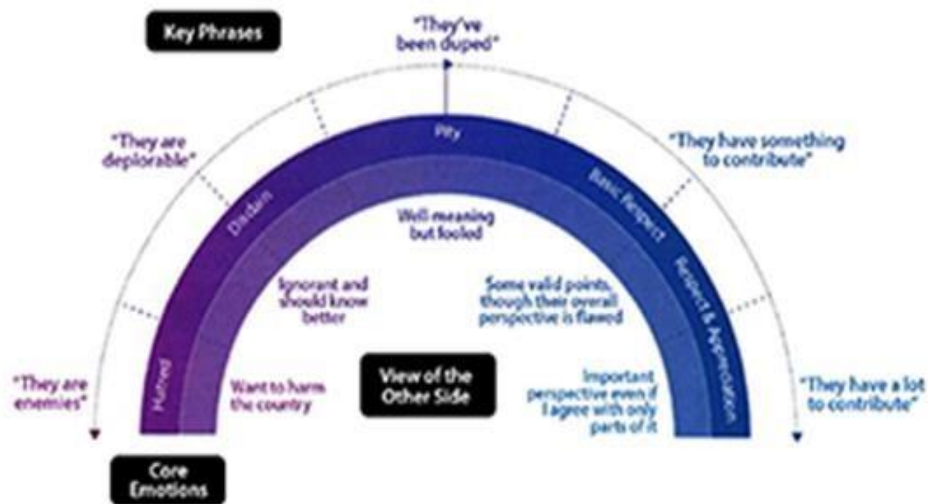


Materials for October 4 Presentation

“A Country Divided - Different Perspective across the Political Spectrum



Moral Politics

How Liberals and Conservatives Think

George Lakoff

University of Chicago Press, 1997

Source – www.getAbstract.com

Recommendation

In this substantial study, liberal linguist George Lakoff delves into schools of thought that mold political debate everywhere, but particularly in the United States. He cites the old-fashioned “strict father” school, which focuses on order, discipline, morality and punishment, as the ethos that shapes conservative ideology. He identifies the newer “nurturant parent” theory, which stresses mutual respect, encouragement and equality, as the bedrock of liberal thinking. Lakoff explains how these theories underpin a variety of political positions. Small-government conservatives espouse bigger prisons, more police and a larger military because they see the world as inherently evil. Liberals who give the benefit of the doubt to the poor are suspicious of CEOs because wealth offends their sense of egalitarianism. This update of Lakoff’s 1996 book came out in 2016, just before the rise of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders and the defeat of Hillary Clinton. So, some examples are dated: Newt Gingrich faded from power nearly two decades ago. **But, to his credit, Lakoff spells out a political**

theory that holds no matter which party is in power or who is the latest political star. He acknowledges he's a liberal and clearly sides with the "nurturant parent" point of view, but he doesn't shortchange the "strict father" school.

Take-Aways

- Two different conceptual metaphors inform today's conservative and liberal worldviews.
 - In the "strict father" model, fathers (or governments) should raise children (citizens) to be strong and self-reliant, so they can survive and even thrive in a harsh world.
 - In the "nurturant parent" model, parents (governments) should show empathy toward their children (citizens) and carefully guide them to be cooperative and self-nurturing.
- Proponents on both sides hold that only their worldview is moral.
- Each view produces stereotypes to oppose.
 - Liberals abhor those they see as selfish, wealthy exploiters; environmental pillagers or small-government hypocrites.
 - Conservatives vilify those they see as cultural warriors; shiftless, lazy welfare cheats; big-government zealots or naive pacifists.
- To understand what drives the other side, both need to assume the other's perspective.
e.g. College Loans:
 - Liberals view them as a moral way to promote equality and prosperity;
 - Conservatives see them as immoral encouragement to rely on government.
- Proposed: Despite conservatives' antipathy toward government, the US has a nurturant society.
- Proposed: The strict father model doesn't work in families or, most likely, in government.

Summary:

The "Strict Father" Model of Morality

The strict father school of thought shapes modern conservative values. In this view, life is treacherous, humanity is inherently nefarious and evil abounds. Anyone can turn bad if he or she lacks the guidance of an unyielding moral code and a stern parent ready to mete out punishment. In this worldview, children are born dissolute, and must learn discipline at a young age so that when they become adults, they can live prosperous lives.

"Very few of those outside the cognitive sciences are used to thinking about social and political issues in terms of the human mind."

In this "sink or swim" view of the world, you master obedience and self-control – and thus become wealthy and independent, or you sink into immorality and shiftlessness. In the strict father view, spoiling a child is a grave sin. Children learn right from wrong only through stern parenting that reinforces the rules with corporal punishment. From this perspective, survival, not to mention material success, depends on learning to compete. The strict father theory idealizes the nuclear family, but a stern mother can also fulfill the role of disciplinarian and moral compass.

“The debate is about the right form of morality, and that in turn comes down to the question of the right model of the family.”

The strict father theory stresses motivating people with rewards and punishment; it says people will alter their behavior to avoid unpleasant penalties. This theory stresses personal responsibility. It works beyond childhood only if the broader world is a competitive arena that rewards self-discipline and punishes sloth. With its misclassification as “traditional morality,” strict father morality calls for harsh punishments. Its adherents are likely to support the death penalty.

“In the Strict Father model of the family, the father is the parental authority who sets strict rules for what counts as right and wrong.”

In this hierarchy, God is stronger and wiser than people. Adults are more powerful than children. The strict father line of thinking lends credibility to power relations, such as the concept that women are subservient to men. In modern America, moral order dictates that the US is morally superior to other nations. This theory also holds that the rich are superior to the poor. After all, in a nation of opportunity, only the indolent and weak-minded fail to prosper.

“Since the Strict Father model is wrong about human nature in the childrearing case, there is no reason to think that its assumptions about human nature will be right in the adult case of politics.”

Strict father morality prioritizes a person’s “moral essence.” Turning away from the church, smoking marijuana or engaging in out-of-wedlock sex are examples of small choices that place someone on a path toward moral dissolution – and send the broader society on a trajectory toward “moral decay.” In this line of thinking, people are either good or bad; their morality is set by the time they reach adulthood. “Three strikes and you’re out” sentencing guidelines reflect this mind-set, as do efforts to take out-of-wedlock children away from impoverished teen mothers.

The “Nurturant Parent” View of Morality

The nurturant parent view shapes liberal thought. This perspective stresses empathy and a shared responsibility to help everyone. In this view, children are born good and become better through nurturing, supportive parenting. While the strict father view puts the male parent in charge, the nurturant parent view is gender-neutral. The mother holds equal sway in decision making, and even children participate in deciding important matters.

“The idea that the rich have moral authority over the poor fits American Strict Father morality very well.”

The nurturant worldview promotes fairness, equality and shared responsibility. Nurturant parents hope to protect their children from crime, cigarettes, underage sex and drinking. They also worry over less-obvious dangers, such as lead paint and pesticides in food. The nurturant parent school, through mutual respect between parents and children, seeks to form adults who are “self-nurturant” – able to take care of themselves.

“In the Strict Father model, it is the duty of the strict father to protect his family above all else.”

Both schools of thought strive to turn children into adult, responsible members of society. However, the two theories pursue this goal using different methods. Rewards and punishments don't drive the nurturant model, which downplays competition. Nurturers believe that competition creates excessive aggressiveness and that cooperation is a more useful mode. The nurturant parent takes a more fluid view of self-discipline. Sex outside of marriage, for instance, isn't inherently bad if it doesn't harm anyone.

"In the Nurturant Parent model of the family, children have the right to have their basic needs met and the right to fair treatment by their parents."

These models take opposing views of hardship and struggle. In the strict father view, hard work is valuable on its own. If it involves pain and suffering, the hard work counts as a character-building exercise. Nurturers question the morality of work that is unsafe and unfulfilling. The two schools hold opposing views of crime and punishment: Nurturers prefer restitution to retribution.

How These Schools of Thought Affect Politics

Most people don't understand the strict father and the nurturant parent theory mind-sets. They're doomed to err when they analyze political motives – both their own and those of their ideological foes. Liberals often misconstrue conservative thought as "an ethos of selfishness," a blind faith in smaller government or a sop to the wealthy. While each is true to an extent, these stereotypes don't enable a liberal to move toward a better understanding of a conservative's positions.

"The ideal nurturant parents must be, or become, what they want their children to be: basically happy, empathetic, able to take care of themselves, responsible, creative, communicative and fair."

Consider the notion of small government. When conservatives espouse smaller government, what they typically mean is less of the government they don't like. Conservatives are eager to cut social spending and to slash such liberal programs as the National Endowment for the Arts and the Environmental Protection Agency. Yet conservatives have no interest in slashing the military, gutting law enforcement, or cutting back on prisons and law-and-order programs. They aren't really proponents of smaller government. In many cases, they want more government.

"From the beginning, the United States has been built on a nurturant principle."

The favor-the-rich theory of conservatism is another stereotype that isn't completely true. The Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush administrations inflated the national debt and redistributed that money to the ultra-wealthy. Yet arguing that conservatives made wealth redistribution their main focus isn't accurate. Liberals might view conservatives as being the super-rich and their lackeys, but many conservatives have pure intentions and modest bank accounts. Defining how some conservative positions enrich the wealthy is difficult. Building prisons, for instance, requires a huge public works investment, and you can't draw a straight line from killing the National Endowment for the Arts to the portfolios of the wealthy.

"The EPA has not just a practical mission but a moral mission – safeguarding the environment, which includes choosing a moral view of the environment."

Liberals have their own quirks. The nurturant parent theory holds that humans are innately good and need encouragement to achieve the best versions of themselves. But liberals don't always view others so charitably. When it comes to such topics as workplace safety, pollution and business ethics, liberals expect the worst of those in charge and advocate harsh punishment, while conservatives take a more benign view of human nature.

“Evolution is sometimes mistakenly seen in terms of survival of the fittest. Such a view ignores nurturance.”

Those on both sides often frame America as one big family. Just as parents must protect and punish their children, the government must take care of its citizens. The word “patriot” derives from pater, or father. People frequently use familial terms, such as Big Brother or Uncle Sam, to refer to the government. Politicians often equate the federal budget to a family's spending plan. But the analogy only goes so far. Families can't issue currency, collect taxes or marshal armies. This fundamental need to compare families to government gives the strict father and nurturant parent theories special relevance.

Example: Morality and College Loans

The two schools of thought have different approaches to many issues, such as abortion or gun control. But to get a sense of how morality applies to an issue, consider a relatively uncontroversial topic: student loans. The US government provides low-interest loans to college students. The liberal school of thought sees student loans as moral on a number of fronts. The loans provide opportunity to those who can't afford college. Because workers with college degrees earn more, the loan program promotes equality and prosperity, and ultimately pays for itself in the form of greater tax collections.

“So far as I can tell, the main issue in every conservative political policy is morality – good versus evil.”

From the conservative perspective, college loans are inherently immoral. They encourage reliance on the government rather than self-reliance, and underwriting the loans means redistributing wealth from those who earned it to those who haven't.

Conservatives' Demons

Because political leanings grow from moral frameworks, it's no surprise that people on both sides need to create demons. For conservatives, demonology breaks down along the following lines:

- **Cultural warriors** – Feminists, gays, multiculturalists and other rabble-rousers seek to unsettle the natural, hierarchical order of things.
- **The shiftless and lazy** – Unwed mothers, drug addicts and the chronically unemployed are people who lack discipline.
- **Big-government zealots** – Environmentalists, consumer advocates and proponents of government health care are all pushing for a bigger public-sector role in society.

- **Pacifists** – These liberals criticize police brutality, question military spending and seek to limit gun rights.

“Political life in America is not run from the top by a smooth-functioning machine. It is messy.”

To conservatives, Hillary Clinton is the Great Satan. She’s a feminist, and she was an antiwar protester. She promotes multiculturalism, and – as of 1996 – owed her prominence not to her accomplishments but to those of her husband. This demonization forestalls the creation of new demons. Former labor secretary Robert Reich learned this lesson in 1994, when he attempted to marginalize big companies as recipients of corporate welfare. Reich characterized corporations as beneficiaries of public infrastructure and invisible price supports, but his effort “fell flat immediately.” Conservative preconditioning supports corporations and their CEOs as industrious and intelligent – the direct opposite of shiftless recipients of individual welfare benefits.

Liberals’ Demons

The demons that liberals abhor include:

- **The selfish wealthy** – This class of people pursue profit above all else.
- **Exploiters** – Companies that bust unions and agricultural giants who poison workers with pesticides are two examples.
- **Environmental pillagers** – These demons pollute the air and rape the land for profit.
- **Small-government types** – Liberals deeply dislike conservatives who oppose public support for schools, the arts and health care.

Were America’s Founders “Nurturant Parents” or “Strict Fathers”?

Despite conservatives’ deep-seated antipathy toward government, the US traditionally has been a nurturant society. The nation’s founders believed that public resources could support and enrich private life. Government has long supported roads, bridges, courts, schools, the mail and other services. Conservatives argue for the privatization of Social Security and water supplies, and the elimination of such regulatory agencies as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Education. Less government, conservatives argue, equals more freedom. This is a misinterpretation of what freedom means. In fact, public services provide freedom. Consider health care: Millions of uninsured Americans couldn’t break free of this burden. The Affordable Care Act nurtured freedom by providing a safety net.

Can the Dysfunctional Parenting Metaphor be applied to American Political Culture?

Evidence indicates that the strict father school of child rearing doesn’t work. Researchers found the strict-father school created shocking levels of beatings and domestic violence by men against their wives. A 1974 book, *The Violent Home*, reported “astonishing” levels of physical altercations in New Hampshire families. Other researchers found violence was routine in homes that followed the strict father theory. Commonplace abuse has the effect of normalizing

violence and making children more likely as adults to beat their spouses and children. The strict father theory doesn't work in families. It seems unlikely to work in the political realm.

About the Author

Linguist and cognitive scientist **George Lakoff** teaches at the University of California at Berkeley. His political books include *The Political Mind*, *Don't Think of an Elephant* and *Thinking Points*.

[Opinion](#)

STEVE CHAPMAN: A polarized public? No. A polarizing system

By Steve Chapman | Syndicated Columnist Posted Jul 8, 2017 at 3:00 AM

American politics is a bicycle with a rusty chain, flat tires and no brakes. It's broken, and it's not taking any of us where we want to go.

Congress is so bogged down in conflict it can barely function. Presidents have found it's easier to issue executive orders than win over legislators. Polarization has grown to the point that people in each party increasingly see the opposition as dangerous extremists.

It's tempting to blame this entirely on voters. Donald Trump and supporters think the left is hellbent on destroying him because he represents real Americans and patriotic values. A lot of other people think the problem is all the Trump supporters who dislike minorities and believe things that aren't true. If only those other people would come to their senses, each side thinks, things would be fine.

Some of the fault is in ourselves. But some of it is the product of a political system that has changed in ways that magnify our worse qualities and suppress our better ones. Trump is mostly a symptom rather than a cause.

The fundamental problem is the gap between what most Americans want and what our elected officials increasingly represent. The most sharp-edged figures set the agenda for both parties — Trump and Ted Cruz in the GOP, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren with Democrats.

The two parties in Congress have never been so dissimilar in their voting patterns or so reluctant to work together. The overlap that existed when there were liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats is gone, taking pragmatic bipartisan problem-solving with it.

This shift leaves a lot of citizens unrepresented. A majority of Americans regard themselves as moderate, slightly liberal or slightly conservative -- more than in the 1970s -- but these centrists have the least influence.

Just look at the debate over Obamacare. Republicans thrived politically by adamantly opposing it and promising to repeal it. But now they find that position unpopular with the electorate. Only 12 percent of Americans favor the Senate health care bill, with 53 percent in favor of

keeping Obamacare. The amazing thing is not that the bill is so unpopular but that Republicans may enact some version of it regardless.

How could that happen in a democratic country? Today, all sorts of institutional factors promote and reward all-or-nothing militancy. If we want to encourage our leaders to find solutions they can agree on, we need to create conditions that foster compromise. Fortunately, there are reforms that could help. Here are a few:

- End partisan redistricting. When seats are safe for one party, the incumbents don't fear a challenge from the other party; they fear a challenge from someone more ideologically pure. Republicans are reluctant to vote to keep Obamacare because they don't want to invite more conservative candidates to run against them. Incumbents naturally resist giving up gerrymandering, but in its next term, the Supreme Court will hear a constitutional challenge that could curtail it.
- Revise campaign finance laws. "Increasing or entirely removing limits on how much money party organizations can raise and spend would be a step toward reducing polarization," argue political scientists Raymond La Raja and Brian Schaffner, because parties tend to have a moderating influence. Existing restrictions on parties induce candidates to "seek a greater share of donations directly from highly ideological individuals and group donors." Giving parties more latitude would nudge politicians toward the middle.
- Scrap party primaries. California has replaced them with "open" primaries, which pit all candidates against one another, with the top two vote-getters, regardless of party, proceeding to the general election. Research by political scientists Eric McGhee and Boris Shor indicates the change has had a moderating effect on outcomes. Another option comes from Louisiana, which forgoes primaries in favor of an open general election, with a runoff if no one gets a majority. It could help centrists because general elections involve more voters, diluting the influence of zealots.

The great majority of Americans have more in common with one another and more willingness to cooperate than they may realize. They need to repair a political system that seems rigged to keep them from getting their way.

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