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# The "New Centrism" and Its Discontents

by George Lakoff

There is no ideology of the "center." What is called a "centrist" or a "moderate" is actually very different -- a bi-conceptual, someone who is conservative on some issues and progressive on others, in many, many possible combinations. Why does this matter? From the perspective of how the brain works, the distinction is crucial.

Because we think with our brains, all thought is physical. Our moral and political worldviews are realized as brain circuits with strong synapses. If you have two conflicting worldviews, you have two brain circuits that are mutually inhibitory, so that when one is activated, it is strengthened and the other is shut off and weakened. When a worldview applies to a given issue, there is a neural binding circuit linking the worldview circuit to that issue circuit in such a way that the issue is understood in terms of that worldview. The right language will activate that that issue as understood via that worldview. Using that language strengthens that worldview.

When a Democrat "moves to the center," he is adopting a conservative position -- or the language of a conservative position. Even if only the language is adopted and not the policy, there is an important effect. Using conservative language activates the conservative view, not only of the given issue, but the conservative worldview in general, which in turn strengthens the conservative worldview in the brains of those listening. That leads to more people thinking conservative thoughts, and hence supporting conservative positions on issues and conservative candidates. Material policy matters. Language use, over and over, affects how citizens understand policy choices, which puts pressure on legislators and ultimately affects what policies are chosen. Language wars are policy wars.

And so to the State of the Union Address. The President will be using business language to indicate that he is pro-business. He will speak of the need for "competitiveness" as if America were a corporation, and will stress "investments" in education, research, infrastructure, and new energy. Paul Krugman, in the *NY Times*, [writes](#):

The favorable interpretation, as I said, is that it's just packaging for an economic strategy centered on public investment, investment that's actually about creating jobs now while promoting longer-term growth. The unfavorable interpretation is that Mr. Obama and his advisers really believe that the economy is ailing because they've

been too tough on business, and that what America needs now is corporate tax cuts and across-the-board deregulation.

My guess is that we're mainly talking about packaging here. And if the president does propose a serious increase in spending on infrastructure and education, I'll be pleased.

For Krugman, language can be just "packaging" and the packaging doesn't matter if the right policies are followed.

But conservatives know better. They know that they had better get their language front and center. As Eric Cantor [said](#), "We want America to be competitive, but then he talks about investing ...When we hear 'invest' from anyone in Washington, to me that means more spending. ... The investment needs to occur in the private sector." Mitch McConnell had the same reaction, "Any time they want to spend, they call it investment."

Conservatives have made the word "spending" their own. It has come to mean wasteful or profligate spending, as if the government just takes money out of your pocket and wastes it on people who don't deserve it. "Spending" as used by conservatives, really mean the use of money to help people. Since conservatives believe in individual, not social, responsibility, they think it is immoral to use one person's tax money on helping someone who should be helping himself. The word "spending" has been used that way so often, that for many people, it always evokes that conservative frame, and hence strengthens that frame and worldview that makes sense of it. When Democrats use the word "spending" assuming falsely that it is a neutral economic term, they are helping conservatives.

Conservatives are trained not to use the language of liberals. Liberals are not so trained. Liberals have to learn not to stick to their own language, and not move rightward in language use. Never use the word "entitlement" -- social security and medicare are earned. Taking money from them is stealing. Pensions are delayed payments for work already done. They are part of contracted pay for work. Not paying pensions is taking wages from those who have earned them. Nature isn't free for the taking. Nature is what nurtures us, and is of ultimate value -- human value as well as economic value. Pollution and deforestation are destroying nature. Privatization is not eliminating government -- it is introducing government of our lives by corporations, for their profit, not ours. The mission of government is to protect and empower all citizens, because no one makes it on their own. And the more you get from government, the more you owe morally. Government is about "necessities" -- health, education, housing, protection, jobs with living wages, and so on -- not about "programs." Economic success lies in human well-being, not in stock prices, or corporate and bank profits.

These are truths. We need to use language that expresses those truths.

Obama's new centrism must be viewed from the perspective of biconceptualism. In his Tucson speech, Obama started off with the conservative view of the shooting. It was a crazy lone gunman, unpredictable, there should be no blame -- as if brain-changing language did not exist. It sounded like Sarah Palin. But at the end, he became the progressive of his election campaign, bringing back the word "empathy" and describing American democracy as essentially based on empathy, social responsibility, striving for excellence, and public service. This is the progressive moral worldview, believed implicitly by all progressives, but hardly ever explicitly discussed. The end of the Tucson address has helped bring back support from his progressive base. Will "empathy" return in the State of the Union Address?

Obama's message in his warm-up video to his supporters said that the economy can be rebuilt only if we put aside our differences, work together, find common ground, and so on. It's the E Pluribus Unum message -- no red states or blue states, just red, white, and blue states message. It's a message that resonates with a majority of Americans. And so his poll numbers have risen.

How realistic is it?

Robert Kuttner [is unconvinced](#).

He is now Mr. Reasonable Centrist -- except that in substance there is no reasonable center to be had.

A well funded and tightly organized right wing has been pulling American politics to the right for three decades now. And with a few instructive exceptions, Democrats who respond by calling for a new centrism are just acting as the right's enablers.

What exactly is the beneficial substance of this centrism? Just how far right do we have to go for Republicans to cut any kind of deal? Isn't the mirage of a Third Way a series of moving targets -- where every compromise begets a further compromise?

Kuttner has good reason to feel this way. The conservative moral worldview has a highest principle: to preserve, defend, and advance that worldview itself. Radical conservatives have taken over the Republican party. Their goal is to make the country -- and the world -- as conservative as they are. They want to impose strict father morality everywhere. In economics it means laissez-fair capitalism, with the rich seen as the most disciplined, moral and deserving of people, and the poor as undisciplined and unworthy of safety nets. In religion, their God as the punitive strict father God, sending you to heaven or hell depending how well you adhere to conservative moral principles -- individual not social responsibility, strict authority, punitive law, the use of overwhelming force in defending conservative moral principles, and so on. Big government is fine when used to those ends, but not when used to social ends. Only "spending" on measures to help people should be cut, not the use of money to fund what conservative morality approves of. The concern for the

deficit is a ruse. They regularly support ideas that would raise, not lower the deficit. Science is to be believed if new weapons systems are based on it, but not if it shows that human pollutants are causing global warming and disastrous climate change.

The Obama strategy seems to be to drive a wedge between the responsible business community and the radical conservatives. Most Americans, whether Republican or Democrat, are in business and most people in business want the country -- not just themselves -- to thrive. Sensible business people rely on the best economics they can find, not just on ideological economics. And even the biconceptuals who identify themselves with the conservative part of their brains show empathy -- their progressive sides -- in many parts of their lives.

The bi-conceptuals include those who call themselves "moderates" and "independents" -- a very significant part of the electorate, probably fifteen to twenty percent, more than enough to swing any election.

What should progressives make of the "new centrism?"

First, they have to recognize the reality of bi-conceptualism. Adopting conservative language helps conservatism. Adopting conservative programs makes the world more conservative and so helps drive empathy from the world, and that is disastrous.

Second, progressives should recognize that the business of America is business -- that there are successful businesses and businesspeople with progressive values, and they should be praised and courted -- and separated from radical conservatives.

Third, progressives have to organize around a single morality, centered on empathy, both personal and social responsibility, and excellence -- being the best person you can be, not just for your own sake, but for the sake of you family, community, and nation. All politics is moral; it is about the right things to do. Get your morality straight, learn to talk about it, then work on policy. It is patriotic to be progressive.

Fourth, progressives must understand the critical need for a communication system that rivals the conservative system: An overall understanding of conservatism, effective framing of progressive beliefs and real facts, training centers on understanding and articulating progressive thought, systems of spokespeople on call, booking agencies to book speakers on radio and TV, and in local venues like schools, churches, and clubs.

Fifth, it is progressive to be firm, articulate, and gentle. You can stand up for what you believe, while being gentlemanly and ladylike.

Sixth, progressives have to get over the idea that conservatives are either stupid, or mean, or greedy -- or all three. Conservatives are mostly people who have a different moral system from progressives.

A new centrism that makes sense ought to be one that unifies progressives under a single moral system centered on empathy; that recognizes, and shows respect for, the progressive side of biconceptuals; that respects the intelligence of conservatives; that allies with progressive businesspeople as well as with unions; that builds a communication system that brings it in touch with most Americans; that calls upon the love of nature; that is gentle and firm; and that refuses to move to the right, either in language or action.

If you start adopting conservative language and/or positions, you become conservative-lite, or worse.