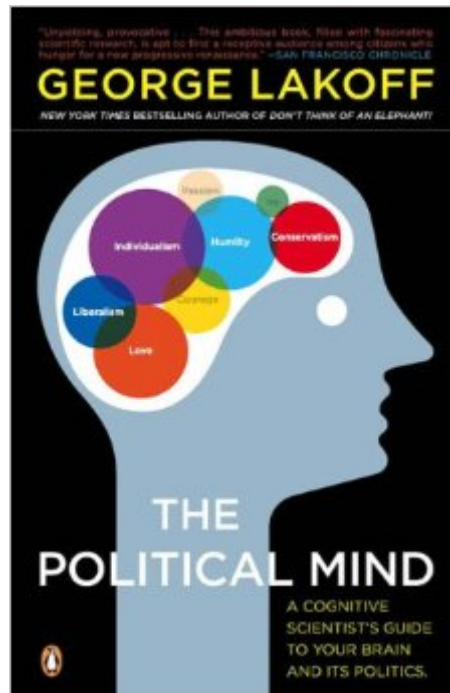


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The Political Mind: A Cognitive Scientist's Guide To Your Brain And Its Politics



Synopsis

A groundbreaking scientific examination of the way our brains understand politics from a New York Times bestselling author One of the world's best-known linguists and cognitive scientists, George Lakoff has a knack for making science make sense for general readers. In his new book, Lakoff spells out what cognitive science has discovered about reason, and reveals that human reason is far more interesting than we thought it was. Reason is physical, mostly unconscious, metaphorical, emotion-laden, and tied to empathy-and there are biological explanations behind our moral and political thought processes. His call for a New Enlightenment is a bold and striking challenge to the cherished beliefs not only of philosophers, but of pundits, pollsters, and political leaders. The Political Mind is a passionate, erudite, and groundbreaking book that will appeal to anyone interested in how the mind works and how we function socially and politically.

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Customer Reviews

George Lakoff, cognitive scientist and political commentator, returns in The Political Mind to themes already made familiar in earlier books such as Moral Politics (2002), Don't Think of an Elephant (2004) and Whose Freedom? (2007). He argues that political discourse arises from a process of conceptual and metaphorical framing which ultimately is grounded in the way the brain works, and that an understanding of this process is essential for successful political campaigns. I don't know that there's really anything in The Political Mind that Lakoff hasn't already said in one form or another

elsewhere (the primary reason for the three-star rating). But he does stress here what he sees as the errors of the theory of mind he argues was formed by the Enlightenment and which political progressives still assume today. Lakoff characterizes that theory as stressing the transparency of mind, drawing a sharp division between reason and emotion, and assuming that reason is a universal human capacity that accurately describes the world. But nothing in this model, asserts Lakoff, is correct. Much of what we call the mind is unconscious; what we think, because of our tendency to operate through largely unconscious metaphorical frames, is largely constitutive rather than straightforwardly conceptual; and reason is rarely dispassionately reflective. So what's the connection between all this and politics? Simply, claims Lakoff, that progressive politicians still buy into the Enlightenment model of mind, and operate accordingly in trying to influence voters and win elections. "Rational" arguments in the Enlightenment mode are ineffective because they rest on a false understanding of how the mind works--the assumption that our decisions are made consciously, abstractly, and dispassionately.

We think in metaphors, and words describe metaphors. A metaphor is a description like "He's cold as ice." He's not cold, he's unfriendly, but we know what it means. Metaphors form neural pathways, or connections, between neurons. The more we activate the pathways, the stronger they become, and the more we accept them as true. Metaphors, words, thoughts, and language therefore have a neurological basis that result from physical transformation of brains (actual physiological change to brain cells similar to increased muscle mass that results from weight lifting). Republicans have intuitively known this and have used language to create metaphors and neural pathways that have become dogmatic in America--example: tax relief, page 234. Relief is not normally connected to taxes (road building, social security, and armed forces result from taxes, not relief). However, tax relief has become a metaphor in the US that is identified as generally good, and puts anyone who criticizes the concept on the defensive. The conservative Republican model society is based on Old Testament concepts: right and wrong are absolute. It is based on a strict father model (page 78) that relies on discipline. The father tells the children how to behave and punishes them if they do not heed the father. Children learn discipline so they will do the right thing without question (think of Marines who obey commands in the heat of war as described in the book *Flags of Our Fathers*, James Bradley and Ron Powers, 2001). Obeying authority without questioning it is paramount. That's why Republicans supported President Bush's pardon of Scooter Libby for lying to Congress - Libby was merely obeying orders.

Lakoff is perhaps the foremost linguist and cognitive scientist working in the realm of political speech and this iteration of "The Political Mind" follows on the heels of his 2008 book "The Political Mind: You Can't Understand 21st Century American Politics with an 18th Century Brain" as well as "Framing the Debate" (2007), "Thinking Points" (2006) and "Don't Think of an Elephant" (2004), all of which focus on how politicians employ language to frame their arguments. For a layperson the idea of reading a book on linguistics and cognitive science sounds daunting, but Lakoff is a master at making the material easy to understand while not dumbing things down. The main idea Lakoff puts forward is that reason is mostly unconscious and challenges the conventional wisdom of many political scientists, political theorists, policy makers and other scholars regarding how to frame issues for the electorate. The key problem for those parties, to Lakoff's theory, is that they fail to grasp the biological explanations that drive the electorate's thought processes. Lakoff frequently points to the successes Republicans have had in framing issues through narratives when presenting ideas to the electorate rather than presenting raw facts, statistics and data which largely leave voters to frame the issue in their own minds. The net result is voters understand the narratives presented by Republicans to frame the argument. Failure to frame the information presented results in widely varying degrees of comprehension and mixed messages or in some cases the "paralysis of analysis." This is perhaps the argument that is of most value to political scientists, theorists, and policy makers but potentially the hardest for some to embrace as it runs counter to long-held beliefs.

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