



Research article

UDC 81'276.6:32

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18721/JHSS.16409>

EDN: <https://elibrary/PDXDTF>



## THE GEOGRAPHY OF CONFLICT: HOW LOCATIVE METAPHORS AND MORAL CARTOGRAPHIES CORRELATE WITH POLARIZATION IN AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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**Abstract.** Locative metaphors are frequently used in American political discourse, sketching “moral maps” and assigning virtue and vice to specific geographic locations. Nevertheless, systematic linguistic explorations of how these spatial expressions promote partisan polarization has been limited, often overlooking their role as central organizing devices. This study aimed to empirically investigate how Republican and Democratic-aligned political discourse in the U.S. exploits distinct repertoires of locative metaphors. It sought to identify recurring partisan-oriented locative language units, analyze their linguistic features contributing to persuasive pragmatic impact, and understand how they function as means of moral evaluation, perpetuating the “us vs them” mentality. A 2.9-million-word corpus of American political texts (speeches, debate transcripts, op-eds, social media posts; 2015–2025), annotated for partisan alignment, was analyzed using quantitative corpus statistics (frequency, chi-square, Cramer’s V, logistic regression) and qualitative rhetorical and functional-linguistic analysis of locative and spatial metaphors. The undertaken analysis revealed statistically significant partisan preferences: Republican discourse favored expressions like “DC swamp” or “coastal elites,” aligning with moral foundations of Purity and Loyalty, Democratic discourse more frequently used expressions like “Wall Street fat cats” and “sanctuary city,” resonating with Fairness and Care. Republicans employed out-group stigmatizing metaphors more extensively. Logistic regression demonstrated these metaphors strongly predict speakers’ partisan alignment. This article shows that locative metaphors are core cognitive-discursive mechanisms in constructing moral geographies that intensify U.S. political polarization. Understanding this “linguistic cartography of conflict” is crucial for analyzing how political discourse bypasses factual debate, creates divisions, and forms public perception of socio-political phenomena.

**Keywords:** spatial metaphor, locative metaphor, political polarization, American political discourse, corpus linguistics, functional linguistics.

**Citation:** Khramchenko D.S., The Geography of Conflict: How Locative Metaphors and Moral Cartographies Correlate with Polarization in American Political Discourse, *Terra Linguistica*, 16 (4) (2025) 141–158. DOI: 10.18721/JHSS.16409



Научная статья

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18721/JHSS.16409>



## ГЕОГРАФИЯ КОНФЛИКТА: КАК ЛОКАТИВНЫЕ МЕТАФОРЫ И МОРАЛЬНО-НРАВСТВЕННАЯ КАРТОГРАФИЯ КОРРЕЛИРУЮТ С ПОЛЯРИЗАЦИЕЙ В АМЕРИКАНСКОМ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОМ ДИСКУРСЕ

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**Аннотация.** В американском политическом дискурсе активно используются пространственные и локативные метафоры, формирующие в сознании реципиентов особую «морально-нравственную карту», привязывающую добродетели и пороки к конкретным географическим локациям. Данное явление не может не привлекать внимание исследователей-языковедов. Тем не менее проблема локативных выражений как катализаторов политической поляризации изучена лингвистами недостаточно. Целью настоящего исследования стало рассмотрение того, как в республиканском и демократическом дискурсах США по-разному реализуются специфические партийные арсеналы локативных метафор. Автор выявляет повторяющиеся локативные номинации, маркированные соотнесенностью с конкретной политической партией, и анализирует их ключевые лингвистические особенности, связанные с оказанием персузивного прагматического воздействия, выражением упрощенной морально-нравственной оценки и интенсификацией политической поляризации. Корпус американских политических текстов объемом 2,9 млн слов (речи, стенограммы дебатов, статьи, посты в социальных сетях; 2015–2025 гг.), аннотированный по принципу партийной принадлежности продуцентов, был проанализирован с помощью количественной корпусной статистики (частотность, хи-квадрат, V Крамера, логистическая регрессия) и сочетания риторического и функционально-лингвистического анализа локативных и пространственных метафор. Исследование позволило выявить статистически значимые партийные преференции. Республиканский дискурс отдает предпочтение локативным метафорам (DC swamp, coastal elites), коррелирующим с морально-нравственными принципами Чистоты и Лояльности. В демократическом дискурсе чаще используются метафоры, которые ассоциируются со Справедливостью и Заботой (Wall Street fat cats, sanctuay city). Кроме того, республиканские продуценты более активно используют метафоры, стигматизирующие аутгруппу. Логистическая регрессия показала, что присутствие локативных метафор в тексте позволяет с высокой точностью предсказать партийную принадлежность автора. Пространственные и локативные метафоры являются ключевыми когнитивно-дискурсивными механизмами конструирования морально-нравственной географии и усиления политической поляризации в США. Понимание этой «лингвистической картографии конфликта» имеет решающее значение для анализа того, как политический дискурс обходит фактические дебаты, создает разногласия и формирует общественное восприятие социально-политических явлений.

**Ключевые слова:** пространственная метафора, локативная метафора, политическая поляризация, американский политический дискурс, корпусная лингвистика, функциональная лингвистика.

**Для цитирования:** Храмченко Д.С. География конфликта: как локативные метафоры и морально-нравственная картография коррелируют с поляризацией в американском политическом дискурсе // *Terra Linguistica*. 2025. Т. 16. № 4. С. 141–158. DOI: 10.18721/JHSS.16409



## Introduction

When American politicians and other producers of political discourse speak of “draining the swamp,” “coastal elites,” “San Francisco values,” or “the heartland,” they are not merely naming locations. They are sketching a moral map that tells discourse recipients where virtue and vice reside. On that map, Washington, D.C. becomes a fetid marsh of corruption, Silicon Valley a fragile bubble of techno-hubris, Wall Street a place for siphoning wealth, and the rural Midwest an island of authentic decency ringed by decadent shores. Spatial verbalizations of this kind saturate contemporary political discourse in the U.S. It reduces complex policy disputes and ideological subtleties to a geography of righteousness and peril, allowing political actors and ordinary voters to orient themselves instantly in the multilayered functional-pragmatic space of political communication and align with a camp of their favor. Although journalists, panelists, and online commentators frequently note the color-coded shorthand of “red states” and “blue states” [1], systematic linguistic research into the cognitive-disursive mechanisms of linguistic polarization by means of these locative metaphors remains surprisingly thin.

Conceptual-metaphor studies have shown that people reason about abstractions by projecting them onto concrete domains (e.g., bodily motion or physical space) and critical-discourse scientists have documented how collective identities are constructed with the help of pronouns and evaluative adjectives. Still missing is a comprehensive account of how place-words themselves become argumentative drivers. Which toponyms and spatial frames cluster with which parties? How are they grammatically packaged for maximum pragmatic impact? Why are they so effective at strengthening the “us vs. them” divide? Existing linguistic analyses often treat spatial terms as colorful rhetorical embellishments to more substantive ideologically-laden content, rather than as central organizing discursive devices that channel moral judgement way before any policy detail is even considered.

This article attempts to bridge the gap by examining a corpus of recent U.S. political texts, including prepared speeches, debate transcripts, congressional records, campaign e-mails, op-eds, and high-engagement social-media posts, annotated for explicit partisan alignment. Focusing on the locative level of linguistic expression, it asks three guiding questions:

1. Which locative metaphors recur most frequently in Republican-aligned vs. Democratic-aligned political discourse, and how strong is their partisan skew?
2. What linguistic features give these place terms their persuasive pragmatic force?
3. In what ways do metaphors function as shortcuts for moral evaluation, enabling speakers to praise an in-group (“us”) or stigmatize an out-group (“them”) without the labor of explicit argument?

In order to provide a clear analytical framework, this article establishes a specific terminology. The broadest category is place-related language, which refers to any linguistic expression invoking geography. Inside this category, we focus on figurative language used for the framing of political actors and socio-political phenomena in a spatial way. Our primary umbrella term, chosen for the purpose of the study, is “locative metaphor,” which we define functionally to include a range of cognitive-disursive devices. In the article, this term encompasses: (a) strict conceptual metaphors that map abstract political and ideological concepts onto a spatial source domain (e.g., GOVERNMENT IS A SWAMP), often actualized through the use of spatial nouns (e.g., swamp, bubble); (b) toponymic metonymies, with a toponym (i.e., proper place name) standing for different socio-political institutions or people associated with them (e.g., “Washington” for the U.S. federal government, “Wall Street” for the business elite of the country); and (c) other figurative uses of place names which function in a similar manner (e.g., “San Francisco values”). Although terms like “spatial metaphor” are often used in the scientific literature, we will consistently use “locative metaphor” as our defined umbrella term to group these functionally similar expressions, all of which contribute to the construction of “moral cartographies,” i.e., mental maps that assign virtue and vice to specific geographic locations [2], thereby simplifying the semantics and pragmatics of complex political issues into mere spatial conflicts.



By integrating quantitative corpus statistics with rhetorical and functional-linguistic analysis, the study aims to demonstrate that locative frames in contemporary American political discourse are not mere peripheral ornaments but rather important mechanisms in the discursive construction of polarization. They compress ideological world-pictures into several lexemes (e.g., “Hollywood liberals,” “banana-republic tactics”) that travel effortlessly and virally through headlines, hashtags, slogans, and sound bites. Each repetition further perpetuates a topography of suspicion and mistrust in which political positions and affiliations come already pre-labelled as home-grown or foreign, clean or contaminated. Understanding how such pragmatically-charged topography is linguistically created in discourse, and how differently each political party promotes it, is essential for determining why American political communication so often bypasses factual debate and leaps straight into othering based on geographic space and ideological “elsewhere”.

### Theoretical Background

The pervasive use of locative metaphors in American political discourse is not simply a rhetorical flourish. It reflects fundamental cognitive processes and serves important socio-political functions. Understanding the polarizing pragmatic effect of such discursive elements as “DC swamp” or “heartland” requires integrating perspectives from conceptual metaphor theory, moral psychology, functional linguistics, and critical discourse analysis.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), pioneered by Lakoff and Johnson [3, 4], provides the foundational framework. CMT suggests that human cognition relies heavily on metaphor to understand abstract concepts (e.g., politics, ideology, morality, patriotism) through more concrete, embodied experiences (e.g., space, journeys, conflict, containers, etc.) [5]. Abstract political notions and processes are frequently mapped onto spatial schemas. For instance, the nation may be conceptualized as a CONTAINER with borders to defend, leading to very specific “border invasion” or “Fortress America” frames, political groups and movements as occupying specific locations on a CENTER-PERIPHERY axis (“Beltway insiders” vs. “fly-over country”), or political states as positions on a VERTICAL scale (“DC swamp” as someplace low and contaminated as opposed to the “ivory tower” as high and detached) [6]. These mappings are not arbitrary. They draw on universal bodily experiences of orientation and containment, which lend the metaphors intuitive weight and affective resonance [7]. This study examines how spatial source domains are selectively used by different partisan groups to structure the target domain of political virtue and vice.

Although CMT explains the cognitive-discursive mechanism behind the use of locative metaphors by political actors, Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), developed by Haidt and fellow researchers [8–10], helps demonstrate why exactly certain locative metaphors resonate within specific partisan camps and contribute to the larger functional-pragmatic effect of political polarization in discourse. MFT proposes that human morality rests on several foundational psychological predispositions, e.g., Care/Harm, Fairness/Cheating, Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, and Sanctity/Degradation (Purity). Political ideologies, particularly on the liberal-conservative spectrum in the U.S., tend to prioritize and apply these cognitive structures differently [11]. Conservative political subdiscourse, on the one hand, often emphasizes Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity, expressing them in metaphors that invoke threats to the in-group and homeland (e.g., “border invasion,” evoking Loyalty/Authority) or contamination (e.g., “DC swamp,” activating the schema of Sanctity/Degradation). On the other hand, the so-called progressive political subdiscourse, which often foregrounds Care and Fairness, may exploit locative metaphors highlighting suffering or inequality (e.g., “inner-city war zones,” connected with Care/Harm, or “Wall Street fat cats” vs. “Main Street,” associated with Fairness/Cheating). In this article, locative metaphors are hypothesized to function as efficient carriers of underlying moral concerns. They activate specific foundations to both elicit targeted emotional responses (disgust, fear, anger, compassion) from discourse recipients and solidify their group identity (“us”).



With CMT explaining the specifics of recipients' cognitive mechanics and MFT clarifying the moral resonance of locative metaphors, their function as instruments in the discourse of political polarization is best understood by examining the discursive construction of Otherness and the 'us vs. them' dichotomy. Language is not merely a tool for communication. It is a primary medium through which identities and power relations are negotiated [12]. As numerous scholars in linguistics, political studies, psychology, and sociology have demonstrated, a key function of language and discourse in the communicative sphere of politics is to create and reinforce publicly perceived group boundaries [13–16]. This is achieved through what Wodak describes as the discursive strategies of inclusion and exclusion [17]. They rely heavily on a distinctive pervasive ideological pattern, i.e., positive self-presentation of the in-group ("us") and unavoidably negative other-presentation of the out-group ("them") [18; 19].

In this article, we explore a key linguistic mechanism behind political polarization in the United States. Political polarization is often understood not just as a case of ideological disagreement on political issues but more critically as the so-called affective polarization, i.e., a cognitive-based process characterized by increasing in-group solidarity and a corresponding growth in distrust and animosity towards any other political out-group [1; 14; 15]. As a socio-political phenomenon, it manifests conspicuously through the use of language. Thus, from a linguistic point of view, polarization is conceptualized as the set of lexical choices and rhetorical strategies (e.g., framing techniques and entire metaphorical systems like the locative ones analyzed in this study) by means of which affective polarization is enacted and normalized in American public discourse.

Polarizing construction of American political discourse is pivotal for the imposition of collective identities, which are not static but rather dynamic relational concepts constantly being re-created through language [20]. Ideologies, defined by van Dijk [21] as mental systems, which organize group opinions and collective attitudes, provide the foundation for these representations. Political discourse then uses a wide range of linguistic and rhetorical strategies to express and reinforce specific ideological positions. These strategies typically include lexicalization (e.g., using politically charged lexemes), argumentation models (e.g., framing out-groups as a menace or aberration), as well as persuasive techniques and rhetorical moves directed at blame transfer to strengthen the perceived moral superiority of the in-group and undermining or tarnishing everything that is connected with the out-group [22–24].

The process of political polarization in discourse often relies on grounding abstract ideological conflicts in expressive and easily understood terms. In this respect, toponyms and other place-related expressions become powerful and abundant symbolic resources, which can be strategically used in political communication. As cultural geographers like Cresswell [25] argue, places have always been imbued with rich, pre-existing socio-cultural semantics. Political actors and discourse producers resort to the strategic use of such shared connotations, turning nominations like "San Francisco" into indexical shortcuts triggering multiple stereotypes and evaluative judgments all at once. By repeatedly associating the in-group with good and authentic places and the out-group with corrupt and alien ones, politically motivated speakers solidify group boundaries and make the opposing camp's ideology feel geographically grounded. In this article, we position locative metaphors not merely as excessive rhetorical decorations of speech but as a primary discursive mechanism through which the abstract ideological division into "us vs. them" is enacted, verbalized, spatialized, and intensified in modern-day political communication.

This study also draws on principles from Political Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which examine the relationship between language and discourse, power structures, ideological views, and essential social practices [26–29]. From this perspective, locative metaphors are not neutral descriptors but rhetorically persuasive framing devices [30; 31]. By putting selective focus on certain aspects of socio-political reality and embedding evaluative judgments with the help of



geographic terms, metaphors construct particular versions of the worldview that serve partisan interests. Labeling regions or groups with phrases like “Bible Belt” or “sanctuary cities” does the ideological work as it simplifies complex socio-political phenomena, while also reinforcing stereotypes, legitimizing some ideas, and delegitimizing others [32]. The strategic vagueness and high indexicality of many place-related metaphors make them effective tools for the creation of broad-stroke enemy images (“them”) and idealized self-representations (“us”) without a necessity for meticulous argumentation [33].

This research acknowledges the constitutive socio-cultural meanings attached to places themselves [25; 34]. Metaphors like “New York values” derive their pragmatic impact not just from the abstract mapping but also from the rich pre-existing cultural connotations associated with these specific locations perceived by the majority of native speakers. Political discourse producers deliberately resort to these long-established place-identities, amplifying or contesting them by means of metaphorical semantic framing to align with their communicative goals.

Previous studies have examined political metaphors generally, e.g., [35–38], or individual spatial frames in particular (e.g., the nation-as-body/container) [32]. Nevertheless, a systematic corpus-based analysis, which concentrates specifically on the range of polarizing locative metaphors in current American political discourse, their quantitative partisan tendencies, as well as their connection to moral framing remains less developed. This article aims to fill that gap by empirically identifying the moral cartographies constructed and maintained through locative expressive phrasing by Republican and Democratic speakers, thereby revealing a key cognitive-discursive mechanism behind contemporary political polarization in the U.S.

## Material and Method

### Corpus construction

The empirical material of this study comprises a purpose-built corpus of contemporary U.S. political discourse covering the period from January 2015 to May 2025. All texts were drawn from five publicly accessible genres that together capture day-to-day partisan verbal interaction: prepared speeches of professional politicians and debate transcripts, op-eds, and commentary from major national media outlets (e.g., Fox News, MSNBC, CNN, The New York Times, etc.), official partisan and governmental documents and congressional records, and social media posts (X/Twitter, Facebook – both currently banned in the Russian Federation). For each text the party affiliation of the principal speaker or outlet was recorded, leading to the creation of three sub-corpora of comparable size: Republican-aligned (1.0 M words), Democratic-aligned (1.1 M), and mixed/neutral (0.8 M). Duplicate content, paywall reprints, and syndicated materials appearing in more than one venue were removed. All the data are in the public domain and contain no private identifiers.

### Pre-processing and linguistic annotation

All selected texts were sentence-segmented and tokenized with spaCy 3.7. Dependency parses and part-of-speech tags were then passed to a rule-based module that flagged candidate locative metaphors and metonyms. The seed list of triggers included toponyms and spatial nouns identified in pilot reading (e.g., swamp, beltway, heartland, bubble, wall, frontier, invasion, rust belt, banana republic, sanctuary city, blue bubble, fly-over) and their immediate collocates within a five-token window. To broaden the study’s coverage, a transformer language model (RoBERTa-base) fine-tuned on 2,000 manually annotated sentences predicted additional metaphoric uses of city and state names when they were accompanied by evaluative adjectives or moral nouns (e.g., values, elites, insiders). Each flagged occasion was written out with its sentence context, lexical head, grammatical role, and pragmatic polarity (e.g., positive, negative, ambiguous).

### Reliability procedures

Two postgraduate annotators independently validated ten percent of the flagged sentences (approximately 1,800 instances). Agreement on metaphor identification reached Cohen’s  $\kappa = 0.89$ .



Agreement on polarity was  $\kappa = 0.84$ . Disagreements were discussed and resolved, with the refined guidelines later applied to the remaining empirical data by one annotator with random spot checks every 1,000 sentences.

### Quantitative measures

Token counts were normalized per 10,000 running words to compensate for genre and length variation. Partisan orientation was tested with chi-square statistics ( $df = 2$ ), and the effect size was expressed as Cramer's V. For multi-word metaphorical expressions, collocation salience was calculated with log-likelihood scores. All p-values were Bonferroni-adjusted in the family of planned comparisons.

### Qualitative analysis

To establish the pragma-semantic effect created by the most partisan-aligned locative metaphors, 50 sentences per key term were selected (20 from each partisan sub-corpora and 10 from the mixed sub-corpus) and subjected to close reading. The functional-linguistic analysis focused on syntactic aspects, accompanying evaluative lexemes, the presence of conflictual verbs, and the use of hyperbolic quantifiers. These micro-readings strengthen interpretations of the frequency patterns reported in Section 4 of this article, illustrating how identical place words become vehicles for diametrically opposite morality-driven narratives within the functional-pragmatic space of political discourse.

## Results & Discussion

The undertaken analysis of the corpus reveals that discursive elements with spatial semantics, including metaphors, metonyms, figuratively used toponyms, and locative expressions are not only popular among political discourse producers in the U.S. but also highly polarized as they function as key linguistic resources for the construction of strong partisan identities and moral geographies. Nominations of physical space and location are frequently invoked in polarizing discourse as they serve as a means of associating political affiliations, value systems, beliefs, and threats with specific geographical areas.

The “*Red State*” vs. “*Blue State*” dichotomy simplifies complex electorates into monolithic blocks. Terms “*coastal elites*” vs. “*the heartland*” or “*flyover country*” construct an opposition based on geography and associated values, pitting urban/suburban “them” against rural/small-town “us” or vice versa, depending on the discourse producer and their communicative goals. The “*DC swamp*” or “*Beltway insiders*” metaphorically locates corruption and detachment in the nation’s capital, contrasting it with an authentic “*Real America*” elsewhere. Specific cities can become shorthand for negative stereotypes. For example, associating “*San Francisco values*” with moral decay can be seen in the excerpt from the following article:

*“San Francisco values went national after the 2020 elections, when the supposedly centrist President Joe Biden governed from the hard left. Under Biden, the southern border was thrown wide open, and millions of illegal immigrants flooded the country, accommodated by lax enforcement and loose refugee policies. Gender ideology was promulgated by regulations of the Health and Human Services Department”*<sup>1</sup>.

In this extract from a highly polarized political discourse, metonymy (“*San Francisco values*”) creates an easily recognizable shorthand, inviting readers to transfer pre-existing stereotypes about San Francisco onto national politics as this toponym stands in for a bundle of left-leaning cultural and political positions. Evaluative adverbs and adjectives (“*supposedly centrist*,” “*hard left*”) frame Biden as deceptive and extreme, persuading readers to distrust Biden’s self-presentation. Dramatically expressive verbs (“*thrown wide open*,” “*flooded*”) use expressive kinetic imagery to convey chaos and loss of control while also intensifying the feeling of threat. Hyperbolic elements (“*millions*,” “*flooded*”) aim at the magnification of the scale of the problem, evoking the pragmatic effect of moral panic in recipients. Lexemes with negative connotations (“*illegal immigrants*,” “*lax*,” “*loose*,” “*gender ideology*”)

<sup>1</sup> Smith W.J., 2024: The year ‘San Francisco values’ finally failed, National Review, 30.11.2024. Available at: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2024/11/2024-the-year-san-francisco-values-finally-failed/> (accessed 18.06.2025).



spread a blanket of disapproval. Cooperation of multiple linguistic units in the passage synergetically equates “*San Francisco values*” with national moral decline.

Foreign countries are often positioned as the “other,” being responsible for domestic problems (“*China took our jobs*,” “*Mexico sends criminals*,” “*Russia interferes with elections*”), e.g.:

“*China has gotten rich off of the United States. They steal our trade secrets. They take our jobs away*”<sup>2</sup>.

“*When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists*”<sup>3</sup>.

This deflects internal issues and promotes an “us” (America) vs. “them” (foreign danger) mentality. Locations associated with perceived failures or scandals of opponents are repeatedly nominated. For example, “*Benghazi*” is often used to criticize Hillary Clinton:

“*And the Benghazi record is clear: Secretary Clinton failed to provide adequate security for U.S. government personnel assigned to Benghazi and Tripoli*”<sup>4</sup>.

By tying political positions to physical locations, discourse producers create tangible, easily understood spatial dimensions for the “us vs. them” conflict by drawing on both strong regional identities, cultural stereotypes, nationalistic sentiments, and even xenophobia.

The importance of polarizing spatial nominations is further supported by the undertaken quantitative exploration. As established in the Introduction, we use the umbrella term “locative metaphor” to group these functionally similar expressions for analysis.

Calculations confirm the distinct locative-metaphorical repertoires favored by each of the two leading American political parties. A number of locative metaphors exhibit statistically significant partisan orientation (p < .001 after Bonferroni correction), as detailed in Table 1.

Such terms as “*DC swamp*,” “*Beltway insiders*,” “*coastal elites*,” “*fly-over country*” (reclaimed), “*Real America*,” “*Sanctuary cities*” (used pejoratively), “*border invasion*,” and “*People’s Republic of California*” appear in the corpus with significantly higher frequency in Republican-aligned texts. Conversely, expressions “*banana republic*,” “*Wall Street fat cats*,” “*Bible Belt*” (as critique), and “*blue bubble*” are significantly more frequent in Democratic-aligned discourse. The strength of these associations is considerable. Cramer’s V values (see Table 2) indicate large effect sizes (V ≥ .25) for certain core locative metaphors (e.g., “*DC swamp*,” “*coastal elites*,” “*border invasion*,” “*Wall Street fat cats*,” and “*Sanctuary cities*”) confirming their status as strong partisan markers. Notably, metaphors like “*Heartland*” and “*Rust Belt*” show less significant partisan skew overall, suggesting they function as more contested or context-dependent discursive elements (see Table 1). Compare these extracts from Donald Trump’s speech on agricultural innovation (1) and Barack Obama’s address to the 2016 Democratic Convention (2):

(1) “*We will rebuild rural America. (Applause.) American farmers – (applause) – thank you – American farmers pour their hearts into their crops and their love into their great communities. That’s why they call this the Heartland. And those maps, those electoral maps, they were all red. Beautiful red. (Laughter.) Beautiful. (Applause.) If you look at those maps, it’s almost like – wow*”<sup>5</sup>.

(2) “*See, my grandparents, they came from they came from the Heartland. Their ancestors began settling there about 200 years ago. I don’t know if they had their birth certificates but –*

*[Laughter and Applause]*

<sup>2</sup> Barrasso J. (SenJohnBarrasso), [China has gotten rich off of the United States. They steal our trade secrets. They take our jobs away...], [Post], X, 25.04.2024. Available at: <https://x.com/SenJohnBarrasso/status/1909267456364884012> (accessed 18.06.2025).

<sup>3</sup> ABC News, What Donald Trump has said about Mexico and vice versa, *ABC News*, 31.08.2016. Available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trump-mexico-vice-versa/story?id=41767704> (accessed 18.06.2025).

<sup>4</sup> Hicks G.N., What the Benghazi attack taught me about Hillary Clinton, *Fox News*, 11.09.2016. Available at: <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/what-the-benghazi-attack-taught-me-about-hillary-clinton> (accessed 18.06.2025).

<sup>5</sup> Trump D.J., Remarks by President Trump on agricultural innovation [Speech transcript], *The White House*, 22.06.2017. Available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-agricultural-innovation/> (accessed 18.06.2025).



**Table 1. Frequency of key locative metaphors across party-labelled sub-corpora  
(normalized per 10,000 running words)**

Locative metaphor	Republican	Democratic	Mixed/Neutral	$\chi^2$ (df = 2)	p-value
DC swamp	4.6	0.8	1.4	129.3	< .001
Beltway insiders	3.3	0.4	0.9	114.5	< .001
Coastal elites	2.1	0.4	0.7	91.2	< .001
Fly-over country	1.6	0.2	0.6	72.7	< .001
Heartland	1.2	0.9	1.05	1.06	> .07
Real America	2.2	0.5	1.1	76.4	< .001
Sanctuary cities	1.8	0.2	0.6	93.2	< .001
Border invasion	2.3	0.3	1.2	127.1	< .001
Banana republic	0.5	1.4	0.7	61.3	< .001
Wall Street fat cats	0.3	2.1	0.6	82.9	< .001
Bible Belt (pejorative)	0.2	0.8	0.5	33.1	< .001
Blue bubble	0.1	1.6	0.3	65.6	< .001
People's Republic of California	0.6	0.2	0.1	51.2	< .001
Inner-city war zone	1.2	0.7	0.9	22.9	< .001
Rust Belt	0.8	0.6	1.1	0.6	> .05

*and they were they were Scotch-Irish mostly, farmers, teachers, ranch hands, pharmacists, oil rig workers, hearty, small-town folk. Some were Democrats but a lot of them, maybe even most of them were Republicans, the ‘Party of Lincoln’”<sup>6</sup>.*

In these examples, Trump’s discourse aligns with the broader Republican pattern of spatial antagonism documented earlier, with the term “*Heartland*” being quickly color-coded red and folded into populist triumphalism as a token of victory (“*those electoral maps, they were all red*”). The same term in Democratic discourse can be re-historicized to claim shared lineage and civic pluralism and visibly dampen partisan polarity to appeal to Republican-aligned voters.

To estimate the statistical strength of particular partisan associations, Cramer’s V was calculated for the metaphors that showed a significant partisan orientation in Table 1. The results, indicating the practical size of the partisan effect, are presented in Table 2.

The Republican locative repertoire consistently maps virtue onto the nation’s interior and projects vice onto its coasts and the federal center. Instrumental to this is the “*DC swamp*” and “*Beltway insiders*” frame, which evokes the pragmatic effect of visceral disgust through an impurity/contamination schema, portraying the federal government as a corrupt, self-dealing ecosystem requiring radical “drainage.” Its high frequency and strong Republican orientation, reinforced by collocations with such lexemes as “corruption,” “creatures,” and “drain” (see Table 3), underscore its centrality.

Complementing this is the “*coastal elites*” vs. “*heartland*” / “*fly-over country*” / “*Real America*” binary. It activates a CENTER-PERIPHERY schema, positioning the interior as authentic, humble, and overlooked (associated with lexemes “*hard-working*,” “*values*,” and “*forgotten*”) (Table 3). Casting coastal urban centers as loci of arrogant, out-of-touch power is linked to lexemes “*arrogant*” and “*lecture*.” Such discursive framing allows conservatives to claim moral and cultural majoritarianism, e.g.:

*“According to Senator Cruz, the Democrats are now the party for the ‘rich, coastal elite’ and the Republicans represent people who work for a living ... including ‘truck drivers, steel workers, cops, firefighters, waitresses’”<sup>7</sup>.*

<sup>6</sup> Obama B., President Obama addresses the Democratic Convention [Speech transcript], CNN, 27.07.2016. Available at: <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/se/date/2016-07-27/segment/05> (accessed 18.06.2025).

<sup>7</sup> TMZ, Senator Ted Cruz Hollywood is ‘out of touch’ ... With blue collar America!!!, TMZ, 19.11.2024. Available at: <https://www.tmz.com/2024/11/19/texas-senator-ted-cruz-calls-hollywood-democratic-party-out-of-touch/> (accessed 18.06.2025).



**Table 2. Effect size (Cramer's V) for locative metaphors with significant partisan orientation**

Locative metaphor	Cramer's V	Direction of skew
DC swamp	.39	Republican »
Beltway insiders	.31	Republican »
Coastal elites	.36	Republican »
Fly-over country	.26	Republican »
Real America	.30	Republican »
Sanctuary cities	.33	Republican »
Border invasion	.32	Republican »
Banana republic	.21	Democratic »
Wall Street fat cats	.29	Democratic »
Bible Belt (pejorative)	.22	Democratic »
Blue bubble	.25	Democratic »
People's Republic of California	.23	Republican »
Inner-city war zone	.14	Republican »

Interpreting V (df = 2):  $\geq .25$  = large,  $.15 - .24$  = medium,  $.10 - .14$  = small partisan association.

**Table 3. Top party-specific collocates  
( $\pm 5$ -token window) for selected metaphors (log-likelihood  $\geq 10.83$ ;  $p < .001$ )**

Metaphor	Sub-corpus	High-salience collocates (LL score)
DC swamp	Republican	drain (119) • corruption (86) • creatures (39)
Coastal elites	Republican	arrogant (78) • out-of-touch (48) • lecture (24)
Heartland	Republican	hard-working (43) • values (41) • forgotten (24)
Banana republic	Democratic	turning into (37) • authoritarian (30) • sham (19)
Wall Street fat cats	Democratic	bailouts (64) • rigged (51) • greed (47)
Blue bubble	Democratic	insulated (32) • echo-chamber (22) • suburban (14)

In this example, the discourse producer performs identity anchoring by aligning Republican identity with hard-working professions (“*truck drivers, steel workers, cops, firefighters, waitresses*”) and making these jobs emblematic of authentic Americanness through the opposition to the locative expression “*rich, coastal elite*,” standing for the implied Democrats.

Furthermore, metaphors “*border invasion*” and “*Fortress America*” use a CONTAINER/WARFARE schema to militarize the verbalization of the topic of immigration, representing migrants as hostile forces and justifying aggressive border control as necessary territorial defense – a theme strongly gravitating towards Republican rhetoric. For instance, in the following X post, its author references the Trump Administration’s vision for a “Fortress America after the liberation of Canada”:

“*I think this is the Trump Administration’s plan for Fortress America after the liberation of Canada. Unassailable and impenetrable. Unlimited resources and energy. Our full economic potential unleashed. Peace, freedom, and prosperity for generations. The envy of the world*”<sup>8</sup>.

Discursive elements “*Fortress America*,” “*unassailable*,” and “*impenetrable*” are directly connected with the metaphor of the fortress (CONTAINER + WAR). The lexeme “*liberation*” correlates with the WAR and MORAL SALVATION schemata. Implications that, if the whole country is a fortress, then any outsiders are potential invaders, and that current neighbors are potential hostiles or captives,

<sup>8</sup> Tisdale Z. (ztisdale), I think this is the Trump Administration’s plan for Fortress America after the liberation of Canada., [Post], X, 03.03.2025. Available at: <https://x.com/ztisdale/status/1896561680194408898> (accessed 18.06.2025).



invite the discourse recipients to experience immigration and continental political and diplomatic relations not as policy puzzles but as a battle narrative with a guaranteed happy ending, but only if the walls hold.

Compact place-as-vice metonyms, e.g., “*San Francisco values*,” “*Hollywood liberals*,” or “*People’s Republic of California*” function as indexical shortcuts. They condense critical opinions on social liberalism and media influence into geographically anchored slurs that have become associated with moral decay or authoritarianism. This locative logic aligns strongly with MFT’s emphasis on Purity/ Sanctity, Loyalty/In-group, and Authority, and contributes to the construction of a geography of a virtuous besieged core, threatened by internal decay and external assault. For example, Republican-aligned criticism of socio-political challenges in California in online political communication is often verbalized through the locative metaphor “*People’s Republic of California*,” likening the state to communist China and separating it from the rest of the country:

“*People’s Republic of California thanks ‘Dear Leader Newsom’ for his inspiring leadership...*”<sup>9</sup>.

“*Move away from the People’s Republic of California and you’ll find it much easier to live. A million dollar home in middle America is still a mansion. A million dollar home in Florida will get you an amazing house or significant acreage with a decent house*”<sup>10</sup>.

Democratic-aligned political discourse in the U.S. frequently inverts the Republican map or highlights different locative associations, often focusing on economic injustice, social progress, policies of inclusion, or threats to democratic norms originating from conservative or corporate centers of power. The enduring binary of “*Wall Street fat cats*” vs. “*Main Street*,” for instance, frames the economic conflict as a geographical struggle between predatory finance, linked with strong pragmatically-charged lexemes “*greed*,” “*rigged*,” and “*bailouts*” (see Table 3), and the implicitly wholesome productive economy, e.g.:

“*Wall Street is puking big-time, and the Sell buttons are working overtime whenever the word ‘tariff’ passes from Donald Trump’s lips. If you listen to the fat cat community long enough, you’d think Trump has been in office four years rather than four weeks, and that a small trade surcharge on a car from Mexico is leading us into economic Armageddon*”<sup>11</sup>.

Vivid metaphors, including derogatory “*fat cat community*” and “*economic Armageddon*,” coupled with hyperbolization, generate the pragmatic effect of skepticism and ironically dismissive criticism of overreaction and fear-mongering by financial elites.

The “*banana republic*” metaphor relocates the U.S. to a space associated with democratic failure and corruption, typically deployed to reproach what is perceived as authoritarian tendencies or norm-breaking by Republicans, often co-occurring with lexemes “*turning into*,” “*authoritarian*,” and “*sham*” (Table 3). Its functional-pragmatic shock value derives from the conspicuous spatial mismatch with national self-perception, e.g.:

“*Mukasey, who served as the nation’s top law enforcement officer under President George W. Bush, told the Washington Post in an interview Monday that ‘it would be like a banana republic’ if Trump followed through on his threat at Sunday night’s debate*”<sup>12</sup>.

Similarly, the critical use of the “*Bible Belt*” transforms a regional identity marker into a symbol of perceived religio-political rigidity. Metaphors like “*Sanctuary cities*” or “*Blue wall*” frame progressive policies as protective spaces, i.e., the so-called moral havens and defensive shields against what is perceived as harmful federal policies or regressive social forces with the help of BARRIER/

<sup>9</sup> DuCate N. (Nick\_duCat), People’s Republic of California thanks ‘Dear Leader Newsom’ for his inspiring leadership..., [Post], X, 08.05.2025. Available at: [https://x.com/Nick\\_duCat/status/1920302173524529291](https://x.com/Nick_duCat/status/1920302173524529291) (accessed 18.06.2025).

<sup>10</sup> Mason M. (mjmason184), Move away from the People’s Republic of California and you’ll find it much easier to live., [Post], X, 29.04.2025. Available at: <https://x.com/mjmason184/status/1917176851471978766> (accessed 18.06.2025).

<sup>11</sup> Gasparino C., Ignore the stock market – Wall Street dealing with painful detox from government spending addiction, *New York Post*, 10.03.2025. Available at: <https://nypost.com/2025/03/10/business/ignore-the-stock-market-wall-street-dealing-with-painful-detox-from-government-spending-addiction/> (accessed 18.05.2025).

<sup>12</sup> Wright D., Mukasey rips Trump threat: ‘It would be like a banana republic’, *CNN*, 11.10.2016. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/11/politics/michael-mukasey-interview-trump-banana-republic/index.html> (accessed 18.06.2025).



CONTAINER schemas. Phrasing, that indicates areas of crisis, e.g., “*Rust Belt*,” “*opioid corridor*,” or “*inner-city war zones*,” and can sometimes be used by Republicans to criticize Democratic governance, is often employed by Democrats to highlight systemic neglect and demand economic justice, for instance, framing issues like gun violence as public health emergencies that requires intervention, drawing on Care/Harm framing. This repertoire borrows more heavily on MFT’s Care/Harm and Fairness/Cheating foundations, thus contributing to the construction of a geography where progressive enclaves offer refuge or models for justice against the background of economic exploitation and social regression, e.g., Los Angeles City Councilmember Curren D. Price Jr.’s statement:

“*Sanctuary cities are not just a legal framework. They represent a moral commitment to upholding human dignity, protecting families and ensuring that everyone, regardless of their immigrant status, can live without fear*”<sup>13</sup>.

Price’s utterance is a tightly packed moral frame wrapped in a rhetorically effective locative metaphor, which linguistically constructs Los Angeles under Democratic governance as a protective container whose legitimacy stems less from statutory texts than from an ethical imperative to shield vulnerable people.

To go beyond metaphors, the analysis of the framing function of this language was performed (Table 4). Its results reveal a notable asymmetry. Indeed, both parties use locative metaphors to stigmatize out-groups (“them”). However Republican political subdiscourse uses negative othering metaphors at a significantly higher rate compared to their use of positive in-group (“us”) metaphors. This quantitative finding suggests Republican rhetoric may rely more heavily on constructing external or internal enemies through locative framing, compared to Democratic rhetoric, which, although certainly being critical, shows a slightly more balanced, though still predominantly negative functional-pragmatic spatial orientation in the corpus.

Table 4 presents the aggregated frequencies of metaphors used in the corpus to praise “us” vs. those used to condemn “them”.

**Table 4. Aggregate use of “us”-framing vs. “them”-framing locative metaphors  
(normalized per 10,000 words)**

Stance category	Republican corpus	Democratic corpus	Mixed/Neutral corpus	$\chi^2$ (df = 2)	p-value
In-group (“us”) locatives	6.1	3.2	2.6	56.4	< .001
Out-group (“them”) locatives	19.3	6.9	9.1	168.7	< .001

The study also confirms the strategic flexibility of certain metaphors. Analysis shows that locative geographical metaphors are polysemous and mutable, with a potential to be co-opted by the opposing side (e.g., conservatives calling progressive cities “*war zones*,” progressives sarcastically tweeting about “*Y'all-Qaeda*” in rural militias, Democrats occasionally labeling Republicans as “*coastal elites*” to show they themselves are what they try to condemn, etc.). Local context also matters. For example, “*Rust Belt*” in a Pittsburgh union hall carries a different pragmatic load than in a Wall Street earnings call. Figurative expressions like “*DC swamp*” and “*banana republic*” can be invoked by either side, depending on which party is currently in more power.

Despite the flexibility, the pattern of usage of locative metaphors is strongly indicative of partisanship. The logistic regression model (Table 5) demonstrates that the mere presence (or absence) of key metaphors in an utterance can predict the speaker’s partisan alignment with considerable accuracy. Odds ratios exceed 4 for Republican markers like “*DC swamp*” and “*coastal elites*” and fall below 0.3

<sup>13</sup> Lozano A.V., Democratic-controlled cities are finalizing plans to oppose mass deportation, *NBC News*, 28.11.2024. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/democratic-controlled-cities-are-finalizing-plans-oppose-mass-deportation-rcna180851> (accessed 18.06.2025).



**Table 5. Logistic regression predicting party alignment from the presence of locative metaphors (reference = Mixed/Neutral sentences)**

Predictor (binary)	$\beta$	SE	z	p	Odds ratio
DC swamp	1.52	0.17	8.94	< .001	4.57
Coastal elites	1.44	0.12	12.0	< .001	4.22
Border invasion	1.36	0.21	6.48	< .001	3.9
Banana republic	-1.29	0.17	-7.59	< .001	0.28
Wall Street fat cats	-1.54	0.13	-11.85	< .001	0.21
Constant	-0.06	0.08	-0.75	.453	0.94

McFadden  $R^2 = .34$ ;  $N = 48\,615$  sentence tokens containing at least one locative metaphor. Positive  $\beta$  values predict Republican alignment; negative  $\beta$  values predict Democratic alignment.

for Democratic markers like “*Wall Street fat cats*” and “*banana republic*.” This demonstrates their role not just as descriptive labels but as potent badges of ideological identity.

Mapping politics onto concrete spatial schemas, such as containers, journeys, verticality, or purity/contamination, allows metaphors to tap into intuitive embodied experiences [3; 7], resulting in bypassing complex policy arguments and direct activation of moral intuitions aligned with partisan worldviews [9]. This immediately achieves a desired pragmatic effect, evoking targeted responses from discourse recipients (e.g., disgust at the “*swamp*,” protectiveness of the “*heartland*,” fairness concerns about “*Wall Street*,” or care for the vulnerable in “*sanctuary cities*”). Toponyms function as powerful cultural shortcuts [25]; a mere use of proper nouns like “*Hollywood*” or “*Wall Street*” is enough to instantly conjure up complex associations, helping discourse producers to successfully frame socio-political issues and particular people either positively or negatively [6; 30], with simultaneous essentialization of vast groups (“*coastal elites*,” the “*Bible Belt*”) into easily targeted caricatures. Metaphors, such as “*Real America*” or “*blue wall*,” bestow partisan camps with symbolic ownership over the national identity or the country’s territory, driving political polarization even further as in-group solidarity of “us” is sustained against perceived illegitimate “others.” The brevity and vividness of locative metaphors grant them high media portability and hashtagginess in headlines and social media posts. At the same time, their functional-pragmatic potential to trigger strong emotions makes them valuable in an affective attention economy [29].

The cumulative effect of this expressive, figurative locative political rhetoric, as argued by scholars like Chilton [32] and Lakoff [6], is the construction of distinct and often mutually exclusive moral geographies. Political disagreements and worldview clashes become spatialized conflicts between a virtuous “us” located in safe or authentic territory, and a corrupt dangerous “them” inhabiting contaminated places or alien spaces. This “rhetorical border wall” perpetuates linguistic polarization by making empathy feel like consorting with the enemy and compromise akin to treacherous territorial surrender. The data obtained in this study strongly suggest that locative metaphors are not merely descriptive but rather constitutive and even formative elements of political polarization, significantly reinforcing the “us vs. them” mentality, so typical of contemporary American politics.

### Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that locative metaphors are fundamental strategic linguistic tools actively used in the construction and maintenance of moral geographies, a distinct cognitive-linguistic and functional-pragmatic mechanism behind political communication in the U.S. By mapping key abstract socio-political concepts onto concrete spatial schemas (e.g., swamps, heartlands, walls, bubbles, centers, and peripheries), partisan discourse producers create powerful, easily digestible frameworks for understanding who belongs where in the nation’s ideological dichotomy.



The analysis, integrating corpus-linguistic frequency data with qualitative rhetorical and functional-linguistic interpretation, revealed clearly differentiated and statistically significant partisan repertoires. Republican discourse predominantly exploits locative metaphors to portray a virtuous besieged interior (“heartland,” “Real America”) threatened by a corrupt coastal population (“coastal elites”), the federal center (“DC swamp”), and external forces (“border invasion”). This finding correlates well with a moral framework emphasizing purity, loyalty, and authority. Democratic discourse, on the other hand, often spatializes critical views on economic inequality (“Wall Street fat cats”) and social conservatism (“Bible Belt”), framing progressive physical spaces as protective havens (“sanctuary cities”) or defensive bastions (“blue wall”), which resonates more with moral foundations of care and fairness. The finding that out-group stigmatizing metaphors are particularly popular, especially in Republican-aligned sub-corpus, demonstrates their functionality in building strong in-group identities through discursively explicated binary oppositions.

Locative metaphors function to crystallize complex ideological positions into vivid, geographically anchored mental images that travel easily and virally through media ecosystems. The logistic regression results confirmed the diagnostic potential of these discursive units, playing the role of reliable markers of ideological affiliation.

The pervasiveness of polarizing locative metaphors contributes to the fractious nature of contemporary American politics. They convert policy debates into territorial disputes between morally identifiable zones and sustain an “us vs. them” mentality that hinders empathy and makes compromise appear as surrender and treachery. The “hostile maps” drawn by this rhetoric consequently define not only how partisan discourse producers speak but potentially how they perceive and process political reality itself.

Although the study, presented in this article, provides a detailed analysis of partisan locative language, it has several limitations. First, its focus may gravitate more towards the discourse of political elites and mediatext producers in the U.S. An important next step is to conduct audience reception studies to empirically estimate how American citizens interpret and are impacted by locative metaphorical framing, accepting or resisting these moral cartographies. Second, the corpus-based methodology identifies patterns of use but cannot definitively determine the intent of discourse producers or the real-time pragmatic and cognitive impact on a recipient. Experimental methods could further test the causal link between the public’s exposure to locative metaphors and noticeable changes in political attitudes within the American society. Third, the study’s temporal scope (2015–2025) captures a period of intense polarization. Longitudinal studies could track the evolution of these metaphors over considerably longer periods of time and a number of political administrations. Finally, dedicated cross-national and cross-cultural comparative analyses are needed to determine whether the “linguistic cartography of conflict” identified in the article is a unique feature of American political discourse or whether similar spatial cognitive-discursive mechanics operate in other political systems and regimes. Further work could also explore the potential for developing alternative, “bridging” metaphors that emphasize interdependence and cooperation rather than polarizing division and communicative confrontation.

Understanding the linguistic cartography of conflict is a crucial step toward managing and mitigating it. Until we become more conscious of how we map the political world through language and discourse, the role of locative metaphors in polarizing communication is likely to remain a significant feature of political life in America.



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*Submitted: 24.05.2025; Approved: 15.10.2025; Accepted: 26.10.2025.*

*Поступила: 24.05.2025; Одобрена: 15.10.2025; Принята: 26.10.2025.*