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Why Voters Aren't Motivated by a Laundry List of Positions on Issues

This article is re-published from the Rockridge Institute and was written by Joe Brewer and George Lakoff. It provides an introduction to cognitive policy – the values, frames, and arguments that make sense of the political process.

There is a faulty view of voting behavior – widely held by political strategists on the left – that people already know what they want. All you have to do is conduct a poll to find out where they stand on the issues, then build a platform of positions that accords with the polls, and they will vote for you. Missing from this view is the importance of cognitive policy – the ideas necessary to understand what the issues are and how they should be addressed. It is the ability to understand where a candidate is coming from that makes public support possible. Endorsement quickly follows when this understanding combines with a sense of shared values.

There are two kinds of policy: cognitive and material. Material policies are familiar: they outline what is to be done in the world. For example, the details of a health care plan, or a plan for getting out of Iraq. Material policies each have a cognitive dimension, often unconscious and implicit. This includes the ideas, frames, values, and modes of thought that inform the political understanding of the material policy. For example, consider the following questions: *Do all Americans, just by their very existence, deserve health care, just as they deserve police protection? How does health care differ from health insurance?* How these questions are answered plays a crucial role in what the material details of health care policy should be.

The Rockridge Institute is centrally concerned with the cognitive dimension of particular material policies and how the cognitive dimension—the often-unstated ideas behind material policies—shapes those policies. We are especially concerned with how change in those ideas point toward material policy changes.

But there is a deeper aspect to cognitive policy—general cognitive policy: strategies for getting high-level ideas—values, frames and principles—to dominate public discourse and shape public understanding so that future material policies will be natural and win public support with ease.

Conservative think tanks, over the past three decades, have been extremely successful in pure cognitive policy, that is, in shaping public discourse to lead the public to accept basic conservative values and principles. That long-term investment has paid off in making material conservative policies seem natural, for example, massive tax cuts for the wealthy, the pre-emptive invasion of a country that hadn't threatened us, defunding such federal agencies as FEMA and the FDA, and government spying on US citizens.

The success of a policy depends on how it meets both cognitive and material criteria. Concentrating on material criteria alone can be counterproductive if a policy is either unpopular, or if it instills in the public's mind long-term values that contradict the aims of the policy.

Cognitive policy comes first. It is comprised of ideas, frames, and arguments. It forms the basis of what the issue is, how it is understood and what should be done about it. The material criterion is comprised of mechanisms for achieving the goals that emerge from the cognitive criteria.

This can be seen in the Endangered Species Act (ESA). It was based on the fundamental progressive values of empathy and responsibility: empathy with all forms of life, a sense of their inherent worth, and a responsibility for maintaining them and the habitats they depend on. The material policy had specific cognitive dimensions: (1) an understanding of the human activities that place species in jeopardy and of the role of habitat protection in species protection, (2) an understanding of how government agencies could play an effective role, and (3) a legal strategy based on the Constitution's interstate commerce clause to give the federal government not only the authority, but the responsibility, for protecting endangered species and their habitats.

Such moral and practical understandings guided the formulation of material policy—the legal guidelines of the ESA. A material criterion that emerged through this understanding is that any land development project that places an endangered species in jeopardy must halt until the Department of Fish and Wildlife assesses the situation.

Over the years, the conservative think tanks working on cognitive policy have succeeded in getting into public discourse and the public mind a set of general cognitive policies that conflict with the Endangered Species Act:

1. The idea that nature is a resource for human use that habitats and species are such resources, and that human beings have a natural right to the use of such "natural resources."
2. The metaphor that markets are both natural and moral, and that government regulation is an unnatural and immoral interference with the operation of markets.
3. A special case of (2) is the idea that the potential for development of real property is a form of "wealth," that governmental regulations restricting development is a "taking" of that "wealth," and that such "takings" should be illegal or that property owners should be compensated for the loss of that "wealth." This is, of course, an extended metaphor, but one capable of being made into law.
4. Jobs are at odds with environmental protection. Inevitably, specific constraints on development can result in the loss of specific jobs, though overall habitat protection can lead to the creation of other, often more attractive, jobs. But conservatives rally political support by pointing to the specific jobs.
5. When habitats are in a single state, endangered species do not cross state lines, and hence do not fall under protection of the interstate commerce clause of the Constitution.

Conservative think tanks have patiently spent a vast amount of money and energy getting these general ideas into the public mind and public discourse, so that they now seem natural to many people. Conservative legal theorists and judges have promoted these ideas as well. And the Bush administration took them as basic governing principles, for example, refusing to add polar bears to the list of endangered species so that resources can be developed freely in the arctic. The result has been a whittling away at the effects of the Endangered Species act — not through legislation, but through the workings of cognitive policy.

Progressives have lacked a cognitive policy-making arm. As a result, they try to sell policies on a case-by-case basis via “messaging,” last-minute PR for the specific policy (e.g., listing polar bears as an endangered species), rather than developing a progressive worldview that automatically makes sense of the policy and counters conservative ideas.

Without this deeper exploration, progressives often inadvertently adopt conservative ideas. For example, a significant number of progressives give preference to immediate existing jobs that are environmentally destructive over the development of green jobs.

Political Support for All the Right Reasons

To be implemented, worthwhile policies must have political support. Whether they have such support depends on how the public understands them. Public understanding, for the sake of political support, should be an inherent and explicit part of policy-making.

There is a fundamental principle behind robust public policies, what we might refer to as the Cognitive Criterion for Public Support:

An effective policy must be popular if it is to stand the test of time and it must be popular for the right reasons, namely because it promotes the right long-term values in the minds of citizens.

It is not easy to meet this criterion, but we cannot afford to overlook it in the policy-making process. It is a cognitive criterion for generating and evaluating policies. That is, it is a criterion based on how the cognitive dimension of policy affects the minds — and hence, the brains — of the public.

Creating Policies that Work

The ultimate test of any policy is simple: does it work? We take a pragmatic approach to policy-making that incorporates insights from the cognitive sciences – the array of disciplines devoted to the study of brain, mind, and thought. A major finding of the cognitive sciences is that roughly 98% of the neural activity comprising human thought is structured outside conscious awareness. It is necessary to analyze the mental structures – called frames – that bring substance to our thoughts, in order to see the critical role they play in effective policy.

Cognitive analysis reveals how to make the way the world should be and the way the world could be into a coherent whole. This synergy of values, meaning, and truth – from commonsense understanding to inspirational vision – is the essential feature of successful policy.

An example is Social Security. This popular program has survived decades of attack by conservatives. It is based on the simple ideas that (1) *we are all in this together*; (2) *hard-working people should be taken care of when they retire*; and (3) *a caring society takes care of its people*. These progressive ideas are easy to understand, get reinforced each time a senior citizen receives a social security check and thus does not have to depend on children or grandchildren—if he or she has them—in their old age. And it is reinforced when the grown children understand that burden that social security has lifted from them.

Social Security stands not only as a bulwark against material conservative policy, but as a wedge against conservative cognitive policy. The ideas behind it are general ideas, and the effectiveness of social security should be trumpeted regularly as support for the general values that underlie it. Those are the values needed, for example, for support for a sensible health care plan. Social security and health care are different specific policies, but the general cognitive policies behind them overlap strongly.

Material Failure for Cognitive Success

When conservatives are in power, they can institute policies that are designed to fail—fail in a way to support conservative cognitive policies. In short, for conservatives in power, deliberate material policy failure can lead to cognitive policy success, and hence many strategic successes in the future.

For example, take No Child Left Behind. Its stated purpose is to improve public education, but its covert purpose has been to undermine it so that public schools can be replaced by charter schools, private schools, and religious schools. This would increase conservative control over what is taught and further inculcate conservative ideas. It would institute a two-tier educational system to maintain and reproduce the two-tier economic system in the country, so that children of the elite can get an elite education subsidized by the public through vouchers, while children of the uneducated poor remain educated just enough to continue to provide a source of cheap unskilled or low-skilled labor. This agenda is hidden, but it is justified and advanced via cognitive policy.

Conservative cognitive policy over many years has resulted in the following ideas being promulgated to the public:

1. Successful wealthy people merit their success. Those who are not successful and wealthy don't deserve to be.
2. Success is a matter of individual talent and discipline. Social factors do not enter in and government is a hindrance, not a help to this success.

3. Accountability works from the top down; those lower on the hierarchy are accountable to those on top. Hence, the schools, the teachers, and the students are accountable to those political leaders who allot funding to the schools. But political leaders and taxpayers are not accountable for providing adequate funding for teacher salaries, school maintenance, and social factors that affect education.
4. High standards will separate out those who merit success from those who don't, and rewards and punishments should be based on performance — of the students, the teachers, and the schools.
5. Morality comes from conservative religion, and so conservative religious education will help instill morality and should be publicly supported.
6. Education is, or should be, a market phenomenon, in which competition benefits consumers. This involves three metaphors: The students are consumers of their education, and will benefit from consumer choice (hence vouchers and charter schools). The public is the consumer of educated students, and competition will produce better products (students). Knowledge is something that can be delivered whole from teacher to student, like FedEx delivers packages.
7. The main purpose of education is financial success in the market. Thus education should be tailored to the needs of business.
8. Government is wasteful and ineffective, and so cannot produce quality education. Thus, education should be privatized whenever possible.

All these ideas are part of a conservative worldview. Teaching to the test is a material policy that helps to inculcate many of these ideas, as does defunding “failing schools.”

Conservatives have put a tremendous effort and a lot of money over many years into their cognitive educational policy. Progressives cannot turn it around overnight. It will take a considerable cognitive policy effort, along with well-funded and well-designed material policies.

Conservatives have the advantage here. They have a strong cognitive policy arm, which will be hard to match and overcome.

They argue that government is bad. When they create programs designed to fail, this idea is reinforced. Progressives, on the other hand, must argue that government is good AND make their programs work – as conservatives try to keep them from working or appearing successful.

The take home message is simple: Progressives need to learn about cognitive policy and put it to use.

Note:

The Rockridge Institute was a think tank that analyzed political discourse to reveal how language works in politics. It closed on April 30, 2008.