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Evaluating the Utility of Metaphors for Explaining Citizens' Political Cognitions

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Abstract

Research on metaphor's role in politics has thus far focused predominately on metaphors used by the political elite. While these metaphors are important, they provide limited insight on metaphor's capacity as a reasoning tool for citizens. Metaphor as a cognitive mechanism enables citizens to make sense of the political world by drawing from previous knowledge and experience in nonpolitical domains. Because metaphors shape and constrain understanding by framing it within existing knowledge structures, they generate important predispositions. As a result, the study of metaphor offers an opportunity to enrich our descriptive understanding of the political cognition of citizens. The implicit nature of metaphorical reasoning means that empirical investigation will be a challenge for future research, but previous studies on metaphor suggest some productive avenues. Metaphor offers not only the chance to better explain how citizens view the political world and why they hold the preferences they do, but its criteria and processes also hold wider relevance for political psychology research.

Keywords: Cognition, Elite, Heuristic, Metaphor, Political

I. Introduction

How do citizens make political decisions and why do they hold the preferences they do? These are fundamental questions in the field of political psychology. Citizens are a particularly interesting focal point in research because they can vary widely in how much they know or even care about politics. While a full review is outside the scope of this article, it is commonly recognized that citizens often rely on cognitive heuristics (or shortcuts) to guide their political decisions (e.g., Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). Using what Popkin (1991) aptly termed “low-information rationality,” citizens navigate the political domain by drawing from simplified information shortcuts and rules of thumbs to substitute for full information. More than anything, research on heuristics has enriched the field's descriptive understanding of how citizens actually make political decisions (see, e.g., Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Lupia, McCubbins, & Popkin, 2000).

It is argued in this article that metaphor is a heuristic device that merits greater attention in future research. How citizens make decisions depends in no small part on how they come to understand the political world. Metaphors shape and constrain understanding by framing it within previous knowledge structures. Research has not fully explored metaphor's capacity as a reasoning tool for citizens. Instead, this capacity has been understated by a

disproportionate focus on metaphors found in elite discourse. As will be reviewed, the study of metaphor in political cognition offers the opportunity to better understand how citizens view and interpret the political world. This study requires a move away from elite discourse as the primary source of data, and the implicit nature of metaphorical reasoning requires methods that extend beyond citizen discourse. The criteria and processes behind metaphorical reasoning offer not only the chance to further enrich descriptive accounts of civic cognition, but they also hold relevance and implications for other topics within political psychology.

2. Heuristics and Analogies

To begin, metaphor is a heuristic device because it represents a form of analogical reasoning, which itself involves heuristic processing. In order to understand how citizens make sense of the political world, it is instructive to consider how they make decisions in other realms of life. After all, “it is only reasonable to assume that people will apply to politics the same information shortcuts they have learned to use throughout life” (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001, p. 952). One of the greatest resources individuals have to help them understand the world, in general, is to draw from what they already know. This “intelligent transfer of knowledge” (Holyoak & Thagard, 1995), whereby previous knowledge is applied to new situations, forms the basis of analogical reasoning. At its most basic level, analogical reasoning involves the adoption of a familiar source or experience to serve as a base analog that is then mapped onto an unfamiliar target analog; inferences are drawn from the source in order to fill gaps in knowledge about the target (e.g., Gentner, 1983; Gentner, Bowdle, Wolff, & Boronat, 2001; Holyoak & Thagard, 1995). In this manner, people make sense of the unfamiliar by tapping into the familiar (Sternberg, 1977).

The most researched application of analogical reasoning in political science has been on how the political elite employ historical analogies when reasoning in the realm of foreign policy (for an overview, see Mintz & DeRouen, 2010, pp. 103–114). More recent work has examined, for example, the elite characteristics that influence the usage of historical analogies (Dyson & Preston, 2006), and how additional frameworks, such as complexity theory, can help overcome some of the drawbacks that accompany analogical reasoning (Marcus & Sheaffer, 2009). Houghton (1998) once observed that research on the application of analogy in the domestic realm was not nearly as extensive as that on foreign policy, but scholarly examples explicitly recognizing the role of analogy in domestic policy do exist (see, e.g., Houghton, 1998; Neustadt & May, 1986); and studies on “policy transfer” (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). What all of these studies have shared—whether they involved foreign or domestic policy, implicit or explicit uses of analogy—is an exclusive focus on the decision making of the political elite, not citizens who make up the electorate. It is citizens, though, for whom politics will be the least familiar and who, therefore, may rely more heavily on analogical reasoning to guide their decisions.

Analogies can be effective problem-solving tools because they involve a transfer of knowledge from within the same domain. This means that they can provide specific guidance on how to deal with novel situations. For example, if a voter uses his past vote as an analogous source for his current vote, the past vote can contain clear instructions for how to vote again this time, whether it is for the same candidate or the same party. While analogy's role in the heuristics citizens commonly employ in politics could be more fully recognized, an even richer area that merits deeper investigation in future research is analogy's cousin, metaphor. The same cognitive processes underlie both analogy and metaphor (Gentner et al., 2001), but metaphors involve a transfer of knowledge across domains.

3. Political Cognition and Metaphors

Metaphor is a central component of human cognition (Gentner, 2003; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989) and is ubiquitous in everyday life (see, e.g., Geary, 2011). Contemporary research continues to consider its role as “a central cognitive process for abstract conceptualization and reasoning” (Johnson, 2010, p. 412). Researchers themselves have used metaphor as a cognitive tool to understand a number of topics, including, but certainly not limited to, politics (e.g., Carver & Pikalo, 2008), societies (Rigney, 2001), policy issues (Dodge, 2008), and decision making (Newell & Bröder, 2008; Tetlock, 2002). Because metaphor is

a form of analogical reasoning, it is instrumental for abstract learning and causal understanding (Gentner & Colhoun, 2010; Colhoun & Gentner, 2009, respectively).

The more abstract, complex, or unfamiliar the topic, the more likely metaphorical reasoning will be employed. For these reasons, metaphor is likely to figure prominently in the political cognition of citizens. Its prospects for filling gaps in political knowledge while offering a relatively nontaxing cognitive procedure make metaphor a particularly alluring object to study. Metaphor provides a mechanism that clarifies how previous knowledge and experience in nonpolitical domains can both structure and constrain how citizens view the political world. Identifying the metaphors that shape the publics' understanding of political issues can help further elucidate why citizens hold the preferences they do and indicate which they are likely to hold in the future—even if those preferences or the reasons behind them are outside of citizen awareness.

In contrast to its theoretical appeal, there has been relatively little empirical research on how citizens use metaphors to make sense of politics. The search for heuristics has particularly been confined to the political domain, with partisanship and ideology receiving the most attention (Popkin & Dimock, 2000). When research has examined metaphor's role in politics, the predominant focus has been on metaphors used by the political elite (e.g., Charteris-Black, 2005; Chilton, 2004; Musolff, 2004; Okulska & Cap, 2010). And even then, the amount of literature has only just recently started to "[reflect] the importance of the subject" (De Landtsheer, 2009, p. 60).

3.1 Communicative vs. Conceptual Metaphors

The failure to adopt a methodological framework that adequately acknowledges metaphor's varied functions has further delayed research on civic applications of metaphor. Steen (2008) has identified three functions of metaphors: linguistic (naming), conceptual (framing), and communicative (perspective changing). These three functions are represented by metaphors in language, thought, and communication, respectively. The three types of metaphor are not mutually exclusive, but they also do not correspond one-to-one. For example, metaphors in communication do not always represent metaphors in thought, and vice versa.

The particular distinction between metaphors in thought and metaphors in communication helps clarify that citizens are not passive recipients who simply accept the metaphors presented to them by politicians and the media. Elite communication can contain metaphors that citizens do not integrate into their political reasoning; it can also leave out the metaphors that citizens do use. As a result, while research on metaphors in political discourse has flourished in recent years, the focus on elite communication has left metaphor's wider capacity as a reasoning tool for citizens underexplored.

Recent literature recognizes that framing is "not always an elite-driven process" (Borah, 2011, p. 250) and that citizens play an active role. This has prompted researchers to look for variables that influence the effectiveness of elite frames. Not least, frames are constrained by the credibility of the speaker, civic deliberation, and the degree of political competition (see, e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007a, 2007b). It is proposed here that pre-existing frames in thought, such as conceptual metaphors, are an additional constraint on frames in communication. "[A]frame in thought or an individual frame refers to an individual's cognitive understanding of a given situation" (Chong & Druckman, 2007b, p. 101). Metaphors in thought likewise structure the knowledge of a given situation by framing it within some more familiar source analog. Politicians and the media provide metaphors, which citizens may or may not adopt. But citizens also generate their own metaphors (i.e., spontaneous metaphors) to make sense of the political environment—and it is these that have been neglected in the research.

Thus, identifying the metaphoric sources that citizens spontaneously adopt to understand politics becomes a point of scholarly interest. Fortunately, there are some clues as to which criteria are likely to be influential in determining these preferences, and existing methods suggest productive ways to go about this task.

3.2 Source Analogs: Familiarity and Similarity

According to Holyoak and Thagard (1995), two criteria guide the selection of source analogs: familiarity and similarity. These criteria are also likely to determine which metaphoric sources are spontaneously applied in political cognition.

The preference for familiar source analogs is the essence of analogical (and metaphorical) reasoning—using the familiar to make sense of the unfamiliar. Research on embodied cognition has become more prominent in recent years and demonstrates the saliency of familiarity in human thought. The main premise of embodiment is that human cognition is constrained by our concrete, sensorimotor experiences, which form the basis of our understanding of more abstract, higher-level thinking (Barsalou, 2008; Gibbs, 2006; Williams, Huang, & Bargh, 2009). Empirical research has shown that these concrete experiences form influential source analogs in metaphorical reasoning (e.g., Gibbs, Costa Lima, & Francozo, 2004; for a comprehensive review of metaphors identified by recent embodied cognition research, see Landau et al., 2010).

While the body may be a candidate source analog for politics in terms of familiarity, similarity also matters. The preference of similarity goes deeper than shared surface attributes between target and source analogs; individuals prefer sources that are structurally similar to the target. The absence of structural similarity can make a frame less credible, just as it can make a work of fiction less compelling (Thagard, 2011). In politics, choices are often centered around the collective rather than the individual, making them public choices, not personal—“sociotropic, not egocentric” (Sniderman, 2000, p. 80). As a result, citizens are likely to consult familiar source analogs that share deeper social relations, such as family, employer, or even school experience, when mapping knowledge onto the political domain.

4. Metaphorical Challenges

Identifying the metaphors citizens employ in political cognition will be empirically challenging. As Shimko (1994) observed, “the fact that the same metaphor might have different implications for various people is one of the things which makes a systematic study of the influence of metaphors particularly difficult” (p. 658). The complexities of metaphorical reasoning advocate a mixed methods research agenda. To ease the task ahead, it is useful to consult previous research. This work not only highlights the difficulties, it also provides invaluable lessons and ideal starting points for examining civic applications of metaphor.

4.1 Elite vs. Citizen Discourse

When the research aim is to understand how ordinary citizens use metaphor in the political domain, elite discourse is a limited resource. However, the methods used in studies of elite discourse are instructive. Many studies on the elite usage of metaphor analyze corpora—large collections of naturally occurring texts or discourse. For elite discourse, this has included speeches, debates, manifestos, and media content such as newspaper articles. While some researchers focus on isolated metaphors from the outset, others make a semi-exhaustive list of potentially salient metaphors from the discourse itself. This latter approach provides a particularly good starting point for identifying some of the most salient metaphors that shape the public's understanding of the political world.

Although focus must shift from elite discourse to citizen discourse, the underlying analytic strategy remains: “To use metaphor as a research tool we need first to identify metaphors in relevant discourse; we need to consider why these metaphors were used at their particular points in the discourse activity; we need to find patterns in metaphor use and function; from patterns in data, we can make inferences about the people using the metaphors” (Cameron, 2010a, p. 7). Citizen discourse data can include in-depth qualitative interviews, focus group studies, and ethnographic studies. Focus group discussions and ethnographic studies of political conversations between friends and family may be particularly insightful in revealing the dynamic way metaphor shapes conversations about political matters (Cameron, 2010b; Gibbs & Cameron, 2008), casting new light on the “social logic” of political preference formation (see, e.g., Zuckerman, Dasović, & Fitzgerald, 2007).

Cameron and Maslen's (2010) work is particularly illustrative of the added value offered by analyses of citizen discourse. The authors looked at both expert interviews (elite discourse) and focus group discussions with ordinary citizens (citizen discourse) to identify which metaphors guided elite and public interpretations concerning terrorism. Interestingly, the authors found that the public and the elite rely on different metaphoric sources and on some of the same metaphoric sources applied differently. These differences influenced how citizens and experts understood and conceptualized the risk of terrorism, and the consequent actions they supported. A key implication of this work was that experts could improve communication by taking into account the spontaneous metaphoric frameworks used by citizens.

4.2 Explicit vs. Implicit Analyses

Citizen discourse analysis may indeed help identify the metaphoric sources that are influential in political reasoning. Because metaphorical reasoning is a highly implicit procedure, though, researchers cannot rely on explicit discourse alone. Explicit discourse is problematic for two main reasons: individuals do not always say what they mean, and they do not always mean what they say. Some of the most influential metaphors, such as primary metaphors, need not even appear in discourse (Zinken, 2007). And studies comparing metaphors in speech to spontaneous gestures have revealed that the metaphors that do appear in discourse can sometimes be misleading (Casasanto, 2008, 2009; Cienki & Müller, 2008).

Work in cognitive linguistics has acknowledged the limitations of using explicit discourse to capture metaphors of thought (and the subsequent controversies for the field; see, e.g., Johnson, 2010). Efforts to capture the implicit nature of metaphor in discourse, however, have heightened the need for clarity and transparency in metaphor identification methods. The metaphors identified in citizen discourse—whether in explicit or implicit form—provide a useful “source of hypotheses about the structure of abstract concepts” (Casasanto, 2009, p. 143), such as those surrounding politics. This is especially true since comparably advanced techniques for identifying metaphors in thought “are not yet available” (Steen, 2011, p. 182). Nevertheless, the implicit nature of metaphorical reasoning and the distinction between metaphors in thought versus metaphors in language still necessitate the use of methods that go beyond discourse. Not least, laboratory studies can be used to “follow up” on metaphors uncovered in citizen discourse or test those suspected on theoretical grounds. For example, the “naturalness” of some metaphors in politics over others can be tested through latency response analyses.

5. Key Lines of Inquiry

Equipped with methodological options, a number of questions remain: Which metaphors do citizens adopt to understand the political world? Are the metaphors universal, or do they vary between individuals, subgroups, or cultures? Are they specific to politics vis-à-vis nonpolitical domains? Are they specific to certain political issues or do they pervade politics more widely? What about competing metaphors—do similarity and familiarity predominantly guide the selection of source analogs applied in politics, or are there other criteria? Are the criteria context-dependent? How do metaphors interact with other heuristics applied to politics? Do different cognitive preferences (e.g., memory-based versus online, need for closure) cause some citizens to rely more heavily on or to avoid reasoning by metaphors? Do political metaphors undergo dynamic development in civic discourse? The answers to these questions will lead to a far more elaborate and refined understanding of metaphor's role in political cognition.

6. Future Prospects

Metaphorical reasoning presents an opportunity to better understand how citizens reason politically. For instance, preferences citizens inherently hold for some source analogs over others provide crucial predispositions. This makes their identification fundamental for political cognition research. Individuals tend not to execute an exhaustive list of potential source analogs, even though other sources may form a better base for analogical transfer onto the target (Holyoak & Thagard, 1995; Wharton et al., 1994). Instead, sources preferred early on exert a disproportionate amount of influence, and each successful application of that source further

strengthens that preference (see also Markman & Moreau, 2001), reinforcing the criterion of familiarity. As Hofstadter (2001, p.522) summarized, “[e]ach person, as life progresses, develops a set of high-level concepts that they tend to favor, and their perception is continually seeking to cast the world in terms of those concepts”. Consequently, research on citizens' spontaneous applications of metaphor in political reasoning can highlight systematic and enduring biases in political understanding.

Citizens' cognitive preferences can generate perceptual bias, thereby constraining the effectiveness of political frames (Arceneaux, 2009). In this regard, the study of metaphor in political cognition can help address the “paucity of work on [the] limits to framing effects” (Druckman, 2001b, p. 1045). By providing a more elaborate cognitive framework that highlights the processes and criteria that guide frame production and selection, metaphor research can elucidate two issues in framing theory that require more attention: the origins of frames and selection amongst competing frames (Borah, 2011). The study of metaphor in cognition also further refines the link between motivated reasoning and framing (see, e.g., Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Metaphoric frames can evoke the transfer of motives from source to target analogs (Landau et al., 2009). Even more, Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) found that metaphor determined not only inferences drawn but exerted a much earlier, compounding influence by biasing the information search. Their finding reiterated what Lakoff (2004, p.17) once observed, “if the facts do not fit a frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off”. Studying citizens' spontaneous selection of metaphoric frames together with the deliberate provision of frames by politicians and the media can lead to a more comprehensive model of framing—one that can account for both the reasoning and communicative functions of frames (Steen, 2008) and, more importantly, the interaction between the two (see Chong & Druckman, 2011).

Metaphorical reasoning can also help illuminate the “rationale” of affect in political reasoning. Politicians tend to use analogies with high emotional content (Dunbar, 2001), and Thagard (2000) has argued that emotional coherence is an additional constraint for competing frames (see also Thagard, 2006). While the literature largely recognizes that frames often contain both cognitive and emotional content (e.g., Druckman & McDermott, 2008; Gross, 2008; Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004), metaphorical reasoning can offer a more integrated account of these two dimensions. Emotions may appear “displaced” in political issues when citizens are unable to articulate why exactly they feel the way they do. Identifying the metaphoric sources used in political reasoning can not only clarify the origins of those emotions; it can also demonstrate the cognitive complexity that underlies emotion and intuitive understanding.

The discussion of metaphorical reasoning also highlights a wider issue for the field of political psychology. Metaphorical reasoning presents an additional challenge to the economic model of voter rationality. On the one hand, metaphor is a heuristic that violates the standard of full information required by economic definitions of rationality; instead, individuals draw from past knowledge and experience to fill gaps in knowledge about target analogs. On the other hand, metaphorical reasoning has been instrumental in the development and advancement of scientific theory. Any definition of rationality that excludes metaphorical reasoning, therefore, seems inappropriate (Indurkha, 2007). This is not to say that all decisions based on metaphor are necessarily rational, but it also does not mean that all metaphor-based decisions are irrational.

Finally, the study of metaphor in citizen decision making also offers the chance for political science to contribute back to cognitive science—a direction of exchange that is less common in the interdisciplinary field of political psychology (Druckman, Kuklinski, & Sigelman, 2009). As discussed, political studies have tended to focus on “given” sources, whether made explicit through discourse or evoked through priming. This has bypassed one of the most important and elusive steps in metaphorical reasoning: selection. Similarity and familiarity are proposed to guide this step, but a shift of attention and subsequent discovery of spontaneously adopted, opposed to “given,” source analogs can help refine these criteria. Because politics is an example of a complex, real-world setting, such findings would be all the more insightful. Steen (2008) has also argued that metaphor theorists have paid insufficient attention to the communicative function of metaphor, where metaphor is a deliberate rhetorical strategy intended to change perspectives; political discourse is rife with such metaphors. As a result, political discourse can help in the formulation and testing of more elaborate theories concerning metaphor's role in

communication (e.g., Ottati & Renstrom, 2010). While political science can learn from cognitive science's work on metaphor, it also holds promise to distinctively expand on that work, generating a beneficial collaboration for both fields.

7. Conclusion

Metaphors both shape and constrain political understanding. Yet, as has been argued in this article, research has paid insufficient attention to the spontaneous metaphors that guide the political reasoning of citizens. Instead, research has focused predominantly on metaphors found in elite discourse. Elite discourse is no doubt important, but it understates metaphor's capacity as a reasoning tool for citizens. Identifying the metaphors citizens adopt on their own, and the criteria that guide that selection, offers the opportunity to better understand why citizens hold the political preferences they do. Metaphor offers a cognitive mechanism that explains how citizens make sense of the political world by drawing from their nonpolitical knowledge and experiences. In addition to its descriptive value, metaphor is relevant for and can help integrate a number of other issues in political psychology research. The complex, implicit nature of metaphorical reasoning also offers the chance to partially redeem voter rationale from its largely dim portrayal in economic models. Studying metaphor's role as a device for civic reasoning entails methodological challenges, but current methods in wider metaphor research have suggested some productive empirical avenues. The potential insight that can be gained from further study makes metaphor an exciting, if not indispensable, area for future research on political reasoning and cognition.

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