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Lakoff's Theory of Moral Reasoning in Presidential Campaign Advertisements, 1952–2012

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Abstract

This study examines the presence and distribution of George Lakoff's Strict Father and Nurturant Parent paradigms of moral reasoning in presidential campaign advertisements between 1952 and 2012. Results show that Republicans outpace Democrats in the general use of moral reasoning and that Republicans are far more likely to use Strict Father language than Democrats. The study found no difference in the use of Strict Father/Nurturant Parent morality throughout history, during times of war and recession, or if the candidate was an incumbent. The Strict Father and Nurturant Parent models of moral reasoning were also evaluated based on their relationship to political issues. Findings reveal that Democrats actively avoid Nurturant Parent reasoning when discussing specific social programs.

Keywords: Lakoff, Moral Reasoning, Political Advertising, Presidential Campaign

During a debate in the 2012 presidential primary, former Republican Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, responded to a question on immigration policy by labeling the GOP "the party of the family" (Navarrette, 2011). Gingrich's rhetoric echoes a prevalent

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sentiment throughout much of contemporary American political discourse; namely, that conservatism features a more direct association with family values than liberalism (Stacey, 1996). Instead of assuming an absence of familial consideration on behalf of liberal voters and candidates, cognitive linguist George Lakoff suggests that liberals and conservatives simply differ in their interpretations of political symbols and messages linked with the family. Lakoff contends, “[t]he conservative/liberal division is ultimately a division between strictness and nurturance as ideals at all levels—from the family to morality to religion and, ultimately, to politics” (2002, p. x). Through a conceptual framework of the “Nation as Family,” Lakoff asserts that political orientations are based on two divergent metaphorical models of the family known as Strict Father and Nurturant Parent.

In the patriarchal Strict Father model, which Lakoff (2004, 2008) associates with conservatism, the highest priorities are moral strength, respect for authority, and “tough love.” Conversely, the Nurturant Parent model connected with liberalism emphasizes empathy, communal assistance, and “unconditional love.” For Lakoff, these base metaphorical structures of the family forge political identities and articulate normative relationships between citizens and the government by depicting how the government *should* act based on the most “appropriate” style of parenting. In this account of moral reasoning, conservatives commonly oppose social welfare programs because they interpret government assistance as discouraging self-reliance and promoting laziness. By contrast, Lakoff’s theory argues that most liberals look favorably on social welfare programs because it illustrates the power of an empathetic government to help struggling citizens in need of care.

Lakoff provides extensive textual evidence to support his heuristic theory, but the Strict Father and Nurturant Parent models of moral reasoning have received limited empirical evaluation (Bar-Lev, 2007, p. 460). The relative shortage of empirical support for Lakoff’s theory orients our project and guides our research questions. Is Nurturant Parent reasoning prominent in the discourse of Democrats and is Strict Father morality used more by Republicans? Does one party utilize a broader repertoire of moral reasoning? Have there been changes in the use of moral reasoning over time? And are there particular political issues that attract Nurturant Parent or Strict Father language? To address these questions, we analyze television and Internet campaign advertisements from presidential candidates nominated by the two major political parties between 1952 and 2012. We believe that acquiring a richer sense of the longitudinal trends in Strict Father and Nurturant Parent reasoning in campaign television advertisements provides an important context for testing Lakoff’s theory. Doing so promises to advance our understanding of the symbolic and ideological functions of presidential campaign advertising.

While there are numerous genres of political communication that could be used to scrutinize Lakoff’s hypothesis, political campaign advertisements are uniquely suited because they are concise messages that capture a candidate’s campaign, are strategically crafted by professional communicators and are widely circulated messages used to mobilize voters (Jamieson, 1996). Schultz concludes that in our contemporary visual culture, “[p]olitics today occurs through television and political advertising more

often than it does in any other fashion” (2004, p. xi). In comparison to presidential debates, news media coverage, and stump speeches, campaign advertisements are often interpreted as less rigorous sources of information for scholarly analysis because of their brevity, frequency of exposure, and their style and emotional content (Brader, 2006). Yet, it is precisely these characteristics that make campaign advertising fruitful when studying the ways that candidates frame themselves and their policy positions to voters. The intense publicity of presidential debates precipitously fades after their completion, whereas campaign advertisements are perpetually remediated throughout the entire campaign cycle. Print and television news coverage are most often dependent on active pursuit by citizens in search of information; in comparison, campaign advertisements passively inject themselves into everyday life (Bohn, 2012). Finally, because candidates cannot elaborate in an advertisement to the same extent as a formal address, advertisements require succinct argumentative strategies to appeal to voters. Benoit validates the study of political advertisements by stating, “[o]ne cannot understand presidential campaigns without understanding the mass media in which these campaigns occur” (2007, p. 31). The fact that campaign advertisements avoid many of the trappings of rational critical debate allows them to articulate moral values forwarded by campaign narratives.

We continue this essay by first explicating Lakoff’s theory of moral politics and situating it within the existing literature on framing, metaphor, and political discourse. Then, we outline our methodological approach and develop several empirical models to predict patterns of moral reasoning in political advertisements. After discussing our findings, we conclude by exploring the theoretical and political implications of this research.

Framing Morality in Political Discourse

Because human beings are incapable of grasping the full complexities of the world, Goffman (1974) contends that we rely on framing to classify, to manage, and to interpret experience. Framing consists of a strategy of organization and filtering that allows reality to become more intelligible. Entman writes that framing involves the “presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences, that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (1993, p. 52). Stated otherwise, framing is a linguistic process by which “people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). Framing assumes that multiple descriptions of the same event are possible, and that differences in portrayal have implications for the formation of perception, belief, and action (Scheufele, 1999, 2000). For example, the contemporary advent of the phrase “tax relief” functions ideologically by constructing a particular worldview in which taxation is framed as a burden requiring reprieve. Lakoff contends that when taxation is affiliated with relief “the person who takes it away is a hero, and anyone who tries to stop him is a bad guy” (2004, p. 4). Framing strategies contained in public discourse do not completely determine individual response, but they have an undeniable influence on

how citizens understand and evaluate political candidates and policy (Scheufele, 2000; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004).

Metaphors of the “Nation-as-Family”

With language providing an indispensable resource in the production of human cognition and decision making, Lakoff argues that “understanding language is not just nice, it is necessary” (2008, p. 232). A powerful component of framing is metaphor, a particular kind of discursive frame that guides interpretation by explaining one phenomenon in terms of another (Burke, 1973). Although metaphors often operate beyond a strictly cognitive level (i.e., they often work at a nonconscious affective level as well), they condense moral orientations and political ideology into compact symbols that help organize the world around us (Ottati & Renstrom, 2010; Sopory & Dillard, 2002). Furthermore, metaphors often contain more explicit emotional content, which plays a considerable role in the evaluations of candidates and policies (Gibbs, 2002; Markus, 1988).

Lakoff asserts that the fundamental metaphor in political communication is the “Nation as Family,” in which the government assumes the role of parent and citizens are positioned as children dependent on sovereign protection (Lakoff, 2002, p. 153). Classical philosophy is filled with allusions to the government/citizen relationship as mimicking a family structure. Plato, for instance, argues in the Greek dialogue *Crito* that the citizen stands before the state like a child before a parent (1980, p. 51e). References to this conceptual metaphor are abundant in American political culture as well. Iconic phrases, such as “Founding Fathers,” “Uncle Sam,” and “Big Brother,” all draw on a familial association between the government and its citizens. However, these tropes do not specifically articulate what *kind* of family the nation is or should be.

If citizens perceive the government as a type of parental figure, then expectations of government/citizen responsibilities are contingent on how people imagine the “ideal” family should operate. Lakoff theorizes two paradigmatic types of family that, diametrically opposed in the moral priorities and principles they espouse, are best identified through the metaphors of Strict Father and Nurturant Parent. The aim of the Strict Father mode of parenting is to produce children who are self-disciplined and self-reliant through the implementation of steadfast rules and principles. When abstracted to the level of national governance, Strict Father morality assumes that protection of citizen-children is best exacted through the exercise of military strength and maintenance of traditional moral virtues. The central goal of the Nurturant Parent model is to develop happy and altruistic children through nurturance, value, and respect. When applied to governance, Nurturant Parent morality presumes that the state’s duty is to provide all citizens with basic needs such as food, education, and health care.

Testing Lakoff

The Strict Father and Nurturant Parent moralities function as useful heuristic tools—master metaphors—for how conservatives and liberals might understand and favor

government/citizen relationships differently. Such a perspective suggests that political ideology and moral reasoning cannot be neatly separated, because as Lakoff observes, “American politics is suffused with family-based morality” (2002, p. 331). The implication of Lakoff’s theory is that discourses of the family are not in some way “outside” of politics, but rather they are constitutive of political identity and behavior. Several studies support Lakoff’s premise that citizens utilize metaphors of the family to describe their own political affiliations and advocate for public policy (Barker & Tinnick, 2006; Hayden, 2003; McAdams et al., 2008); however, the majority of scholarship on Lakoff’s moral framing has focused on the discourse of elected representatives. For example, using data from campaign advertisements in a 2006 Missouri Senate race, Page and Duffy (2009) contend that the majority of the Republican messages contained Strict Father allusions, while the Democratic advertisements echoed a Nurturant Parent worldview.

Of particular interest has been Lakoff’s conclusion that liberal politicians have an underdeveloped sense of moral metaphor compared to conservatives (2002, p. 18). Cienki’s (2004) analysis found that Republican nominee George W. Bush nearly doubled Democratic nominee Al Gore in the use of moral metaphors in the 2000 presidential debates. Complicating this disparity, Cienki also found that while Bush deployed *both* moral models in the debates, Gore’s rhetoric predominantly used only Nurturant Parent reasoning. Additional research suggests a similar pattern in the 2004 presidential campaign between incumbent president George W. Bush and the Democratic challenger John Kerry. According to Spielvogel’s examination of campaign speeches, “[m]ore so than Republicans, Democrats such as John Kerry have experienced difficulty articulating a coherent understanding of the relationship between moral values and public policy” (2005, p. 565). Both studies found that conservatives incorporate moral metaphor into their public address more frequently and with greater flexibility than liberals. Deason and Gonzales’ (2012) analysis of moral framing in convention acceptance speeches from the 2008 election suggests that this trend might be shifting. They found that Democrats Barack Obama and Joseph Biden used more moral metaphors in total than Republicans John McCain and Sarah Palin; but while conservatives used roughly the same amount of both Strict Father and Nurturant Parent references, Democrats once again focused mostly on Nurturant Parent themes.

Despite its popularity, Lakoff’s theory has not received wholesale acceptance. Some suggest his conceptualization of moral politics is politically biased toward Democrats, inattentive to the role of media, and logically inconsistent by assuming that political elites are in control of framing (Bar-Lev, 2007; Barker & Tinnick, 2006; Iyengar, 2005). Others agree with Lakoff’s premise that Republicans benefit from a strategic communicative advantage but disagree that metaphors of the family are the source of perceived moral authority (Marietta, 2009). Our strategy for examining the integrity of Lakoff’s system, as well as the criticisms leveled against it, is to provide a more panoramic view of the presence of moral metaphors throughout the last 60 years of presidential campaign advertisements. This approach can hopefully determine if divergent political ideologies are manifested in moral metaphors, or if Lakoff’s theory is simply applicable to only the past three election cycles.

Based on Lakoff's theory, we can presume that if Nurturant Parent reasoning better reflects the principles of liberalism then it should be used more by Democrats; conversely, assuming that Strict Father morality embodies conservatism, we would expect it to be used more by Republicans. Furthermore, if Lakoff (2002, 2004) is correct in suggesting that Republicans are more experienced in the use of moral reasoning, we can predict that they should make more references to the moral paradigms and should be able to shuffle between models. These premises result in the following hypotheses:

- H1: Moral reasoning will be a prominent component of presidential campaign advertising.
- H2: Democrats will use more Nurturant Parent reasoning and Republicans will use more Strict Father reasoning in their political advertising.¹
- H3: Republicans will use more moral reasoning than Democrats in their political advertising.
- H4: Republicans will be just as likely as Democrats to use Nurturant Parent reasoning in their political advertising.

Although morality is typically perceived as constant, public moral argument is dynamic and contextual (see, for instance, Condit & Lucaities, 1993; Heyse, 2008). In his critique of Lakoff, Iyengar (2005) suggests that instead of functioning as static taxonomical categories, the Strict Father and Nurturant Parent frames may be rhetorically deployed differently depending on the specifics of the particular electoral cycle. For instance, the increasing pluralism of American society as a result of globalization may have accelerated the use of Nurturant Parent themes over the past 30 years. Additionally, considering that incumbent presidents can summon the powerful symbolism of the president as commander-in-chief (Norpoth & Sidman, 2007), we might also expect incumbents to rely more on Strict Father elements. With regard to political context, the Strict Father emphasis on safety is perhaps more effective during times of war, whereas the Nurturant Parent value of empathy should presumably have more traction during economic difficulties. Finally, issue ownership theory indicates that certain issues might be more likely to attract one form of moral reasoning (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003). We expect advertisements that address traditionally Republican issues of defense, foreign policy, and crime to emphasize more Strict Father reasoning because the primary duty of parents/government in this model is to provide security and to encourage self-reliance (Lakoff, 2002, pp. 179-196). Likewise, we expect advertisements that feature traditionally Democratic issues of social programs (such as welfare, Social Security, and Medicaid) to emphasize Nurturant Parent reasoning because the paradigm invokes a governmental duty to care for all citizens. These tensions between permanence and change coalesce into the following hypotheses:

- H5: Nurturant Parent reasoning has become more common in campaign advertising over time.
- H6: Incumbent presidents will use more Strict Father reasoning in their campaign advertising.

H7: Strict Father reasoning will be used more in campaign advertising during times of war.

H8: Nurturant Parent reasoning will be used more in campaign advertising during times of economic recession.

H9: Campaign advertising featuring security issues will be more likely to use Strict Father reasoning.

H10: Campaign advertising featuring social issues will be more likely to use Nurturant Parent reasoning.

Methods

The data for this study comes from presidential campaign advertisements archived at *livingroomcandidate.org*. This online repository of the *American Museum of the Moving Image* provides streaming video files, transcripts, and historical information for both television and Web advertisements from major party presidential candidates in each election cycle from 1952–2012. Our dataset is not a complete compilation of every presidential campaign advertisement between 1952–2012. Early campaign advertisements are notoriously difficult to find, and the *Living Room Candidate* does not feature advertisements that were circulated during the primaries or only targeted at specific regions. Despite this limitation, John Geer (2006, p. 25) notes that with all of the quantitative studies of campaign advertising conducted with different sample sizes over the years “the results all appear quite comparable.”

The *Living Room Candidate*'s selection process involves the collection of the most prominent advertisements available during each election cycle. Darrell West emphasizes that focusing on prominent advertisements is useful because “in each presidential year, certain ads attract more viewer and media attention than others” (in press, p. 51). Thus, while this collection is by no means an exhaustive list of all advertisements aired by Democratic, Republican, and Independent party candidates, it does provide an extensive sample of major advertisements seen by the American public during the general election cycle and a particularly useful dataset by which to test Lakoff's theory.

Data

From the total list of 368 advertisements appearing on the *Living Room Candidate* Web site, we opted to exclude advertisements over 10 minutes in length due to the broadness of their content. This left us with 361 unique advertisements spanning 16 different presidential elections. The number of advertisements is evenly distributed across election years with only a few exceptions in the early campaign cycles when television advertising was still in its infancy.² In the overall dataset, approximately 92% of the advertisements were televised, 8% were Internet advertisements aired in 2004, 2008, and 2012, and 5.5% of the advertisements were sponsored by outside groups such as *Democrats for Nixon*, *National Security PAC*, *MoveOn.org*, and *Swift Boat Veterans*

for Truth.³ The dataset contains an equal number of pro-Democrat and pro-Republican advertisements. In total, 180 of the advertisements (49.9%) were for Democratic candidates and 181 for Republican candidates (50.1%). Advertisements from Independent candidates were excluded from this project because of their rarity and exclusion from Lakoff's schema.

Procedures/Data Analysis

To test Lakoff's theory of moral politics, we created a Strict Father and Nurturant Parent taxonomy based on his (2002) description of these orientations. This resulted in eight subordinate categories associated with Strict Father reasoning and eight subordinate categories linked to Nurturant Parent reasoning (see Table 1). We also controlled for contextual factors of time period in years, incumbency, war, recession, and political issue. Our war variable reflects whether the United States was engaged in military conflict with another nation or nonstate actor in the previous 4 years. By using data from the National Bureau of Economic Research, we assigned values to election years that had experienced an economic recession in the previous 4-year period. Finally, we grouped issues into major topic categories: *economic issues* (economy, taxes, cost of living, inflation, finance), *defense/foreign policy* (war, military, terrorism, Cold War, communism, international trade, international incidents, United Nations), *crime* (gangs, illegal drugs), *social programs* (Medicare, Medicaid, welfare, Social Security), *social issues* (civil rights, homelessness, marriage, abortion), and *other policy issues* (education, the environment, immigration, energy, infrastructure, political process).

Two independently trained research assistants coded the advertisements by assigning a score of 1 when a Strict Father/Nurturant Parent subordinate theme was present in the advertisement and a 0 if the subordinate category was not referenced. For example, the 2012 advertisement by the conservative Super PAC *American Crossroads* titled "Not Optimal" opens by declaring, "Today, terrorists are on the rise. Killing four Americans in Libya and spreading throughout the Middle-East." The visual and verbal representations of terrorists in this advertisement corresponded with a 1 under the Strict Father subordinate category of "Danger comes from human agents." The initial analysis produced an intercoder agreement of 91%. Subsequent reliability analysis was conducted when the 2012 campaign advertisements were made available. The intercoder agreement rose above 95% for the second round of coding, and all discrepancies were resolved based on the group consensus of the authors.

Composite scores were created for the Strict Father and Nurturant Parent variables by aggregating the number of the subordinate categories and dividing by the total number of possible themes. For example, with the Strict Father variable, we added the individual items for a summary score that could range from 0-8 (no Strict Father characteristics up to 8 Strict Father characteristics), then we divided this by the total number of possible Strict Father items (8). We performed the same technique with the Nurturant Parent items (range 0-8), and divided by the total number of possible Nurturant Parent items (8). In order to make these findings easier to interpret, we converted the percentage into an integer, which illustrates the extent to which the

Table 1. Lakoff's Strict Father and Nurturant Parent Elements

Strict father reasoning	Description	Example advertisement
Danger comes from human agents	Visual or verbal representations of criminals, terrorists, armies	"1982 Noriega" (Dukakis, 1988)
Us vs. them mentality	Divides groups into camps	"Communism" (Goldwater, 1964)
Opposes illegitimate authority	Government, organizations, or people act as meddling parents intervening in contexts where they should not	"Dome" (McCain, 2008)
Emphasizes reward and punishment	Hard work will be rewarded, tougher sanctions will deter bad behavior	"Second Chance" (Clinton, 1992)
Emphasizes moral strength	Explicit reference to moral fiber, backbone, or moral character	"Cartoon Guy" (Citizens for Eisenhower, 1956)
Belief in moral decay	References decline in moral standards, traditional values; increase in deviance and disorder	"Moral Responsibility" (Goldwater, 1964)
Promotes integrity	Mentions integrity of candidate, party	"Family/Children" (Bush, 1988)
Promotes courage	Willingness to fight against foes, stand up to foreign enemies	"Dangerous World" (Bush, 2000)
Nurturant parent reasoning	Description	Example advertisement
Danger comes from bad environment	Conditions and situations keep people from flourishing	"First Time" (Clinton, 1996)
Emphasizes community	Appeals to preserving and strengthening community; value of togetherness as a nation	"Children/Achievements" (Ford, 1976)
Encourages leading by example	Appeals to moral beacon, global leadership/stewardship	"Civil Rights" (Humphrey, 1968)
Encourages cooperation	Appeals to working together, collaboration	"Foreign Policy" (Reagan, 1984)
Promotes fairness	Uses keywords of equality, justice; fair economic practices or educational opportunities; equality before the law	"Down" (Gore, 2000)
Encourages compassion (Fund, 2004)	Caring for others, responsibility to care for less fortunate	"Ashley's Story" (Progress for America Voter Fund, 2004)
Promotes self-determination	Highlights individual dignity, ability to control ones' own destiny	"Poverty" (Johnson, 1964)
Encourage self-nurturance	Control over decisions lies with individuals, not beholden to others for judgment or deciding what's right	"Secrecy" (Carter, 1976)

All advertisements listed in this table can be found at <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org>

advertisement emphasizes Strict Father or Nurturant Parent reasoning. For instance, President Obama's 2012 advertisement named "Always" received a 0.25 Nurturant Parent score with its references to the subordinate categories "Emphasizes community" and "Encourages cooperation." In this advertisement, the president responds to accusations that he opposes small business initiatives by stating:

What I said was that *we needed to stand behind them, as America always has* [Emphasizing community]. By investing in education and training, roads and bridges, research and technology. I'm Barack Obama, and I approve this message because I believe *we are all in this together* [Encourages cooperation].

The dual appeals to national unity and collaboration were coded and then divided by the total number of Nurturant Parent subordinate categories. Although our coding scheme involved the use of dichotomous variables and would thus imply the appropriateness of chi-square tests, we utilized analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests based on our decision to create Strict Father/Nurturant Parent integers.

Results

Party Use of Moral Reasoning

Our results reveal that moral reasoning is a prevalent aspect of political campaign advertisements (H₁). In total, 49% of the campaign advertisements in our dataset had at least one instantiation of moral reasoning, and 12.5% of the advertisements made both Strict Father and Nurturant Parent references. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test for differences between Democrats and Republicans in the implementation of moral reasoning (H₂). Findings yielded significant differences between Republicans and Democrats ($F = 17.36, p < .0000$), such that across all election years, 39.2% of Republican advertisements evoke Strict Father elements compared to 25.0% of Democratic advertisements. Regarding Nurturant Parent morality, Republicans include this reasoning in 26.5% of advertisements, compared to 31.1% of the ads by Democrats. Although Democrats made more Nurturant Parent allusions, the difference between the two party's candidates was not statistically significant ($F = 0.51, p < .476$). Thus, our second hypothesis was only partially confirmed. Still, in 13 of the 16 election cycles, Republican advertisements were more likely than Democratic advertisements to use Strict Father reasoning.

Strategic Advantage

Regarding the comparative frequency by which the parties utilize the two moral paradigms in their political ads, we hypothesized that Republicans would use greater levels of overall moral reasoning (both moral paradigms combined) (H₃) and would be more likely to deploy both the Strict Father and Nurturant Parent models than Democrats (H₄). The findings of our one-way ANOVA support these hypotheses in that Republicans ($m = 1.06$) did articulate more *total* Strict Father and Nurturant Parent

features than Democrats ($M = 0.75$), ($F = 5.44, p < .02$). We also discovered that while Republicans outpace Democrats in the use of Strict Father reasoning, Democrats were not statistically more likely than Republicans to use Nurturant Parent morality. Hence, Republicans and Democrats both apply Nurturant Parent reasoning with no clear pattern of party dominance.

Political Context

Our second set of hypotheses concern the effects of political context on the use of moral reasoning. Controlling for time period (H5), incumbency (H6), war (H7), and recession (H8), we ran linear regressions to test for party effect on the use of moral reasoning. Overall, we found little impact on the presence of moral reasoning due to temporal or political factors we identified. There was no statistically significant indication that Nurturant Parent reasoning has become more common over time (see Table 2). Furthermore, the analysis revealed no statistically significant results regarding the use of Strict Father/Nurturant Parent morality on behalf of incumbent presidents. Also, Strict Father elements are not necessarily evoked more during wartime than during peace ($p < 0.534$), and Nurturant Parent elements are mentioned regularly during periods of economic growth as well as recession ($p < .480$). Therefore, despite dynamic changes in national climate, the use of moral reasoning remained generally stable across time and political context (see Table 3).

Table 2. Percentage of Ads Using Strict Father (SF) and Nurturant Parent (NP) Reasoning over Time

Year	NP Democrat	NP Republican	SF Democrat	SF Republican
1952	28.6	14.3	28.6	42.9
1956	55.6	33.3	11.1	66.7
1960	25.0	37.5	25.0	62.5
1964	30.8	61.5	46.2	76.9
1968	40.0	40.0	40.0	40.0
1972	30.0	40.0	40.0	0.00
1976	55.6	22.2	33.3	55.6
1980	22.2	0.00	22.2	11.1
1984	50.0	40.0	30.0	10.0
1988	36.4	9.10	27.3	45.5
1992	10.0	30.0	10.0	30.0
1996	30.0	20.0	20.0	60.0
2000	44.4	44.4	11.1	22.2
2004	15.0	10.0	25.0	35.0
2008	16.7	10.5	5.60	36.8
2012	35.3	29.4	29.4	35.3

Political Issues

Finally, the last set of hypotheses focused on the relationship between Strict Father/Nurturant Parent allusions and particular issue areas. It was theorized that political issues traditionally associated with conservatism would correspond to higher levels of Strict Father morality (H₉), and issues related to liberalism would correlate to increased use of Nurturant Parent morality (H₁₀). A series of regressions were conducted to test the relationship between issue attention and Strict Father/Nurturant Parent reasoning, and then the models were run separately for Democrats and Republicans.

The results (Table 4) support our initial contention that Strict Father reasoning is significantly more likely to be present in advertisements that discuss crime ($p < .05$) and defense/foreign policy ($p < .001$). Although Democrats are also likely to use Strict Father reasoning when mentioning defense and foreign policy ($p < .01$), the effect is weaker than among Republicans. Nurturant Parent reasoning is more likely to emerge in advertisements that talk about social issues ($p < .001$); however, we were surprised to find that Democrats *avoid* using Nurturant Parent language when addressing specific social programs ($p < .05$). By contrast, Republicans are significantly *more likely* than Democrats to evoke Nurturant Parent reasoning on social issues ($p < .001$).⁴

Surprised by the relationship between Nurturant Parent reasoning and social programs, we questioned whether certain components within our Nurturant Parent modeling were primarily driving these results. We specified a series of logistical regression

Table 3. Patterns of Moral Reasoning Across Issue Areas

	Strict father reasoning	Nurturant parent reasoning
Constant	4.77 (1.77)**	6.93 (1.67)***
Recession	-0.80 (1.29)	-0.86 (1.22)
Wartime	-0.97 (1.56)	-1.60 (1.48)
Incumbent	-1.87 (1.15)	-1.14 (1.09)
Party	3.73 (1.08)***	-0.55 (1.02)
Issues		
Economy	-0.97 (1.20)	-0.45 (1.13)
Defense/ Foreign Policy	5.23 (1.10)***	1.25 (1.04)
Crime	5.30 (2.07)**	1.88 (1.96)
Social Programs	-1.50 (1.47)	-3.68 (1.39)**
Social Issues (not programs)	2.05 (1.79)	6.00 (1.70)***
Other	-2.48 (1.36)	2.52 (1.29)
Adj. R-square	.133	0.054
N	361	361

Table values are unstandardized ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses.

** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

models using the individual Nurturant Parent characteristics as dependent variables and included controls for recession, wartime, incumbency, and the major issues in each advertisement. Examining each Nurturant Parent element separately did not produce different results from the summary Nurturant Parent measure. Furthermore, revised Nurturant Parent scales with the highest loading items from the factor analysis failed to produce substantively different outcomes from the combined Nurturant Parent measure. These results provide additional credence to the finding that while both parties veer away from using Nurturant Parent reasoning when discussing social programs, Democrats surprisingly make a concerted point to avoid it. Thus, while both parties use Nurturant Parent reasoning when talking about social issues, Republicans are significantly more likely to do so than Democrats.

Discussion

Our findings support Lakoff's assertion that there are considerable differences between Republicans and Democrats in their use of moral reasoning associated with the "Nation as Family" metaphor. The analysis of 60 years of campaign advertisements shows Republicans outpace Democrats in their overall use of moral reasoning. Not only do Republicans use Strict Father language more extensively on more issues, Republicans also use Nurturant Parent reasoning on specific issues where Democrats in theory should but do not. Previous empirical evaluations of Lakoff's theory have focused only on single electoral contests within the past 10 years. Our analysis is a strong verification that basic ideological assumptions between liberals and conservatives are

Table 4. Partisan Differences in Moral Reasoning by Issue Area

	Strict father reasoning		Nurturant parent reasoning	
	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats
Constant	9.05 (2.76)***	3.12 (1.86)	4.32 (2.16)*	8.86 (2.42)***
Recession	-0.25 (2.59)	0.20 (1.37)	-2.11 (2.03)	-0.34 (1.78)
Wartime	-2.44 (2.68)	0.40 (1.63)	0.33 (2.10)	-3.35 (2.12)
Incumbent	-3.67 (2.28)	0.03 (1.24)	-0.44 (1.78)	-1.01 (1.62)
Issues				
Economy	-0.63 (1.98)	-1.52 (1.31)	0.44 (1.55)	-1.07 (1.71)
Defense/ Foreign Policy	7.39 (1.87)***	3.17 (1.16)**	1.97 (1.47)	0.45 (1.51)
Crime	8.78 (3.75)*	3.75 (2.15)	2.95 (2.94)	0.40 (2.80)
Social Programs	-4.66 (2.84)	0.07 (1.45)	-2.91 (2.23)	-4.62 (1.89)*
Social Issues (not programs)	4.07 (3.13)	0.326 (1.84)	8.27 (2.45)***	3.83 (2.40)
Other	-2.83 (2.575)	-1.85 (1.32)	1.59 (2.02)	3.54 (1.72)*
Adj. R-square	0.159	0.100	0.102	0.037
N	181	180	181	180

Table values are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

manifested in their use of family metaphors, and that liberals struggle more with the projection of moral reasoning than conservatives.

We could account for the unexpected use of Nurturant Parent moral reasoning in one of three ways. If we take the results at face value, this would suggest that Democrats may not use Nurturant Parent reasoning as much as previously suggested. Lakoff provides a potential explanation for this inconsistency when he warns liberals against avoiding moral-based reasoning:

[Because] conservatives understand the moral dimension of politics better than liberals do, they have been able to gain not only political victories, but to use politics in the service of a much larger moral and cultural agenda for America [...] liberals do not fully comprehend the moral unity of their own politics and the role that the family plays in it. Liberals need to understand that there is an overall, coherent liberal politics which is based on a coherent, well-grounded, and powerful liberal morality. (2002, pp. 18–19)

Thus, at the same time that Lakoff associates Nurturant Parent reasoning with liberalism, he acknowledges that Democrats may not fully embrace the paradigm due to their underdeveloped appreciation of moral reasoning. Our results indicate that Democrats *actively avoid* talking about social programs in Nurturant Parent terms, perhaps by internalizing and resisting the popular conception that Democrats are “soft” by favoring the welfare state (Cloud, 1998). Similarly, Republicans may adopt Nurturant Parent reasoning on social issues in order to challenge the sentiment that they are cold-hearted promoters of the free market, exemplified by George W. Bush’s adoption of the “compassionate conservatism” mantra (Kuypers, Hitchner, Irwin, & Wilson, 2003).

Regardless of intent, our findings support Lakoff’s claim that Republicans outpace Democrats in their use of moral reasoning and reveal that perhaps the magnitude of the fissure between liberals and conservatives is even larger than Lakoff anticipated. This study contributes to our understanding of Lakoff’s theory by highlighting the need for scholars to consider the particular issues being discussed when observing the use of Strict Father and Nurturant Parent morality. Although we found that time and political context only marginally affected the use of moral reasoning, Strict Father/Nurturant Parent metaphors were dynamically influenced by the issues discussed in campaign advertisements. Additional research on the relationship between moral reasoning and issue ownership in Lakoff’s theory is warranted. Our finding that Democrats strongly avoid Nurturant Parent themes when discussing social programs contradicts the logic of Lakoff’s theory and indicates a gap in the use of moral reasoning between the parties that might transcend simple matters of preference or familiarity.

Conversely, it is possible that Democrats avoided Nurturant Parent language while still advocating for policies that advance a Nurturant Parent worldview. Cienki’s (2004) analysis of the 2000 Bush/Gore debates found that in certain instances the moral language used by the candidates conflicted with the policy issue being

discussed. For example, Al Gore used “tough” Strict Father language when discussing the need to enforce civil rights legislation, which might be more commonly associated with Nurturant Parent morality (Cienki, 2004, p. 419). Thus, Cienki proposes a division between the *use* of Strict Father/Nurturant Parent language and the *goals* of each approach. It is possible that while arguing for the Nurturant Parent goal of egalitarian social programs, Democrats relied more heavily on Strict Father language to avoid social stigmas of weakness and inconsistency. This suggests that even in cases where the goal of the policy leans toward nurturance, Democrats may summon Strict Father frames over those of the Nurturant Parent. Our study’s methodology does not lend itself to this form of textual analysis; however, additional research combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies could reveal differences between the use of moral metaphors and the objectives being sought. It then becomes important to question whether the implementation of Strict Father language to reach Nurturant Parent outcomes (or vice versa) is a successful rhetorical strategy. The relative inability of Democrats to implement social programs following World War II could be, in part, because the logic of Strict Father language undermines the implementation of such policies.

Second, it is possible that our result conflicts with Lakoff’s theory because the Nurturant Parent paradigm is itself conceptually flawed. Rather than assuming the existence of a Nurturant Parent frame and then concluding that Democrats simply do not understand or use it, an equally likely possibility is that the description of the paradigm does not accurately reflect how liberals think and behave politically. Lakoff’s theory of moral politics is not exclusively descriptive; it also is prescriptive of the type of rhetorical framing liberals should use to be politically successful. However, liberalism as an ideology is somewhat resistant to traditional moral reasoning due to its historical commitments. As Lakoff recognizes, liberalism comes from an Enlightenment tradition of “literal, rational, issue-oriented discourse, a tradition of debate using ‘neutral’ conceptual resources” (2002, p. 387). By privileging logical and dispassionate discussion, the rhetorical resources of classical liberalism counteract the Nurturant Parent model’s emphasis on compassion, caring, and empathy. As Cloud explains, “American political discourse is both imbalanced and selective in its overweening emphasis on the individual and private family as source of all private responsibility” (1998, p. 410). The individualistic and rational orientation of Western liberalism clashes with the more communal and emotional perspective championed by the Nurturant Parent philosophy. Our findings underscore the difficulty that liberals experience when producing moral justifications for policy formation. If Democrats want to compete in terms of moral reasoning, they seem to be on the horns of a dilemma: Either they must make more conscious efforts to use Nurturant Parent reasoning in public, in which case they may compromise their liberal roots in rational-critical debate (Habermas, 1996), or they must generate an alternative conceptual model not grounded in the family, in which case they cede a powerful constellation of metaphors to Republicans.

A final explanation for the unexpected finding comes from the fragmented nature of political campaign advertisements. The dataset used for this analysis shows that

advertisements have become truncated over time and more issues have been inserted in a shorter timeframe. In early campaign advertisements, it was not uncommon to see advertisements focus on a single issue at length. Modern advertisements have become shorter, less specific, and more diverse in terms of the issues presented. In 1952, the median for advertisement length was 55.5 seconds and featured an average of 2.5 issues per ad. In comparison, in 2012 the median advertisement was 32.5 seconds long and contained an average of 4 issues per ad. As a result of changes in campaign advertising, it is possible that when Nurturant Parent allusions occurred, social program issues were not dominant in the advertisements but were only part of a series of issues briefly mentioned. The interaction between multiple issues, and the use of both Strict Father and Nurturant Parent morality in the same advertisements, problematizes the ability to anchor the moral frames to specific issues.

It is possible that shorter advertisements may be less favorable to Nurturant Parent morality because the paradigm privileges collaboration, discussion, and understanding. In fact, when we included the length of the advertisement as an independent variable in our regression equation for Nurturant Parent, we discovered a significant negative relationship between length and the use of Nurturant Parent reasoning ($p < .001$). The relative inability to fully grasp the intricacies of a policy issue in 30 seconds or less could mean that production logistics and the increasing speed of modern media hamper Nurturant Parent reasoning (Hallin, 1992). In other words, the complexities of Nurturant Parent morality may involve too much time, and thus cost too much money, to be an expedient rhetorical strategy in political campaign advertisements. With less opportunity to elaborate on policy positions, candidates may be drawn to Strict Father language in advertisements for its brevity, directness, and absolutism and rely more on Nurturant Parent language for interviews and public addresses. If Strict Father morality is more amenable to political advertising, this would help explain why it has become more widely circulated and recognizable than Nurturant Parent reasoning. The consequences of this potential incommensurability between Nurturant Parent reasoning and campaign advertisements are considerable. If campaign advertisements favor the moral framing of conservatives, Democratic candidates may face increasing pressure to adopt Strict Father language because as Jamieson contends, televised campaign advertising is now the “major means by which candidates for the presidency communicate their messages to voters” (1996, p. 517). With the likelihood that funding for political advertisements will increase in future elections, voters may experience a lack of recognizable alternatives to Strict Father morality in a considerable amount of political discourse.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this study contribute a clearer empirical picture of Lakoff's theory of moral politics and the use of moral reasoning in presidential campaign advertisements. The analysis supports the arguments and findings of Lakoff (2002), Cienki (2004), Spielvogel (2005), and Page and Duffy (2009) that conservative candidates use more moral reasoning and specifically more Strict Father reasoning than

their Democratic competitors. Republicans use moral reasoning at higher rates and they draw from both of the moral paradigms outlined by Lakoff. Conversely, Democrats rely less on moral reasoning overall while employing Strict Father frames only on the issues of defense and foreign policy, and wholly avoiding Nurturant Parent language on several issues where Democrats should theoretically accentuate. Future research is still needed to understand the role of moral framing on particular voting behaviors. It is not clear whether voters find Strict Father or Nurturant Parent appeals more palatable, but there is strong empirical support Republicans have so far outpaced Democrats in both the volume and flexibility with which they invoke these moral frames. While it is difficult to connect our results directly to electoral success, the cognitive and rhetorical power of metaphor is reason to believe that the political “tug-of-war” for the votes of the American people takes place on the plane of moral discourse.

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Notes

- ¹ Lakoff often uses the categories liberal/conservative and Democrat/Republican interchangeably. It is important to underscore that political ideology and partisanship are indeed different constructs: Ideology refers to a broader political worldview, while partisanship refers to specific identification with a political party (Converse, 1964; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). However, political ideology and partisanship are highly (and increasingly) correlated. Republicans tend to be conservative and Democrats are likely to identify as liberal, and this is especially true among political elites (Huckfeldt, Levine, Morgan, & Sprague, 1999; Levendusky, 2009; Levine, Carmines, & Huckfeldt, 1997; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006; Poole & Rosenthal, 1997). With this relationship in mind, we use partisanship as a proxy for ideology in testing Lakoff’s theory of moral politics.
- ² The *Living Room Candidate* provides 14 campaign advertisements for the 1952 election, 18 ads for the 1956 and 1960 elections, and 26 ads for the 1964 election. The 1968, 1972, 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000 contests were all represented by roughly 20 campaign advertisements. The number of advertisements published by the Web site increased with the last three presidential elections, likely due to the ease of access and the rise in the number of shorter advertisements produced by the campaigns. The 2004 and 2008 campaigns are represented by roughly 40 advertisements each, and the most recent election in 2012 contains 34 ads. Although elections in the twenty-first century are represented with a higher number of advertisements, this likely did not skew our results due to the cumulative seconds of advertising in each campaign offered by the Web site. For instance, the *Living Room Candidate* presents 18 advertisements for the 1956 election for a total of 2,234 seconds of advertising. The 2012 campaign, in contrast, was represented by roughly double the number of advertisements but only 1,763 seconds of advertising.
- ³ While outside groups have historically produced several advertisements for presidential elections, the campaigns of the twenty-first century have brought a dramatic increase in the number of 527 and 501(c) nonprofit corporations willing to spend unprecedented amounts of money on campaign advertising. This was especially the case with the 2012 election where nearly \$1 billion was spent on advertising by outside groups following the *Citizen’s United* ruling (Beckel, 2012). The ad samples from 2004, 2008, and 2012 utilized in this article contained a handful of ads from outside groups, but not enough to make any accurate assessments of the differences in moral reasoning between ads produced by traditional candidate organizations and outside groups.

4 Deason and Gonzales (2012) studied the association between Strict Father/Nurturant Parent reasoning and issues in the convention acceptance speeches of the 2008 presidential campaign. Their analysis shows that Democrats use Strict Father themes to discuss the traditionally Republican issues of defense and terrorism, which our analysis confirms. However, our results diverge in describing the use of Nurturant Parent morality. Deason and Gonzales found that Nurturant Parent reasoning was used more by Democrats in the context of traditionally Democratic issues such as education, health care, and *social programs* ($x^2 = 38.21, p < .0001$). Whereas they found that Democrats used Nurturant Parent reasoning to discuss social programs, our analysis shows a negative correlation between Nurturant Parent reasoning by Democrats and social programs ($p < .01$). It is important to note that their study is limited to four speeches from a single election cycle; however, this discrepancy between our findings supports the possibility that Strict Father/Nurturant Parent reasoning is influenced by the medium of political discourse.

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