

Does Violent Political Rhetoric Fuel Support for Political Violence?¹

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Abstract

Does violent political rhetoric fuel support for political violence? Political leaders regularly infuse communication with metaphors of fighting and war. Building from theoretical foundations in media violence research, I field a nationally-representative survey experiment in which subjects are randomly assigned to different forms of the same political advertisements. I find that even mild violent language increases support for political violence among citizens with aggressive predispositions, especially among young adults.

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Introduction

The specter of political violence haunts even the most stable democracies, including the United States. Assassins have shot down American Presidents, members of Congress, federal judges, state governors, mayors, activists, and others. Political extremists have exploded bombs outside government buildings. Vandals have smashed and ransacked government offices. And each year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Capitol Police, and the Secret Service respond to hundreds of threats made against public officials and their families.

Recently, the furor surrounding the national healthcare debate – beginning with raucous town hall meetings in August 2009 and culminating in the bill’s passage in March 2010 – led to a spike in death threats against public officials and smashed windows in Congressional offices; someone even cut the gas line at a house thought to belong to a Congressman after the wrong address was posted on a hostile website (Hulse 3/25/10). Another man wrote an anti-government suicide note before flying a small plane into a Texas IRS building, killing himself and one employee (Brick 2/18/10).

As protestors marched outside the U.S. Capitol building chanting “kill the bill” – some carrying signs with slogans endorsing explicit violence – political leaders inside and others on television literally shouted their opposition as they described apocalyptic implications of passage. Congress members appeared regularly before the crowd, showing their approval by waving their own “kill the bill” signs and a “don’t tread on me” flag (Hulse 3/21/2010). One leader posted a map on Facebook with rifle cross-hairs on the districts of lawmakers who voted for the bill, alongside their names (Palin 3/23/2010a), and later added a Twitter post saying, “Don’t Retreat – Instead, RELOAD!” (Palin 3/23/2010b). At least four of the “targeted” members of Congress received death threats or had their offices vandalized with bricks thrown

through their windows (Bazinet 3/24/2010; Rich 3/27/10; Rucker 3/25/2010). The governor of Minnesota encouraged supporters to “take a 9-iron and smash the window out of big government in this country,” (Condon 2/19/10). And in the early months of 2010, with the acrimony surrounding the health care debate, the Senate Sergeant of Arms reported a 300-percent increase in threats against members of Congress (Lovley 5/25/10). This conjunction of opposition politicians encouraging hostile crowds and the outbreak of death threats and vandalism led some commentators to ask whether political leaders were partly to blame for the violence and threats (Rich 3/27/10).³

This episode is not unprecedented. Throughout the years, leaders of all political persuasions have indulged in inflammatory and hyperbolic rhetoric, and citizens of varying ideologies and partisan affiliations have engaged in various forms of political violence, ranging from destruction of property to murder.

Fighting Words in Political Rhetoric

When asked whether the debate over healthcare was becoming too incendiary, Senator John McCain replied, “to say that there is a targeted district or that we ‘reload’ or go back to fight again, please...Those are fine. They’re used all the time... That rhetoric and kind of language is just part of the political lexicon,” (Montopoli 3/25/10). Although metaphorical violence is more often directed at problems than individuals – which may explain the particular concern expressed over personally-directed language and imagery in the healthcare uproar – the use of violent metaphors in American political rhetoric is indeed frequent and widespread.

Leaders regularly promise to “fight” for noble causes and “combat” pressing problems. They declare “war” on a plethora of social problems, including poverty, disease, drugs, and

³ Notably, leaders from both parties strongly condemned the death threats and violent actions by some citizens, advocating expression of opposition through non-violent means instead (Hulse 3/25/10).

terrorism, and more. We hear this language from both political parties in campaign advertisements and presidential addresses, in activist emails and political news coverage.

Examples abound in some of the most famous American political oratory, including Lincoln's "House Divided," Bryan's "Cross of Gold," LBJ's "Great Society," FDR's fireside chats, and Carter's "Crisis of Confidence," among dozens of others. In each case, the language of fighting and war recur in passages about non-violent issues. The appendix includes quotes from several of these examples. More recently, Sen. John McCain used more than 30 violent metaphors in his 2008 national convention speech, arguing that he would "fight for what's right for our country" and exhorting voters to "fight with me," (WSJ Staff 9/4/08). Similarly, President Barack Obama used violent metaphors to describe economic problems and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 (Washington Post 1/22/10; Stolberg 6/7/10).⁴ In sum, violent metaphors are prevalent in political rhetoric across time, parties, issues, and other contexts.

Political Speech as Media Violence

Conceptually, I treat violent political rhetoric a form of media violence. In operational terms, I expect that the violent metaphors used in political speeches activate the same cognitive and emotional processes that are triggered by violent entertainment. To build a theoretical foundation for translating media violence dynamics into political rhetoric effects, I provide a brief summary of the media violence literature.

Decades of research and hundreds of studies using complementary methodologies demonstrate a clear causal link between exposure to media violence and interpersonal aggression, from media of all kinds – including video, music, pictures, and text (e.g. Anderson

⁴ Violent political rhetoric is also cross-national. For example, in a 2010 British campaign speech in Northern Ireland, soon-to-be Prime Minister David Cameron used the word "fight" 19 times times in about 90 seconds – e.g. "We're fighting for people," and "Join us in this fight," (Cameron 5/4/2010). Even Ghandi used violent metaphors while explicitly swearing off actual violence in his famous "Quit India" speech.

1997; Anderson & Bushman 2002b; Anderson & Dill 2000; Bartholow & Anderson 2002; Bushman 1995; Bushman 1998; Bushman & Geen 1990; Zillman & Weaver 1999). Media violence effects work through priming: cues activate aggressive cognitive and emotional structures in memory, making aggressive responses more accessible (e.g. Bushman 1998).

Although political speech may not seem as explicit or compelling as most forms of violent entertainment, psychologists have found that violent text is sufficient to promote aggression (e.g. Anderson et al 2003; Bushman et al 2007), even when the text is presented subliminally (Bargh & Pietromonaco 1982). Theoretically, then, violent political rhetoric can produce the same psychological dynamics as violent entertainment.

Support for Political Violence

Although many forms of violence might be considered political one way or another, I focus particularly on violence or threats of violence directed at political leaders, government officials, and government institutions (e.g. Congress, Internal Revenue Service). This excludes most forms of ethnic violence, which tend to be directed at group members generally, but which sometimes include violence against group leaders. This focus is also limited to actions by individual citizens or groups, rather than violence carried out by state entities or their proxies.⁵

I focus on support for political violence for several reasons. First, actual political violence is extremely rare. No practical nationally-representative sample would be large enough to capture variance on violent political behavior. Even if sample size was not an issue, respondents would be unlikely to report committing or planning to commit political violence due to social desirability (and legal) considerations. As an alternative, support for political violence provides a satisfying compromise that achieves both methodological and substantive goals.

⁵ In other portions of this project, I consider the aggressive roots of citizen support for state violence (Kalmoe 2010).

Second, support for political violence is almost certainly a predictor for propensity to commit acts political violence, though other factors related to criminality and anti-social behavior almost certainly intervene to move citizens from violent attitudes to violent behavior. While social desirability concerns are still relevant, they are less problematic than self-reports of personally-perpetrated violence in the past or willingness to personally commit political violence in the future. Thus, support for political violence may indirectly identify respondents with a higher propensity for engaging in violent political behavior.

Third, support for violence provides a direct measure of a citizen's willingness to contribute to an atmosphere that encourages political violence by others. Although violent offenders are ultimately responsible for their crimes, the likelihood of violent acts may increase when political leaders and other citizens give voice to violent feelings toward government or fail to denounce the expression of violent attitudes. Even when most leaders and citizens may ultimately restrain themselves from committing violent political acts, a tolerant atmosphere toward political violence may encourage others with less restraint to act. Support for political violence also indicates a level of poisonous rancor – wishing physical harm on leaders – that is troubling on its own, even if it did not encourage outright violence.

Research Design

To test the effects of violent political rhetoric, I designed and carried out a nationally-representative online survey experiment with 412 U.S. adults, administered through Knowledge Networks. The survey was fielded between July 2nd and July 20th, 2010, before the midterm Congressional election campaign began in earnest.

Knowledge Networks provides a representative group of respondents recruited through probability-based sampling techniques with random-digit dialing and address-based sampling

methods.⁶ Participants receive financial incentives, internet services, and computer hardware (if necessary) to reduce attrition and enable more representative participation in households that otherwise would be excluded. Knowledge Networks maintains an ongoing re-sampling process to limit distortions in representativeness caused by attrition. Subjects for the present study were drawn from a random sample of panel participants.⁷

The quality of the sample provides reasonable grounds for generalizing the experimental findings to the full population.⁸ Additionally, the internet-based format allows subjects to complete the survey at a time and place of their choosing. Subjects are exposed to the treatments in the same contexts that they receive other political messages through television, email, printed news, and mailings. Moreover, the self-administered survey also encourages subjects to provide more honest answers to sensitive questions compared to interviewer-administered surveys.

Treatments

Rather than focus on the effects of the most incendiary rhetoric – which is episodic and rare – I assess the aggressive influence of mild violent language – metaphors of war and fighting – which are far more common in political speech and relatively non-controversial.

To simulate exposure to violent political rhetoric, I present subjects with text from two ostensible television advertisements for U.S. House candidates, representing both competitors in the race. Each respondent reads a violent or non-violent ad for Candidate A, and then reads a violent or non-violent ad for Candidate B. The resulting 2x2 design permits a test of whether the effects of violent political rhetoric are amplified when both competing candidates deploy violent

⁶ Knowledge Networks uses a dual sampling frame that includes households with listed phone numbers, unlisted numbers, cell phone only, and no phone.

⁷ Completion rate for the study among selected Knowledge Networks panelists was 68%.

⁸ Chang & Krosnick (2009) show that a probability sample is more representative than non-probability sample in internet studies, even after weighting. Internet samples showed less random measurement error & satisficing than a telephone surveys, suggesting that an online, probability-based survey (e.g. Knowledge Networks) is optimal.

language, or whether violent rhetoric by one candidate is sufficient to increase support for political violence. Neither candidate is identified by name or party.

Tables 1 and 2 present the text for both ads, with key words bolded to indicate interchanged words across the treatment versions. The text in the ads is drawn almost verbatim from Sen. John McCain’s 2008 Republican convention speech, but is unlikely to be recognized out of context. Both ads are politically similar, advocating agreeable platitudes rather than partisan issue positions. Perhaps the only notable difference between the two ads is that Candidate B mentions past political experience, while Candidate A makes no mention of it.

Although the violent version includes several instances of “fighting” words, the text is quite mild. There are no vivid descriptions of graphic violence and the ads include plenty of non-violent language. This approach is quite conservative, but also realistic, reflecting natural political rhetoric drawn from mainstream, high-profile sources. Even in political communication with repeated violent rhetoric, the content is not usually dominated by violent language. Additionally, the text format lacks the power of an impassioned delivery seen on video or in person, providing even greater control over the content and likely dulling the treatment effects.

Table 1: Candidate A’s Violent & Non-Violent Ad Text

<p>Fighting/Standing Up for America’s Future</p> <p>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.</p>

Table 2: Candidate B’s Violent & Non-Violent Ad Text

<p>Fighting/Working for You</p> <p>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.</p>
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Support for Political Violence

Support for political violence has received little attention in the American context.

Without instrumentation from past studies as a guide, I created five questions to tap support for threats against political leaders, politically-motivated property violence, use of physical force against government, implied assassination of leaders, and a disavowal of violence as a legitimate form for expressing grievance (reverse-coded). The items were presented as statements with 5-point agree-disagree responses. The wording for these items is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Question Wording for the Support for Political Violence Scale

“When politicians are damaging the country, citizens should send threats to scare them straight.”

“The worst politicians should get a brick through the window to make them stop hurting the country.”

“Sometimes the only way to stop bad government is with physical force.”

“Some of the problems citizens have with government could be fixed with a few well-aimed bullets.”

“Citizens upset by government should never use violence to express their feelings.”

These questions were designed as face-valid indicators of clear violent feeling across a range of violent activities, with several considerations in mind. First, social desirability concerns could lead to universal rejection of political violence, even among citizens who secretly harbor supportive attitudes toward political violence. The questions are partly shrouded with ambiguity and remoteness to make them seem more acceptable: they indicate an unspecified set of citizens acting rather than the respondent, the identity of the target is open to projection, and the target’s transgressions are unnamed. But despite the ambiguity, the statements clearly indicate support for inflicting physical harm on political leaders and government entities. The ambiguity regarding targets and transgressions results in political violence questions devoid of partisan and ideological content. Militant citizens from a variety of ideological backgrounds engage in political violence, so the items assessing support allow respondents to infer the targets and the

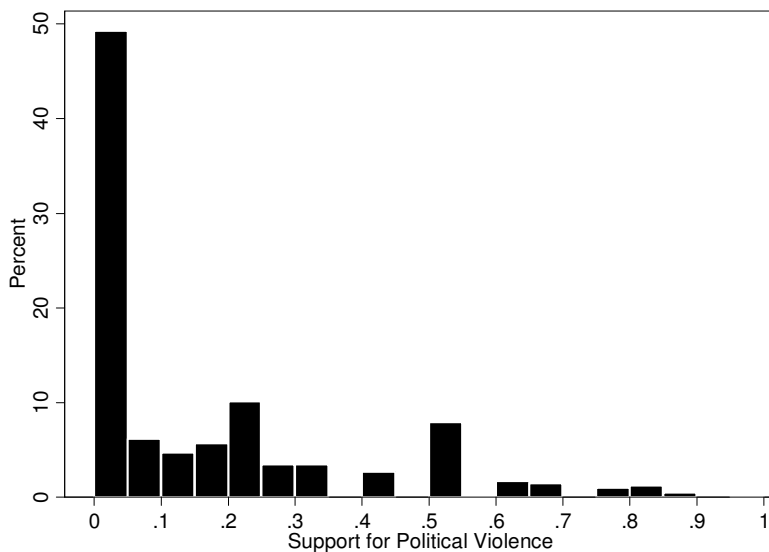
transgressions that might call for violence. The statements also utilize euphemistic wording and paint leaders in ways to facilitate disengagement from the moral reasoning processes that might otherwise discourage agreement with the statements (see Bandura et al 1996).

Table 4 presents the distribution of individual items indicating support for political violence for the full sample. These items also form an impressively reliable additive index in these data ($\alpha = .84$). Figure 1 shows the distribution of the support for political violence index. Although a large majority clearly rejects the use of violence in politics, a substantial minority avoids rejecting political violence or even expresses some support for it.

Table 4: Distribution of Support for Political Violence

Response Scale	Threaten	Brick	Force	Bullets	No Violence
Strongly Disagree	68.5%	75.6%	70.2%	80.3%	9.9%
Somewhat Disagree	9.6	6.7	8.9	4.2	5.7
Neither Agree nor Disagree	12.8	11.3	12.6	10.4	10.8
Somewhat Agree	5.4	3.9	5.9	2.5	10.8
Strongly Agree	3.7	2.5	2.5	2.7	62.8
<i>N</i>	406	406	406	405	406

Figure 1: Distribution of Support for Political Violence Index



Results

The initial OLS models include indicator variables for 3 of the 4 treatment conditions, with the constant term reflecting average responses in the fourth condition. Each model includes education and income as control variables, because randomization procedures left imbalanced levels of each across the treatment cells. Although I expect more or less equal effects from the violent version of each ad, I initially present the results for each separately to be sure.

One result to watch for is whether two violent ads are stronger than one. This might occur due to the doubled volume of violent words. Or, subjects might infer some kind of legitimacy from the seeming universal use of violent rhetoric by both sides. Or, subjects could infer with greater certainty that their favored (or disfavored) partisan representative was using violent language. Table 5 presents the results for the five items and the index.

Table 5: Violent Rhetoric Effects on Support for Political Violence

	Threaten	Brick	Force	Bullets	No Violence	Index
Only Ad A Violent	.05 (.04)	.02 (.03)	.00 (.04)	.01 (.03)	.03 (.05)	.01 (.03)
Only Ad B Violent	.03 (.04)	.03 (.03)	.01 (.04)	.02 (.03)	.01 (.05)	.02 (.03)
Ads A & B Violent	.00 (.04)	.01 (.03)	-.01 (.04)	.03 (.03)	.09 [^] (.05)	-.01 (.03)
Constant	.30*** (.04)	.26*** (.03)	.24*** (.04)	.21*** (.03)	.66*** (.05)	.27*** (.03)
R^2	.08	.08	.03	.06	.03	.08
N	406	406	406	405	406	405

OLS models, standard errors in parentheses. [^] $p < .1$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$, two-sided t-test. Models include education & income as controls for treatment imbalances.

These results are reassuring for people worried about the effects of violent political rhetoric. In fact, the only marginally-significant treatment effect is for *rejecting* political violence when both ads are violent. Moreover, to the extent that the other results show a

consistent positive effect on support for political violence, the effect sizes are substantively-small and statistically-insignificant. Subjects reading two violent ads are no more responsive than subjects seeing one of the violent ads. Similarly, neither ad seems to consistently generate stronger effects than the other. These results justify collapsing the three violent treatment categories together into a single variable, which produces nearly identical results (political violence index model, treatment coefficient $b=.00$, $p<.85$).

Does Trait Aggression Moderate Treatment Effects?

So far, the results suggest null results for violent political rhetoric. However, this aggregate non-responsiveness may hide individual variation in citizen reactions to the violent rhetoric. In fact, the media violence literature provides good reason to suspect individual differences in this regard. Although media violence studies show net-positive relationships with aggressive behavior, these effects are regularly moderated by trait aggression – an individual’s stable propensity to engage in interpersonal aggression – with trait aggressive subjects showing greater responsiveness to violent cues, even from violent text (Anderson et al 2003; Bushman 1995; Bushman et al 2007). People lower in trait aggression also show signs of anxiety when exposed to violent cues, consistent with a “flight” response rather than a “fight” response (Bushman 1996; Berkowitz 1990).

Trait aggression is the most critical individual difference for predicting aggressive behavior. Trait aggression has diverse environmental and biological origins, including exposure to high levels media violence and other aggressive models as a child (e.g. Bushman & Huesmann 2006) and genetic predispositions (e.g. Coccaro et al 1997; Rushton et al 1986). Although aggressive behavior generally decreases as people age, relative levels of aggression between individuals remain stable over decades (Huesmann et al 1984; Olweus 1979). In other words,

the people who are most likely to act aggressively as young adults are most likely to act aggressively in later years. Individuals with high trait aggression show more developed cognitive-associative networks related to aggression (Bushman 1996), and they expect and perceive greater hostility in others (Dill et al. 1997).

I measure trait aggression using the short form of the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ; Buss & Perry 1992). The BPAQ is the most commonly-used measure of aggressive personality in psychology, with proven validity as a predictor of aggression and its antecedents in the lab and in real life, e.g. discriminating between violent and non-violent criminals, distinguishing perpetrators of domestic violence, and predicting the relative aggressiveness of high school hockey players in games (see Bushman & Wells 1998), and as a moderator of media violence effects (e.g. Bushman 1995). In addition to being more wieldy (with 12 items in place of 29), the BPAQ short form also exhibits superior psychometric properties (Bryant & Smith 2001). Both long- and short-forms of the BPAQ are divided into four subscales – physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. Importantly, the construct validity and factor structure for the BPAQ is consistent for both men and women, indicating that the measure identifies the same construct for both sexes (Buss & Perry 1992).

Full-text for the BPAQ items is presented in Table 6. Trait aggression was measured near the beginning of the survey and prior to the political violence questions. The order of presentation for the 12 statements was randomized. For each item, subjects were asked to indicate whether the statement is true or false for them on a 6-point scale. The responses are then summed to create a highly reliable scale ($\alpha = 0.92$), coded continuously from 0 to 1. Figure 2 presents the distribution of the trait aggression index in this sample.

Table 6: Trait Aggression Question-Wording (BPAQ-SF)

<p>For each of the following statements, indicate whether the statement is true or false for you.</p> <p>There are people who have pushed me so far that we have come to blows. Given enough provocation, I may hit a person. I have threatened people I know. I often find myself disagreeing with people. I can't help getting into arguments when people disagree with me. My friends say I'm somewhat argumentative. I have trouble controlling my temper. Sometimes I fly off the handle for no good reason. I flare up quickly but get over it quickly. At times I feel I have gotten a raw deal out of life. Other people always seem to get the breaks. I wonder why sometimes I feel so bitter about things.</p> <p>Response scale: Completely true for me, Mostly true for me, Slightly true for me, Slightly false for me, Mostly false for me, Completely false for me</p>

Figure 2: Distribution of Trait Aggression

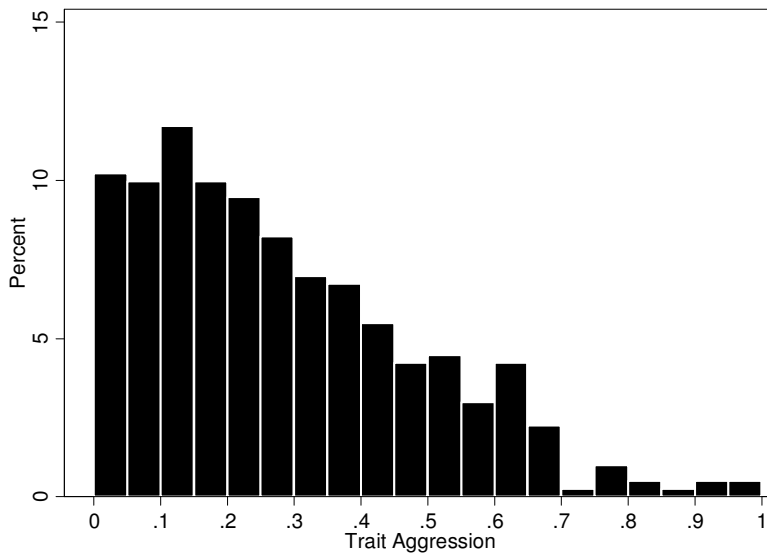


Table 7 presents the relationship between trait aggression and important social and political characteristics. Coding for these items is described below. Trait aggression is mostly unrelated to political staples like party identification, authoritarianism, and presidential job approval. Although trait aggression shows a stronger – but still moderate – relationship with

political knowledge and vote intention, these disappear when controls are added for education, age, and income in a multivariate OLS regression. Consistent with past literature on sex differences in aggression (e.g. Eagly & Steffen 1986), when all items are included in a multivariate model, female respondents exhibit slightly lower levels of trait aggression compared to male respondents ($p < .10$). In this model, age is the strongest predictor of trait aggression, followed by education and income. Young people, low-income people, and less educated people all score higher on the trait aggression index.

Table 7: Bivariate Relationships between Trait Aggression & Politically-Relevant Variables

Party ID (Rep)	Obama Approval	Authoritarianism	Political Knowledge	Vote Intention	Income	Age	Edu	Female	South
-.01	.06	.08	-.21*	-.19*	-.24*	-.32*	-.25*	-.06	.04

$N = 392$. ^ $p < .1$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$, two-sided t-test.

Nisbett and Cohen (1997) identify regional differences in culture as a source for some forms of aggressive behavior, with the honor culture of the American South encouraging more violence. However, the greater tendency for violence holds only for honor-related provocations, not in general. Thus, it is not surprising that the general trait aggression measure picks up no substantial difference among Southerners compared to respondents from other regions.

Table 8 re-estimates the models from Table 5, adding the trait aggression variable and its interactions with the treatment conditions. In contrast to the previous analysis, the results here show strong and consistent evidence of violent rhetoric effects. Across each of the items and the index, trait aggressive subjects become more supportive of political violence. The results not only reach statistical significance, they are also substantively large, pushing the most aggressive citizens across about one-quarter of the support for political violence scales. Moreover, these treatment effects are on top of the already strong predispositions of trait aggressive citizens to support political violence in the absence of violent rhetoric.

Table 8: Violent Rhetoric Effects on Support for Political Violence

	Threaten	Brick	Force	Bullets	No Violence	Index
Trait Aggression	.30** (.12)	.27** (.11)	.30** (.12)	.10 (.10)	.01 (.16)	.20* (.09)
Only Ad A Violent	-.00 (.06)	-.05 (.05)	-.07 (.06)	-.08 (.05)	.12 (.08)	-.06 (.05)
Trait Aggression* Only Ad A Violent	.18 (.17)	.23 (.15)	.28 (.18)	.29^ (.15)	-.36 (.23)	.26* (.13)
Only Ad B Violent	-.05 (.06)	-.10^ (.05)	-.09 (.06)	-.12* (.05)	.09 (.08)	-.09^ (.05)
Trait Aggression* Only Ad B Violent	.28^ (.16)	.42** (.14)	.31^ (.16)	.45*** (.14)	-.30 (.22)	.35** (.13)
Ads A&B Violent	-.04 (.06)	-.04 (.05)	-.07 (.06)	-.09 (.05)	.10 (.08)	-.06 (.05)
Trait Aggression* Ads A&B Violent	.23 (.19)	.23 (.16)	.28 (.18)	.48** (.16)	-.08 (.24)	.24^ (.14)
Constant	.16** (.05)	.12** (.05)	.09^ (.05)	.14** (.05)	.68*** (.07)	.16*** (.04)
R^2	.20	.25	.18	.20	.05	.23
N	401	401	401	399	401	399

OLS models, standard errors in parentheses. ^ $p < .1$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$, two-sided t-test. Models include education & income as controls for treatment imbalances.

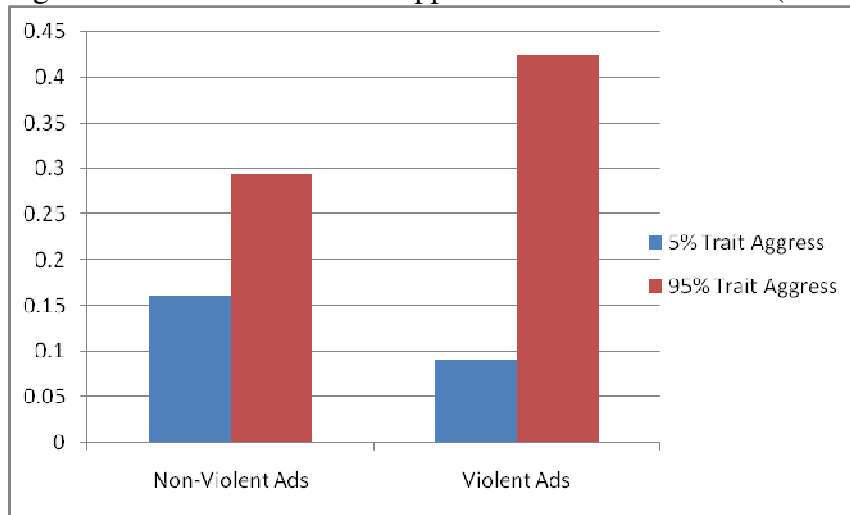
Since the conditional treatment effects are substantively similar across the three violent conditions, I pool them and re-estimate the results, presenting them in Table 9 in more digestible form. The condensed analysis more clearly reveals the large effects of violent rhetoric on support for state violence among trait aggressive subjects across each of the individual items and in the political violence index. Figure 3 presents predicted values for the index model at the 5th and 95th percentiles of trait aggression in this sample, and Figure 4 presents the marginal treatment effect plot with 95% confidence across varying levels of trait aggression.

Table 9: Violent Rhetoric Effects on Support for Political Violence – By Trait Aggression

	Threaten	Brick	Force	Bullets	No Violence	Index
Trait Aggression	.29* (.12)	.27** (.10)	.30** (.11)	.10 (.10)	.01 (.16)	.20* (.09)
One/Both Ads Violent	-.04 (.05)	-.06 (.04)	-.08 (.05)	-.09* (.04)	.11^ (.07)	-.07^ (.04)
Trait Aggression* One/Both Ads Violent	.24^ (.14)	.31* (.12)	.29* (.13)	.40*** (.12)	-.28 (.18)	.30** (.11)
Constant	.16*** (.05)	.12** (.05)	.09^ (.05)	.14** (.05)	.68*** (.07)	.16*** (.04)
R^2	.20	.25	.18	.19	.04	.23
N	401	401	401	399	401	399

OLS models, standard errors in parentheses. ^ $p < .1$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$, two-sided t-test. Models include education & income as controls for treatment imbalances.

Figure 3: Predicted Values – Support for Political Violence (Index)

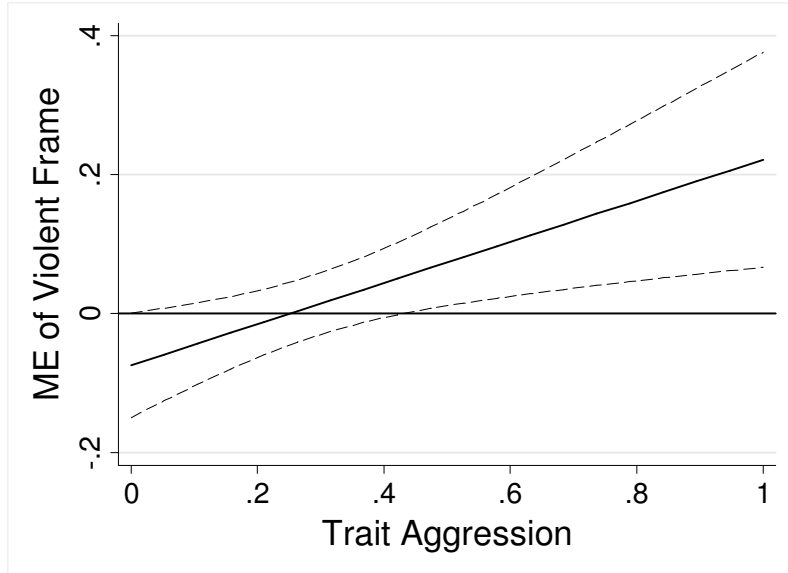


Predicted values at the 5th & 95th percentiles for trait aggression based on the index model in Table 9.

We see here why the net effect of violent rhetoric was nil for political violence support: while high-aggression citizens become *more* supportive of political violence when exposed to violent rhetoric, low-aggression citizens become *less* supportive. For the political violence index, this result among low-aggression citizens just barely misses conventional levels of statistical confidence ($p < .06$, two-sided t-test). Violent political rhetoric has a polarizing effect

on citizens, with trait-aggressive citizens becoming substantially and significantly more supportive of political violence and low-aggression citizens moving in the opposite direction.

Figure 4: Marginal Effect of Violent Rhetoric on Support for Political Violence (Index)



The figure shows the marginal effect of the violent vs. non-violent ads from Table 9. Dashed lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Age Differences?

One of the regularities in aggression research is the diminishing level of aggressive behavior as people age (e.g. Huesmann et al 1984). Given this decreased propensity for aggression, media violence research tends to focus primarily on effects among young adults, with less attention to older adults. In keeping with this line of work, I expect younger subjects to show greater responsiveness to violent rhetoric. I re-estimate the index model from Table 9, splitting the sample into the youngest third – under 40 years old – versus the two older thirds, with the results in Table 10.

Treatment effects for subjects under 40 years old are substantively much stronger than those for older subjects. The treatment effect age difference approaches statistical significance among low-aggression subjects ($p < .07$) and achieves statistical significance among high-aggression subjects ($p < .02$). In other words, young adults are significantly more responsive to

the violent political rhetoric on both ends of the trait aggression scale. The polarizing effect of violent political rhetoric on support for political violence is significantly diminished among older citizens, perhaps to the point of non-existence.

Table 10: Violent Rhetoric Effects on Support for Political Violence – By Age

	Under 40	40 or Older
Trait Aggression	.08 (.18)	.24* (.11)
One/Both Ads Violent	-.14 (.09)	-.03 (.04)
Trait Aggression*	.50* (.20)	.07 (.13)
One/Both Ads Violent		
Constant	.23* (.09)	.14*** (.04)
R^2	.25	.16
N	132	267

OLS models, standard errors in parentheses. ^ $p < .1$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$, two-sided t-test. Models include education & income as controls for treatment imbalances.

Sex Differences?

Media violence researchers regularly test for sex differences in responsiveness to violent content, with somewhat mixed results. Some studies have found that media violence increased aggression in men and women equally, though with lower baseline levels of aggression for women (Bushman 1995; Zillmann and Weaver 1999). Several studies of video game aggression effects showed larger effects on men (Anderson & Dill 2000; Bartholow & Anderson 2002; Bushman & Geen 1990). Other studies have shown no sex differences in media violence effects (e.g. Anderson 1997; Anderson & Bushman 2001; Anderson et al 2003; Bushman 1998; Bushman & Anderson 2002). In one study, however, state hostility in women increased significantly more than it did for men who played violent video games (Anderson & Dill 2000).

Table 11: Violent Rhetoric Effects on Support for Political Violence – By Sex

	Women	Men
Trait Aggression	.29* (.12)	.10 (.14)
One/Both Ads Violent	-.05 (.05)	-.09 (.06)
Trait Aggression* One/Both Ads Violent	.23 (.14)	.35* (.17)
Constant	.13* (.05)	.21*** (.06)
R^2	.31	.16
N	202	197

OLS models, standard errors in parentheses. $^{\wedge} p < .1$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$, two-sided t-test. Models include education & income as controls for treatment imbalances.

I re-estimate the index model from Table 9 separately for men and women, with the results presented in Table 11. Men and women show the same broad patterns of responsiveness to violent rhetoric, though the treatment effects are non-significantly greater for men than women. These results seem to be generally consistent with media violence studies assessing behavioral aggression and aggression-related responses in the lab – women tend to be equally-responsive or less-responsive to violent cues, but are rarely more responsive.

Partisan Differences?

Finally, I consider the moderating potential of partisanship on the interactive model with treatments and trait aggression. I re-estimate the political violence index model from Table 9, with results presented separately by partisanship in Table 12. Partisanship is measured here using the standard multi-question branching format, yielding a 7-point scale. “Leaners” are included as partisans.

Table 12: Violent Rhetoric Effects on Support for Political Violence – By Partisanship

	Democrats	Republicans
Trait Aggression	.23* (.11)	.21 (.18)
One/Both Ads Violent	-.14** (.05)	.02 (.07)
Trait Aggression* One/Both Ads Violent	.40** (.13)	.10 (.20)
Constant	.17*** (.05)	.11 (.07)
R^2	.33	.14
N	214	171

OLS models, standard errors in parentheses. $^{\wedge} p < .1$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$, two-sided t-test. Models include education & income as controls for treatment imbalances.

The results suggest that Democrats might be more responsive to violent rhetoric. Republicans show statistically null results, and the substance of the coefficients is small. However, while partisan difference in treatment effect among low-aggression subjects is marginally significant ($p < .08$), no significant difference appears among aggressive partisans ($p < .28$), despite the substantive difference. The results are similar when partisanship is measured as a 7-point variable, differentiating partisans by strength of identification.

Conclusion

Using a controlled survey experiment with a nationally-representative sample, I tested whether the most common and mild forms of violent political rhetoric increase public support for political violence. The results are simultaneously reassuring and unsettling. On one hand, I found that average levels of support for political violence are unchanged by violent rhetoric. However, this seemingly-null result hides a polarizing effect based on individual differences in the audience. In keeping with the literature on media violence effects, citizens with aggressive personality traits expressed significantly greater support for political violence when exposed to

ads infused with violent metaphors. Consequently, citizens who are already predisposed to express more support for political violence are pushed even higher in their support by mild violent language. In contrast, citizens with low trait aggression express significantly lower levels of support for political violence after exposure to the same content. Young adults – the demographic most likely to engage in all forms of aggression – showed significantly greater responsiveness to the violently-worded ads.

Leaders Mobilizing Aggression in Mass Publics

This work suggests that political leaders regularly mobilize aggressive responses in audiences. Given the important state goal of minimizing aggression in society, the role of political leaders in stoking aggressive responses in citizens may be of some concern. There is a dark irony in this hidden conflict of interests. But whatever positive effects leaders seek when employing violent metaphors – whether support for themselves, for policies, or for political mobilization – are offset by the implications of violent language for political violence support. These mild rhetorical devices push some citizens to a level of hostility in which they openly wish physical harm on political leaders, contravening vital norms that enable democratic government to function. Yet it is difficult to imagine a workable solution for addressing this problem with constitutionally-protected speech, beyond self-restraint by leaders. The evidence here might be sufficient to make political leaders think twice before infusing violent language into speeches and ads, particularly in situations when their audiences are already boiling over with hostility.

The Ideological Neutrality of Political Violence

Most of the recent concern about violent rhetoric and support for political violence is being voiced by partisans on the ideological Left, focused on the words and behavior of the political Right. However, American politics has been plagued by violence instigated by all

extremes of the ideological spectrum in different political times – including the anarchist bombings of the early Twentieth century, political violence against the Vietnam War on the fringes of that movement, the Oklahoma City bombing in 1996, violence against abortion doctors, and riots by anti-globalization protestors.

The results from this study provide some evidence rebutting partisan interpretations of political violence support, at least in the present form. Trait-aggressive Democrats and Republicans both expressed greater support for political violence following exposure to violent metaphors in political texts, though Democrats seem to show somewhat greater reactivity. Additionally, the mean level of support for political violence in the sample was slightly lower among Republicans, though not significantly so. Although Democrats and Republicans differ in many ways, support for political violence is not one of them.

Sources of Violent Rhetoric

The provocative findings, new research domain, and significant social implications make replication of this study especially important, and one is already under way. But the aggressive effects of violent political rhetoric deserve broader scrutiny. In this study, the identities of the political leaders were unknown. However, we know that the partisanship of political leaders and general source credibility exert large moderating effects on political influence (e.g. Druckman 2001). In future studies, I plan to assess the potential heterogeneity in responses to violent rhetoric when these source attributes are included.

Mild Metaphors vs. Stronger Violent Language

The language used in the experimental studies is mild and utterly common. It does not use vivid details of specific violent acts, and the metaphorical targets are public policy problems like unemployment and goals like justice and equal opportunity. Moreover, although not

ubiquitous, this type of rhetoric is extremely common, even in the concentrated doses used in this study. This result mirrors the findings from media violence research in which mild forms of entertainment violence (e.g. *Karate Kid*) and even subliminal violent text increase interpersonal hostility and aggression in audiences (Bargh & Pietromonaco 1984; Bushman 1995).

If mild violent rhetoric increases support for political violence, how does the public respond to more extreme violent rhetoric and to language that specifically targets government and politicians? Media violence research indicates that vivid accounts of graphic violence evoke aggressive behavior more strongly than weaker depictions (e.g. Zillman & Weaver 1999). Future studies might fruitfully address the effects of more extreme violent language in politics.

Broader Implications

This work also encourages a broader study of aggression dynamics in mass politics. Aggression is a fundamental component of human behavior (Wilson 2004), yet has received little attention in the study of political behavior. This study begins to identify ways in which aggression influences public opinion, and the ways in which political leaders dynamically shape the consequences of politicized aggression in citizens.

Appendix

Famous Examples of Violent Language in Political Speech

Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" (1858):

Two years ago the Republicans of the nation **mustered** over thirteen hundred thousand strong. We did this under the single impulse of resistance to a common danger, with every external circumstance against us. Of strange, discordant, and even hostile elements, we gathered from the four winds, and **formed and fought the battle through, under the constant hot fire of a disciplined, proud, and pampered enemy**. Did we brave all them to falter now?-now, when that same **enemy is wavering, dissevered, and belligerent?** The result is not doubtful. We shall not fail-if we stand firm, we shall not fail. Wise counsels may accelerate, or mistakes delay it, but, sooner or later, the **victory** is sure to come.

William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" (1896):

We do not come as **aggressors**. Our **war** is not a **war of conquest**. We are **fighting** in the **defense** of our homes, our families, and posterity. Never before in the history of American politics has a great issue been **fought** out as this issue has been by the voters themselves. Here is the **line of battle**. We care not upon which issue they **force the fight**. We are prepared to meet them on either issue or on both.

If they dare to come out in the **open field and defend** the gold standard as a good thing, we shall **fight** them to the uttermost, having behind us the producing masses of the nation and the world. Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses, we shall answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them, you shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not **crucify** mankind upon a cross of gold.

Theodore Roosevelt's "Man with a Muckrake" (1906):

There are in the body politic, economic and social, many and grave evils, and there is urgent necessity for the **sternest war upon them**. There should be relentless exposure of and **attack** upon every evil man, whether politician or business man, every evil practice, whether in politics, business, or social life. I hail as a benefactor every writer or speaker, every man who, on the platform or in a book, magazine, or newspaper, **with merciless severity makes such attack**, provided always that he in his turn remembers that the **attack** is of use only if it is absolutely truthful. It is because I feel that there should be **no rest in the endless war** against the forces of evil that I ask the **war** be conducted with sanity as well as with resolution.

Robert LaFollette's "Free Speech in Wartime" (1917):

I did all that I could, and I shall continue to **fight** with all the power **at my command** until wealth is made to bear more of the burden of this war than has been laid upon it by the present Congress. I have been greatly depressed by the **brutal and unjust attacks** that great business interests have organized against you. It is a time when all the spirits of evil are turned loose. The **Kaisers of high finance**, who have been developing hatred of you for a generation because you have **fought against them** and for the common good, see this opportunity to turn the war patriotism into an **engine of attack**. They are using it everywhere, and it is a day when lovers of democracy, not only in the world, but here in the United States, need to go apart on the mountain and spend the night in fasting and prayer. I still have faith that the forces of good on this earth will be found to be greater than the forces of evil, but we all need resolution. I hope you will have the grace to keep your center of gravity on the inside of you and to keep a spirit that is unclouded by hatred. It is a time for the words, "with malice toward none and charity for all." It is the office of great service to be a shield to the good man's character against malice. Before this **fight** is over you will have a new revelation that such a **shield** is yours.

Franklin Roosevelt's 1st Inaugural (1933):

Our greatest primary task is to put people to work. This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously. It can be accomplished in part by **direct recruiting by the Government** itself, treating the task as we would treat the **emergency of a war**, but at the same time, through this employment, accomplishing great -- greatly needed projects to

stimulate and reorganize the use of our great natural resources. These, my friends, are the **lines of attack**. I shall presently urge upon a new Congress in special session detailed measures for their fulfillment, and I shall seek the immediate assistance of the 48 States.

With this pledge taken, I assume unhesitatingly the leadership of this **great army** of our people dedicated to a **disciplined attack** upon our common problems. I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis -- broad Executive power to **wage a war** against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact **invaded by a foreign foe**.

Richard Nixon's "Checkers" (1952):

I remember in the dark days of the Hiss case some of the same columnists, some of the same radio commentators who are **attacking** me now and misrepresenting my position, were **violently opposing** me at the time I was after Alger Hiss. But I continued to **fight** because I knew I was right, and I can say to this great television and radio audience that I have no apologies to the American people for my part in putting Alger Hiss where he is today. And as far as this is concerned, I intend to continue to **fight**.

And I say that the only man who can lead us in this **fight** to rid the Government of both those who are Communists and those who have corrupted this Government is Eisenhower, because Eisenhower, you can be sure, recognizes the problem, and he knows how to deal with it. But just let me say this last word: Regardless of what happens, I'm going to continue this **fight**. I'm going to campaign up and down in America until we drive the crooks and the Communists and those that defend them out of Washington.

Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" (1964):

Today we must act to prevent an ugly America. For once the **battle** is lost, once our natural splendor is **destroyed**, it can never be **recaptured**. And once man can no longer walk with beauty or wonder at nature his spirit will wither and his sustenance be wasted.

So, will you **join in the battle** to give every citizen the full equality which God enjoins and the law requires, whatever his belief, or race, or the color of his skin? Will you **join in the battle** to give every citizen an escape from the crushing weight of poverty? Will you **join in the battle** to make it possible for all nations to live in enduring peace -- as neighbors and not as mortal enemies? Will you **join in the battle** to build the Great Society, to prove that our material progress is only the foundation on which we will build a richer life of mind and spirit?

There are those timid souls that say this **battle** cannot be won; that we are condemned to a soulless wealth. I do not agree. We have the power to shape the civilization that we want. But we need your will and your labor and your hearts, if we are to build that kind of society.

Lyndon Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" (1965):

But even if we pass this bill, the **battle** will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and State of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause

must be our cause too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.

For at the real heart of **battle** for equality is a deep seated belief in the democratic process. Equality depends not on the force of arms or tear gas but depends upon the **force** of moral right; not on recourse to violence but on respect for law and order. And there have been many pressures upon your President and there will be others as the days come and go. But I pledge you tonight that we intend to **fight** this **battle** where it should be **fought** -- in the courts, and in the Congress, and in the hearts of men.

Jimmy Carter's "Crisis of Confidence" (1979):

We are the generation that dedicated our society to the pursuit of human rights and equality. And we are the generation that will **win the war** on the energy problem and in that process, rebuild the unity and confidence of America. Just as a similar synthetic rubber corporation helped us win World War II, so will we mobilize American determination and ability to win the **energy war**.

Energy will be the immediate test of our ability to unite this nation, and it can also be the **standard around which we rally**. On the **battlefield** of energy we can **win** for our nation a new confidence, and we can **seize control** again of our common destiny.

Recent Examples

Note: John Kerry and Al Gore used dozens of fighting metaphors in their campaign speeches and debates, but did so in less concentrated ways than John McCain and David Cameron, making quotation unwieldy.

Al Gore, first televised debate of 2000 (10/3/00):

I have spent the last quarter century **fighting** for middle-class working men and women in the United States of America. I believe very deeply that you have to be willing to **stand up and fight** no matter what powerful forces might be on the other side. If you want somebody who is willing to **fight for you**, I am asking for your support and your vote and, yes, your confidence and your willingness to believe that we can do the right thing in America, and be the better for it.

John McCain's 2008 Republican Convention speech:

I'm going to **fight** for my cause every day as your President. I'm going to **fight** to make sure every American has every reason to thank God, as I thank Him: that I'm an American, a proud citizen of the greatest country on earth, and with hard work, strong faith and a little courage, great things are always within our reach. **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 to defend our country from its enemies. Stand up for each other; for beautiful, blessed, bountiful America. Stand up, stand up, stand up and fight. Nothing is inevitable here. We're Americans, and we never give up. We never quit. We never hide from history. We make history. Thank you, and God Bless you.

David Cameron campaign speech (5/4/2010):

Join us in our **fight**. And let me tell you what we're **fighting** for. We're not **fighting** Gordon Brown or Nick Clegg in this election. We're **fighting** poverty, disadvantage, blocked opportunity. We're **fighting** for people. We're **fighting** for all the couples who can't afford to own their own home. We're **fighting** for all the children growing up in homes where no-one works. We're **fighting** for all those who are held back because of their race, their gender or their sexuality. We're **fighting** for all the businesses struggling to stay afloat. We're **fighting** for all the parents who can't find a good school for their kids. We're **fighting** for all those who are struggling to make ends meet, month after month. We're **fighting** for the nurse covered in red tape who just wants to do her job. We're **fighting** for the pensioner who's saved and doesn't want to sell his home to pay for his care. We're **fighting** for everyone who just wants to do the right thing, to do the best for their families and to make a difference to our country. That's why we're **fighting** for change. That's why we're **fighting** to win. So come out and **fight** and win with the Conservatives and Unionists. Let's go for it.

Barack Obama speech (1/22/2010):

Let me tell you - so long as I have the privilege of serving as your President, I'll never stop **fighting** for you. I'll take my lumps, too. I'll never stop **fighting** to bring jobs back to Elyria. I'll never stop **fighting** for an economy where hard work is rewarded, where responsibility is honored, where accountability is upheld, where we're creating the jobs of tomorrow.

...

So long as I'm President, I'll never stop **fighting** for policies that will help restore home values, to redeem the investment that folks have made. I'll never stop **fighting** to give our kids the best education possible; to take the tens of billions of dollars we pay banks to act as middlemen on student loans and invest that money in the students who need it. I'll never stop **fighting** to give every American a fair shake.

...

So long as I'm President, I'll never stop **fighting** to protect you from the kind of deceptive practices we've seen from some in the financial sector. That's why I signed a Credit Card Bill of Rights into law to protect you from surprise charges, retroactive rate hikes, and other unfair rules. And that's why I'm **fighting** for a tough Consumer Financial Protection Agency to protect you against those hidden overdraft fees that can make a single ATM withdrawal cost thirty dollars or more.

I'll never stop **fighting** to open up government. That's why we put in place the toughest ethics laws and toughest transparency rules of any administration in history. So long as I'm President, I'll never stop **fighting** to cut waste and abuse in Washington; to eliminate what we don't need - to pay for what we do; to rein in exploding deficits we've been accumulating for too long.

And I'm going to keep up the **fight** for real, meaningful health insurance reforms. That's why we expanded the children's health insurance program to include four million more kids. And that's why I'll continue **fighting** for reform that will hold the insurance industry accountable and bring more stability and security to folks in our health care system. These are some of the **fight**s we've had. And I can promise you, there will be more **fight**s in the days ahead.

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