

Thinking Points

- A Progressive's Handbook -
by George Lakoff
as Summarized by Bob Stachnik
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George Lakoff

- Professor of Linguistics / Cognitive Science, Berkeley
- Founder: Rockridge Institute
- Author: "Don't Think of an Elephant"

"Rationalism" (1&2)

"...people vote on the basis of their material self-interest,
...they are conscious of why they voted,
... they can tell a pollster what their most important
concerns are, and they will vote for the candidate who best
addresses their concerns."
"...all problems and solutions are objective and in no way
worldview dependent.
...solutions are rational
...tools used in arriving at them include logic, probability
theory, game theory, cost-benefit analysis ..."

But, Says Lakoff:

- "We know from cognitive science research that most thought is unconscious."
- "'Common sense' is determined by the frames we unconsciously acquire."
- "Rationalism pervades the progressive world. It is one of the reasons progressives lose to conservatives."

From 10/7/06 *New Scientist*

University of Virginia Experiment:

- 4 identical items of clothing
- subjects asked to select best quality
- 80% select rightmost

(a well-known phenomenon)

All give detailed rational reasons for their choice

In this case, decisions seem driven by the way our brains are wired.

More generally, though, they are products of the conceptual frames through which we perceive facts. We always believe, however, that we are being fully "rational".

"Frames"

"Frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality"

"Facts bounce off frames."

- Lakoff

Examples (1&2)

Are taxes...

- 1) an oppressive burden and an affront to freedom, or,
- 2) paying our dues and investing in our future?

Is the environment...

- 1) God's gift to Man to use as he sees fit, or,
- 2) a sacred trust we hold for our children?

Was 9/11...

- 1) perpetrated by freedom-hating evil-doers, or,
- 2) a heinous criminal act driven by hatreds we cannot afford to misunderstand?

Is "The Market"...

- 1) an inherently fair mechanism for rewarding diligence and hard work, or,
- 2) a powerful, but inherently flawed, tool that can be made more fair with public oversight?

In each example, the frame a citizen brings to an issue completely determines his/her "common sense" response.

Questions:

- Do elected Republicans ever adopt frame #2 positions? **No**
- Do large numbers of elected Democrats implicitly (perhaps unthinkingly) adopt frame #1 positions? **Yes**

Lessons from Cognitive Science

- 1) The use of frames is largely unconscious
- 2) Frames define "common sense" and "the answer"
- 3) Repetition can embed frames in the brain
- 4) *Activation* links surface frames to deep frames and inhibits opposition frames
- 5) Existing deep frames do not change overnight
- 6) The facts alone will NOT set you free
- 7) Simply negating the other side's frames only reinforces them
- 8) Speak to biconceptuals as you would speak to your base

"The Center"

"It doesn't exist" - Lakoff

Swing voter views are not "in the middle". They are progressive or conservative issue-by-issue and can be influenced by the frame through which individual issues are seen.

"Partial Progressives"

- Lovers of the Land
- Communitarians
- People of Faith
- Socially Conscious Employers
- Civil Libertarians

Why Have Conservatives Been So Successful?

- They speak to swing voters the way they speak to their base
- **As a result, they seem (in fact, are) authentic**
- They communicate **values**, not **programs**
- Conservatives did not become successful by moving to the left

Authenticity Matters

Lakoff is fanatical about this point:

Framing is not "spin". It is ABOVE ALL about deeply understanding our values and addressing issues in terms of those values.

Values *never* come from polls.

What Are Conservative Values?

Lakoff's starting point is his Strict Father / Nurturant Parent Theory

"Conservative Morality centers on issues of authority and control, both self-control and control over others."

In a word, "strictness".

Conservatives genuinely see these as central to morality.

What Are Progressive Values?

"Progressive morality ... is based on empathy and responsibility."

Four Core Progressive Political Principles

- The Common Good Principle
- The Expansion of Freedom Principle
- The Human Dignity Principle
- The Diversity Principle

Practical Framing

- The application of framing to politics can mean as little as speaking of the issues that matter to us in terms of these core progressive principles.

...and, at a minimum, it means using OUR language, not THEIRS

Language Example: "Liberals"

THEM: Tax-and-spend liberals want to take your hard earned money. Latte-sipping liberals are elitists who look down their noses at you. Anti-war liberals are unpatriotic.

US: Liberty-loving liberals founded our country and enshrined our freedoms. Dedicated fair-minded liberals ended slavery and brought women the vote. Hardworking liberals fought the goon-squads and won fairness for workers.

Language Example: "Patriotism"

THEM: True patriots do not undermine our nation and our troops by questioning the president. Revealing secret, even illegal, government programs is treasonous.

US: The greatest testament to one's love of country is when one works to improve it. Times of war are no exception. Our first loyalty is to the principles of democracy, not to any political leader.

Language Example: "National Security"

THEM: It's a scary world. Fanatics wish us harm. We must respond with every means available to us. We must take the fight to the enemy regardless of ANY cost. Military force is our greatest weapon.

US: Threats to Americans surely include losing our humanity and commitment to democracy. These are precisely what set us apart from the terrorists. We need to show moral leadership rather than just that we are the meaner opponent.

"Tax Relief" is a Strategic Initiative by the Right

- **Surface:** Paint conservatives as the heroes
- **Surface:** Paint opponents as oppressors
- **Hidden:** Starve social programs
- **Hidden:** Undercut government's protective and regulatory roles
- **Hidden:** redistribute income upward
- **Hidden:** strengthen wealthy contributors

Other Strategic Initiatives by the Right

- "Tort Reform"
- "Partial Birth Abortion"
- Elimination of the "Death Tax"

(All have hidden consequences that favor conservative goals)

A Sample Democratic Strategic Initiative

"Ethical Business Initiative"

- Establish Air Trust, Ocean Trust, Internet Trust, etc, and charge business for use of this common wealth
- Corporate re-chartering to include responsibilities to all stake holders (not just stockholders)

(These simultaneously advance environmental, labor, community and health interests)

Other Possible Democratic Initiatives

- "Clean Elections"
- "Healthy Foods"
- "Transit For All"

(All advance multiple progressive interests)

"Thinking Points"

"Thinking points are the opposite of talking points, the opposite of slogans..."

"Thinking is the activism that comes first. Movements are ultimately about values and ideas. Organizing is crucial, but it has to be *about* something."

Bob's Conclusions (1,2,3,4)

- "Lakoff" is extremely important
- We need to understand our opponents' methods
- This stuff is not easy or obvious. It takes time, commitment, discipline and effort to learn.
- Unless we explicitly understand our assumptions, our frames, and take the trouble to communicate them, conservative frames will dominate.
- Democrats need to learn about the cognitive process, think more deeply about their values and consistently speak in terms of those values
- We are way behind the other side, and it may be that we have yet to "wake up"
- It will take leadership for these ideas and techniques to become SOP for the Democratic Party.
- Lakoff's insights have potential to make the entire national mindset more liberal and, thereby, more friendly to Democrats.