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The Cry for Democratic Moral Leadership and Effective Communication

by George Lakoff

If you have not read Drew Westen's outstanding piece, "What Created the Populist Explosion and How Democrats Can Avoid the Shrapnel in November", on the Huffington Post, Alternet, and other venues, read it immediately. Westen states as eloquently and forcefully as anyone what he, I, and other progressives have been saying from the beginning of the Obama administration. I agree fully with everything he says. But ...
Westen's piece is incomplete in crucial ways. His piece can be read as saying that this election is about kitchen table economics (right) and only kitchen table economics (wrong).

This election is about more than just jobs, mortgages, and adequate health care. All politics is moral. All political leaders say to do what they propose because it is right. No political leaders say to do what they say because it is wrong. Morality is behind everything in politics -- and progressives and conservatives have different moral systems.

In the conservative moral system, the highest value is preserving and extending the moral system itself. That is why they keep saying no to Obama's proposals, even voting against their own ideas when Obama accepts them. To give Obama any victory at all would be a blow to their moral system. Their moral system requires non-cooperation. That is a major thing the Obama administration has not understood.

The conservatives understand the centrality of morality. They attacked the Obama health care plan as immoral for violating the moral principles of freedom ("government takeover") and reverence for life ("death panels.") The Obama administration made a policy case, not a moral case. The conservatives have characterized the bailouts as thievery and Obama's ties to Wall St. as immoral -- as being in bed with the thieves. The attacks on government are seen as moral attacks, with government seen as taking money out of working people's pockets and giving it to people who don't deserve it. Whether it is the birthers, or the anti-Muslims, or the anti-immigrants, of the pro-lifers, the attack is a moral attack. The Tea Party cry is moral -- for "freedom" (see my book Whose Freedom?), for God, for patriotism. Even
jobless benefits are seen as giving money to people who are not working and don't deserve it. Even social security that workers have earned, that are deferred payments for work, are seen as undeserving people "sucking on the tits of the government." The moral case is not answered just by good policy that will help people who need help -- as Westen proposed. The good policies -- extending unemployment benefits, help to small businesses, help for teachers and firemen, limits on credit card rates, restrictions on rate increases and service reductions by HMO's -- in themselves fit a progressive moral system, but don't in themselves make a case for progressive moral leadership.

Why are so many people about to vote against their interests? The Republicans are not offering kitchen-table benefits. When people are voting against their interests, more interest-based arguments don't help.

Westen's discussion of "the center" and of populism in general, misses what is crucial in this election. There is no one "center." Instead, a considerable number of Americans (perhaps as many as 15 to 20 percent) are conservative in some respects and progressive in other respects. The have both moral systems and apply them to different issues -- in all kinds of ways. You can be conservative on economics and progressive on social issues, or conservative on foreign policy and progressive on domestic issues, and so on -- in all sorts of combinations.

Neuroscience 101, which Westen correctly invokes, tells us that in the brains of such voters, the two incompatible systems inhibit each other, that strengthening one weakens the other, and that the stronger one can have its influence spread to other issues. The "swing voters" are really "swing thinkers." And it is language -- moral language, not policy language, heard over and over -- that strengthens one political moral system over the other and determines how people vote. The Democrats need to reach the swing thinkers -- the people who are moral conservatives on some issues and moral progressives on others -- and strengthen their progressive moral views. The kitchen table arguments must become moral arguments as well -- arguments about freedom, life, fairness, and the most central of American values.

What are those values? They are the values that won the 2008 election for Barack Obama -- and they were not just hope and change. Candidate Obama made the case that American is, and has always been, fundamentally about Americans caring about each other and acting responsibly on that care. Empathy, which he proclaimed over and over was the most important thing his mother taught him, and is the basis of our form of government. Responsibility is both personal and social. "I am my brother's keeper," as he said over and over in the campaign. And thirdly, excellence -- doing everything as well as we can, individually and as a nation. That is why we have life, freedom, fairness, equality -- and quality -- as fundamental values.
We haven’t heard that kind of moral leadership since the inauguration. Americans are longing for it. And those moral values really do motivate every kitchen table policy!

It is morality, not just the right policy, that excites voters, that moves them to action - that creates movements. Legislative action must come from a moral center, with moral language repeated over and over.

What should be avoided, besides policy-wonk and pure-policy discourse? Again, the answer comes from Neuroscience 101. Offense not defense. Argue for your values. Frame all issues in terms of your values. Avoid their language, even in arguing against them. There is a reason that I wrote a book called, *Don't Think of an Elephant!* Don’t list their arguments and argue against them using their language. It just activates their arguments in the brains of listeners.

Don’t move to the right in your discourse or action. That will just strengthen the conservative moral system in the brains of swing thinkers. Frame your arguments from your moral position.

In addition, beware of the same pollsters and focus-group-dialers who missed Scott Brown’s moral message to the swing-thinkers in Massachusetts and claimed that Martha Coakley would win so handily that she could go on vacation. Just because a message plays well in focus-group-dialing doesn’t mean it will win elections.

Finally, Democrats need a truly effective communication system. They need unified, morally-based framing of issues. They need to train spokespeople all over the country in using such framing and avoiding mistakes. They need to organize those spokespeople. And they need to book them, as conservatives do, on radio, TV, in civic and religious groups, in schools and universities. This is doable, but this late, it will take resolve from the top.

Winning this election will require the right policies and actions, but it will also require moral leadership with honest, morally-based messaging and a communications that will not just blog and knock on doors, but will be there in the districts with the crucial swing-thinkers 24/7 day and night.

The Democrats cannot take their base for granted. Only moral leadership backed by actions and communicated effectively can excite the Obama base once more. Without that excitement, the Democrats will lose big.