation motives based on trait aggression. For the first set of hypotheses, I estimate OLS models predicting voter turnout intention as a function of exposure to violent metaphors, trait aggression, and the interaction between them.

For the tests involving motives, I estimate OLS models predicting voter turnout intention as a function of exposure to violent metaphors, trait aggression, participation motives, and all two- and three-way interactions between them. Table I presents the results for both studies. OLS models are presented here for greater comparability with subsequent results from additive indices for other forms of participation. Results are substantively the same with ordered probit models (Online Appendix, Tables A1 & A2). There were no consistent net effects of violent metaphors on vote intention or other participation outcomes across due to the heterogeneity of the national population represented in these samples.

[Table I here]
The results for the two-way interaction models for voting show no consistent effects. In contrast, we see consistent estimates in the three-way models involving participation motives. They show that randomized exposure to violent metaphors and trait aggression moderates the weight of participatory motives in voter turnout intentions, as evidenced by significant interactions between the treatment variable, trait aggression, and motives.

Given the difficulty of interpreting two- and three-way interactions, these tests are more comprehensible in graphical form. I present the marginal effects of violent metaphors from the voting model in Figure 1, based on adaptations of code published by Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006). The y-axis indicates the marginal effects of violent metaphors on the impact of motives in turnout decisions across levels of trait aggression (x-axis). In other words, positive effects indicate the increasing impact of motives in turnout decisions, and negative effects show declining influence of motives. The dashed lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.6

Figure 1 provides ample support for the shifting impact of participatory motives in turnout decisions. As the plot illustrates, violent metaphors substantially and significantly increase the influence of participatory motives on turnout intentions among citizens who score high on trait aggression in both studies. In contrast, violent metaphors substantially and significantly decrease the impact of participatory motives in voter turnout decisions among low-aggression citizens in both studies. In other words, a strong partisan would ordinarily be more motivated to vote than a weak partisan. Violent metaphors make the strong partisan even more likely to vote if they are aggressive, but reduce their voting likelihood if low in aggression.

6 Figure A1 in the Online Appendix presents the marginal treatment effects of violent metaphors on voter turnout intentions for both studies at low and high participation motives, with change in turnout as the y-axis effect rather than change in motive impact.
The substantive size of these effects can be seen in comparison to the baseline coefficient for motives in each model among low-aggression citizens: exposure to violent metaphors cut the strong influence of participatory motives down to nothing. Reinforcing effects among high-aggression people are larger still. In sum, hypotheses for the conditional impact of violent metaphors depending on trait aggression levels are resoundingly supported for vote intention.

**Results: Non-Voting Campaign Participation**

Next, I test violent metaphor effects on campaign participation beyond voting, including financial contributions/volunteering, attending a meeting, putting up a campaign sign or wearing a button, persuading others who to vote for, and discussing politics with friends and family during the campaign. This analysis shows the breadth of effects since voting differs from other kinds of campaign (Valentino et al., 2011). Nonetheless, I expect similar violent metaphor effects. Table II presents results from the OLS models predicting the campaign participation index with the same model specifications as Table I.

[Table II here]

These tests for campaign participation strongly resemble voting intention results in Table I, though the substantive size and statistical significance are diminished in comparison. Once again, we see no consistent results until we account for participatory motives in the models. Figure 2 provides a clearer look at the marginal treatment effects, showing the change in impact of participatory motives on participation intentions.

[Figure 2 about here]

As with the results for voter turnout intentions, exposure to violent metaphors substantially increases the impact of participatory motives on non-voting campaign participation
among high-aggression people. These reinforcement patterns are statistically significant in Study 1 and marginally significant in Study 2.

Predictions of motivational disruption among low-aggression people are supported for non-voting campaign participation in Study 1, with large and significant estimates. Study 2 estimates for this group fail to reach marginal significance ($p=.28$). These results suggest that violent metaphor effects extend beyond voter turnout intentions to influence other forms of campaign activity, though perhaps to a lesser extent.

Overall, the results strongly support expectations for voting behavior and for campaign activism. Exposure to violent metaphors generally reinforces the impact of participatory motives in high-aggression citizens but weakens them for low-aggression citizens. The results for high-aggression citizens are strong and significant for vote intentions and non-voting participation. Strong and significant effects in the opposite direction were found for low-aggression citizens in vote intentions but were much weaker for campaign participation.

**Discussion & Conclusion**

How do personality traits condition the effects of campaign messages meant to mobilize voters? With two nationally-representative U.S. survey experiments, I showed that common violent metaphors mobilize or demobilize voters depending on their traits.

I found that the effects of exposure to violent campaign metaphors on voter turnout intentions and other campaign actions depend on aggressive personality traits that resonate (or clash) with the language and participatory motives that direct the effects. Although the balance of violent metaphor effects was neutral in the two national samples – reflecting the diversity of the nation as a whole – the language substantially altered who was more or less likely to participate by shifting the impact of participatory motivations in decisions to act in politics. This
led some citizens to be mobilized while others were demobilized, belying the illusion of no change in the aggregate.

The results support a general model of trait resonance in which violent metaphors reinforce the role of predispositions among high-aggression citizens and disrupt the same predispositions among low-aggression citizens. This conclusion is consistent with other studies on the congruence of messages and personality traits, though the present study is the first to examine this particular language and trait – despite their commonality and importance in everyday life (e.g. Gerber et al. 2013; Kam & Simas 2010; Lavine et al. 2000; Weinschenk & Panagopoulos 2014). More broadly, these findings emphasize the key moderating role of personality in campaign message effects, the power of metaphors, and the surprising role of aggression in political behavior.

**Strategic Communication**

Practitioners would like to direct the participatory effects of violent metaphors, but they may wonder about the practical implications of this research since they are unlikely to have aggression measures for audiences. Additionally, audiences are often addressed as groups rather than individuals. These two factors complicate targeting efforts. Here I describe, how practitioners can seek net effects from violent metaphors to mobilize (or demobilize) individuals and groups based on likely audience traits.

Even without direct measures of trait aggression, communicators can make reasonable inferences about aggression levels in individuals based on other characteristics often known to campaigns. Trait aggression is higher among young adults and people with less education, on average, and aggression is somewhat higher among men than women (Kalmoe 2015). That
means, for example, that a young man without a college education is likely to be substantially more aggressive than an older college-educated woman.

Participation motivations are also vital for directing violent metaphor effects. People who have conspicuously demonstrated their motivation by attending a rally or signing up for campaign emails may be safely classified as high-motivation. Attributes like older age and higher education may help inferences about partisan strength and external efficacy as well (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960; Craig et al. 1990). For individual communications like emails, mail, and door-to-door canvassing, this may be sufficient for targeting messages.

Group audiences are more challenging. As the experiments show, the more diverse the audience, the less likely any net effects will accrue from using violent metaphors. Consequently, broad-audience messages like TV ads that include violent metaphors are unlikely to produce net effects on electoral participation. However, more homogenous groups may be open to mobilizing influence with violent metaphors. As with individuals, average traits can be inferred for groups.

Violent metaphors are likely to mobilize individuals and groups with higher aggression and strong participatory motives. Violent metaphors may also be useful for mobilizing low-aggression, low-motivation people. For all other trait combinations, violent metaphors should be avoided (unless the intention is to demobilize). Unfortunately, these demographic inferences are complicated by the fact that trait aggression is negatively correlated with participation motivations. But that challenge can be reduced if motivations are pinned down with more certainty by demonstrated levels of individual or group commitment to politics.

In sum, conditional violent metaphor effects are important not just for academic understandings of political behavior; they also inform campaigns about opportunities for micro-targeting. Some leaders may already intuit some of these dynamics – particularly by using
more violent language with more aggressive audiences – but the nuanced participatory effects clearly require more careful attention to produce the desired outcomes.

**Limitations & Opportunities**

Of course, these studies include limitations that present opportunities for future research. For example, although the interaction of violent cues and trait aggression is known to produce enthusiasm, anger, and anxiety among different types of people, and while the results here resemble the moderating role of emotions on the political impact of predispositions, these studies did not include direct measures of emotion’s mediating role. It is possible that alternative mediators related to violent cues and trait aggression could explain the connection between randomized exposure to violent metaphors and the participatory effects observed here. Future studies could include both self-reports and physiological measures to more readily identify the cognitive and affective processes at work.

Similar questions may be raised regarding the role of mild violent metaphors. Although the real-world violent and non-violent language is designed to be interchangeable and passes an empirical test for comparable strength, alternative accounts might not be ruled out to the satisfaction of all. Nonetheless, the strong results and the design’s close correspondence to common campaign rhetoric establish the presence of consequential effects, and the theoretical foundation laid here provides a strong explanatory fit for the patterns that emerge in both national experiments.

Future studies could also test the duration of effects and individual differences in real-world message exposure. While effects likely wane with time (Chong and Druckman 2010; Gerber et al. 2011), they may be reinforced with repetition over campaigns. Implications of real-world message exposure also matter for generalizing communication effects (Arceneaux and
Exposure to political messages is greatest among the most motivated citizens (Zaller 1992), and, among this group, the present studies show statistically-significant substantial effects mobilize high-aggression citizens and demobilize those low-aggression citizens across participation types.

**Contributions**

This work identifies important new dynamics of message-based campaign mobilization, advancing participation research on the psychology of political behavior. Given the widespread use of violent metaphors in campaigns, strategists likely employ the language with strategic goals in mind, though they may not fully comprehend its conditional effects.

More broadly, these findings support models of political behavior that theorize interactive effects between fundamental personality traits and features of the political environment (Gerber et al., 2013; Mondak et al., 2010, Stenner, 2005; Weinschenk & Panagopoulos 2014). This article reinforces the moderating role of individual differences in personality in response to messages, and it does so with trait aggression rather than the Big Five traits.

This work also extends recent findings on metaphorical reasoning and metaphorical frames (Bougher 2012; Hartman 2012; Lau and Schlesinger 2005; Schlesinger and Lau 2000) by providing the first test of metaphor effects on political participation. And while other scholars have examined conditional effects of metaphors – particularly related to political sophistication – this work goes farther in identifying individual traits that shape how citizens think and feel about the metaphors they hear, resonating differently across citizens.

Finally, this work breaks new ground by introducing aggression into forms of political behavior that have no obvious ties to aggression. No matter the normative conclusions to be drawn from these findings about violent language in politics, this work reveals new ways of
understanding political behavior through the fundamental behavioral lens of human aggression (Wilson 2004), through the participatory impact of campaign metaphors, and through the critical moderating role of a vital new personality trait in politics research.
References


Table I: Conditional Effects of Violent Metaphors, Trait Aggression, and Participation Motives on Voter Turnout Intentions

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<th>Study 1 Vote Intention</th>
<th>Study 2 Vote Intention</th>
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<td>Trait Aggression</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.11 (.14)</td>
<td>.48^ (.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>.52* (.13)</td>
<td>.97* (.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trait Aggression*</td>
<td>-.82^ (.44)</td>
<td>-1.18^ (.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Violent Metaphors*</td>
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<td>-.98* (.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trait Aggression</td>
<td>-.24 (.16)</td>
<td>-1.06* (.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Violent Metaphors*</td>
<td>-.39* (.19)</td>
<td>-.89* (.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent Metaphors*</td>
<td>1.84* (.61)</td>
<td>1.87* (.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trait Aggression*</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.60* (.08)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.81* (.05)</td>
<td>.35* (.12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.04 496</td>
<td>.13 496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>396 396</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: OLS models for vote intention. Results are equivalent with ordered probit (see Online Appendix), but presented as OLS for consistency with non-voting participation models. “Violent Metaphors” in Study 1 represents the effect of randomized exposure to a single message with violent language (0, 1). In Study 2, the variable represents the randomized effect of exposure to one or more messages with violent language (0, 1). *p < .05, ^p < .10
Table II: Conditional Effects of Violent Metaphors, Trait Aggression, and Participation Motives on Non-Voting Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study 1 Non-Voting Participation (1 item)</th>
<th>Study 2 Non-Voting Participation (5 items)</th>
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<td>Violent Metaphors</td>
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<td>.19 (.11)</td>
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<td>Trait Aggression</td>
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<td>.00 (.11)</td>
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<td>Participation Motivation</td>
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<td>.49* (.19)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-.48 (.28)</td>
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<td>Trait Aggression</td>
<td>-.58^ (.31)</td>
<td>-.14 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent Metaphors*</td>
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<td>-.24 (.22)</td>
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<td>Motivation</td>
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<td>.90 (.60)</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.29* (.04)</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: OLS models for non-voting participation. “Violent Metaphors” in Study 1 represents the effect of randomized exposure to a single message with violent language (0, 1). In Study 2, the variable represents the randomized effect of exposure to one or more messages with violent language (0, 1). * $p < .05$, ^ $p < .10$, two-tailed.
Figure 1: Marginal Effects of Violent Metaphors on the Impact of Motives: Voting

Study 1

Note: Figure shows results from Table I. Y-axis indicates marginal effect of violent metaphors on the change in impact of participatory motives on voting participation intentions at each level of trait aggression (x-axis). Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals. “Violent Metaphors” in Study 1 represents the effect of randomized exposure to a single message with violent language (0, 1). In Study 2, the variable represents the randomized effect of exposure to one or more messages with violent language (0, 1).
Figure 2: Marginal Effects of Violent Metaphors on the Impact of Motives: Non-Voting Participation

Note: Figure shows results from Table II. Y-axis indicates marginal effect of violent metaphors on the change in impact of participatory motives on non-voting participation intentions at each level of trait aggression (x-axis). Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals. “Violent Metaphors” in Study 1 represents the effect of randomized exposure to a single message with violent language (0, 1). In Study 2, the variable represents the randomized effect of exposure to one or more messages with violent language (0, 1).
Appendix A: Experimental Campaign Message Treatments

Study 1

**“Fighting/Working for You**

Americans today are **fighting/struggling** to keep their jobs and their homes. All you ever asked of government is to stand on your side and **fight/stand up** for your future. That’s just what I intend to do. I will **fight/work** hard to get our economy back on track. I will **fight/work** for our children’s future. And I will **fight/work** for justice and opportunity for all. I will always **fight/work** for America’s future, no matter how tough it gets. Join me in this **fight/effort.”**

Study 2

[Candidate A’s Violent and Non-Violent Ad Text]

**“Fighting/Standing Up for America’s Future**

Americans today are **fighting/struggling** to keep their jobs and their homes. All you ever asked of government is to stand on your side and **fight/stand up** for your future. That’s just what I intend to do. I will **fight/work** hard to get our economy back on track. I will **fight/work** for our children’s future. And I will **fight/work** for justice and opportunity for all. I will always **fight/work** for America’s future, no matter how tough it gets. Join me in this **fight/effort.”**

[Candidate B’s Violent and Non-Violent Ad Text]

**“Fighting/Working for You**

For almost 25 years, I’ve been **fighting/working** hard for you. And with your support, I will continue to **fight/work** for you in Washington. In these tough times, we need to **fight for/do** what’s right for our country. That means **fighting/working** hard to ensure equal opportunities for everyone in life. As your representative, I promise to **fight/work** for all the people, not the powerful interests. But I can’t win this **battle/race** without your help. Together, we can build a better future.”

Note: key treatment text is bolded here for emphasis, but was not distinguished in treatment text viewed by participants.