

# Lakoff's Moral Politics Theory

George Lakoff's Moral Politics Theory is a framework for understanding how political ideologies are shaped by underlying moral values and metaphors. Here are the key elements of the theory:

## Metaphorical Frames

Lakoff argues that people understand complex concepts through familiar metaphors.

These metaphors work as cognitive structures that help us understand one kind of experience in terms of another, but in doing this, metaphorical frames profoundly shape our perspectives – focusing on some dimensions of a situation rather than others.

Lakoff believes that in politics, these metaphors often stem from family-based models. The two primary models he identifies are the "Strict Father" and the "Nurturant Parent" metaphors.

But the idea of framing applies beyond just politics to the way language and symbols work more generally. For example, using the metaphor "Life is a game" will shape our perceptions, thoughts, and language about life in particular ways.

A game has specific goals and objectives, so we're invited to think about the targets people aim for, and think about life as striving toward goals, scoring points or winning. Since games are governed by rules, this frame invites a respect for social norms and ethical guidelines, and perhaps values like honesty, integrity, and respect in various life situations.

In sports, competition is central, and teamwork is often essential for success. This metaphorical frame leads people to see life as inherently competitive, where individual or collective efforts are necessary to achieve success. This competitive outlook can drive ambition and foster collaboration, as people work together to overcome challenges and reach their goals.

On the other hand, framing life as a game might tend toward a winner-takes-all mentality about life, where success is seen as the ultimate goal and failure as unacceptable – perhaps leading to stress and anxiety, particularly in competitive environments like workplaces or schools. The emphasis on competition may overshadow the importance of collaboration and mutual support, creating a culture where people focus on outcompeting others rather than working together for common goals. The frame could marginalize those who don't fit into the competitive paradigm, reinforcing social inequalities.

Lakoff's point is that the metaphors we use do work. They organize our thinking in particular ways, which have real-world impact on our daily lives.

## Metaphorical Frames and Language

Language and symbols play a pivotal role in activating these cognitive frames. And when a particular frame is activated, it brings along a network of associated ideas, emotions, and values. For example, using the term "tax relief" activates a frame where taxes are seen as a burden, and relief is a positive action. This framing influences how people perceive tax policies, presenting them as something negative that needs alleviating. Similarly, calling a policy "healthcare reform" rather than "healthcare overhaul" can activate frames of improvement and progress rather than disruption and risk.

The connection between language and frames has profound political implications. Politicians and communicators use language and symbols strategically to activate frames that align with their ideological goals. By choosing specific words and metaphors, they can shape public perception and opinion. For instance, framing a military intervention as a "peacekeeping mission" activates a frame of benevolence and protection, which can generate public support. Conversely, framing the same intervention as an "invasion" activates a frame of aggression and illegitimacy, which can lead to public opposition.

Effective communication involves understanding the frames that resonate with different audiences. By tapping into the appropriate frames, media producers can make their messages more compelling and persuasive. Recognizing the power of language, symbols and frames allows for more effective political strategy, helping to bridge divides and foster understanding. For example, a politician aiming to appeal to both conservative and progressive voters might frame a policy in terms that activate the two fundamental political frames Lakoff identifies as "Strict Father" and "Nurturant Parent."

## **Family Metaphors**

For Lakoff, family metaphors are key to understanding American politics because they serve as foundational cognitive structures that shape how we conceptualize and interpret political ideologies, policies, and social issues. Family relationships and dynamics are among the earliest and most deeply ingrained experiences in a person's life. These early experiences form a cognitive framework that influences how individuals perceive and process information.

By framing political issues in terms of family dynamics, politicians tap into deeply held beliefs and emotions. Family metaphors in political communication help make complex issues more relatable and understandable. This increases the effectiveness of political messaging and persuasion.

In the US, Lakoff sees two basic approaches that structure politics and connect with common cultural approaches to parenting: the "Strict Father" and the "Nurturant Parent." For Lakoff these frames offer a comprehensive lens through which to understand the moral underpinnings of conservative and progressive ideologies in American politics.

## **The Strict Father Model**

The Strict Father model aligns closely with conservative ideology. This metaphorical frame is built on the notion of a family where the father is the moral authority. The father's role is to protect and provide for the family, but also to enforce discipline and set clear rules. In this frame, the world is perceived as a dangerous and competitive place. Therefore, the father must prepare his children to face these challenges by instilling self-discipline, respect for authority, and a strong sense of personal responsibility.

In the political realm, this translates into a preference for policies that emphasize law and order, national security, and economic self-reliance. Conservatives often advocate for a strong military, strict immigration laws, and a free-market economy. They believe that individuals should be responsible for their own success and that government intervention should be minimized. Welfare programs and social safety nets are often viewed skeptically, as they are seen as potentially fostering dependency rather than self-sufficiency.

Moral values associated with the Strict Father frame include authority, loyalty, discipline, and traditionalism. These values manifest in conservative positions on social issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, and religious freedom. The belief is that a strong, disciplined society is morally upright and capable of facing external threats.

The Strict Father model also emphasizes the importance of meritocracy. In this view, success is a result of hard work, discipline, and individual effort. Therefore, those who succeed deserve their success, and those who fail have not put in sufficient effort. This perspective often leads to resistance against redistributive policies, as they are seen as undermining the meritocratic system.

### **The Nurturant Parent Model**

In contrast, the Nurturant Parent model aligns with progressive or liberal ideology. This frame is based on the idea of a family where both parents are equal partners who provide care and nurturing. The focus is on empathy, open communication, and mutual respect. In this model, the world is seen as an interconnected community where people have a responsibility to help and support each other.

Politically, this translates into a preference for policies that promote social welfare, equality, and environmental protection. Progressives advocate for universal healthcare, public education, and social safety nets. They believe that government has a role in leveling the playing field and ensuring that everyone can succeed. Policies aimed at reducing income inequality, protecting civil rights, and addressing climate change are central to this worldview.

Moral values associated with the Nurturant Parent frame include empathy, fairness, care, and community. These values shape progressive positions on issues such as healthcare, education, and environmental policy. The belief is that a compassionate and supportive society is morally just and capable of fostering collective well-being.

The Nurturant Parent model also emphasizes the importance of diversity and inclusion. In this view, a society is enriched by its diversity, and efforts should be made to ensure that all voices are heard and respected. This perspective often leads to support for affirmative action and policies aimed at protecting minority rights.

### **The Mix of Perspectives**

While the Strict Father and Nurturant Parent models offer contrasting views of the world, they are not mutually exclusive. Many individuals may hold beliefs that draw from both frames, depending on the issue at hand. For example, someone might support strong national defense (a Strict Father value) while also advocating for universal healthcare (a Nurturant Parent value).

However, the dominance of one frame over the other can significantly influence political attitudes and behaviors. Understanding these frames helps explain why conservatives and progressives often find it challenging to agree on policy issues. Their disagreements are not merely about specific policies but are rooted in fundamentally different moral worldviews.

One area where these differences are particularly stark is in the realm of economic policy. Conservatives, operating from the Strict Father frame, tend to support policies that promote free

markets and individual responsibility. They argue that economic success is a result of hard work and discipline, and that government intervention can disrupt the natural order of the market. In contrast, progressives, operating from the Nurturant Parent frame, tend to support policies that promote economic equality and social safety nets. They argue that the government has a responsibility to ensure that all citizens have access to basic needs, such as healthcare and education.

Another area of significant difference is in the realm of social issues. Conservatives, operating from the Strict Father frame, tend to support traditional values and norms. They argue that a strong society is built on a foundation of discipline and respect for authority. In contrast, progressives, operating from the Nurturant Parent frame, tend to support social justice and inclusion. They argue that a just society is built on a foundation of empathy and mutual respect.

### **Political Messaging**

Lakoff's theory also has significant implications for political communication. Political messages that resonate with the underlying moral values of a person's metaphorical frame are more likely to be persuasive. For instance, a conservative message that emphasizes discipline, responsibility, and traditional values will resonate more with individuals who operate from the Strict Father frame. Conversely, a progressive message that emphasizes empathy, fairness, and community will resonate more with individuals who operate from the Nurturant Parent frame.

Understanding these frames can also help explain why certain political messages fail to resonate with their intended audience. For example, a message that emphasizes the importance of social safety nets might fail to resonate with conservatives if it does not also emphasize the importance of personal responsibility and discipline.

For Lakoff, by adopting each other's metaphorical frames and speaking in terms that resonate with the opposing side's core values, both conservatives and progressives can better communicate their policies to each other's constituents. For example, for conservatives, this might mean emphasizing empathy, fairness, and community in their messaging. For progressives, it might involve highlighting responsibility, discipline, and self-reliance. Finding common ground and using shared language around universal values like family and community can bridge the ideological divide and foster more productive political discourse.

George Lakoff's theory underscores the powerful connection between language, symbols and cognitive frames. Language is not just a tool for communication; it is a tool for shaping perception and interpretation. By understanding how language activates frames, we can better understand the ways media messaging shapes our social and political realities.

#### Reference:

Lakoff, G. (2014). *The all new don't think of an elephant!: Know your values and frame the debate*. Tenth anniversary edition. White River Junction, Vermont, Chelsea Green Publishing.