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Speaking of Values: The Framing of American Politics

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In *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, the distinguished UC-Berkeley linguist George Lakoff theorizes that to be persuasive, candidates must integrate their everyday rhetoric and positions on policy issues into an overarching philosophy of governance. By practicing such “principled” rhetoric, he argues, Republicans have overcome their minority standing within the electorate to achieve sustained control of the White House, Congress, and most state governments.

When George Bush calls for military action against terrorists, federal aid for religious organizations and the right to life for those in a persistent vegetative state, Lakoff argues that his principled rhetoric presents him as a conservative with a deep-seated world view. When John Kerry attacks tax cuts as favoring the rich at the expense of the middle class, advocates subsidized health care for the poor, and supports a woman’s right to choose, Lakoff argues that he is presenting himself as an opportunistic liberal Democrat shopping for votes.

Don't Think of an Elephant!, an extract from Lakoff’s more expansive earlier work *Moral Politics*, made the *New York Times* bestseller list and is required reading among the Democratic-liberal intelligentsia. Howard Dean contributed the foreword. Lakoff is regularly sought out as an advisor by high-ranking Democrats, including Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi, and has appeared in person before the House Democratic Caucus. Prestigious news outlets regularly comment on his ideas. In short, Lakoff is that rarity among academics: a serious scholar taken seriously by political practitioners.

Lakoff’s diagnosis of the Republican rhetorical edge is based on the following analysis. American culture consists of two competing worldviews that broadly correspond to the “strict” versus “nurturing” role of the parent. The first stipulates that human nature is weak, thus necessitating a “strict father” who resorts to discipline and punishment to set the child securely on the path of human development. The “strict parent” outlook is associated with a limited view of the appropriate scope of government—while governance is necessary to maintain law and order and protect society from external threats, most domestic problems are and should be matters of individual responsibility. If people are poor, it is because they lack initiative; people who are unemployed could find work if they tried harder; criminals (or terrorists) can and must be effectively deterred from breaking the law. By this logic, social welfare programs are counterproductive because they breed dependence instead of self-reliance. Clearly, the strict father model fits well with the platform of the post-1980 Republican Party.

The Democrats and other progressive groups stand for policies that emanate from the “nurturing parent” point of view. With appropriate parental care and nurturance, all children have the potential to develop into fundamentally decent and productive human beings. This view of human nature as essentially robust implies a more expansive set of governmental responsibilities focused on the

realization of the personal potential of all members of society and the elimination of social barriers impeding normal development.

Given this cultural dualism, what accounts for Republican successes at the polls despite the greater number of Democrats within the electorate? Lakoff's explanation includes the following elements:

1. Lakoff theorizes that because people vote their moral identity rather than their self-interest, the Democrats lose *even when* their platform is closer to the stated views of the median voter. In advocating their policy positions, Republicans systematically use value-laden catchwords and metaphors (such as tax relief, partial birth abortion, or "We do not need a permission slip to defend America") that invoke the strong father world view. Democrats, on the other hand, put forward specific positions without value-laden catchwords and phrases. For example, John Kerry and other Democrats, in response to the Republican attack on gay marriage, distinguished between civil unions that would confer the same economic benefits as marriage (which they supported), and same-sex marriage (which they felt was best left to the church).

2. Republicans, having recognized the importance of language, invested early in the appropriate infrastructure while Democrats did not. Established think tanks and a network of talk radio programs provide the talent pool and media platform for distribution of their message.

3. The political center—often pivotal to the outcome of elections—consists of voters who subscribe to elements derived from both worldviews. Accordingly, the task of the politician is to activate or make salient the values that work to his or her advantage. The Republicans have done so more effectively than the Democrats.

4. The political left suffers from a paucity of core concepts. Liberals, for example, are unable to articulate a convincing rationale for taxation beyond the standard "giveaway to the rich" reaction to Republican tax cuts. Lakoff argues that if taxes were framed as a patriotic duty, as "citizenship dues" and a form of national service, then more people would be willing taxpayers.

5. Unlike the right, progressives have yet to discover the value of "strategic initiatives": advocacy of a single policy position that leads logically to acceptance of a host of other positions. In the case of tort reform, for instance, Republicans not only seek to curb litigation directed at their corporate base (often with massive jury awards for entire classes of plaintiffs), but also to rein in plaintiffs' lawyers who are major donors to the Democratic Party.

Ultimately, Lakoff argues that strategic political communication is pivotal to election outcomes. The party more capable of integrating issues with values, and the candidate with the sound bite that more intuitively evokes the triggering metaphor for the appropriate value system, wins.

Despite the enthusiasm with which Democratic leaders have accepted this story line, I remain skeptical on at least two grounds. First, although political communication plays a role in influencing voters, there are other significant factors. The question is one of disentangling the importance of how political issues are framed as a matter of political communication from other obviously relevant factors such as the state of the country or voters' beliefs about the state of the country. *Don't Think of an Elephant!* generally does not acknowledge alternative explanations; it is a tantalizing theory rather than a demonstrated conclusion. Second, Lakoff's theory presumes that political elites are the key framers of political discourse. However, the scholarly evidence (at least in the fields of political science and communications) suggests that what gets through to the public is not the candidates' rhetoric but rather news media coverage of the campaign. Modern "interpretive" styles of journalism emphasize dissection, rather than repetition, of the candidates' messages.

Alternative Explanations of Elections

In the political science literature on voting, it seems that a candidate's speech counts for little. The results of presidential elections can be predicted with a high degree of accuracy from indicators of economic growth and public approval of the incumbent administration: voters re-elect the incumbent during times of economic growth, but opt for change during times of distress. Changes in GNP over the past year or the level of public approval of the incumbent president four months before the election are relevant to election outcomes; day-to-day tactics of the candidates in October seemingly are not (see Bartels and Zaller 2001; Campbell 2004). At the very least, this evidence suggests that the prevailing political context is just as important as anything the candidates themselves might say over the course of the campaign.

But well-entrenched perceptions of the state of the nation and the performance of the incumbent administration do not make campaign strategies irrelevant. Campaign professionals know that context matters and they design their content accordingly. They position their clients to capitalize on the critical issues of economic performance and national security. During the recession of 1992, the Clinton campaign fixated on the state of the economy as its core message. In 2004, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the first stages of the war in Iraq, President Bush ran for reelection on the ground that he had made the country more secure from terrorist attacks. To the extent that message framing enters campaign strategy, it is to define a candidacy on the basis of the current political issues deemed important by voters.

Lakoff's account emphasizes the framing of political discourse in terms of fundamental value systems (e.g. tax relief or permission slips for waging war)

rather than in terms of specific measures of performance or effectiveness or a candidate's personal demeanor. But empirical evidence shows that presidential elections are fundamentally referenda on the performance of the incumbent administration, based largely on beliefs about the economy, bolstered by judgments about the candidates' relative suitability for the office. Accordingly, one would expect campaigns to craft their messages to speak to key performance and image themes. And in fact, they do. In 1992 the Clinton campaign (on behalf of a client not noted for high moral values) said it succinctly: "It's the economy, stupid."

Cultivation of image is also key. For the 25 percent of the electorate that lacks a partisan identity, voting is really about "likeability quotients" rather than issue positions. In 2000, during the first debate with Governor Bush, Vice President Gore came across as a domineering know-it-all. (In the "Saturday Night Live" recreation of the debate, Gore offered to sum up for himself and Bush.) In addition to continually interrupting his opponent and grimacing at Bush's answers, Gore incorrectly recalled that he had accompanied FEMA Director James Lee Witt to an area of Texas devastated by wildfires. The Republicans seized upon this error and other misstatements (including one concerning his grandmother's out-of-pocket expenses for prescription drugs) as further evidence of Gore's penchant for exaggeration and bravado. Fanned by Bush campaign press releases, a secondary "debate" over Gore's veracity burst out in the media and on talk radio. Gradually, a significant number of swing voters came over to Bush on the grounds that Gore played fast and loose with the facts (Johnston et al. 2004). Once again, the "image" issue was one relating to personal traits and not to fundamental views of human nature and corollary value systems.

What Actually Is Framing and Who Is Doing It?

In essence, Lakoff asserts that the power of political rhetoric derives significantly from the use of specific words and phrases which have the ability to elicit core value systems. He cites the well-known speech manuals developed by the Republican consultant Frank Luntz, who advises his clients to incorporate the words "healthy," "clean" and "safe" when discussing the environment, or to make frequent references to compassion when addressing women. His theory assumes that people have adequate opportunity to encounter the candidates in their own words.

But in reality unmediated candidate rhetoric is an increasingly endangered form of political communication. Today, virtually all political speech is mediated, either by reporters or pundits. Hallin's well-known research on the length of the candidate sound bite in network newscasts documents that on average, voters get to hear a presidential candidate for six seconds per day (Hallin 1992). While this

perhaps provides sufficient time to get in a reference to gay marriage, the more telling point is that much of what the public encounters during the campaign is journalistic commentary inspired not by the guiding metaphors of political elites but by the agendas of their own profession (e.g. to provide an independent view; to be recognized as the most reliable source of news; to provide color as needed to attract viewers; and to give the perennial update on the horse race aspects of the present campaign¹). In short, the actual “framers” are increasingly journalists, not candidates or partisan pundits. Although Lakoff does not deal with media framing, he does observe that Republicans have invested more in think tanks and media outlets that provide them with a regular supply of television personalities and outlets.

No matter the extent to which framing occurs at the level of political elites, particular candidates or through media interventions, there can be no avoiding the fundamental definitional question—what do we mean by framing? Lakoff’s use of the framing concept, which reflects his interests as a linguist, is but one of several entries in the social sciences. At the most general level, framing refers to the way in which opinions about an issue can be altered by emphasizing or de-emphasizing particular facets of that issue. In psychology, framing theory was developed as a challenge to the economist’s model of full-information rationality. In a series of compelling experiments, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman showed that choices could be reversed simply by defining outcomes as either potential gains or losses; a program which would certainly save 200 out of 600 people from an outbreak of a rare disease, for instance, was preferred over a more risky alternative with the identical expected outcome (a 1/3 probability of saving 600) by a majority of subjects. However, when the same choice was presented in terms of loss (400 certain deaths versus a 2/3 probability of 600 deaths), the majority now preferred the riskier alternative (see Kahneman and Tversky 1982). Similar presentation effects occur in surveys. Trivial changes in the wording of attitude questions can bring about large shifts in public opinion; for example, people respond far less charitably when asked about the desirable level of government aid for “people on welfare” than when asked about aid for “poor people.”

For their part, communication researchers have identified two distinct types of media framing effects: equivalency framing and emphasis framing. *Equivalency framing*, derived from the experiments described above, involves “the use of different, but logically equivalent, words or phrases” to describe the same phenomenon, while *emphasis framing* involves highlighting a particular “subset of potentially relevant considerations” (Druckman 2001). In Lakoff’s analysis,

¹ Virtually every serious study of campaign news has concluded that references to polling and campaign strategy drown out references to policy issues (Patterson 1994; Farnsworth and Lichter 2003).

most instances of framing approximate the former category (as in “gay marriage” versus “same-sex marriage”). In media research, most work on framing focuses on alternative forms of presentation that differ in more than the choice of words. Broadcast news coverage of political issues, for instance, falls into two distinct genres corresponding to thematic and episodic news frames (Iyengar 1991). The thematic frame places an issue in some general context and usually takes the form of an in-depth, “backgrounder” report. An example of thematic framing would be a story about the Iraq war that addressed the historical context of the relations between the two countries, and the factors that contributed to the current conflict.

Episodic framing, on the other hand, depicts issues in terms of individual instances or specific events—the carnage resulting from a particular terrorist bombing, for example. Episodic coverage typically features dramatic visual footage, while thematic reports tend to be more sedate, consisting primarily of “talking heads.”

In the United States, episodic framing is by far the predominant mode of presentation in news stories, largely as a result of market pressures (episodic news tends to be more engaging for the audience). The preponderance of the episode frame has serious political repercussions, for exposure to the frame discourages viewers from attributing responsibility to government. In effect, episodic framing reinforces the Republican message of limited government.

Lakoff’s cultural dualism can be recast in terms of attributions of responsibility. Responsibility for most political issues (either responsibility for causing the issue or for curing it) is attributed either to societal-governmental forces or to the private actions of individuals. Rising crime, for instance, might be attributed to youth unemployment and government neglect of inner city areas (societal responsibility/nurturing parent model), or to innate willingness to break the law (individual responsibility/strong father model). Similarly, the appropriate treatment for crime might be either punitive criminal justice codes or greater attempts to retrain and rehabilitate the prison population. The tendency of people to gravitate to either societal or individual attributions for issues depends, in part, on how television frames the issue.

In a series of experimental studies (see Iyengar 1991), more viewers adopted the nurturing parent model of societal responsibility under conditions of thematic framing. Following exposure to news reports about increases in malnutrition in rural areas, study participants discussed poverty in terms of inadequate social welfare programs; confronted with news accounts of the shrinking demand for unskilled labor, subjects attributed unemployment to inadequate economic policies or insensitive public officials; and provided with news reports on increasing rates of crime in the inner cities, subjects cited improved job opportunities for the underprivileged as the appropriate remedy for crime. Thus, when television news coverage presented a collective and impersonal frame of

reference, attributions of responsibility—both for causing and curing national problems—were societal in focus.

When provided with the dominant episodic news frame, however, viewers attributed responsibility not to societal or political forces, but to the actions of particular individuals or groups. For example, when poverty, crime, and terrorism were depicted in episodic terms, viewers' causal accounts as well as their prescriptions of treatment responsibility were directed primarily to poor people, criminals, and terrorists. In response to news stories describing particular illustrations of these issues, viewers' attributions invoked individual and group characteristics rather than historical, social or political forces.

As the discussion above suggests, there are any number of ways of thinking about framing depending on the disciplinary perspective and what one takes to be the relevant providers of information. Lakoff's analysis treats candidates as the relevant framers; the Republican success is attributed to the superiority of their campaign rhetoric. For others, news coverage takes precedence over candidate speech and journalists are the framers of interest. In the analysis of broadcast news frames, the Republican advantage is attributed to market forces that produce greater mass exposure to the strict father worldview.

Overall, Lakoff has proposed a provocative account of electoral politics that highlights the importance of political semantics. Although written for a lay audience, this is a book rich in hypotheses concerning the psychology of campaign strategy. As is true with most theorists, the single-minded pursuit of an argument takes precedence over breadth of coverage. Lakoff's account does not come to grips with other equally plausible explanations of voter behavior, some of which have little to do with language or framing. Lakoff does not seem particularly interested in subjecting his arguments to empirical testing. One possibility is that frames interact with political circumstances. Perhaps the strict father model resonates well with the public during times of military threat, but sounds discordant when overwhelming natural disasters call for a significant governmental response (e.g. Hurricane Katrina). Equally problematic is Lakoff's focus on candidate speech. Today, voters encounter the candidates primarily through news reports, and media coverage is increasingly interpretive, with reporters seeking to explain and deconstruct campaign rhetoric. The real framers are the news media.

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