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**Book Review**

**Don't Think of an Elephant**

*Progressive Values and the Framing Wars a Progressive Guide to Action*

by [George Lakoff](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer  
Posted: October 13, 2006

Progressives have been wondering for some time why it is that so many people vote for politicians who don't appear to have their interests at heart. ([What's the Matter with Kansas?](#) is another book that addresses this question.) Why do ordinary people vote for representatives who will send their children to war, cut taxes for other people, and slash funding for schools, healthcare, and other social services that they depend on?

George Lakoff argues that people don't vote according to self-interest: they vote according to their own identity, as they perceive it. Political issues are understood through an overall *frame*, and Republicans have done a much better job at framing the issues they care about than Democrats have. They have funded conservative think tanks to develop their ideas, they have overcome the differences among themselves, and they have devised language that serves to frame issues in ways that fit their worldview.

One example of such language is tax *relief*. Tax relief implies that taxes — rather than being the price we pay to live in a civilized society — are a burden, and that tax cuts relieve us of that burden. When Democrats use terms like tax relief, they are falling into the Republicans' trap.

The basic Republican frame, says Lakoff, is that of the *strict father*. The Democratic frame is that of the *nurturing parent*.

The strict father frame makes these assumptions: "The world is a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good."

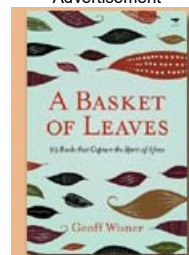
The nurturing parent frame makes these assumptions: "Both parents are equally responsible for raising the children. The assumption is that children are born good and can be made better. The world can be made a better place, and our job is to work on that. The parents' job is to nurture their children and to raise their children to be nurturers of others."

Each frames links to many related values. Here are some of the "nurturing parent" values:

- If you want your child to be fulfilled in life, the child has to be free enough to do that. Therefore **freedom** is a value.
- You do not have very much freedom if there is no opportunity or prosperity. Therefore **opportunity** and **prosperity** are progressive values.
- If you really care about your child, you want your child to be treated fairly by you and by others. Therefore **fairness** is a value.
- If you are connecting with your child and you empathize with that child, you have to have **open, two-way communication**. Honest communication. That becomes a value.
- You live in a community, and that the community will affect how your child grows up. Therefore **community-building**, **service to the community**, and **cooperation in a community** become values.
- To have cooperation, you must have trust, and to have **trust** you must have **honesty** and **open two-way communication**. Trust, honesty, and open communication are fundamental progressive values — in a community as in a family.

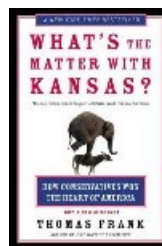
Understanding how to frame issues and use the right language, according to Lakoff, will be critical to the political survival of progressives in the coming years.

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What's the Matter with Kansas?  
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