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Violence Metaphors in Presidential Debates

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Abstract: In an election year, political messaging can become feisty or even violent. In the 2012 U.S. presidential election, Americans were inundated with statements that metaphorically referred to violence, such as “Romney slams Obama” and “Romney slaughtered Obama.” Such expressions grab our attention and resonate with our understanding of actual physical violence. Despite their frequent use in election discourse, little is known about how such messages affect voters. Here we report the results of a novel experiment that examines how varying degree of violence in these metaphors influences inferences people make about politicians and election outcomes. Our results indicate that participants perceive candidates differently depending on degree of violence in descriptions of their performance in presidential debates. The results are informative and valuable because they shed new light on how framing works in election messages, especially how varying source domain information can lead to notable differences in reasoning.