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The Persuasive Power of Political Metaphors

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Abstract

Political discourse is saturated with messages that frame sociopolitical issues using metaphor. For example, the newspaper headline “the economy struggles against headwinds” compares a complex system to a sailboat, and the blog quote “the proposal was torn down brick-by-brick” compares a policy to a building. Are such metaphoric framings interpreted simply as colorful figures of speech, or do they impact observers’ political attitudes and behavior? Emerging lines of research in social psychology address this question using conceptual metaphor theory, which posits that metaphor is a cognitive mechanism that people use to understand (not just talk about) abstract concepts in terms of superficially unrelated, more concrete concepts. Accordingly, studies show that exposure to metaphoric framings changes observers’ attitudes toward target issues in line with their knowledge of the messages’ concrete concepts, and highlights conditions under which these effects occur. This chapter reviews this work and charts the course for future research.

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The Persuasive Power of Political Metaphors

Imagine reading in a newspaper article that the U.S. economy is “struggling against stiff headwinds” but it has not yet “fallen off a cliff” (Mutikani, 2011). You will most likely interpret these phrases effortlessly despite the fact that they do not make sense in literal terms: the economy does not literally struggle against headwinds, like a sailboat, nor can it fall off a cliff. This is an example of a *metaphoric framing*: a communication comparing (e.g., by means of words, phrases, or images) an abstract concept to a superficially unrelated, more concrete concept.

Metaphoric framings pervade public discourse (e.g., magazine editorials, political speeches) surrounding such controversial sociopolitical issues as terrorism (Kruglanski et al., 2007), immigration (O’Brien, 2003), and war (Lakoff, 1991). To mention just a few examples, leaders such as Martin Luther King, Winston Churchill, and Barack Obama have attempted to rally civic action by describing a physical journey toward a state of the nation as egalitarian, prosperous, or victorious over evil (Charteris-Black, 2011); Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke compared the central bank’s efforts to keep its controversial stimulus program from failing to vehicle operation: “If the...economy is able to sustain a reasonable cruising speed, we will ease the pressure on the accelerator by gradually reducing the pace of purchases” (Hargreaves, 2013); and Al Gore compared reliance on fossil fuels to a drug addiction: “Junkies find veins in their toes when their arms and legs go out. We are now at a point where we are going after dangerous and dirty fuels” (Sheppard 2013).

Metaphoric framings are commonly expressed in other modes of communication besides written and spoken language. Consider the symbolic meaning of the Statue of Liberty. She is postured to be taking a bold step forward and she bears a torch. Why? Two metaphors are

working in concert to represent historical change as *movement* from a state of ignorance – or *darkness* – to a state of knowledge, or *enlightenment*. Metaphoric framings are also expressed in pictorial mode. A sample of political cartoons reproduced in Figure 1 compares the economy to a wide range of unrelated things: an animal, a vehicle, a pill, a cornucopia, a building, and a disease.

The ubiquity of metaphoric framings in political discourse raises an important question: Do observers dismiss these communications simply as ornamental figures of speech and symbolic tropes, or do these communications influence how observers understand and evaluate political issues? Conceptual metaphor theory suggests a provocative answer to this question. It posits that exposure to a metaphoric framing can activate a systematic mapping between the target issue and the concrete concept to which it is compared. Consequently, observers use their knowledge of the concrete concept as a framework for interpreting and evaluating the issue, despite the fact that these concepts are superficially unrelated to each other.

The next section elaborates on the theoretical background behind this broad hypothesis. We then review supporting evidence before discussing future research directions and practical implications of this emerging body of research.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Metaphor is commonly known as a figure of speech through which we describe one thing in terms of another. When Romeo says “Juliet is the sun,” he cannot *really* mean that she is a giant spherical mass of hot plasma. Most of us are taught in grade school that metaphor is a colorful but essentially useless embellishment to ‘normal’ or even ‘proper’ language, and that it is the special province of poets and other literary elites. But that is incorrect. English speakers

utter about one metaphor for every ten to twenty-five words, or about six metaphors a minute (Geary, 2011).

But does metaphor's ubiquity in language tell us anything about how people think? Although some theorists claim that metaphoric expressions are simply idiomatic figures of speech (Haser, 2005; McGlone, 2007; Pinker, 2007), there is a long philosophical tradition maintaining that metaphor is fundamental to human thought (Gibbs, 1994). On this view, people communicate metaphorically because they think metaphorically. This proposal has become prominent in the last thirty years with the rise of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) starting with the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By* (for an introductory overview, see Kövecses, 2010).

CMT posits that a metaphor consists of two superficially dissimilar concepts, one of which is understood in terms of the other. The concept that people try to understand – called the *target* – is typically complex or abstract, referring to outcomes and causal relations that cannot be observed with the senses. The concept people use to understand the target – the *source* – is relatively more concrete, referring to familiar perceptual experiences and well-known causal relations.

What does it mean to think about a target in terms of a source? According to CMT, metaphor operates as a *conceptual mapping*, defined as a systematic set of associations between aspects of the target (i.e., its features, properties, and relations) and analogous aspects of the source. By means of this mapping, metaphor use enables people to access their knowledge of the source as a framework for interpreting and evaluating analogous aspects of the target. To illustrate, consider the metaphor *civil rights is a journey*, which featured prominently in Martin Luther King's political speeches (Charteris-Black, 2011). According to CMT, establishing this

mapping (depicted in Figure 2) allows people to use their knowledge of journeys to inform how they think and feel about civil rights. For example, they can represent the civil rights “movement” as having a *starting point* (predecessors’ pioneering efforts) and an intended *destination* (an egalitarian society), and as *stalling* or *moving* in the wrong *direction* (failed civil rights legislation). Conceptual mappings may also guide behavior. For example, people generally know that a person on a journey usually has to pass over difficult terrain to reach a destination. Understanding civil rights as a journey may therefore prepare people to endure hardships as *steps* necessary to *reach* their political goals.

In short, the transfer of knowledge across a metaphor’s mapping highlights some aspects of the target and conceals or diverts attention away from other aspects. A corollary claim is that thinking about the same target in terms of a different source, or without the use of metaphor, will highlight and downplay different aspects of the target. To illustrate, thinking about a slum community metaphorically as a ‘diseased’ area may transfer knowledge that diseased tissue must be either treated or excised, implying that the correct response is to destroy the slums and replace them with different residential neighborhoods. But conceiving of slums as withering plants may downplay that destructive response and even promote efforts to help the community ‘grow’ and ‘blossom’ (Schön, 1993).

Emerging lines of research in social psychology provide evidence for the vitally important role played by metaphor in the way people understand and process sociopolitical issues, among other abstract social concepts (Landau, Meier, & Keefer, 2010; Landau, Robinson, & Meier, 2013). In this chapter we limit our review of this work to those studies that experimentally activate metaphor use by exposing observers to a metaphoric framing of a target issue.

Metaphoric Framing Exposure Prompts Metaphor Use: Consequences for Political Attitudes

How can we test CMT's claim that metaphor structures cognition by creating a systematic mapping between analogous aspects of a target and a source? Some researchers have reasoned that if exposure to a metaphoric framing comparing even one aspect of a target to an aspect of a source activates a metaphor in observers' minds, it should trigger a cascade of other associations entailed by that metaphor. This will lead observers to draw on their knowledge of the source to interpret and evaluate aspects of the target – *even those which are not explicitly described in the original communication* (for a detailed discussion of this broad hypothesis, see Ottati & Renstrom, 2010; Ottati, Renstrom, & Price, 2013).

To illustrate this reasoning, imagine that people hear on TV that a military engagement in Afghanistan “upped the ante.” By comparing an element of military conflict to an element of games requiring bets (e.g., poker), this metaphoric framing may activate related associations between the concepts *military operation* and *games*. In this way, the message can shape observers' attitudes toward other aspects of the war. For instance, since people generally know that in games the party with the most points wins, they may infer that the United States' invasion of Afghanistan was a successful military operation insofar as the U.S. military accrued more “points” (i.e., enemy casualties) than the Taliban resistance, even though the original communication did not explicitly describe what constitutes a successful military operation (Boettcher & Cobb, 2006; Lakoff, 1991). If the message had compared the battle to another source, such as a chapter in a story, or described it without using metaphor, observers may be less likely to gauge military success in such quantifiable terms.

Empirical support for this reasoning comes from studies showing that even brief exposure to a metaphoric framing prompts observers to make inferences about sociopolitical issues based on their source knowledge. In one study, Morris and colleagues (2007) reasoned that because people generally know that living things move with intention toward destinations, participants exposed to a message comparing stock market trends to living agents (e.g., “the NASDAQ started *climbing* upward”) would infer that those trends would continue along their current trajectory the following day, whereas those exposed to a message comparing those trends to an inanimate object (e.g., “the NASDAQ was *swept* upward”) would not make this inference. This is exactly what they found.

Researchers have also examined metaphoric influences on problem solving (Gick & Holyoak, 1980; Gilovich, 1981). People often recognize dissatisfactory states of affairs and want to change or improve them, but they may not clearly see how that gap can be bridged. They can use metaphor to map that abstract problem onto a superficially unrelated problem that is relatively more concrete and familiar. This mapping highlights which features of the problem are most important, which actions to take toward the abstract problem, and how to forecast the potential effects of the actions on the goals. Based on this reasoning we can hypothesize that that exposure to a metaphoric framing of a target problem will incline observers to prefer solutions that are consistent with their knowledge of the metaphor’s source.

A series of studies by Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) supports this hypothesis. They asked participants to think about a city with a serious crime problem. For some participants, crime was subtly described as a “beast” that was “preying upon” the innocent citizens of the town, while for other participants it was described as a “disease” that “plagued” the town. Participants exposed to the *wild animal* framing of crime were more likely to generate solutions

based on increased enforcement (e.g., calling in the National Guard; imposing harsher penalties). In contrast, participants exposed to the *virus* framing strongly preferred solutions that were more diagnostic and reform-oriented (e.g., finding the root cause of the crime wave; improving the economy). In other words, the solutions that participants generated to solve the crime problem were consistent with the metaphoric framings they were provided: if crime is a beast, it must be ‘controlled,’ but if it is a disease, then it must be ‘treated.’

Examining Mechanism: Stronger Evidence for Metaphoric Transfer

The studies just reviewed show that exposure to even subtle metaphoric framings leads observers to think about a sociopolitical issue in terms of unrelated or even irrelevant source concepts. Taken as a whole, this work suggests that widespread metaphoric framings have powerful but largely unrecognized consequences for political attitudes. Note, though, that these studies rely on an empirical strategy that assesses metaphor use somewhat indirectly: Researchers manipulate exposure to a metaphoric framing and measure whether target attitudes change in the direction of what is presumed to be commonplace knowledge of the source. For example, Morris et al. (2007) presupposed that study participants know that living agents normally move along a trajectory. Similarly, Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) assumed that people know that treating disease requires identifying root causes. One next empirical step, then, is to directly test whether exposure to metaphoric framing prompts transfer of source knowledge to process the target. Another is to go beyond the study of main effects to model the conditions under which metaphor exposure is likely to influence political attitudes. Next we summarize our efforts to achieve these goals.

Measure source knowledge. Rather than assume invariant source knowledge on the part of observers, researchers can measure individual differences in that knowledge. In this way

researchers can predict that, following metaphoric framing exposure, differences in observers' source knowledge will predict analogous differences in their target attitudes.

In a study testing this reasoning, we (Landau, Rothschild, & Keefer, 2013) examined a conventional metaphor comparing system failure to a vehicle accident, which is reflected in common expressions such as "the economy is *veering off course*" and "student senate is *headed for a ditch*." Vehicle accidents, we assumed at first, are generally understood to be the fault of the vehicle's driver. We predicted that exposure to a metaphoric framing comparing a system failure to a vehicle accident would support the judgment that, just as drivers often bear considerable responsibility for vehicle accidents, blame for the system failure lies primarily with the highest-ranking individual in charge of that system – that is, the person in the 'driver's seat.' Our guiding analysis suggests that this effect should occur even if the question of who is to blame for the system failure is *not* explicitly addressed in the original communication.

However, people differ in how much they blame drivers for vehicle accidents, and these differences should predict blaming of the system's leader. Accordingly, we first had participants read a news story about a vehicle accident and then indicate how responsible the vehicle's driver was for causing the accident and the resulting damage. We then sought to establish discriminant validity of this predictor. If metaphoric framing exposure maps a target on a particular source, then it should lead participants to base target attitudes on their knowledge of that source, specifically, but not on related concepts. We therefore measured how much participants blamed a home resident for causing a fire. Although the vehicle wreck and fire were both described as unforeseen and destructive accidents, we did not expect resident blame perceptions to predict system failure blame following a vehicle-metaphoric framing of the target issue.

We then had participants read a brief news report on the bankruptcy of a (hypothetical) computer software company, labeled Micro-Processing Inc., and the resulting unemployment and stockholder losses. Critically, this report contained no information about the cause of the company's failure. Then, half of the participants read "Many people have drawn an analogy between the bankruptcy of Micro-Processing Inc. and an automobile accident." The other participants read "Many people have described the bankruptcy of Micro-Processing Inc. as a negative event that had an array of harmful consequences."

All participants then indicated how much they blamed the company's failure on its CEO, its employees, and the conditions of the national economy at the time. As predicted, the degree to which participants blamed a driver for a vehicle accident positively predicted how much they blamed the company's CEO, but only after exposure to the vehicle metaphoric framing of the company's failure. Also as predicted, driver blame perceptions were unrelated to participants' willingness to blame the company's employees or economic conditions regardless of the framing provided, suggesting that the vehicle metaphor highlighted the responsibility of the system's leader, and did not simply increase a general tendency to assign blame. Supporting our prediction that the effect was specific to knowledge of vehicle accidents per se, and not just any accident, we observed no association between resident blame perceptions and CEO blame, again regardless of the framing provided.

It is just as important to note that when the vehicle metaphor was not primed, driver blame perceptions did not predict CEO blame. This shows that when a metaphor is not activated, people do not use source knowledge to judge a target: vehicle accidents and a software company going bankrupt remained unrelated events in participants' minds.

Manipulate source knowledge. In addition to measuring variations in source knowledge, researchers can observe how manipulated changes in source knowledge and experience interact with metaphoric framing to influence target processing. We examined this possibility in the context of attitudes toward immigration (Landau et al., 2009). We based our hypotheses on evidence that anti-immigration rhetoric in the early 20th century viewed the nation as analogous to a physical body vulnerable to corruption by invading sub-groups (O'Brien, 2003). Do people occasionally transfer their motivation to protect their *own* bodies from contamination to conceptualize this complex sociopolitical issue?

To find out, we manipulated contamination threat by priming participants to view airborne bacteria in their environment as either harmful to their physical health or innocuous. Participants – all American citizens – then read an ostensibly unrelated essay describing the United States. For half the participants, the essay contained statements subtly comparing the United States to a body (e.g., the “The U.S. experienced a *growth spurt*”); for the other participants, those statements were replaced with literal paraphrases (“The U.S. experienced a *period of innovation*”). We then assessed immigration attitudes. As predicted, heightening the threat of bodily contamination caused participants to hold more negative attitudes toward immigration into the U.S., but only if they were additionally primed to think of the U.S. as a physical body.

This finding provides strong evidence that metaphoric framings influence political attitudes by prompting people to transfer their knowledge of the source to interpret the target issue. If this effect were simply due to semantic or affective priming, we would have expected only a main effect of contamination threat, such that the mere salience of harmful bacteria would have increased opposition to immigration. The fact that contamination threat interacted with

metaphoric framing exposure suggests, instead, that a body-metaphoric framing of the country prompted participants to draw on their bodily experience to form immigration attitudes.

Moderation by epistemic benefit. A limitation of prior metaphor research is that it lacks an account of when metaphoric framing exposure influences target processing. To clarify, metaphoric framings are ubiquitous in public discourse, yet attitudes have a degree of relative stability across time and situations. It is therefore unlikely that metaphoric framing exposure inevitably influences attitudes. To predict when the effect will occur, we need an account of the situational variables that increase people's reliance on conceptual metaphor.

CMT provides just such an account, proposing that metaphor use serves an epistemic function: it satisfies people's motivation to gain a confident grasp of a concept that they find otherwise abstract and uncertain. This suggests that when people feel uncertain about a target, and they encounter a metaphoric framing, they should hungrily draw on their source knowledge to interpret and evaluate the target; but if they are not particularly uncertain about the target, they should be less motivated to use metaphor and thus less likely to show source-consistent target attitudes.

To test this idea, we (Landau et al., 2013) had study participants first take a quiz assessing their knowledge of corporate bankruptcy. For half of our participants, this quiz was designed to induce feelings of uncertainty by asking questions that only the most knowledgeable bankruptcy lawyers or economists would know (e.g., "In the first five months of 2012, large corporations filing for bankruptcy laid off how many employees? a. 20,170; b. 32,500; c. 48,922; d. 65,003; e. Not sure/Uncertain"); for the other participants, this quiz was designed to be very simple (e.g., "When large corporations go bankrupt, national unemployment rates generally: increase/decrease/stay the same").

Then, using the procedure discussed earlier, participants read about the bankruptcy of Micro-Processing Inc. and were randomly assigned to read a statement comparing the bankruptcy to a vehicle accident or describing it without metaphor. As the metaphor would suggest, people who read the vehicle-metaphoric framing (vs. non-metaphoric framing) were more likely to hold the company's CEO accountable for the bankruptcy, but this effect occurred only for participants primed to feel uncertain about the nature of corporate bankruptcy. In contrast, participants who took the easy quiz felt more confident in their knowledge of bankruptcy, and thus did not rely on the vehicle metaphor to form their attitudes about who was to blame for the company's failure.

In a related line of studies, we have found that the degree to which metaphor use helps people to grasp an abstract concept predicts how much they bring their attitudes in line with that metaphor. In one study, participants read an article arguing for the importance of balancing the federal budget. In one condition, the article contained expressions that compared the federal budget to a household budget (e.g., "We're all familiar with paychecks, bills, and other parts of a household budget, and we can understand the federal budget using the same ideas."). In the other condition, the same essential statements were made without using metaphor.

Next participants rated how much the article they read helped them to gain a clear understanding of the federal budget. Finally, they were asked how much they support cuts to various federal programs, including the Department of Education and Social Security. We reasoned that participants exposed to the metaphoric framing would transfer knowledge that, in a well-operating household, families try to live within their means. As a result, they would be more in favor of cutting spending than those who read the non-metaphoric article. This is exactly what we found. More importantly, though, the effect of the metaphoric article on attitudes was due

specifically to its perceived epistemic benefit: the more participants felt the article helped them understand the budget, the more they aligned their attitudes toward the implications of that metaphor.

Theoretical Implications

Taken together, the studies reviewed above provide a unique insight into the cognitive mechanisms underlying political attitudes. Mainstream perspectives in attitude theory assume that people base their attitudes toward a social stimulus on knowledge structures that have a relatively obvious bearing on that stimulus (Greenwald, Brock, & Ostrom, 1968). People's attitudes toward *crime*, for example, are assumed to be based merely on accumulated knowledge about crime. Despite its intuitive appeal and ample empirical support, this account may be incomplete. Metaphor research supplements it by showing that, as people attempt to form attitudes about abstract sociopolitical issues, they sometimes rely on metaphor to conceptualize them in terms of *different types* of stimuli which are easier to grasp. *Crime* and *aggressive animals*, for example, share few similarities at a surface level, yet knowledge of aggressive animals offers a mental scaffold for interpreting and evaluating analogous, but more nebulous, aspects of crime.

Future Directions for Studying Metaphor's Persuasive Power

Future research on metaphor's persuasive influence should further consider the role of *message*, *source*, and *audience* characteristics that may play an important role.

Message. While metaphor is pervasive in political discourse, it is not the only rhetorical strategy used in political communication to arouse audience interest or change people's hearts and minds. Other strategies include narratives, analogies, anecdotes, rhetorical questions, Biblical or literary allusions, and modes of discourse such as irony and sarcasm. We have

isolated metaphor for the purpose of studying its persuasive impact, but future research should examine the interplay between metaphor and other rhetorical strategies.

According to Charteris-Black (2011), using various strategies in combination is especially persuasive because it conceals the contribution of any single strategy, and thus avoids alerting the audience's reactance to being manipulated or exploited. For example, systems of metaphors can be integrated into overarching narratives to enhance persuasive impact. Charteris-Black gives the example of Winston Churchill's World War II public addresses, which interwove metaphors and narrative to dramatically portray the United Kingdom and its allies as locked in a mythic battle of Good and Evil – a narrative that strengthened national unity and stoked patriotic fervor. Future laboratory research could assess the effectiveness of more complex forms of persuasion by testing whether metaphor is more effective when it acts in combination with other rhetorical strategies rather than in isolation.

Source. Yet we also know that a persuasive communication's efficacy depends on factors such as the perceived credibility and attractiveness of the communicator. How does metaphor interact with these factors? Imagine, for example, that people are presented with a metaphor that makes political actions and situations intelligible and in a way that fits their previous experience and assumptions about how the world works, but is delivered by an unattractive or untrustworthy communicator. People may employ the metaphor regardless, or they might dismiss it despite the epistemic benefits it provides.

Audience. Recall how, in Landau et al.'s (2013) study reviewed earlier, the persuasive power of a metaphoric framing was moderated by the observers' motivation to reduce uncertainty about an abstract issue. Future research should model other candidate attributes of an audience that may enhance or attenuate metaphor's persuasive impact. As our work suggests,

idiosyncratic differences in source knowledge based on experience or environment, for example, may result in different interpretations of the same metaphoric communication.

But perhaps more interesting for our purposes is the possibility that other cognitive processes may play a role in metaphor processing. For example, individual differences in the ability to map abstract metaphors may moderate their effectiveness. Metaphors that seem difficult for a person to map are unlikely to induce change in attitudes, whereas more creative, motivated, or receptive audiences may work through a difficult metaphor to form the systematic associations intended by a communicator, or perhaps others which were unintended.

Practical Implications

As we noted earlier, metaphoric framings are commonly used in public discourse to communicate about issues that affect people's lives, such as the *economy* and *war*. They can be found in campaign slogans, consumer advertisements, news reports, educational materials, and the courtroom. Research is beginning to show that these communications are more than colorful figures of speech or imagistic tropes; instead, they lead people to recruit their knowledge of a source to interpret and evaluate a target issue, even though the two concepts are unrelated at a surface level. This suggests that these widespread communications have powerful but largely unacknowledged consequences for political attitudes. For one, exposure to a metaphoric framing can bias people's attitudes toward abstract issues by leading them to base their attitudes on knowledge of irrelevant yet familiar concrete concepts, without due consideration of the unique attributes of target issues.

In addition to changing what people believe, metaphor use may create rigidity in attitudes. This is because metaphor transfers not only bits of knowledge from a concrete concept to an abstract concept; it can also transfer the sheer self-evident nature of one's knowledge about

the concrete concept. When people use that concrete knowledge as a framework for making sense of an abstract issue, they may be equally confident that their attitudes toward that issue are correct. To illustrate, it is obviously true that an infant requires constant care to survive and thrive. So what happens when people encounter a message that metaphorically frames the handling of the national economy in terms of infant care (e.g., a claim that we must “nurture” developing businesses)? We’ve already alluded to the possibility that people will transfer knowledge of infant care to make sense of the economy, perhaps forming the attitude that the economy needs federal oversight to operate properly. Here we are adding a more subtle point: that the attitudes they form about the economy using that metaphor will feel just as obvious, just as self-evident, as their beliefs and attitudes about what infants need to survive. Indeed our ongoing research (reviewed above) finds that metaphors inspire exactly this confidence in understanding.

The practical implication is that interventions designed to reduce bias in attitudes should pay particular attention to the metaphors individuals and groups use to frame discourse (a project already begun; see exemplary investigations by Kruglanski et al., 2007; Lakoff, 1991; 2004). Indeed, some metaphors are so conventional (e.g., due to repeated media exposure) that recipients may not immediately recognize them as metaphors. They may interpret them instead as simply the conventional way of talking about a political issue. Thus, perhaps the first step in increasing the public’s consciousness of metaphor’s persuasive pull would be to educate them on what a metaphor is, and what it is not. For example, at least since U.S. president Richard Nixon declared a “war on drugs” in 1971, discourse surrounding illegal drug regulation, pollution, cancer, and other societal problems has consistently drawn on elements of military combat.

Individuals fed a steady diet of these metaphors may fail to fully appreciate that such messages are, in fact, metaphoric, and may offer a partial or skewed picture of the issue at hand.

The last thing we should do, however, is call for a moratorium on metaphor use.

Metaphor can be very helpful for wrapping one's head around complex or abstract issues in public policy. For example, children who are just learning about the federal budget may find it very helpful to think about it metaphorically in terms of familiar notions such as a weekly allowance, saving up for a big toy, and so on.

Indeed, perhaps the most interesting aspect of metaphor's political significance is that it plays a role at both ends of the continuum of ideological flexibility. On the one hand it gives people a concrete grasp of an abstract issue by grounding it in something more familiar and well-understood. And, once in place, it may infuse attitudes toward that issue with a subjective confidence that makes them highly resistant to change. On the other hand, people turn to poets, philosophers, and analysts for novel metaphors that shed new light on abstract social issues. Rather than banning metaphors from political discourse, then, we need to be alert to when metaphor is used to reinforce and defend conclusions and ideologies that one already prefers and when it is used to generate new perspectives on persistent problems.

Furthermore, awareness of metaphor's effect on political attitudes can offer insight on divisive and seemingly intractable political conflicts. While more liberal groups may see important programs like unemployment and healthcare as a *safety net*, counter messages from conservatives often frame such programs as *hand-outs* (for more examples, see Lakoff, 1996). It does not take much to recognize the very different entailments of these metaphoric understandings: for example, a *safety net* is necessary to prevent serious harm, whereas a *hand-out* is not. By relying on metaphoric understandings with divergent entailments, it is no surprise

that political parties often become mired in partisanship and gridlock. A common discourse capable of transcending the simple entailments of a group's chosen metaphor is an important prerequisite for cooperation between competing groups.

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Figure 1

Political cartoons metaphorically frame the economy in terms of various concrete concepts

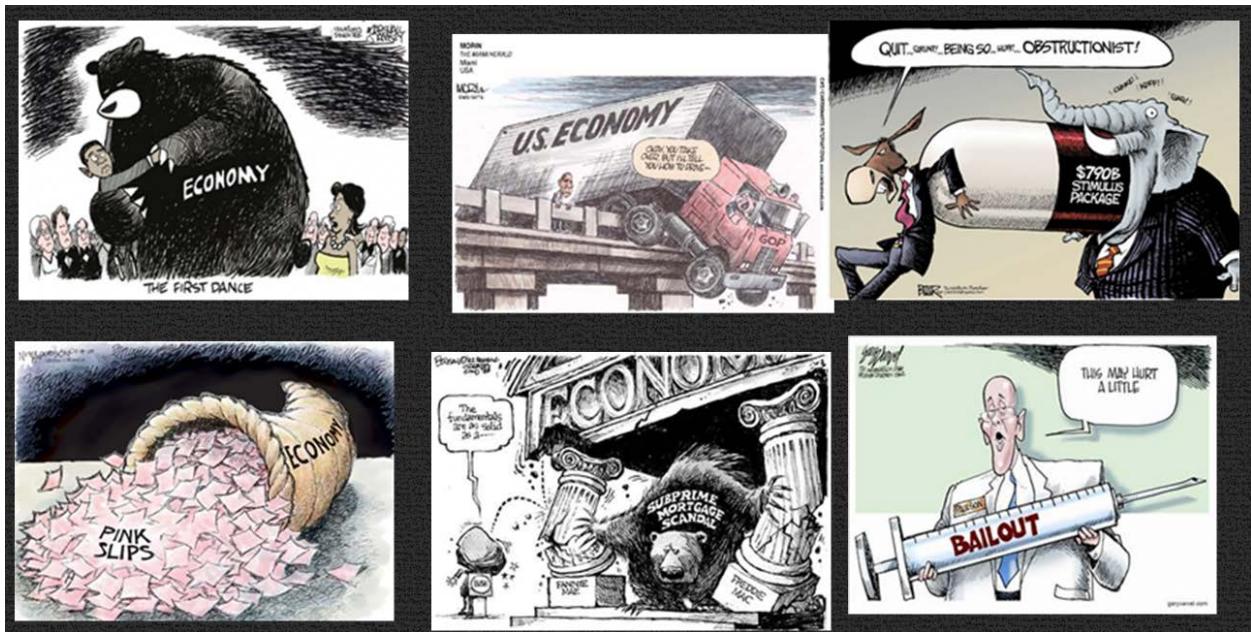


Figure 2

Graphical depiction of a portion of the conceptual mapping created by the metaphor *civil rights is a journey*

