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Why the Democrats' Response to the Pledge Has Been Inadequate

by George Lakoff

The Democratic response to the Republican Pledge to America has been factual about its economics. The September 26, 2010 Sunday *New York Times* editorial goes [through the economic details](#), and Democrats have been citing the economic facts from the Congressional Budget Office. As Dan Pfeiffer reports [on the White House blog](#), the Republicans are proposing:

- Tax cuts for millionaires and billionaires by borrowing \$700 billion we can't afford;
- Tax hikes for 110 million middle-class families and millions of small businesses;
- Cutting rules and oversight for special interests like big oil, big insurance, credit card and mortgage companies and Wall Street banks;
- Doing nothing to stop the outsourcing of American jobs or to end tax breaks that are given to companies that ship jobs overseas;
- All while adding trillions to our nation's deficit.

Their plan is also notable for what it doesn't talk about: protecting Social Security and Medicare from privatization schemes; investing in high-quality education for our nation's children; growing key industries like clean energy and manufacturing; and rebuilding our crumbling roads, rails and runways.

This is the same agenda that caused the deepest recession since the Great Depression...

The Democrats who have checked out the facts have echoed President Obama's judgment of the Pledge: It's "worthless."

I agree. And if the voting public voted on the basis of the economic details, plus the Democrats' system of values, the Republicans wouldn't have a chance in hell in the November elections.

But the polls show otherwise. What do we conclude? The voting public does not vote on the basis of the economic details, and the voting public does not fully accept the Democrats' system of values as they apply in this election.

I will make a bet. When the new polls come out next week, the Democrats' response to the Republican pledge will not have turned around the Republican lead in the polls.

In short, the Democrats' response to the Republican Pledge may well be irrelevant. Why? And why does the President have such a hard time defending his accomplishments?

Pundits have been looking for a simple answer. But the answer is complex and depends on understanding how the minds and brains of voters work. Here are ten basic principles:

First, all politics is moral. People vote for values they identify with, for what they see as right, not wrong.

Second, the facts alone don't set you free. Facts matter, but they must be understandable, that is, framed for normal human beings, and framed so as to be relevant to the moral views that define a voter's identity.

Third, there are two very different moral views at play in our country's politics. Liberal and conservative moral systems are inconsistent as they apply to most major issues. There is no neutral worldview, no worldview of the "center."

Fourth, there are, however, a significant number of voters --as many as 15 to 20 percent -- who have *both* worldviews, but may apply them to different issues in all sorts of ways. Some may be conservative on social issues, but liberal on economic issues, or conversely. Some may be "up in the air" -- not sure about given issues. I call these "bi-conceptual" voters. These are the voters who most matter in this election, as in most others.

Five, because people think with their brains, all ideas are physical. They occur in brain circuits called "frames." Bi-conceptual voters exist because inconsistent ideas can exist in the same brain due to what is called "mutual inhibition," in which the activation of one frame inhibits (that is, turns off) the other. The more a conservative frame is activated, the stronger it gets and the weaker the corresponding liberal frame gets. What activates frames? Language.

Sixth, what follows from all this is that liberals should never use conservative language (e.g., "tax relief" and "entitlements") because it activates conservative frames and weakens their own case. Liberals should not "move to the right" and adopt conservative positions since that will only make bi-conceptuals more likely to vote conservative. The reason is that conservative language and ideas just strengthen the conservative circuitry in their brains and weakens their liberal brain-circuitry.

Moreover, when you negate a frame, you strengthen it. When a liberal argues point by point against a conservative argument, he or she is repeating the conservative argument and hence strengthening its hold on the brain.

Seventh, in political discourse, numbers in themselves are meaningless. They can be made meaningful only in everyday terms and in moral terms. In themselves, numbers from the Congressional Budget Office don't mean much to most people. The facts alone, not properly framed, won't be convincing. This means avoiding policy-wonk talk, the kind of talk the Obama administration has been using nonstop.

Eighth, people tend to adapt their baseline expectations to what they already have. That is why the President gets little appreciation for what he has already accomplished. If he's done it, we take it for granted. People also tend to be risk-averse. That is why conservative attacks on the president and the Democrats can be taken seriously, even if they are not based on hard economic facts. The moral: Always go on offense not defense. Liberal morality means more than just empathy for one's countrymen. It means social and well as personal responsibility and it means excellence -- doing your best as a commitment to family, community and country. And it means framing in terms of such moral views and in terms of risk aversion, not just past accomplishments.

Ninth, there is no reason without emotion. Without emotion, you don't know what to want and what to avoid. Rationality requires the proper emotionality. Reagan knew how to connect emotionally without going into a tirade. So did Obama when he ran for President.

Tenth, repetition matters. The language that people hear most often repeated activates and strengthens the corresponding frames in their brains. Conservatives are better at marketing their ideas. They are better at framing, because they understand the primacy of morality, how their moral system works, and how to talk to bi-conceptuals. They have a much more extensive communication system, built over three decades, with think tanks, training institutes, recruited speakers, owned media, and booking agencies -- in addition to ads and bloggers. Their messages are affecting the brains of voters 24/7, every day in every electoral district.

We can now see why the Democrats have been failing in their communications. Their message system is inadequate. They need to build it up significantly, starting as soon as possible. They need to find and address bi-conceptuals. They need to speak from their own moral perspective. They need to connect emotionally with voters. The need to stop trying to be bi-partisan; that just helps Republicans, who know enough not to be bipartisan in the current electoral situation. And they need to understand how language activates frames in the brain.

The Democratic strategy so far has been to see each race as separate, with no overall

Democratic vision. Bill Clinton sees this as a mistake and I agree. The Republicans have presented a vision, whatever one thinks of the detailed proposals. The NY Times editorial pooh-poohs the pledge's "breathless mimicry of the Declaration of Independence." But that is most of what their audience will read, not the 48 pages of proposals.

In his campaign, Barack Obama articulated beautifully the Democratic moral vision of America. America is based on citizens caring about, and for, each other. The values of empathy, social as well as personal responsibility, and an ethic of excellence lead to a government of, by, and for the people, with values like freedom and fairness, and a governmental responsibility to protect and empower the people. That is a Democratic view of America. It calls on Americans to come together in difficult times, and it characterizes the party's, as well as the President's, moral compass.

Finally, Democrats also need to understand what framing is and isn't. Framing is normal. You activate frames with every word you speak. Careful framing is needed to communicate effectively -- to get your values across and to get the facts out to voters in language they can understand at an appropriate level and appreciate morally. Can framing be used to manipulate and deceive? Yes, by unscrupulous people. Can framing be used to express our deepest values and to tell our most important truths? Definitely! There's no other way. If you use language, you cannot avoid framing. What matters is how you do it.

The usual pundits keep asking what's wrong with the Democrats' communication. As we have seen, it isn't one simple thing. It's complicated. But it all centers on understanding how the mind and brain really work.

Many Democrats work with a major disadvantage: They tend to have an inadequate view of human reason. Human brains work via frames, metaphors, images, emotions, stereotypes and narratives, all of which have their own "logics." Brains work by adjustment of baseline expectations upward in response to improvements, and by risk aversion. And brains use mutual inhibition, which allows them to hold contradictory moral views at once and apply them to different cases.

Every social science program in America should include a required course on how the cognitive and brain sciences shed crucial light on political and social issues. We cannot afford another generation of social scientists who don't understand how the brain works, and why that matters.