

**Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Political Memes and Visual
Propaganda: Case Studies from Recent American Elections**

تحليل الخطاب المتعدد الأنماط للميمات السياسية والدعاية البصرية:

دراسات حالة من الانتخابات الأمريكية الحديثة

Jameela Hussein Aliwi

Department of English

College of Education for Humanities

University of Tikrit

Salahaddin, Iraq



Abstract: This study explores the intersection of multimodal discourse analysis and political communication by examining the role of memes and visual propaganda in recent global elections. Through case studies from various American political contexts, the research investigates how these visual artifacts function as persuasive tools that convey complex political messages. By analyzing the interplay between images, text, and socio-political contexts, the study reveals how political memes and visual propaganda not only reflect but also shape public opinion and election dynamics. The findings highlight the significance of multimodal elements in crafting political narratives and underscore the evolving nature of political discourse in the digital age. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the power of visual rhetoric in contemporary election politics.

Key words: Political memes, visual propaganda, American elections, social semiotics, discourse analysis, multimodality

جميلة حسين عليوي

قسم اللغة الإنكليزية- كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية- جامعة تكريت- صلاح الدين/ العراق

الملخص: تستكشف هذه الدراسة تقاطع تحليل الخطاب المتعدد الأنماط مع التواصل السياسي من خلال فحص دور الميمات والدعاية البصرية في الانتخابات العالمية الحديثة. من خلال دراسات حالة من سياقات سياسية أمريكية متنوعة، وتبحث الدراسة في كيفية عمل هذه الأدوات البصرية كأدوات إقناع تنقل رسائل سياسية معقدة. ومن خلال تحليل التفاعل بين الصور والنصوص والسياقات الاجتماعية والسياسية، تكشف الدراسة كيف أن الميمات السياسية والدعاية البصرية لا تعكس فقط ولكنها تشكل أيضاً الرأي العام وديناميكية الانتخابات. أما النتائج فإنها تسلط الضوء على أهمية العناصر المتعددة الأنماط في تشكيل السرد السياسي وتؤكد على الطبيعة المتطورة للخطاب السياسي في العصر الرقمي، فتسهم في فهم قوة البلاغة البصرية في سياسة الانتخابات المعاصرة.

كلمات مفتاحية: الميمات السياسية، الدعاية البصرية، الانتخابات الأمريكية، السيميائيات الاجتماعية، تحليل الخطاب، تعدد الأنماط

1. Introduction

In order to apprehend the intended implications and interpretations that are embedded within verbal communication, it is undeniably crucial for us not to solely concentrate on the surface-level or superficial content, the propositional constructions, and the connections that interlink the

propositions within texts, whether they are discourses, conversations, or speeches. It is significant for us to direct our attention towards the distinct functions that different linguistic constituents serve in revealing meaning. It is equally important to focus on how different parts of language contribute to uncovering and illustrating meaning. One kind of these non-verbal means of communication is the visual elements like memes.

In the contemporary landscape of political communication, memes and visual propaganda have emerged as powerful tools for shaping public opinion and influencing electoral outcomes. This study presents a multimodal discourse analysis of political memes and visual propaganda, focusing on case studies from recent American elections. By examining how these digital artifacts combine textual, visual, and contextual elements, this study aims to uncover the mechanisms through which they convey political messages, mobilize support, and potentially alter voter perceptions.

Shifman (2014) asserts that political memes, as modern vehicles for satire and commentary, often imply humor, irony, and visual aesthetics to concisely communicate complex political ideas. These memes are not merely cultural artifacts but potent forms of rhetoric that can reinforce ideological positions or challenge dominant narratives. Similarly, visual propaganda employs images and symbols to evoke emotional responses and solidify political arguments (Kritsberg, 2017).

Understanding these modalities requires an analysis that transcends traditional text-based approaches, incorporating insights from semiotics, visual culture studies, and discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how these multimodal texts function within digital ecosystems, influencing and reflecting the polarized nature of contemporary American politics. Through detailed case studies, this research aims to highlight the interplay between visual and textual elements, the role of context in shaping meanings, and the impact of these elements on audience engagement and perception (Davis & Patterson, 2018).

In the digital age, political communication has evolved dramatically, with visual media playing an increasingly central role in shaping public discourse. Political memes and visual propaganda have emerged as

powerful tools for influencing voter perceptions and behaviors during elections. The current study investigates the role of these visual artifacts through the lens of multimodal discourse analysis, focusing on recent American elections to illustrate their impact and significance. Political memes—often characterized by their brevity, humor, and viral nature—serve as contemporary vehicles for political messaging. Similarly, visual propaganda continues to leverage imagery to persuade and mobilize audiences.

Despite their prominence, there remains a gap in understanding how these multimodal elements interact to craft persuasive political narratives. This study aims to bridge this gap by applying a social semiotic approach to analyze how images, text, and other visual elements work together in political memes and propaganda. The theoretical framework for this analysis draws on the work of key figures in social semiotics, including Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, who have pioneered methods for examining how meaning is constructed through various modes of communication. By focusing on specific case studies from recent American elections, this paper seeks to uncover how political memes and visual propaganda function within their socio-political contexts, shaping public opinion and electoral outcomes. This research is significant for its potential to deepen our understanding of modern political communication strategies and the role of visual rhetoric in influencing democratic processes. Through a detailed exploration of multimodal elements in political discourse, this study is supposed to contribute to the broader field of communication studies and provide insights into the evolving landscape of political engagement in the digital era.

1.1. Definition and Scope of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

The basic form of communication is through verbal language, yet people often communicate using different means and modes along with their verbal language. Experienced communicants use different modes, such as visual, auditory, and gestural modes, to communicate. Multimodality is the capacity to successfully communicate using diverse modes at hand. Social semiotic studies of multimodality encompass the communication done through contextualizing various semiotic resources available in diverse modes in language use. Krysanova, (2022).

Multimodality in its general sense refers to the use of multiple modes of communication beyond spoken or written language to convey meaning. The interdisciplinary nature of multimodality, incorporating insights from linguistics, semiotics, and communication studies, is reflected through Kress, & Van Leeuwen (2001) elaboration that it involves the study of how different modes of communication (e.g., spoken language, written text, gestures, images, and sounds) are combined to create meaning in various communicative contexts. It is, according to Jewitt, (2009), the concept that communication and meaning-making are constructed through the interplay of various semiotic resources, including linguistic, visual, and gestural elements, which collectively contribute to the interpretative process."

Since Multimodal Discourse Analysis investigates how different modes, including speech, writing, and images, make meaning through the use of language. It examines how these different modes of interact contribute to the construction of meaning in discourse and explores how these modes work together to produce and interpret messages in various communicative contexts. So , according to Bezemer, & Kress, (2008) it is a "methodological approach that investigates the integration of multiple semiotic resources, including verbal and non-verbal elements, to understand how meaning is generated and interpreted in different communicative settings." See also Jewitt, (2009).

Scollon and Scollon (2004) discuss the scope of multimodal discourse analysis by examining how multiple semiotic resources, including visual and linguistic elements, work together in real-world communication. They argue that Multimodal Discourse Analysis provides a framework for understanding complex interactions in both traditional and digital media contexts

1.2. Political Memes and Visual Propaganda in the Digital Age

Memes can be understood as the most successful template of online communication that has established its own genre conventions. Political memes, more specifically, can be defined as political messages that take the form of multimodal digital content. (Beskow et al., 2020) elaborate that like any other variation of internet memes, political memes contain playful references to popular culture, can be easily generated, and can qualify for

the digital equivalent of the grapevine. However, political memes have the aim of communicating and propagandizing a political idea or a party position. As Max Halupzok puts it, "A meme is a portion of culture that spreads from person to person and, like a gene, replicates from mind to mind." See (Bülow & Johann, 2023).

Political memes and visual propaganda in the digital age have become crucial tools for shaping public opinion and political discourse. Political memes are a contemporary evolution of traditional propaganda. Shifman, (2014) explores the rise of memes in digital culture, including their role in politics elaborating that historically, propaganda used posters, pamphlets, and other visual mediums to influence public sentiment. In the digital age, memes—typically humorous or satirical images with text—have become a dominant form of political communication.

Milner's (2016) discusses how memes function within digital public spheres and their effect on political discourse in that they often simplify complex political messages, making them easily digestible and shareable. Their viral nature allows for rapid dissemination across social media platforms, which can amplify their impact on public opinion. This rapid spread can also contribute to the polarization of political views.

Political memes are a highly influential cultural product and a prevalent communicative form in today's democracies. They serve a variety of purposes, ranging from personal expression and entertainment to public relations, advertising, and political propaganda. Memes are a form of cultural expression which employs humor, comparison, and parody as communicative strategies. They are textual entities, arising in the context of use from multimodal, multi-semiotic exchanges and emerging practices. That is to say, it is the combination of utterances with both visual and linguistic components that actualize meme meanings. In their most stylized form, memes are entrenched in a bidirectional relationship with recognizable pop culture artifacts, reinventing them with subcultural references. (Shiffman, 2014).

Mememes serve the need for self-expression and the identification of the individual with their online communities. In postmodernity, identities are no longer solely built in face-to-face interactions and offline communities but rely on a wide, often international range of virtual, online "imagined"

political, ethnic, religious, and other communities, whose members share or are ideologically committed to similar beliefs and practices. This worldwide mass media system and the spread of digital technology have dissolved traditional source-receiver hierarchies by including also interpersonal communication and small groups as communication sending and receiving nodes.

2. Theoretical Frameworks for Analyzing Political Memes and Visual Propaganda

As a visual form of communication, political memes are interpreted through content characteristics as well as traits of textual and visual image features. In social media, the text (e.g., hashtags, words as captions) sets the discursive tone of the meme. The meaning that is conveyed comes from the semiotic relationship formed between the verbal and the visual, and they are not isolated from each other. Visual elements are usually understood in relation to the texts, and vice versa. This co-constructed interplay between the visual and the narrative content is referred to as the multimodal nature of political memes. As a result, Beskow et al. (2020) describe it as being important to pay attention to what memes say by considering both content and visual image features that portray the main arguments or goals.

Visuality is a communicative practice that connects the unspoken to the spoken words in social interactions. Textual communication is usually seen as the explicit domain of verbal texts, while images are considered the implicit domain. Even though the text investigates linguistic structure and sentence meanings, visuals and images are locked within their context as well as the words used. As a result, meaning is achieved through the mutual relationship between different multimodal resources. These resources constrain their content and usage patterns as a response to particular situational affordances. Since language conveys information about positions, activities, and objects, but not as rich visual information, pictures and sound are used to provide the visual details of the objects and activities surrounding the discourse.

Consequently, Dean (2021) adds that images inform viewers of the setting where the actions, artifacts, and visual activities are located, and the relationship among participants. Their implicit meanings of objects and

people are not used to describe the occurrences in the situations, but rather to manage how viewers should interpret or evaluate them. By naturally co-occurring together in the natural environment, visual and verbal information are used to communicate about the multiple aspects of the given issue. This joint performance of both resources provides many potentially important insights into the communication process that may not be available on content information alone. See (Tyrer, 2021)(Morgan, 2022)

3. Methodology

In the current study, case studies were selected using a random sampling approach to ensure a diverse and representative set of political memes and visual propaganda. This method was chosen to mitigate selection bias and to provide a comprehensive overview of the varied ways in which visual communication is employed in recent American elections.

A broad range of sources was identified, including popular social media platforms, political blogs, and news websites. This ensured that the sample covered a wide spectrum of political discourse. Data were collected over a defined period, namely the period from (2016 to 2024), leading up to recent American elections. The selection period was chosen to capture a range of materials reflecting different stages and contexts of the electoral campaigns. This methodology allows for an objective and thorough examination of political memes and visual propaganda, offering insights into their role and impact in contemporary electoral contexts.

For examining the multimodal aspects of political memes and visual propaganda, this study employs the analytical framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Their model provides a robust foundation for understanding how meaning is constructed through various modes of communication beyond text alone. The analysis is grounded in Kress and van Leeuwen's *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006). This model offers a comprehensive approach to decoding visual texts by focusing on how visual elements interact with textual elements to convey meaning. It emphasizes the following dimensions:

- Representational Meaning: Examines how images represent subjects and actions, including the choice of visual elements and their arrangement.

- Interpersonal Meaning: Focuses on how images engage with the viewer, including aspects such as gaze direction, positioning, and the use of modality to convey attitudes or emotions.
- Compositional Meaning: Analyzes the layout and structure of visual elements, including the use of space, color, and visual hierarchy to organize and emphasize information.

The model uses the concept of 'visual grammar' to dissect how visual elements function similarly to grammatical structures in text. This involves identifying and interpreting visual symbols, their relationships, and their role in constructing messages. The analysis involves examining various semiotic resources employed in the artifacts, including images, icons, typography, and spatial arrangements. Each of these elements contributes to the overall meaning and persuasive power of the visual message.

Understanding the context in which the visual artifacts are situated is crucial includes the socio-political environment, audience demographics, and the specific electoral context in which the memes and propaganda were circulated. By applying Kress and van Leeuwen's framework, this study systematically analyzes how political memes and visual propaganda utilize multimodal elements to influence and engage audiences, providing insights into their rhetorical and ideological functions.

4. Data analysis

Meme no. (1)



This meme is published in Social News Daily by Rose burke within an article entitled " 7 Hilarious political memes that will help you get through the week". The meme shows Trump as looking specifically at his

watch. Trump thinks daylight saving time adds an extra hour to his political life. It is amusing though to think that there are people out there aside from Trump who actually believe this. Perhaps they think they lose an hour of their lives over the winter as well. The producer depicts Trump as stupid, He thinks that by changing time in his watch, he would earn an extra time in presidency.

Multimodal analysis

1. Representational Dimension

- Participants: The central participant is Donald Trump, who is depicted with a specific facial expression and body language. The two flags in the background are also key elements.
- Actions and Processes: Trump is shown looking at his watch with a seemingly annoyed expression, accompanied by the text "just set my watch back." This implies a humorous commentary on time management.
- Roles and Relationships: Trump's gaze and expression suggest a reaction to something related to time and punctuality. The flags in the background represent his political stance as being the president.

2. Interpersonal Dimension

- Gaze: Trump's gaze at his watch is directed downward, which could imply a moment of frustration. The audience is positioned to observe this interaction, which can create a sense of confusion.
- Social Distance: The meme is designed to be easily accessible and relatable to a broad audience. The close-up on Trump's face and watch creates an intimate, detailed view of his reaction.
- Angle and Framing: The focus on Trump's expression and his watch, with the flags in the background, highlights his personal reaction while providing context through the flags. This framing helps emphasize the humor implied in the text.

3. Modal Dimension - Color: The colors used include typical hues associated with Trump and the flags, likely red, white, and blue, which enhance the political and nationalistic context. The contrast between

Trump's expression and the background elements help emphasize the humor.

- **Composition and Layout:** The meme's layout features Trump's expression prominently, with the watch and the flags serving as contextual elements. This composition directs the viewer's attention to Trump's reaction and the associated text.

- **Visual Style and Techniques:** The style is straightforward and designed for clarity and impact, using Trump's recognizable features and a clear message to convey its point. The simplicity of the meme helps in communicating the humorous tone effectively.

Interpretation - Humor: The text "just set my watch back" could be a playful shot at Trump's timing and decision-making. The flags represent a political context, adding a layer of satire related to his political stance or decisions.

- **Cultural Reference:** The use of Trump's image and the flags could also comment on broader political issues or controversies, using humor to engage viewers and provoke thought.

In summary, this meme uses Trump's expression and the context provided by the flags to create a humorous, causing visual and textual elements to communicate the message effectively.

Meme No. (2)



Meme description

The meme is published in an article entitled *"10 Trump Election Defeat Memes You Won't Mind Sleep Over"* where it shows a pumpkin in the shape of Trump with wide-open mouth and a tightly pressed teeth. A statement is written above saying: "That moment when you realize you LOST the ELECTION after announcing you Won the ELECTION".

Multimodal Analysis:

1. Representational Dimension

- Participants: The central participant is the pumpkin designed to resemble Donald Trump. The expression on the pumpkin's is crucial, showing tight teeth and a wide-open mouth.
- Actions and Processes: The pumpkin's facial expression—teeth tightened and mouth wide open—suggests a strong emotional reaction, likely one of shock, frustration, or realization.
- Roles and Relationships: The pumpkin represents Trump, and the exaggerated expression underscores the emotional impact of the realization described in the text. The text contrasts this reaction with the actions mentioned (announcing victory vs. losing).

2. Interpersonal Dimension

- Gaze: The pumpkin's facial expression is directed outward, conveying an intense emotional reaction. This expression draws the viewer's attention to the text and the context of the meme.
- Social Distance: The meme's close-up on the pumpkin's face allows viewers to focus on the exaggerated expression and the accompanying text. This close view highlights the humorous or critical nature of the meme.
- Angle and Framing: The pumpkin is framed prominently, with the text positioned above it. This setup ensures that the viewer's focus is on the expression of the pumpkin and the text that explains its context.

3. Modal Dimension

- Color: The use of orange (for the pumpkin) and potentially contrasting colors for the text helps emphasize the facial expression and the written

message. The colors are vivid, making both the visual and textual elements stand out.

- Composition and Layout: The pumpkin is centrally placed with the text above it, creating a clear visual hierarchy. The capitalized words "LOST," "ELECTION," "WON" and "ELECTION" are meant to grab attention and emphasize the contrasting concepts.

- Visual Style and Techniques: The style is cartoonish and exaggerated, focusing on facial expression to convey the emotional reaction. The use of capital letters in the text underscores the dramatic nature of the statement. Interpretation

- Humor: The meme uses the pumpkin's exaggerated expression to highlight the irony and frustration of realizing a loss after initially claiming victory. The capitalized text further emphasizes the contrast between winning and losing, enhancing the satirical tone.

- Cultural Reference: This meme references a specific political situation where Trump announced a victory but later faced a loss. The use of a pumpkin—suggesting a Halloween or caricatured theme—adds a layer of humor and exaggeration to the critique.

Finally, the meme employs visual exaggeration and capitalized text to create a humorous and critical commentary on Trump's reaction to losing an election despite earlier claims of victory. The combination of these elements highlights the emotional impact and irony of the situation.

Meme No. (3)



Meme description:

The meme depicts a scene from the "Family Feud" program showing Steve Harvey raising a question: "NAME SOMETHING THAT TRIGGERS THE LEFT", with eight appropriate answers.

Multimodal analysis:

1. Representational Dimension

- Participants: The primary participants are Steve Harvey and the list of answers displayed. Steve Harvey, as the host, is asking a question, and the answers are provided in response.
- Actions and Processes: Steve Harvey is asking a question related to what triggers the left (presumably left-leaning individuals or political left). The answers listed are things traditionally associated with American values and political debates.
- Roles and Relationships: Steve Harvey's role is to facilitate the game, while the answers reflect a stereotype about what might provoke left-leaning individuals. The answers suggest a set of items that are either controversial or symbolically significant.

2. Interpersonal Dimension

- Gaze: With Steve Harvey's gaze directed to the right (potentially towards the game board or an off-screen location), the focus is less on direct engagement with the audience and more on interacting with the game's structure or the answers. This could suggest a more procedural approach to the question rather than an engaging, interactive one.
- Social Distance: The meme is designed to be relatable to viewers who are familiar with "Family Feud" and political discourse. The answers presented in a game show format imply a humorous take on political triggers.
- Angle and Framing: The scene is framed to highlight Steve Harvey's question and the list of answers. This setup places the focus on the list of answers, which is the central element of the meme.

3. Modal Dimension

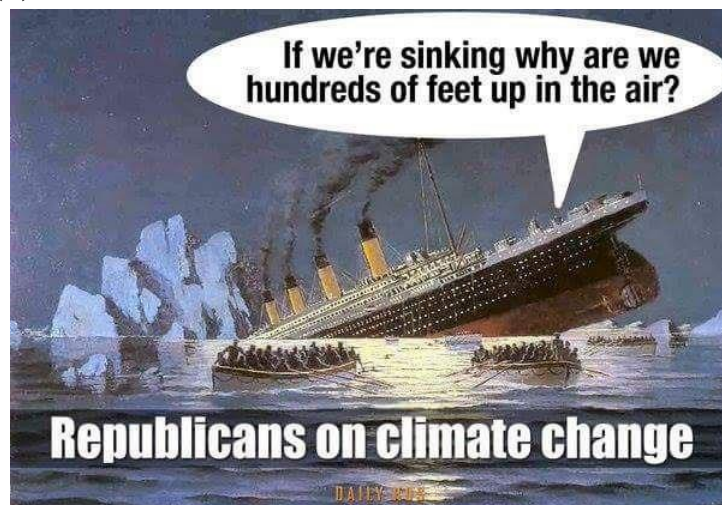
- Color: The use of colors typical of "Family Feud" (e.g., bright and bold) helps draw attention to the list of answers.
- Composition and Layout: The meme uses the familiar format of a game show question with a list of answers. The answers are displayed in a way that emphasizes their humorous nature. The layout mimics the typical "Family Feud" presentation but with a challenging turn.
- Visual Style and Techniques: The meme employs the visual style of a game show to present a list of answers that may seem out of place or ironic in response to the question. This contrast creates humor by using the game show format to address serious issues.

Interpretation

- Humor: The meme humorously suggests that items typically associated with American values and conservative viewpoints (like the Constitution, the flag, and Donald Trump) are perceived as triggering to the political left. This likely satirizes the idea of what might "trigger" people in a political context by framing it in the context of a game show.
- Cultural Reference: By using a game show format, the meme plays on the idea of political debates and sensitivities being treated as trivial or absurd. It reflects how political and cultural symbols are viewed in polarized political discussions.

To summarize, the meme uses the "Family Feud" game show format to humorously list items that are portrayed as triggers for the political left. By combining a familiar game show style with politically charged content, the meme creates a satirical commentary on political sensitivities and cultural symbols.

Meme No. (4)



Meme Description :

The meme is published by a user called Moongrim under a heading "*Everyone expects someone else to solve the problem*". It depicts a scene imitating the Titanic, above the ship is an utterance saying: "If we're sinking why are we hundreds of feet up in the air?" , to the base of the image is a title: "Republicans on climate change".

Multimodal analysis

Representational Dimension

- Participants: The main elements are the ship, which is sinking in the ocean, the icebergs, the safety boats sailing away, and the speech bubble from the ship. The additional participant is the statement below the image.
- Actions and Processes: The sinking ship, icebergs, and the safety boats suggest a catastrophic situation. The speech bubble questions the logic of being "hundreds of feet up in the air" while sinking, implying confusion or contradiction. The statement below connects this scene to Republican views on climate change.
- Roles and Relationships: The ship and its associated imagery symbolize a larger issue. The safety boats and icebergs represent attempts to escape or obstacles. The speech bubble's question highlights a perceived inconsistency, while the statement below links the imagery to the political commentary which shows the producer's political stance as an opponent to the Republicans.

2. Interpersonal Dimension

- Gaze: The ship is depicted as if it's speaking, with the speech bubble directed outward. This directs the viewer's attention to the perceived absurdity of the situation.
- Social Distance: The meme is designed to be relatable to viewers who understand the context of climate change debates. The exaggerated imagery of the sinking ship and the use of humor make the political commentary accessible and engaging.
- Angle and Framing: The image frames the ship in a dramatic sinking scene with safety boats and icebergs, emphasizing the chaos and the raised

question. This setup highlights the contrast between the ship's situation and the raised question.

3. Modal Dimension

- Color: The use of black text on a white bubble and white text on the image creates a clear contrast, making both the speech bubble and the statement stand out. The color scheme reflects a serious or critical tone.
- Composition and Layout: The sinking ship is the central focus, with the speech bubble and text providing commentary. The layout is designed to visually communicate a critique or ironic observation about the depicted scenario and the political statement.
- Visual Style and Techniques: The scene mimics a dramatic disaster with a touch of humor, using the Titanic's sinking as a metaphor. The text adds a layer of critique, suggesting a disconnect between the depicted situation and the political stance on climate change.

Interpretation

- Humor or Critique: The meme uses the dramatic imagery of the Titanic sinking and the associated confusion about being “hundreds of feet up in the air” as a metaphor for perceived inconsistencies or inadequacies in Republican policies or attitudes towards climate change. The humor comes from the exaggerated scenario and the ironic question about the situation.
- Cultural Reference: The Titanic sinking represents a large-scale crisis, and the critique of Republican views on climate change suggests a belief that their approach to the issue is flawed or unrealistic. The meme uses the imagery of a sinking ship and chaotic elements to highlight what the creator sees as an inadequate response to climate change.

The meme uses the Titanic sinking as a metaphor for perceived contradictions in Republican climate change policies. The exaggerated disaster scene, combined with a questioning speech bubble and a critical statement, creates a humorous yet pointed critique of political views on climate change.

5. Conclusion

Investigating the multimodal discourse of political memes and visual propaganda provides an understanding of how these digital artifacts function within contemporary political communication. The study has illuminated how political memes and visual propaganda use a combination of textual and visual elements to convey and reinforce political messages. It reveals how visual communication not only reflects but actively constructs political ideologies, mobilizes support, and frames political discourse in ways that resonate with and influence diverse audiences.

Each meme uses exaggeration and familiar cultural references to criticize political figures, policies, or viewpoints. By employing humor and visual metaphors, these memes effectively highlight perceived contradictions in contemporary political and social discussions. They illustrate how visual and textual elements can combine to create impactful commentary on complex issues.

Studying political memes and visual propaganda through a multimodal framework enhances our understanding of their role in modern political communication. It demonstrates that these digital artifacts are not mere artifacts of popular culture but are instrumental in the strategic shaping of political narratives. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the effects of these multimodal texts on specific voter groups or by comparing their impact across different political contexts and cultures.

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