The Effects of Political Rhetoric on Aggression

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Abstract

The main purpose of this project is to explore if and how two different types of political message frames, negative policy critiques and threat copula frames, which are common features within political rhetoric, cause aggression when individuals are exposed to them. If political orientation is conceptualized as a cultural worldview, then Terror Management Theory predicts that when exposed to arguments which imply that the political orientation of an individual is not absolutely correct aggression will result. Negative policy critiques, which are arguments related to specific problems in policies, and threat copula frames, which are arguments that position an opposing political actor as a threat to America, are both threats to the absolute validity of the political orientation of an individual when those arguments target a supported actor. A convenience sample, utilizing random assignment to condition, was exposed to either a negative policy critique or threat copula frame that targeted the presidential candidate that the participant indicated they would vote for, or a positive advertisement, serving as a control condition, which acclaimed the participant’s supported presidential candidate. The results indicate that aggression was higher in those who supported Obama when those participants were exposed to a threat copula frame targeting Obama compared to a positive advertisement supporting Obama. No other results were significant. The reasons why this experiment may have failed and the implications of the significant result on the U.S. democratic system are discussed.