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### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/05h3v9fc>

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### Publication Date

2003-10-13

## The Frame Around Arnold

by George Lakoff

Newspaper and TV reporters require a story. Each story requires a frame. How was the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger framed? Here is a selection:

**Voter Revolt:** *Gray Davis was such a bad governor that the voters justifiably ousted him and voted in the representative of the other party.*

**The Great Noncommunicator:** *Gray Davis governed as well as possible under the circumstances, but was so bad at communicating with the electorate that he could not communicate his real accomplishments, nor could he communicate the role of the Republicans in the state's problems. The public thought Davis was worse than he was and wanted a communicator, so they voted him out and chose an actor.*

**Those Kooky Californians:** *People in California are so weird that they voted a politically inexperienced bodybuilder-actor into office to replace a governor they voted for just last year.*

**The People Beat the Politicians:** *When the people win, politics as usual must lose (Schwarzenegger's acceptance speech).*

**Just a Celebrity:** *People don't understand politics and just voted for a celebrity.*

**Up By his Bootstraps:** *Coming here as an immigrant, Arnie worked and worked to become a champion body-builder, then a millionaire actor, and finally achieved his dream – becoming governor.*

Framing was rampant in reporting in this election. Frames come with inferences, so each framing implies something different.

The "Voter Revolt" frame legitimizes the recall. It assumes that Davis was incompetent or corrupt, that the voters correctly perceived this, that it outraged them, that they

spontaneously, righteously, and overwhelmingly rose up and ousted him, replacing him with someone they knew to be more competent. Democracy was served and all is well. We should be happy about the result and things will be better.

The "Great Noncommunicator" frame implies that the one and only problem was Gray Davis' inability to communicate. It assumes he was a competent governor and a responsible administrator with that single fatal flaw, that people want communication so badly that they recalled Davis because he couldn't communicate his achievements. The implication is that the recall and Schwarzenegger's election had nothing to do with anything outside California or anything broader, and that the problem just was Davis.

The "Kooky Californians" frame says the recall was irrational, that Californians can't tell the movies from reality, that a movie action hero can't govern a great state in trouble, that Arnie is a political incompetent and that chaos will ensue.

The "People Beat the Politicians" frame is Schwarzenegger's attempt to impose his own frame. The context is that Arnold will have to deal with a majority Democratic legislature. This frame casts himself and the Republican politicians as "the people" and the Democrats as "politics as usual," which "the people" voted against.

The "Just a Celebrity frame" implies that there was no partisan politics in this election and that any celebrity at all could just as well have won.

The "Up by his Bootstraps" frame attributes Arnold's election principally to Arnold himself, especially to his hard work and ambition. Arnold got to be governor because he deserved it. He deserved it because he worked hard – at body-building, acting, and campaigning.

If there's going to be a news story, there's going to be a frame and each frame will have different inferences.

## **Facts and Framing**

It is a general finding about frames that if a strongly held frame doesn't fit the facts, the

facts will be ignored and the frame will be kept. The frames listed above don't do very well at fitting the facts – though each has a grain of truth. Let's look at the facts that each frame hides.

**Voter Revolt:** This frame hides the national Republican effort over several years to make Davis look bad by hurting the California economy. It hides the fact that energy deregulation was brought in by Republican governor Pete Wilson. It ignores the fact that there was no real "energy crisis." It resulted from thievery by Enron and other heavy Bush contributors, thievery that was protected by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission run by Bush appointees. The Bush administration looked the other way while California was being bilked and went to great lengths not to help California financially in any of the many ways the federal government can help. Arnold had had a meeting with Ken Lay and other energy executives in spring 2001 when Lay was promoting deregulation, but denies any complicity in the theft. Arnold is now promoting energy deregulation again.

It also ignores the fact that California's Republican legislature also went out of its way to make Davis look bad, refusing to support reasonable measures for dealing with the budget problems. It ignores the fact that the recall petition was paid for by a wealthy conservative legislator and that signature gatherers were paid handsomely and that some signatures were from out of state, which is illegal. And it ignores the enormous amount of money and organization put into the Schwarzenegger campaign by Republicans. This was no simple popular revolution. Most of all, the "Voter Revolt" frame does not explain why Schwarzenegger should have been the candidate chosen.

The **Great Noncommunicator** frame has a lot of truth to it. But it too hides all the sustained Republican effort, and it also hides the fact that it is not just Gray Davis, but rather Democrats in general, who cannot communicate effectively.

The **Kooky Californians** frame does not explain any of the above. The Republicans' long-term, carefully structured anti-Davis campaign is hidden by this frame. It is as if there were no politics at work here at all.

The **People Beat the Politicians** frame hides the fact that the Republicans have been

playing politics with the state finances for years in an attempt to beat Davis. It hides the fact the Schwarzenegger team run by former governor Pete Wilson will be just as much "politics as usual," and that the Democratic representatives in the legislature numerically represent more of "the people" than do the Republicans.

The **Just a Celebrity** frame ignores all the above political factors, and also cannot explain why *this particular celebrity* won. Jay Leno supported Arnold; Jay is just as much a celebrity, but Jay Leno could never have been elected governor.

The **Up by his Bootstraps** frame also ignores all the politics involved and doesn't explain why other movie actors who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps didn't run and wouldn't have been elected.

These framings hide other important facts as well. They don't explain why a lot of union rank-and-file members ignored their unions' support for Davis and voted for Arnold against their self-interest. They don't explain why a great many Hispanics voted for Arnold instead of Bustamante. They don't explain Arnold's popularity with women despite the revelations against him of sexist behavior.

### **The Moral Politics Analysis**

I'm going to offer a very different account of the Schwarzenegger victory, based on my book 'Moral Politics.' Since the book was written in 1996 and updated in 2002, the account I'll be giving is a general one, based on a general understanding of American politics, not on the special facts about this election. My resulting claim is that much of what occurred in the recall election is the same as what has been going on for some time in American politics. The Schwarzenegger election, I propose, should not be seen as an entirely unique event, despite having unique elements, but rather part of the overall political landscape.

In 'Moral Politics,' I suggested that voters vote their identity – they vote on the basis of who they are, what values they have, and who and what they admire. A certain number of voters identify themselves with their self-interest and vote accordingly. But that is the exception rather than the rule. There are other forms of personal identification – with one's ethnicity,

with one's values, with cultural stereotypes, and with culture heroes. The most powerful forms of identification so far as elections are concerned are with values and corresponding cultural stereotypes. The Republicans have discovered this and it is a major reason why they have been winning elections – despite being in a minority. Democrats have not yet figured this out.

The 'Moral Politics' discovery is that models of idealized family structure lie at the heart of our politics – less literally than metaphorically. The very notion of the founding *fathers* uses a metaphor of the nation as family, not as something we think actively about, but as way of structuring our understanding of the enormous hard-to-conceptualize social group, the nation, in terms of something closer to home, the family. It is something we do automatically, usually without consciously thinking about it.

Our politics is organized around two opposite and idealized models of the family, the strict father and nurturant parent models.

The nurturant parent family assumes that the world is basically good and can be made better and that it is one's responsibility to work towards that. Accordingly, children are born good and parents can make them better. Both parents share responsibility for raising the children. Their job is to nurture their children and raise their children to be nurturers. Nurturing has two aspects: empathy (feeling and caring how others feel) and responsibility to take care of oneself and others for whom we are responsible. These two aspects of nurturance imply family values that we can recognize as progressive political values: From empathy, we want for others: protection from harm, fulfillment in life, fairness, freedom (consistent with responsibility), open two-way communication. From responsibility there follows: competence, trust, commitment, community building, and so on.

From these values, specific policies follow: Governmental protection in form of a social safety net and government regulation (as well as the military and the police), universal education (competence, fairness), civil liberties and equal treatment (fairness and freedom), accountability (from trust), public service (from responsibility), open government (from open communication), and the promotion of an economy that benefits all and functions to promote these values. The role of government is to provide the

infrastructure and services to enact these values and taxes are the dues you pay to live in such a civilized society. In foreign policy, the role of the nation should be to promote cooperation and extend these values to the world. These are traditional progressive values in American politics.

## **Different Family Values**

The conservative worldview is shaped by very different family values.

The strict father model assumes that the world is and always will be dangerous and difficult and that children are born bad and must be made good. The strict father is the moral authority who has to support and defend the family, tell his wife what to do, and teach his kids right from wrong. The only way to do that is painful discipline – physical punishment that is to develop by adulthood into internal discipline. Morality and survival jointly arise from such discipline – discipline to follow moral precepts and discipline to pursue your self-interest to become self-reliant. The good people are the disciplined people. Once grown, the self-reliant disciplined children are on their own and the father is not to meddle in their lives. Those children who remain dependent (who were spoiled, overly willful, or recalcitrant) should be forced to undergo further discipline or cut free with no support to face the discipline of the outside world.

Project this onto the nation and you have the radical right-wing politics that has been misnamed "conservative." The good citizens are the disciplined ones – those who have already become wealthy or at least self-reliant – and those who are on the way. Social programs "spoil" people, giving them things they haven't earned and keeping them dependent. They are therefore evil and to be eliminated. Government is there only to protect the nation, maintain order, administer justice (punishment), and to provide for the orderly conduct of and the promotion of business. Business (the market) is the mechanism by which the disciplined people become self-reliant, and wealth is a measure of discipline. Taxes beyond the minimum needed for such government are punishments that take away from the good, disciplined people rewards that they have earned and spend it on those who have not earned it.

In foreign affairs, the government should maintain its sovereignty and impose its moral authority everywhere it can, while seeking its self interest (the economic self-interest of corporations and military strength).

## **How We Vote**

Given these distinctions, there are the natural complications of real people. Such models are there in the synapses of our brains. When we vote on the basis of values and cultural stereotypes, what determines how we vote is which model is active for understanding politics at the time.

We all have *both* models – either actively or passively. Progressives who can understand an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie have at least a passive version of the strict father model alongside the active nurturant model that defines their politics. Conservatives who can understand the Bill Cosby show have at least a passive version of the nurturant model.

But many people – often enough to decide elections – have active versions of *both* models that they use in different parts of their lives. There are strict fathers in the classroom who have progressive politics. There are strict fathers on the job who are nurturant parents at home. Many blue collar workers are strict fathers at home, but nurturant toward their co-workers. Union employees tend to be strict toward their employers and nurturant toward union members. Women tend to have active nurturant parent models, but a significant number accept the authority of the strict father, are strict mothers, or may have some significant fear. Fear triggers the strict father model; it tends to make the model active in one's brain.

What conservatives have learned about winning elections is that they have to activate the strict father model in more than half of the electorate – either by fear or by other means. The 9/11 attacks gave the Bush administration a perfect mechanism for winning elections. They declared an unending war on terror. The frame of the **War on Terror** presupposes that the populace should be terrified, and orange alerts and other administration measures and rhetoric keep the "Terror" frame active. Fear and uncertainty then naturally activate the **Strict Father** frame in a majority of people, leading the electorate to see politics in



conservative terms.

## **Enter the Terminator**

Enter The Terminator! – the ultimate in strictness, the tough guy extraordinaire. The world champion body-builder is the last word in discipline. What better stereotype for strict father morality? That is the reason that it was Arnold – not just any celebrity like Jay Leno or Rob Lowe or Barbra Streisand – who could activate a strict stereotype and with it conservative Republican values.

What is peculiar to California is Arnold and the culture of the movies. But the same mechanism lay behind the Republican victories in the 2002 election – and in elections around the country since the days of Ronald Reagan – but especially in the last decade when Republicans have mastered the art form of activating the strict father image in the minds of voters. Arnie's popularity has the same source as Bush's popularity with the Nascar dads: identification with strict father values and stereotypes. Moreover, Davis' inability to communicate strong progressive values is hardly unique to him. Democrats nationwide have a similar inability to effectively and strongly communicate their values and evoke powerful progressive stereotypes.

In addition, Davis made the bad mistake of accepting the DLC's metaphor of campaigning as marketing. In the DLC model, you look for a list of particular issues that a majority of people, including those on left, support. In the last congressional election it was prescription drugs, social security, and a woman's right to choose. If necessary, you "move to the right" – adopt some right-wing values in hope of getting "centrist" voters. Davis, for example, favored the death penalty, tough sentencing, and supported the prison guards' union. It's a self-defeating strategy. Conservatives have been winning elections without moving to the left.

By presenting a laundry list of issues, Davis and other democrats fail to present a moral vision – a coherent identity with a powerful cultural stereotype – that defines the very identity of the voters they are trying to reach. A list of issues is not a moral vision. Indeed, many Democrats were livid that Arnold did not run on the issues. He didn't need to. His

very being activated the strict father model – the heart of the moral vision of conservative Republicans and the most common response to fear and uncertainty.

In short, Arnold's victory is right in line with other conservative Republican victories. Davis' defeat is right in line with other Democratic defeats. Unless the Democrats realize this, they will not learn the lesson of this election.

### **Right-Wing Power Grabs**

And indeed, conservatives are busy trying to keep Democrats from learning this lesson. There is an important frame we haven't mentioned yet: The **Right-Wing Power Grab** frame. Davis used this at the beginning of his campaign, and Clinton and the Democratic presidential candidates who supported Davis echoed the frame. This frame does accurately characterize many of the facts as we have discussed them. But Davis was unable to communicate this frame effectively and it fell from public sight. The day after the election it was one of the few frames *not* mentioned by the mainstream media. It has been dropped by the Democrats but kept alive by the Republicans, who are using it to taunt and delegitimize Democrats. They are using the "Voter Revolt" frame to argue that the "Right-Wing Power Grab" frame was inaccurate.

Here's how the argument goes. The Right-Wing Power Grab frame implicitly accuses the Schwarzenegger campaign of deception, of failing to admit connections to Karl Rove and the national Republican apparatus and of misrepresenting the facts – many of which we have discussed above. A "power grab" is illegitimate, using either illegal or immoral means to attain power. The Republicans manipulated the media using some of the frames we have discussed to hide facts and create false impressions. From the perspective of the facts we have discussed, the election does seem to fit the Right-Wing Power Grab frame.

In the wake of the election, the Republicans have grabbed onto the Democrats' previous use of the Right-Wing Power Grab frame, arguing from the Voter Revolt interpretation of the election to claim that there was no power grab at all, that the election simply expressed the will of the voters. The very fact that Arnold got a strong plurality – and near majority – in the election is used as *prima facie* evidence that the Voter Revolt frame is the correct

way to interpret the election. But as we have seen, that frame hides exactly the facts that the Right-Wing Power Grab frame illuminates.

The Democrats ignore the power of framing at their peril.