



## Why do people vote against their own interests?

By David Runciman

Last year, in a series of “town-hall meetings” across the country, Americans got the chance to debate President Obama’s proposed healthcare reforms. What happened was an explosion of rage and barely suppressed violence.

Polling evidence suggests that the numbers who think the reforms go too far nearly match those who think they do not go far enough.

But it is striking that the people who most dislike the whole idea of health-care reform—the ones who think it is socialist, godless, a step on the road to a police state—are often the ones it seems designed to help.

In Texas, where barely two-thirds of the population have full health insurance and over a fifth of all children have no coverage at all, opposition to the legislation is currently running at 87%.



Americans at a “town hall meeting” voicing their anger at healthcare proposals that would benefit them.

have not yet had it properly explained to them. They do it because they resent having their interests decided for them by politicians who think they know best.

There is nothing voters hate more than having things explained to them as though they were idiots.

As the saying goes, in politics, when you are explaining, you are losing. And that makes anything as complex or as messy as healthcare reform a very hard sell.

### Stories not facts

In his book *The Political Brain*, psychologist Drew Westen, an exasperated Democrat, tried to show why the Right often wins the argument even when the Left is confident that it has the facts on its side.

He uses the following exchange from the first presidential debate between Al Gore and George Bush in 2000

to illustrate the perils of trying to explain to voters what will make them better off:

Gore: “Under the governor’s plan, if you kept the same fee for service that you have now under Medicare, your premiums would go up by between 18% and 47%, and that is the study of the Congressional plan that he [Bush] has modelled his proposal on by the Medicare actuaries.”

Bush: “Look, this is a man who has great numbers. He talks about numbers. I’m beginning to think not only did he invent the internet, but he invented the calculator. It’s fuzzy math. It’s trying to scare people in the voting booth.”

A clear difference in the type of language used, even though Mr Bush, too, went on to talk numbers:

“Under my tax plan that [Gore] continues to criticize, ...the federal government should take no more than a third of

### Anger

Why are so many American voters enraged by attempts to change a horribly inefficient system that leaves them with premiums they often cannot afford?

Why are they manning the barricades to defend insurance companies that routinely deny claims and cancel policies?

It might be tempting to put the whole thing down to what the historian Richard Hofstadter back in the 1960s called “the paranoid style” of American politics, in which God, guns and race get mixed into a toxic stew of resentment at anything coming out of Washington.

But that would be a mistake.

If people vote against their own interests, it is not because they fail to understand what is in their interest or

**If you have to explain,  
you’ve lost.**

anybody's cheque. But I also drop the bottom rate from 15 percent to 10 percent because by far the vast majority of the help goes to the people at the bottom end of the economic ladder.

"If you're a family of four in Massachusetts making \$50,000 you get a 50 percent cut in the federal income taxes you pay. It's from \$4,000 to about \$2,000. Now, the difference in our plans is I want that \$2,000 to go to you, and the vice president would like to be spending the \$2,000 on your behalf."

Mr Bush won the debate. With Mr. Gore's statistics, the voters just heard a patronising policy wonk, and switched off.

For Mr Westen, stories always trump statistics, which means the politician with the best stories is going to win: "One of the fallacies that politicians often have on the Left is that things are obvious, when they are not obvious.

"Obama's administration made a tremendous mistake by not immediately branding the economic collapse that we had just had as the Republicans' Depression, caused by the Bush administration's ideology of unregulated greed. The result [of failing to do this] is that now people blame him [Obama]."



Drew Westen

### Reverse revolution

Thomas Frank, the author of the best-selling book *What's The Matter with Kansas*, is an even more exasperated Democrat and he goes further than Mr Westen.

He believes that the voters' preference for emotional engagement over reasonable argument has allowed the Republican Party to blind them to their own real interests.

The Republicans have learnt how to stoke up resentment against the patronising liberal elite—all those do-gooders who assume they know what poor people ought to be thinking.

Right-wing politics has become a vehicle for channelling this popular anger against intellectual snobs. The result is that many of America's poorest citizens have a deep emotional attachment to a party that serves the interests of its richest.

Thomas Frank thinks that voters have become blinded to their real interests. Thomas Frank says that whatever disadvantaged Americans think they

are voting for, they get something quite different:

"You vote to strike a blow against elitism and you receive a social order in which wealth is more concentrated

than ever before in our life times, workers have been stripped of power, and CEOs are rewarded in a manner that is beyond imagining.

"It's like a French Revolution in reverse in which the workers come pouring down the street screaming more power to the aristocracy."

As Mr Frank sees it, authenticity has replaced economics as the driving force of modern politics. The authentic politicians are the ones who sound like they are speaking from the gut, not the cerebral cortex. Of course, they might be faking it, but it is no joke to say that in contemporary politics, if you can fake sincerity, you have got it made.

And the ultimate sin in modern politics is appearing to take the voters for granted.

This is a culture war but it is not simply being driven by differences over abortion, or religion, or patriotism. And it is not simply Red states vs. Blue states any more. It is a war on the entire political culture, on the arrogance of politicians, on their slipperiness and lack of principle, on their endless deal making and compromises.

And when the politicians say to the people protesting: 'But we're doing this for you,' that just makes it worse. In fact, that seems to be what makes them angriest of all.

*Political scientist Dr David Runciman is a British political scientist at Cambridge University.*

*This article appeared on [Turkeys Voting for Christmas](#), first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on Sunday 24 January and repeated on Wednesday 27 January, 2010, at 2045 GMT. Listen via the [BBC iPlayer](#).*



Thomas Frank

**"It's like a French Revolution in reverse in which the workers come pouring down the street screaming, 'More power to the aristocracy.'"**

Dr David Runciman



# Middle Class Votes Wealth to the Rich

By Thomas Walkom

In a strange way, the Depression of the 1930s helped create the modern middle class.

The legacy of this slump may be its destruction.

That the middle class is under attack is not news. People know it in their own lives as pay cheques wither and jobs disappear.

Now a new Canadian study indicates the extent to which this country's middle class has been eroded — even during the so-called good times.

Written by economist Armine Yalnizyan for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and due to be released this month (Dec. 2010), "The Rise of Canada's Richest 1%" uses previously unpublished research to analyze who reaped the gains during the boom years 1997 to 2007.

By an astounding margin, the winners were the ultra-rich. The top one per cent of the population—those earning an average of \$405,000—appropriated more than 30 per cent of the extra income generated in that decade.

Which left less for everyone else.

In past years, the plight of the very poor has received considerable attention, particularly in this newspaper [The Star]. But increasingly, the other side of the income gap is being addressed.

*The Trouble with Billionaires*, a recent book by journalist Linda

McQuaig and tax lawyer Neil Brooks, takes on the common assumption that the ultra-rich deserve what they make, as well as the belief that well-to-do philanthropists are always motivated by a desire to do good works.

Now Yalnizyan, whose previous work on Canada's growing income gap highlighted problems faced by the poor, has turned to the logical corollary: If some people are doing relatively badly, others must be raking the cash in.

Or, to paraphrase McQuaig and Brooks: The problem with billionaires is that they soak up all the money.



Linda McQuaig

**Hard times of the '30s gave rise to radical social movements and Communist parties that convinced governments they had to act. Today the middle classes adhere to the bourgeois virtues of thrift and individualism by cutting taxes, reducing social spending and limiting the power of unions.**

Yalnizyan points out in her study that incomes in Canada haven't been so unequal since the beginning of World War II.

And, she notes, the gap between those at the very top and the rest of us — also known as the middle class—is growing faster than at any time in recorded Canadian history.

Canada's middle classes have been under attack before. Middle class wage earners made gains in the early 1920s, only to see them wiped out by the Depression.

Yet it was the hard times of the 1930s—and the great boost that these times gave to radical social movements and Communist parties—that convinced governments they had to act.

Programs like unemployment insurance, welfare and old age pensions—as well as union-friendly labour laws—were designed in large part to prevent social upheaval.

And they worked. In the decades after World War II, the North American middle classes prospered. The gap between the rich and everyone else narrowed significantly.

Ironically, Depression-era left-wing agitation had helped to create, by the 1950s, a stable, conservative, bourgeois (and anti-Communist) society.

Today, we see the same impoverishment of the middle classes that Canada endured 75 years ago. Employers use high unemployment levels to beat back unions. Governments use recessionary deficits as a rationale for cutting social spending.

But today, unlike the 1930s, no popular radical movement threatens the social order. So there is little reason for governments to do anything serious.

Instead, there is pressure—from the middle classes themselves—to adhere to the bourgeois virtues of thrift and individualism by cutting taxes, reducing social spending and limiting the power of unions.

As documented by Yalnizyan, such measures help the very rich. But they don't help the disappearing middle class.

*Thomas Walkom's column appears Wednesday and Saturday. This one appeared on December 01, 2010. <http://www.thestar.com/News/Canada/article/89927>*

# Why are so many people voting against their interests?

By George Lakoff

## Progressives & conservatives have different moral systems

All political leaders say what they propose to do is right. Morality is behind everything in politics. But 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.

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 appearing to take money out of working people's pockets and giving it to people who don't deserve it. Whether it is the anti-Muslims, or the anti-immigrants, or 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 undeserved by people "sucking on the tits of the government."

The moral case is not answered by good policies that help people in need. The good policies—extending unemployment benefits, helping small businesses, helping teachers and firemen, limiting credit card rates, restricting rate increases and service reductions by Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs)—in them-

selves fit a progressive moral system, but don't in themselves make a case for progressive moral leadership.

## Interest-based arguments don't help

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.

There is no one political "centre." Instead, a considerable number of Americans (perhaps as many as 15 to 20 percent) are conservative in some respects and progressive in others. They 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 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.

## Values that count

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 America 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, 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



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**When people vote against their own interests, more interest-based arguments won't sway them.**

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 centre, with moral language repeated over and over.

### Practical advice

What should be avoided, besides policy-wonk and pure-policy discourse? Again, the answer comes from Neuroscience 101. Offence not defence. Argue for your values. Frame all issues in terms of your values. Avoid the others' 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 strengthen the conservative moral system in the brains of swing thinkers. Frame your arguments from your moral position.

In addition, beware of the pollsters and focus-group-dialers. 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 achievable, but it will take resolve from the top.

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

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.

*Cross-posted from the [Huffington Post](#). Edited for JUSTnews.*

## Why do we Vote the Way we Do?

### The Lure of the Lottery

Why do so many people vote at elections against their own interests?

It's a question I've often pondered. Women vote for parties that are anti-feminist, the poor and middle class vote for parties that cater to the rich, workers vote for parties that favour business.



Joe Bageant

Author Joe Bageant in *Deer Hunting with Jesus* suggested it was lack of education—he was speaking of the poor whites in Virginia—but voting against one's own interests happens where people are well

educated, too.

Perhaps people vote for parties that successfully imply that voting for them will make everybody happy and wealthy—the lure of the lottery: vote for us, and you, too, will win big! This pledge is made to seem credible by a promise of tax cuts. Taxes, we are told, are what keep us all poor, and who wants to pay to be poor? Incredibly, people believe such nonsense.

But ignorance, stupidity and greed, while explaining why some people vote against their own interests, are undoubtedly not the whole story.

### Conservatives and Progressives Think Differently

George Lakoff in *The Political Mind* points out that progressives and small "c" conservatives (who currently predominate in federal and provincial Conservative and Liberal parties) differ in their basic moral philosophies: conservatives believe in the rights of the individual and the authority of leaders to champion individual freedoms. Progressives empathize with others, and are more willing to question authority and "father-figures."

There is some empirical evidence to support this. David Amodio of New York University reported that conservatives were more structured and persistent in their judgements. In tests, they had higher average scores on the need for order, structure and closure. Liberals (progressives) showed higher tolerance of ambiguity and complexity. Might there be a genetic component to our voting?

Conservatives and progressives may have different minds, but many people who usually think progressively vote conservatively. Why?

## Framing

George Lakoff concludes that conservative parties successfully frame solutions in authoritative terms often with just sufficient truth behind them to make them appear reasonable.

One of the best examples of framing is the suggestion that we can solve our problems by waging war on them. Hence we have “war on terrorism,” “war on crime,” “war on drugs,” “war on poverty,” etc.

One wins wars with overwhelming force; “if you don’t like it, nuke it,” students of my era more than half a century ago suggested, cynically alluding to solutions proposed by conservative US politicians for resolving the cold war with the USSR.

The difficulty with solving a problem by waging war on it is that it diverts thinking from what caused the problem in the first place. The war on terrorism, Lakoff points out, became an excuse for the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan when the real problem was a bunch of fanatic criminals flying airplanes into the twin towers. Criminals should have been treated like criminals. Failure to do so hid the real causes of the invasions and occupations, which were to secure supplies of oil (Iraq) and a gas pipeline (Afghanistan) for the USA and its NATO allies (including Canada). Opponents to these wars on terrorists were framed as cowards (“cut and run”) or even as “traitors.”

## Simple Solutions Appeal to Conservatives

The “war on crime” has led to the “get tough on crime” policy where prison terms are lengthened and some suspected criminals (framed as terrorists) may, against all precepts of justice, be locked up without trial (e.g., in Canada Hassan Almrei was imprisoned for nearly a decade in solitary confinement without trial on the basis of a “security certificate” that a judge finally quashed in 2009; there were half a dozen others like him). This thoughtless war on crime is waged despite the fact crime generally is decreasing.

But the simple-minded solution of longer incarceration means the causes of crime—poverty, greed, drugs, oppression (could those fanatical criminals (terrorists) have a case?)—can be ignored. Those who oppose the simplistic authoritarian measures are framed as “bleeding-heart do-gooders.”

Conservative thinkers have several advantages over progressives. In addition to being able to pose simple solutions to complex problems, conserv-

atives promote optimism where none is justified. “[G]enerals on both sides of a conflict tend to be overwhelmingly confident they will win,” says Lakoff.

**One of the best examples of framing is the suggestion that we can solve our problems by waging war on them.**

Here again is the lure of the lottery: vote for us and all will be well (even when past policies have resulted in a recession, rising poverty, and an environment in flames). But who wants to vote for a realist? It’s more uplifting to vote for unrealistic hope.

## Progressive Thinkers fail to take into account the Human Mind

Progressive thinkers, in contrast to conservatives, hold an untenable belief that if a problem is posed in clear factual terms, reason will prevail, voters will see the light, and vote sensibly.

Human minds, as Lakoff points out, unfortunately don’t usually work that way. “Usually,” because, in fairness, conservative thinkers sometimes promote progressive views, and supposedly progressive thinkers may propound conservative views.

I was surprised, for instance, to hear Peter Pocklington, an arch conservative, expound progressive ideas in a radio interview on the legalization of cannabis and other drugs. Progressive thinkers may also hold some very conservative ideas.

## So what’s the progressive’s solution?

“The more [that progressives] can activate empathy, the more support will be available to them and the worse conservatives will do,” says Lakoff. Canadians until recently have generally been a compassionate caring people. Unfortunately, conservative framing over recent decades has eroded many Canadian’s compassionate values. Witness the hostile reaction to boatloads of Tamil refugees. Are we voters becoming un-Canadian? Is this in part why many progressive citizens don’t want to vote “for any of the above?”

The solution, Lakoff suggests, is that voters should become aware of framing and thereby avoid the framing trap. That is, we need educating, as author of *Deer Hunting with Jesus* Joe Bageant suggested. But the belief that education will do the trick simply continues the appeal to logic that our minds, Lakoff argued so cogently, are geared to ignore. Education is always worthwhile, but it obviously isn’t enough.

Lakoff seems reluctant to suggest that progressives should take a page from the conservative’s manual and frame issues themselves. He does, however, suggest that the privatization of



Hassan Almrei

public services be framed as “privateering,” because the chief aim of privatization is to transfer wealth and power from the public to the authoritarian alliance: corporations and the wealthy.

Progressive thinkers may be reluctant to use framing because, unless it is done carefully, it leads to dishonest statements, twisted facts, or outright lies. And that is immoral. Compassionate morality does not figure high among the values of conservatives; deferring to authority does.

But progressives would do well to remember that they are dealing with humans, few of whom are logicians. When progressive candidates frame policies carefully, and emphasize empathy and compassion, more people might vote for them, suggests Lakoff, and at the same time vote in their own interests.

H’m. I wonder.

PEKS.

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### **Don’t Think of an Elephant—Review from *Publishers Weekly***

Lakoff, a cognitive scientist and linguist at Berkeley, believes he knows why conservatives have been so successful in recent years and how progressives like himself can beat them at their own game. This slim book [*Don’t Think of an Elephant*] presents a simple, accessible overview of his theory of “moral politics” and a call to action for Democrats mourning November 2010’s election results.

Lakoff’s persuasive argument focuses on two ideas: what he calls “framing,” and the opposition of liberals’ and conservatives’ concepts of the family. Conservatives, he says, have easily framed tax cuts as “tax relief” because of widespread, pre-existing views of taxes as burdensome. Liberals have had little success conveying the idea that taxes are a social responsibility.

In Lakoff’s view, conservatives adhere to a “strict father” model of family, in contrast to liberals’ “nurturant parent” view, and he sees this difference as the key to understanding most of the two sides’ clashes. His writing is clear and succinct, and he illuminates his theories through easy-to-follow examples from current politics. Although the book has been updated since the election, many of its sections were originally written long beforehand, so some comments are outdated. However, the process of regaining power may be a long one for Democrats, and Lakoff’s insights into how to deal with conservatives and appeal to the general public are bound to light a fire under many progressives.

*Editor’s note: This letter was printed in JUSTnews Vol. 12 No. 2, Winter 2008-2009, but is worth reprinting here.*

### **Liberals and Conservatives live on Different Planets**

Sir, the polls show us running well in the active cingulated cortex demographic.

New research that bodes ill for these contentious times has found evidence that not only do liberals and conservatives believe differently, they literally think differently, and not just about politics.

In an experiment that tested the ability to refrain from knee-jerk reactions, researchers from New York University (NYU) and UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) found differences in how the brain processes information among subjects from across the political spectrum.

In the tests, subjects sat in front of a monitor as it flashed a series of Ms and Ws; Ms outnumbered the Ws four-to-one, so the clicking had a tendency to get habitual.

According the New York Times, “Each participant was wired to an electroencephalograph that recorded activity in the anterior cingulate cortex, the part of the brain that detects conflicts between a habitual tendency (pressing a key) and a more appropriate response (not pressing the key). Liberals had more brain activity and made fewer mistakes than conservatives when they saw a W,” researchers said. “Liberals and conservatives were equally accurate in recognizing M.” Lead author David Amodio of NYU says conservatives were found to be “more structured and persistent in their judgements;” in tests they had “higher average scores” on measures of the personal need for “order, structure and closure.” Liberals showed “higher tolerance of ambiguity and complexity.”

Right now, I can sense the pressure building behind a few eyeballs out there, so let’s get to the caveats quickly. Amodio hastens to emphasize that his work is not saying one cognitive style is better than another. (I am not so reticent: inflexibility and intolerance of ambiguity and complexity are recipes for disaster.) The researchers know that this test had a narrow range and that political views run along a continuum, are shaped by myriad factors and can be inconsistent. But the results do support the idea that our cerebral wiring contributes to a divide across political and other social issues between people who sometimes seem like they’re living in different worlds. To some degree, they are.

*An anonymous letter to “Good Morning Silicon Valley” e-news.*

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