

Berkeley author George Lakoff says, ‘Don’t underestimate Trump’

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Daphne White

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[George Lakoff](#), retired UC Berkeley professor and author of *Don't Think of an Elephant*, is one of a very few people in Berkeley who does not underestimate Donald Trump.



George Lakoff. Photo: Daphne White

“Trump is not stupid,” he tells anyone who will listen. “He is a super salesman, and he knows how to change your brain and use it to his advantage.”

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In fact, Lakoff predicted a year ago that Trump would win with 47% of the vote. (The actual total was 46%.) Lakoff even told Hillary Clinton’s campaign and PAC staffers how to counteract Trump’s message. But they couldn’t hear him.

As far back as 2006, Lakoff saw the writing on the wall. “A dark cloud of authoritarianism looms over the nation,” he wrote in his book *Thinking Points, A Progressive’s Handbook*. “Radical conservatives have taken over the reins of government and have been controlling the terms of the political debate for many years.” The progressives couldn’t hear him, either.

Lakoff's message is simple, but it is couched in the language of cognitive linguistics and neuroscience. The problem is that political candidates rely on pollsters and PR people, not linguists or neuroscientists. So when Lakoff repeatedly says that "voters don't vote their self-interest, they vote their values," progressive politicians continually ignore him. His ideas don't fit in with their worldview, so they can't hear him.

But a worldview is exactly what Lakoff is talking about. "Ideas don't float in the air, they live in your neuro-circuitry," Lakoff said. Each time ideas in our neural circuits are activated, they get stronger. And over time, complexes of neural circuits create a frame through which we view the world. "The problem is, that frame is unconscious," Lakoff said. "You aren't aware of it because you don't have access to your neural circuits." So what happens when you hear facts that don't fit in your worldview is that you can't process them: you might ignore them, or reject or attack them, or literally not hear them.

This theory explains why even college-educated Trump voters could ignore so many facts about their candidate. And it also explains why progressives have been ignoring Lakoff's findings for more than two decades. Progressives are still living in the world of Descartes and the Enlightenment, Lakoff said, a neat world governed by the rules of logic. Descartes said, "I think therefore I am," but Lakoff claims that we are embodied beings and that 98 percent of thought is unconscious.

Our thoughts are chemical in nature, and occur within the confines of a physical body: we are not 100 percent rational beings.

So if you are going to craft a message that can reach people who disagree with you, you have to understand their subconscious worldview. Lakoff calls this worldview a "frame," and claims that Republicans have done a much better job with framing over the past 30 or 40 years. Republicans understand the narrative that governs many people in this country, and they target their message directly to that worldview. Democrats, on the other hand, ignore the worldview and focus instead on rationality, facts and policies.

It is a myth that the truth will set us free, Lakoff said. Case in point: Hillary Clinton's well-thought-out policy positions vs. Donald Trump's tweets. The tweets had one central and fact-free message: "Make America great again." Clinton's message was more detailed and fact-based, but also much more diffuse. Heavy on Enlightenment, short on metaphor. "I spoke to people at the center of Hillary Clinton's campaign in 2016, and told them they were doing everything they could to lose," Lakoff said. "It didn't make any difference. People are who they are, and they were going to do things their way. I could see the disaster happening the entire year."

Lakoff started teaching linguistics at UC Berkeley in 1972 and retired as the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Distinguished Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics in 2016. Since his retirement, he has spent much of his time traveling around the country, giving talks and interviews. He has written or co-authored 11 books, and is at work on another. Lakoff is the kind of professor who will tell you, in answer to a question, that he wrote a 500-page book about that very topic. "I wrote two 500-page books and three 600-page books," he adds, laughing. "I like to be thorough."



In non-academic circles, Lakoff is best known for his slim book *Don't Think of an Elephant*. The book, recently reprinted, was a New York Times best-seller when it first came out in 2004, after the “disaster” of the George W. Bush election. *Don't Think of an Elephant* was mostly a compilation of essays, and the main point was that trying to use Republican’s language and theories against them is counter-productive.

“What George has done is tie the question of political belief to cognitive science,” said Lawrence Rosenthal, chair and lead researcher of the UC Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies. “He understands that the way to get at people’s political opinions is by talking about values, rather than specific arguments about specific issues. He believes conservatives are much better at this than liberals and have been for a very long time. They have a much better track record of crafting political appeals by way of the appropriate value statements for their audience.”

The reason Democrats have such a hard time with Lakoff’s message, Rosenthal said, “is because George is going up against something very deep-rooted, something that goes back to the Enlightenment. He would argue that the Enlightenment approach to political persuasion was never appropriate... Every time I hear a political candidate say the word ‘percent,’ I think of ‘Oh God, they haven’t read George’.”

Lakoff gave a talk recently at the Center for Right-Wing Studies and pointed out that students who become Democratic operatives tend to study political studies and statistics and demographics in college. “Students who lean Republican study marketing. “And that’s his point,” Rosenthal said. “It’s a very different way of thinking.”

Lakoff’s core finding revolves around the metaphor of family. He claims there are two core beliefs about the role of families in society, and the belief one holds determines whether one is conservative or liberal. Moderates are people in the middle who are able to hold some ideas from both sides, and being able to understand and persuade them is crucial to winning any election.

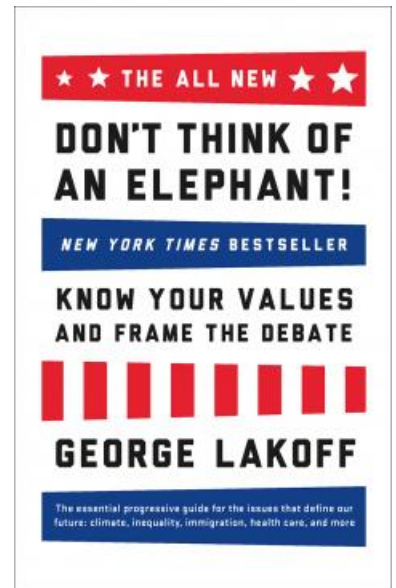
Conservatives believe in a what Lakoff calls the “strict father family,” while progressives believe in a “nurturant parent family.” In the strict father family, father knows best and he has the moral authority. The children and spouse have to defer to him, and when they disobey, he has the right to punish them so they will learn to do the right thing.

“The basic idea is that authority is justified by morality, and that, in a well-ordered world, there should be a moral hierarchy in which those who have traditionally dominated *should* dominate,” Lakoff said. “The hierarchy is God above man; man above nature; the rich above the poor; employers above employees; adults above children; Western culture above other cultures; our country above other countries. The hierarchy also extends to men above women, whites above nonwhites, Christians above non-Christians, straights above gays.” Since this is seen as a “natural” order, it is not to be questioned.

Trump and those crafting the Republican message play straight into this strict father worldview, which is accepted in many parts of the country. Even traditionally Democratic groups such as union members and Hispanics include members who are strict fathers at home or in their private life, Lakoff says. The Republican message plays well with them.

[Click here to see Lakoff’s “A Taxonomy of Trump Tweets,” a breakdown of the President’s tweets.](#)

The nurturant parent family, on the other hand, believes that children are born good and can be made better. Both parents are responsible for raising children, and their role is to nurture their children and raise them to nurture others. Empathy and responsibility toward your child also extend to empathy and responsibility toward those who are less powerful, or suffering from pollution or disease, or are marginalized in some way.



While Lakoff is an unabashed Berkeley progressive, he said Democrats are decades behind in understanding how to frame issues in a way that can reach swing voters.

“Protection is part of the progressive moral system, but it has not been celebrated enough,” Lakoff writes in *Don't Think of an Elephant*. For example, progressives should start calling federal regulations “protections.” If they start re-framing Trump’s promise as “getting rid of two-thirds of federal *protections*” — and spell out what some of those environmental and health and water quality “protections” are — there might be less support for repealing federal regulations, Lakoff said.

“Every progressive knows that regulations are protections, but they don’t say it,” he added. Similarly, “taxes” are actually “investments in public resources.” Government investment pays for the infrastructure on which private industry and everything else is built, Lakoff said. “Roads, bridges, public education, national banks, the patent office, the judicial system, interstate commerce, basic science for drug development — all of that is financed by government investments.” Yet Democrats allow Republicans to frame the debate in terms of tax “relief,” he said.

Lakoff met with Barack Obama when he was still a Senator, and tried to get him to change the terms of the debate more than 10 years ago. When he arrived at the Senate office, he got a round of applause from Obama’s staff and found all of his books in speechwriter John Favreau’s office. But when he gave Obama a copy of his book *Thinking Points*, Obama immediately handed it off to Favreau. “Obama assumed framing was about messaging, and it was about giving speeches. He is a very good speaker, so ...” Lakoff trails off. “Obama did a lot of things right in 2008 when he was running, but then he dropped it. He understood the idea, but he didn’t apply it consistently. I think he believed he could balance both sides, but he wasn’t prepared for the culture wars that he encountered.”

Lakoff believes it’s a mistake for Democratic politicians to move toward the center in an effort to reach more moderate voters. The Republicans have moved further to the right, and they continue to win elections. What Democrats need to do is articulate their message in terms of metaphors that voters can understand, and stick to their core values, Lakoff said.

In terms of messaging, though, he doesn’t believe either Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren have it quite right. “Bernie has a schtick,” he said. “He has great goals, I appreciate his goals, but he is very stubborn. He doesn’t understand conservatives or framing, and he isn’t going to change. He’s been successful with what he’s doing, and that’s enough for him,” Lakoff said. “I talked with him several times, with no effect. He wouldn’t remember it, and couldn’t have cared less.”

Elizabeth Warren “has come the closest to articulating the idea about citizens caring about each other and working through government to provide maximum freedom for everybody,” he said. “But Elizabeth has a problem: she is shrill, and there is a prejudice against shrill women. It’s a terrible prejudice, but it’s a prejudice. She has been recognized as one of the most credible presidential candidates by conservatives, and she has been attacked viciously by the right.”

Berkeley and the Alt Right

Berkeley could also reframe the word “freedom” when it comes to the demonstrations that have started taking place here, Lakoff said. “The protestors are trying to claim that what they are doing is Free Speech, but assemblage for the purpose of beating people up is not freedom,” Lakoff said. “You have the freedom to walk down the street, but not the freedom to keep other people from walking down the street: you don’t have the freedom to impose on other people’s freedom. The alt-right doesn’t have the right to come here and beat people up, and neither does Antifa.”

Lakoff has teamed with Gil Duran, former press secretary to Jerry Brown and Sen. Dianne Feinstein, to create a two-person communications company called Frame Lab that will help nonprofits with their framing issues. He is also creating a Citizens’ Communication Network, which will offer free information on framing issues for activists. Lakoff is trying to raise money for this nonprofit, but in the meantime, he will share ideas and resources on his Twitter feed,

blog and Facebook. “We will do analyses of what works, what doesn’t work, and what they need to look out for,” Lakoff said.

The unassuming Lakoff is an accidental radical, the rare academic who has stepped outside the confines of his discipline and attempted to scale the battlements of real-world electoral politics. When asked whether he was depressed that his message is still not being heard in the political world, he said, “it’s frustrating, and I can be outraged, but I don’t get depressed. Every day I do something worthwhile and positive.” It’s all about the framing.

[Read some of Lakoff’s writing.](#)

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