



Cognitive Models and the Partisan Divide: A Study of the Debate over Health Care Reform

Madeline Herdeman and Robert F. Williams

INTRODUCTION

Since the founding of our nation, American politics has been characterized by competing ideologies of liberalism and conservatism. Discussion of the partisan divide often focuses on opposing views about government size, spending, and regulation as the primary source of disagreement. Cognitive scientist George Lakoff has argued that the partisan divide stems from underlying differences in the cognitive models liberals and conservatives use to conceptualize the role of government. The present study tests these claims by examining arguments presented by conservative and liberal columnists in the recent debate over health care reform.

THE “NATION AS FAMILY” CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR

Lakoff (2002/1996) claims that conservatives and liberals both operate with the Nation As Family conceptual metaphor, yet they have different idealized cognitive models (ICMs) of the family. Conservatives use a Strict Father model, in which the father is viewed as a moral authority whose job is to promote self-discipline, self-sufficiency, and adherence to a moral code. Liberals, by contrast, use a Nurturant Parent model, in which the parent is viewed as responsible for maintaining the well-being of family members and nurturing their development. When extended metaphorically to the nation, these cognitive models have different entailments, so that arguments about policy are fundamentally disagreements over moral world views.

Nation As Family

The Nation Is a Family
The Government Is a Parent
The Citizens Are the Children

Contrasting ICMs of Family

Strict Father (Conservative)	Nurturant Parent (Liberal)
- moral strength	- empathy
- obedience (reward/punish)	- caring (protect/nurture)
- self-discipline	- respect/responsibility
- self-reliance	- fulfillment
- competition	- cooperation

METHODS

We assembled a corpus of op/ed columns on health care reform published in 2009/10 in national newspapers and written by columnists who self-identify or are widely regarded as liberal or conservative. Each column contained at least one instance of the word “government.”

Number of columns:

15 conservative / 14 liberal
(balanced for word count)

We compared uses of the word “government”:

- total number of uses
- words with which it co-occurred
- use as subject/object or modifier
- role within a narrative or conceptual frame

FINDINGS

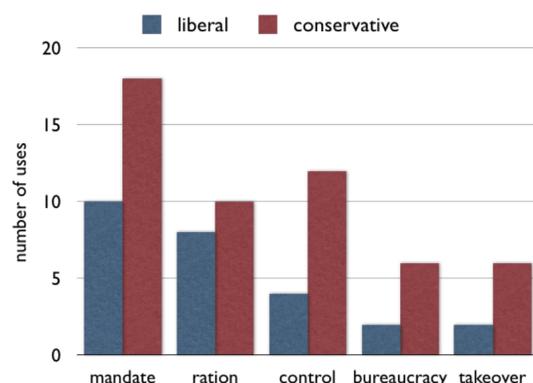
Number of occurrences of “government”:

87 conservative / 35 liberal

Words most commonly co-occurring
with “government”:

mandate
ration
control
bureaucracy
takeover

Frequency of these words in the corpus:



Conservative Use of “Government”

“Government” was often personified as a character in a moral narrative. 6 types of characters were identified:

1 - A person who decides what is best for you at the expense of your making decisions for yourself

“I’m not ready, I’m not ready to die. I’ve got things I’d still like to do.” Barbara Wagner spoke with utter disbelief — a nameless, faceless, **government** bureaucrat had just determined her treatment options, not her physician.

- Gray, C. L. "Healthcare Reform and the Loss of Liberty." *The Hill*, 17 Nov 2009

2 - A person who decides what is best for doctors and companies

Contrary to the president’s implication, most Americans trust doctors not to engage in medical malpractice far more than they trust the federal **government** to tell doctors how to practice.

- Anderson, J. H. "Orszag's 'Pillars' Unsteady as Health Care Foundation." *Omaha World-Herald*, 24 Jan 2010

3 - A person who is ignorant, irresponsible, and inept about how to spend money

Universal and virtually unlimited coverage will vastly compound already out-of-control **government** spending on health care.

- Krauthammer, C. "Obamacare: The Only Exit Strategy." *Washington Post*, 28 Aug 2009

4 - A person who is bossy and controlling

Government will impose an individual mandate that will force the purchase of health insurance on the millions of healthy young people who today forgo it.

- Krauthammer, C. "Obamacare: The Only Exit Strategy." *Washington Post*, 28 Aug 2009

5 - The antagonist in a narrative in which Americans and the government are both fighting for their own self-interest

“We the people” must fight to keep the wellbeing of the individual patient — not the financial interests of **government** — at the center of American healthcare.

- Gray, C. L. "Healthcare Reform and the Loss of Liberty." *The Hill*, 17 Nov 2009

6 - A person who abuses power

ObamaCare's chief goal is using the powers of **government** to redistribute costs and dictate spending.

- Brodsky, A. "Government Wealth Redistribution." *New York Post*, 2 Sep 2009

Use of “Government” in Moral Narratives

Percentage of uses of “government” that were part of a moral narrative:

48% of conservative / 17% of liberal

Liberal Use of “Government”

“Government” was used much less consistently, with few apparent categories.

The word “government” was sometimes used in ways suggestive of Nurturant Parent morality:

No civilized nation should leave its **government** too bankrupt to help the poor.

- Hiatt, F. "A High Price for Health Reform." *Washington Post*, 9 Nov 2009

The word “government” was also used when repeating and refuting conservative claims:

Opponents suggest that a “**government** takeover” of health care will be a milestone on the road to “socialized medicine.”

- Krugman, P. "Baucus and the Threshold." *New York Times*, 17 Sep 2009

DISCUSSION

The numerical findings in Figure 1 reveal conservative creation of a semantic field around the word “government” that gives a specific negative connotation to expressions like “government health care”: care that is mandated, rationed, controlled, bureaucratic, and the result of a takeover.

The six different characters appearing in conservative moral narratives are largely consistent with Strict Father morality as described by Lakoff. They infantilize the adult citizen, usurping the citizen’s self-reliance and self-determination by replacing these with an illegitimate (and apparently inept) outside authority acting inappropriately in the role of parent.

Liberals were much less consistent in their use of the word “government.” While they emphasized empathy and the need for care and protection of citizens, as a group they did not advance a clear, coherent moral narrative that contrasted with the conservative view. Indeed, liberals often repeated the conservative framing while attempting to refute it, a point also made by Lakoff (2002/1996; 2008). It should be noted, however, that the apparent lack of a liberal moral narrative in our data may relate to our focus on the word “government” and liberals’ attempts to redirect focus from government to the suffering of the American people.

REFERENCES

- Lakoff, G. (2002). *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (2nd Ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. (First edition published in 1996.)
- Lakoff, G. (2008). *The Political Mind: Why You Can’t Understand 21st-Century Politics with an 18th-Century Brain*. New York: Viking.