

# George Lakoff

## Why Trump?

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By George Lakoff

Donald Trump is winning Republican presidential primaries at such a great rate that he seems likely to become the next Republican presidential nominee and perhaps the next president. Democrats have little understanding of why he is winning — and winning handily, and even many Republicans don't see him as a Republican and are trying to stop him, but don't know how. There are various theories: People are angry and he speaks to their anger. People don't think much of Congress and want a non-politician. Both may be true. But why? What are the details? And Why Trump?

Many people are mystified. He seems to have come out of nowhere. His positions on issues don't fit a common mold.

He likes Planned Parenthood, Social Security, and Medicare, which are not standard Republican positions. Republicans hate eminent domain (the taking of private property by the government) and love the Trans-Pacific Partnership (the TPP trade deal), but he has the opposite views on both. He is not religious and scorns religious practices, yet the Evangelicals (that is, the white Evangelicals) love him. He thinks health insurance and pharmaceutical companies, as well as military contractors, are making too much profit and wants to change that. He insults major voting groups, e.g., Latinos, when most Republicans are trying to court them. He wants to deport 11 million immigrants without papers and thinks he can. He wants to stop all Muslims from entering the country. What is going on?

The answer requires a bit of background not discussed in the media to date.

### Some Background...

I work in the cognitive and brain sciences. In the 1990's, I undertook to answer a question in my field: How do the various policy positions of conservatives and progressives hang together? Take conservatism: What does being against abortion have to do with being for owning guns? What does owning guns have to do with denying the reality of global warming? How does being anti-government fit with wanting a stronger military? How can you be pro-life and for the death penalty? Progressives have the opposite views. How do their views hang together?

The answer came from a realization that we tend to understand the nation metaphorically in family terms: We have founding *fathers*. We send our *sons* and *daughters* to war. We have *homeland* security. The conservative and progressive worldviews dividing our country can most readily be understood in terms of moral worldviews that are encapsulated in two very different common forms of family life: The Nurturant Parent family (progressive) and the Strict Father family (conservative).

What do social issues and the politics have to do with the family? We are first governed in our families, and so we grow up understanding governing institutions in terms of the governing systems of families.

In the strict father family, father knows best. He knows right from wrong and has the ultimate authority to make sure his children and his spouse do what he says, which is taken to be what is right. Many conservative spouses accept this worldview, uphold the father's authority, and are strict in those realms of family life that they are in charge of. When his children disobey, it is his moral duty to punish them painfully enough so that, to avoid punishment, they will obey him (do what is right) and not just do what feels good. Through physical discipline they are supposed to become disciplined, internally strong, and able to prosper in the external world. What if they don't prosper? That means they are not disciplined, and therefore cannot be moral, and so deserve their poverty. This reasoning shows up in conservative politics in which the poor are seen as lazy and undeserving, and the rich as deserving their wealth. Responsibility is thus taken to be *personal responsibility* not social responsibility. What you become is only up to you; society has nothing to do with it. You are responsible for yourself, not for others — who are responsible for themselves.

### Winning and Insulting

As the legendary Green Bay Packers coach, Vince Lombardi, said,

“Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing.” In a world governed by personal responsibility and discipline, those who win deserve to win. Why does Donald Trump publicly insult other candidates and political leaders mercilessly? Quite simply, because he knows he can win an onstage TV insult game. In strict conservative eyes, that makes him a formidable winning candidate who deserves to be a winning candidate. Electoral competition is seen as a battle. Insults that stick are seen as victories — deserved victories.

Consider Trump's statement that John McCain is not a war hero. The reasoning: McCain got shot down. Heroes are winners. They defeat big bad guys. They don't get shot down. People who get shot down, beaten up, and stuck in a cage are losers, not winners.

### The Moral Hierarchy

The strict father logic extends further. The basic idea is that authority is justified by morality (the strict father version), and that, in a well-ordered world, there should be (and traditionally has been) a moral hierarchy in which those who have traditionally dominated *should* dominate. The hierarchy is: God above Man, Man above Nature, The Disciplined (Strong) above the Undisciplined (Weak), The Rich above the Poor, Employers above Employees, Adults above Children, Western culture above other cultures, Our Country above other countries. The hierarchy extends to: Men above women, Whites above Nonwhites, Christians above nonChristians, Straights above Gays.

We see these tendencies in most of the Republican presidential candidates, as well as in Trump, and on the whole, conservative policies flow from the strict father worldview and this hierarchy

Family-based moral worldviews run deep. Since people want to see themselves as doing right not wrong, moral worldviews tend to be part of self-definition — who you most deeply are. And thus your moral worldview defines for you what the world should be like. When it isn't that way, one can become frustrated and angry.

There is a certain amount of wiggle room in the strict father worldview and there are important variations. A major split is among (1) white Evangelical Christians, (2) laissez-fair free market conservatives, and (3) pragmatic conservatives who are not bound by evangelical beliefs.

### **White Evangelicals**

Those whites who have a strict father personal worldview and who are religious tend toward Evangelical Christianity, since God, in Evangelical Christianity, is the Ultimate Strict Father: You follow His commandments and you go to heaven; you defy His commandments and you burn in hell for all eternity. If you are a sinner and want to go to heaven, you can be "born again" by declaring your fealty by choosing His son, Jesus Christ, as your personal Savior.

Such a version of religion is natural for those with strict father morality. Evangelical Christians join the church because they are conservative; they are not conservative because they happen to be in an evangelical church, though they may grow up with both together.

Evangelical Christianity is centered around family life. Hence, there are organizations like *Focus on the Family* and constant reference to "family values," which are to take to be evangelical strict father values. In strict father morality, it is the father who controls sexuality and reproduction. Where the church has political control, there are laws that require parental and spousal notification in the case of proposed abortions.

Evangelicals are highly organized politically and exert control over a great many local political races. Thus Republican candidates mostly have to go along with the evangelicals if they want to be nominated and win local elections.

### **Pragmatic Conservatives**

Pragmatic conservatives, on the other hand, may not have a religious orientation at all. Instead, they may care primarily about their own personal authority, not the authority of the church or Christ, or God. They want to be strict fathers in their own domains, with authority primarily over their own lives. Thus, a young, unmarried conservative — male or female — may want to have sex without worrying about marriage. They may need access to contraception, advice about sexually transmitted diseases, information about cervical cancer, and so on. And if a girl or woman becomes pregnant and there is no possibility or desire for marriage, abortion may be necessary.

Trump is a pragmatic conservative, par excellence. And he knows that there are a lot of Republican voters who are like him in their pragmatism. There is a reason that he likes Planned Parenthood. There are plenty of young, unmarried (or even married) pragmatic conservatives, who may need what Planned Parenthood has to offer — cheaply and confidentially.

Similarly, young or middle-aged pragmatic conservatives want to maximize their own wealth. They don't want to be saddled with the financial burden of caring for their parents. Social Security and Medicare relieve them of most of those responsibilities. That is why Trump wants to keep Social Security and Medicare.

### **Laissez-faire Free Marketeers**

Establishment conservative policies have not only been shaped by the political power of white evangelical churches, but also by the political power of those who seek maximally laissez-faire free markets, where wealthy people and corporations set market rules in their favor with minimal government regulation and enforcement. They see taxation not as investment in publicly provided resources for all citizens, but as government taking their earnings (their private property) and giving the money through government programs to those who don't deserve it. This is the source of establishment Republicans' anti-tax and shrinking government views. This version of conservatism is quite happy with outsourcing to increase profits by sending manufacturing and many services abroad where labor is cheap, with the consequence that well-paying jobs leave America and wages are driven down here. Since they depend on cheap imports, they would not be in favor of imposing high tariffs.

But Donald Trump is not in a business that makes products abroad to import here and mark up at a profit. As a developer, he builds hotels, casinos, office buildings, golf courses. He may build them abroad with cheap labor but he doesn't import them. Moreover, he recognizes that most small business owners in America are more like him — American businesses like dry cleaners, pizzerias, diners, plumbers, hardware stores, gardeners, contractors, car washers, and professionals like architects, lawyers, doctors, and nurses. High tariffs don't look like a problem.

Many business people are pragmatic conservatives. They like government power when it works for them. Take eminent domain. Establishment Republicans see it as an abuse by government — government taking of private property. But conservative real estate developers like Trump depend on eminent domain so that homes and small businesses in areas they want to develop can be taken by eminent domain for the sake of their development plans. All they have to do is get local government officials to go along, with campaign contributions and the promise of an increase in local tax dollars helping to acquire eminent domain rights. Trump points to Atlantic City, where he build his casino using eminent domain to get the property.

If businesses have to pay for their employees' health care benefits, Trump would want them to have to pay as little as possible to maximize profits for businesses in general. He would therefore want health insurance and pharmaceutical companies to charge as little as possible. To increase competition, he would want insurance companies to offer plans nationally, avoiding the state-run exchanges under the Affordable Care Act. The exchanges are there to maximize citizen health coverage, and help low-income people get coverage, rather than to increase business profits. Trump does however want to keep the mandatory feature of ACA, which establishment conservatives hate since they see it as government overreach, forcing people to buy a product. For Trump, however, the mandatory feature for individuals increases the insurance pool and brings down costs for businesses.

### **Direct vs. Systemic Causation**

Direct causation is dealing with a problem via direct action. Systemic causation recognizes that many problems arise from the system they are in and must be dealt with via systemic causation. Systemic causation has four versions: A chain of direct causes. Interacting direct causes (or chains of direct causes). Feedback loops. And probabilistic causes. Systemic causation in global warming explains why global warming over the Pacific can produce huge snowstorms in Washington DC: masses of highly energized water molecules evaporate over the Pacific, blow to the Northeast and over the North Pole and come down in winter over the East coast and parts of the Midwest as masses of snow. Systemic causation has chains of direct causes, interacting causes, feedback loops, and probabilistic causes — often combined.

Direct causation is easy to understand, and appears to be represented in the grammars of all languages around the world. Systemic causation is more complex and is not represented in the grammar of any language. It just has to be learned.

Empirical research has shown that conservatives tend to reason with direct causation and that progressives have a much easier time reasoning with systemic causation. The reason is thought to be that, in the strict father model, the father expects the child or spouse to respond directly to an order and that refusal should be punished as swiftly and directly as possible.

Many of Trump's policy proposals are framed in terms of direct causation.

Immigrants are flooding in from Mexico — build a wall to stop them. For all the immigrants who have entered illegally, just deport them — even if there are 11 million of them working throughout the economy and living throughout the country. The cure for gun violence is to have a gun ready to directly shoot the shooter. To stop jobs from going to Asia where labor costs are lower and cheaper goods flood the market here, the solution is direct: put a huge tariff on those goods so they are more expensive than goods made here. To save money on pharmaceuticals, have the largest consumer — the government — take bids for the lowest prices. If Isis is making money on Iraqi oil, send US troops to Iraq to take control of the oil. Threaten Isis leaders by assassinating their family members (even if this is a war crime). To get information from terrorist suspects, use water-boarding, or even worse torture methods. If a few terrorists might be coming with Muslim refugees, just stop allowing all Muslims into the country. All this makes sense to direct causation thinkers, but not those who see the immense difficulties and dire consequences of such actions due to the complexities of systemic causation.

### **Political Correctness**

There are at least tens of millions of conservatives in America who share strict father morality and its moral hierarchy. Many of them are poor or middle class and many are white men who see themselves as superior to immigrants, nonwhites, women, nonChristians, gays — and people who rely on public assistance. In other words, they are what liberals would call “bigots.” For many years, such bigotry has not been publicly acceptable, especially as more immigrants have arrived, as the country has become less white, as more women have become educated and moved into the workplace, and as gays have become more visible and gay marriage acceptable. As liberal anti-bigotry organizations have loudly pointed out and made a public issue of the unAmerican nature of such bigotry, those conservatives have felt more and more oppressed by what they call “political correctness” — public pressure against their views and against what they see as “free speech.” This has become exaggerated since 9/11, when anti-Muslim feelings became strong. The election of President Barack Hussein Obama created outrage among those conservatives, and they refused to see him as a legitimate American (as in the birther movement), much less as a legitimate authority, especially as his liberal views contradicted almost everything else they believe as conservatives.

Donald Trump expresses out loud everything they feel — with force, aggression, anger, and no shame. All they have to do is support and vote for Trump and they don't even have to express their ‘politically incorrect’ views, since he does it for them and his victories make those views respectable. He is their champion. He gives them a sense of self-respect, authority, and the possibility of power.

Whenever you hear the words “political correctness” remember this.

### **Biconceptuals**

There is no middle in American politics. There are moderates, but there is no ideology of the moderate, no single ideology that all moderates agree on. A moderate conservative has some progressive positions on issues, though they vary from person to person. Similarly, a moderate progressive has some conservative positions on issues, again varying from person to person. In short, moderates have both political moral worldviews, but mostly use one of them. Those two moral worldviews in general contradict each other. How can they reside in the same brain at the same time?

Both are characterized in the brain by neural circuitry. They are linked by a commonplace circuit: mutual inhibition. When one is turned on the other is turned off; when one is strengthened, the other is weakened. What turns them on or off? Language that fits that worldview activates that worldview, strengthening it, while turning off the other worldview and weakening it. The more Trump's views are discussed in the media, the more they are activated and the stronger they get, both in the minds of hardcore conservatives and in the minds of moderate progressives.

This is true even if you are attacking Trump's views. The reason is that negating a frame activates that frame, as I pointed out in the book *Don't Think of an Elephant!* It doesn't matter if you are promoting Trump or attacking Trump, you are helping Trump.

A good example of Trump winning with progressive biconceptuals includes certain unionized workers. Many union members are strict fathers at home or in their private life. They believe in “traditional family values” — a conservative code word — and they may identify with winners.

### **Why Has Trump been Winning in the Republican Primaries?**

Look at all the conservatives groups he appeals to!

The Democratic Party has not been taking seriously many of the reasons for Trump's support and the range of that support. And the media has not been discussing many of the reasons for Trump's support. That needs to change.



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