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Simple Framing

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An introduction to framing and its uses in politics.

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Carry out the following directive:

Don't think of an elephant!

It is, of course, a directive that cannot be carried out — and that is the point. In order to purposefully not think of an elephant, you have to think of an elephant. There are four morals.

Moral 1. Every word evokes a frame.

A frame is a conceptual structure used in thinking. The word *elephant* evokes a frame with an image of an elephant and certain knowledge: an elephant is a large animal (a mammal) with large floppy ears, a trunk that functions like both a nose and a hand, large stump-like legs, and so on.

Moral 2: Words defined within a frame evoke the frame.

The word *trunk*, as in the sentence "Sam picked up the peanut with his trunk," evokes the Elephant frame and suggests that "Sam" is the name of an elephant.

Moral 3: Negating a frame evokes the frame.

Moral 4: Evoking a frame reinforces that frame.

Every frame is realized in the brain by neural circuitry. Every time a neural circuit is activated, it is strengthened.

Conservatives Know about Framing

On the day that George W. Bush took office, the words *tax relief* started appearing in White House communiqués to the press and in official speeches and reports by conservatives. Let us look in detail at the framing evoked by this term.

The word *relief* evokes a frame in which there is a blameless Afflicted Person who we identify with and who has some Affliction, some pain or harm that is imposed by some external Cause-of-pain. Relief is the taking away of the pain or harm, and it is brought about by some Reliever-of-pain.

The Relief frame is an instance of a more general Rescue scenario, in which there a Hero (The Reliever-of-pain), a Victim (the Afflicted), a Crime (the Affliction), A Villain (the Cause-of-affliction), and a Rescue (the Pain Relief). The Hero is inherently good, the Villain is evil, and the Victim after the Rescue owes gratitude to the Hero.

The term *tax relief* evokes all of this and more. Taxes, in this phrase, are the Affliction (the Crime), proponents of taxes are the Causes-of Affliction (the Villains), the taxpayer is the Afflicted Victim, and the proponents of "tax relief" are the Heroes who deserve the taxpayers' gratitude.

Every time the phrase tax relief is used and heard or read by millions of people, the more this view of taxation as an affliction and conservatives as heroes gets reinforced.

Now we're hearing the slogan "Tax relief creates jobs." Looking at the Relief frame, we see that afflictions and pain can be quantified, and there can be more or less relief. By the logic of framing (NOT the logic of economics!), if tax relief creates jobs, then more tax relief creates more jobs. That is just how the president has been arguing for increasing tax cuts from $350 billion to $550 billion. The new frame incorporates the old Tax Relief frame into a new "Tax Relief Creates Jobs" frame

Now suppose that a Senator goes on a Fox News show in which a conservative argues with a liberal. The way these shows work is that the conservative host states an issue using a conservative framing of that issue. The conservative host says: "Some say that more tax relief creates more jobs. You have voted against increased tax relief. Why?"

The Senator is caught. Any attempt to answer the question as asked simply reinforces both the Tax Relief frame and the "Tax Relief Creates Jobs" frame. The question builds in a conservative worldview and false "facts". Even to deny that "tax relief" creates jobs accepts the Tax Relief frame and reinforces the "Tax Relief Creates Jobs" frame.

The only response is to reframe. But you can't do it in a soundbite unless an appropriate progressive language has been built up in advance. With more time, one can bridge to another frame. But that frame has to be comprehensible in advance.

Long-term Reframing

Conservatives have worked for decades to establish the metaphors of taxation as a burden, an affliction, and an unfair punishment – all of which require "relief." They have also, over decades, built up the frame in which the wealthy create jobs, and giving them more wealth creates more jobs.

The power of these frames cannot be overcome immediately. Frame development takes

time and work. Progressives have to start reframing now and keep at it. This reframing must express fundamental progressive values : empathy, responsibility, fairness, community, cooperation, doing our fair share.

Progressives have to articulate over and over the moral basis for progressive taxation. They have to overcome the outrageous conservative myth that wealthy people have amassed their wealth all by themselves.

The truth is that the wealthy have received more from America than most Americans — not just wealth but the infrastructure that has allowed them to amass their wealth: banks, the Federal Reserve, the stock market, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the legal system, federally-sponsored research, patents, tax supports, the military protection of foreign investments, and much much more. American taxpayers support the infrastructure of wealth accumulation. It is only fair that those who benefit most should pay their fair share.

Reframing is **telling the truth as we see it** – telling it forcefully, straightforwardly, articulately, with moral conviction and without hesitation. The language must fit the conceptual reframing — a reframing from the perspective of progressive morality. It is not just a matter of words, though the right words do help evoke a progressive frame: paying their fair share, those who have received more, the infrastructure of wealth, and so on.

Reframing requires a rewiring of the brain. That may take an investment of time, effort, and money. The conservatives have realized that. They made the investment and it is paying off. Moral: The truth alone will not set you free. It has to be framed correctly.

Taxation is not an affliction. Tax cuts will not create jobs. These are facts, but stating them as we just did just reinforces conservative frames. The right framing for the truth must be available and used for the truth be heard.

If the truth doesn't fit the existing frame, the frame will stay in place and the truth will dissipate.

It takes time and a lot of repetition for frames to become entrenched in the very synapses of people's brains. Moreover, they have to fit together in an overall coherent way for them to make sense.

Effective framing on a single issue must be both right and sensible. That is, it must fit into a system of frames (to be sensible) and must fit one's moral worldview (to be right).

Framing vs. Spin

Every word comes with one or more frames. Most frames are unconscious and have just developed naturally and haphazardly and have come into the public's mind through common use. But, over the past 40 years, conservatives — using the intellectuals in their think tanks — have consciously and strategically crafted an overall conservative worldview, with a conservative moral framework. They have also invested heavily in language — in two ways:

- Language that fits their worldview, and hence evokes it whenever used. "Tax relief" is a good example.
- Deceptive language, that evokes frames they don't really believe but that public

approves of. Saying "Tax relief creates jobs" is an example — or referring to their environmental positions as being "clean," "healthy" and "safe."

The Rockridge Institute advises against the use of deceptive language and we will not engage in it. We believe that honest framing both accords with progressive values and is the most effective strategy overall.

Responding to "Tort Reform" in Texas

Conservatives have been battering progressives on what they have framed as "tort reform" – legislation to cap awards in tort cases. They have been most aggressive in Texas, where they have used the following language::

Litigation Lottery, Lawsuit Abuse, Lawsuit Abuse Tax, Frivolous Lawsuits, Greedy Trial Lawyers, Out of Control Juries, Runaway Juries, Jackpot Awards

The term *reform* is defined in the Corruption frame, *lottery* in the Gambling frame, and so on. Opposites are defined with respect to the frame, but given opposite values, one positive, the other negative. When you say your opponent is *frivolous*, it is rhetorically implied that you are the opposite, *serious*; if your opponent is a *gambler*, then you are *fiscally responsible*, and so on. That's how Republicans were framing Democrats.

These words evoke frames that, as they are used in context, evoke conservative values:

> *You alone are responsible for happens to you.*
> *You shouldn't get what you haven't earned.*
> *You should be disciplined, prudent, orderly.*

We crafted a response that allowed the trial lawyers to take the moral high ground — in a way that fits what they believe. We took out a copy of *Moral Politics* and listed progressive values. Then we followed a systematic procedure:

A. Pick out the relevant core values for this issue.
B. Write down how your position follows from these values.
C. Articulate the facts and their consequences within this moral framing.
D. Define us and them within this moral frame.

Here's how the issue looks from a progressive moral perspective:

Tort law is the public's last defense against irresponsible, if not downright immoral, corporate behavior that harms the public. It is only the threat of huge punitive damages that has any effect on companies that put profit ahead of public health and well-being. Without that threat — with a small cap on awards — irresponsible companies can fold the relatively low cost of potential lawsuits into the cost of doing business and go on selling dangerous products unchecked. Public safety requires keeping the courts open for juries to make awards appropriate not just to the suffering of the victims, but to the threat to the public. It is a matter of protection.

The proposal to cap awards would effectively take the power to punish away from juries, and would make it hard for those harmed to sue, since lawyers would have a financial disincentive to take such a case. This would have the practical effect of closing off the courts to those seeking redress from corporate harm. Justice requires open courts.

The fundamental progressive values are:

> *We are empathetic; we care about people.*
> *Be responsible*
> *Help, Don't Harm*
> *Protect the powerless*

These led to the following language to describe conservative Republicans and the relevant corporations in this case:

> *The Corporate Immunity Act;*
> *Corporate Raid on Responsibility;*
> *Accountability Crisis;*
> *Closed Courts;*
> *The New Untouchables;*
> *Rewards Greed and Dishonesty;*
> *Protects the guilty, punishes the innocent.*

Taking this morals-based approach changes both how you think as well as talk about tort cases and open courts:

Talk about *responsibility* instead of *victimhood*; about *accountability* instead of *grievances*; about *citizens* instead of *consumers*; about *open courts* instead of *money*.

The Texas legislature is ovewhelmingly conservative and will not be swayed by this reframing. However, some legislators know that immoral corporations must be held accountable when they sell dangerous products that harm Americans. They have now been given a powerful tool to express their values. The major newspapers in the state have adopted this framing enthusiastically and now support this position, and it appears that the proposed constitutional amendment will fail.

Communicative, Conceptual, and Moral Framing

Communication itself comes with a frame. The elements of the Communication frame include: A message, an audience, a messenger, a medium, images, a context, and especially, higher-level moral and conceptual frames. The choice of language is, of course, vital, but it is vital because language evokes frames — moral and conceptual frames.

Frames form a system. The system has to be built up over time. It takes a long-range effort. Conservative think tanks have been at it for 40 years. Most of this system development involves moral and conceptual frames, not just communicative frames. Communicative framing involves only the lowest level of framing.

Framing is an art, though cognitive linguistics can help a lot. It needs to be done systematically.

Negative campaigns should be done in the context of positive campaigns. To avoid negating the opposition's frame and thus activating it, do the following: start with your ideal case of the issue given. Pick frames in which your ideal case is positively valued. The contrast will attribute the negatively valued opposite quality to the opposition as a nightmare case.

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