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What to Watch for in the Presidential Debates

by George Lakoff

I've been applying cognitive linguistics and neuroscience to politics in [six books](#) over the past two decades. The ideas in those books were on display in many of the speeches at the Democratic National Convention. Look for them in the debates. They include:

- All politics is based on moral values, with strict conservatives and progressives having different moral values.
- There are also morally complex voters -- moderates, independents, swing voters -- who are progressive on some issues and conservative on others. The activation of one moral frame turns off the other.
- All issues are conceptually "framed" -- that is, they have a mental structure that fits one's moral system.
- Facts matter, but only when they clearly fit one's morally-based frames. Facts and figures, when used, should create a moral point in a memorable way. And if the facts don't fit your frames, the frames stay (since they are in your brain) and the facts are ignored or ridiculed.
- Political language is rarely neutral. Because all words are defined in conceptual frames, all political language is defined in terms of morally-based frames.
- Effective political speech uses language based on one's own frames and avoids language based on the opponent's frames. The opponent's language, even if negated and argued against, activates his frames in the brains of the public.
- If the moderator uses the other side's frames, shift to yours.
- The best defense is a good offense: a narrative based on your frames. Always go on offense.
- Tell why your views are patriotic.
- Tell the truth.
- Repeat. Repetition is necessary.

The presidential debates have other vital constraints as well. Here is the basic advice for candidates in the debates.

- State your values as the basis of any policy discussion. That tells why you think the policy is right. Be positive.
- Limit discussion of policy details. Policies -- and the facts and figures behind them -- should only be discussed when they exemplify your values. Avoid isolated facts and figures. Tell stories with clear morals.
- Be clear and to the point. Connect empathetically with your audience.

- Say straightforwardly what you believe. Be authentic. Tell the truth. Authenticity matters.
- Values, clarity, connection with empathy, and authenticity lead to trust. Trust is absolutely vital. Can you be trusted to do what you say you'll do?
- Present an authentic view of yourself that the public can identify with and be proud of.

Presidential debates are not won or lost on how good a policy wonk a candidate is. The above list is what counts.

In this election, there are a few basic ideas that are absolutely crucial:

- Democracy is based on citizens caring about and taking responsibility for all citizens, as well as for themselves. The American government is the instrument that the people use to guarantee protection and empowerment for all.
- We all, together, provide what is needed for a decent life. Individual accomplishment rests on what other Americans have provided. No one makes it without the rest of America. The private depends upon the public.
- Building the economy requires investment -- in public infrastructure, education, research, and much more.
- Success is much more than money. It is your contribution to America as a whole -- whether it is teaching, raising children, providing food, healing the sick, making useful products, guaranteeing our rights and our safety, or running businesses that make life better. America needs them all.
- A number to remember: Most people may not be aware of it, but **96 percent** of all Americans make use of what other citizens provide through our government: 96 percent of us have received tax deductions for mortgages, education, and dependent children, business subsidies, unemployment insurance, veterans' benefits, as well as all the other benefits that we all enjoy because of what we give and have given each other. This applies to almost all Americans, rich or not, Republican or Democrat. If your work contributed, or will contribute, to our country, you have earned, or will earn, whatever you have gotten. You are the 96 deserving percent. The other 4 percent are youngsters -- too young to have benefited yet, but they will inevitably join the 96 percent soon.
- These are largely progressive, not conservative ideas. They are about citizenship, not about going it alone, about a commitment to our country, not just a commitment to oneself.
- That is the central issue in this election. It is a moral issue. Who are we as Americans? Are we citizens who join together to form a great nation? Or are we isolated individuals, with no commitments to each other, at the mercy of corporations whose central goal is their short-term profit.