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# Curiosity or Manners: The Values that Shape American Political Mindsets

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# Curiosity or Manners: The Values that Shape American Political Mindsets

## **Abstract**

In the late 1990s, political analyst and linguist George Lakoff proposed an intriguing new way to understand what separates liberals from conservatives in American politics. His theory was based on the premise that there are two opposing frames through which Americans view politics, and that parenting values determine which frame one chooses. Those who adhere to the strict father model hold conservative beliefs on a wide range of issues, while nurturant parents are more liberal. Lakoff's writings have since become widespread and his parenting theory has convinced many political strategists and activists, despite the fact that his hypotheses lacked empirical evidence. This study used survey data to test the impact of parenting values on a wide range of controversial policies. It finds strong support for the hypotheses that strict fathers tend to prefer stronger security measures and support traditional social norms, while nurturant parents are more liberal on these issues. However, parenting style proved to be a poor indicator of political attitudes on the government's role in the economy.

## CURIOSITY OR MANNERS: THE VALUES THAT SHAPE AMERICAN POLITICAL MINDSETS

Ryan Winter

***Abstract:** In the late 1990s, political analyst and linguist George Lakoff proposed an intriguing new way to understand what separates liberals from conservatives in American politics. His theory was based on the premise that there are two opposing frames through which Americans view politics, and that parenting values determine which frame one chooses. Those who adhere to the strict father model hold conservative beliefs on a wide range of issues, while nurturant parents are more liberal. Lakoff's writings have since become widespread and his parenting theory has convinced many political strategists and activists, despite the fact that his hypotheses lacked empirical evidence. This study used survey data to test the impact of parenting values on a wide range of controversial policies. It finds strong support for the hypotheses that strict fathers tend to prefer stronger security measures and support traditional social norms, while nurturant parents are more liberal on these issues. However, parenting style proved to be a poor indicator of political attitudes on the government's role in the economy.*

### INTRODUCTION

On September 20th of 2004, millions of Americans turned on their televisions to watch the first presidential debate between George W. Bush and John Kerry. On issues ranging from foreign policy to social problems to financial matters, the candidates clashed at every turn. Then, during one of Kerry's responses, Bush made a very strange comment. It was such a small, unremarkable moment that most people have now forgotten it. However, if one were to believe the writings of cognitive scientist George Lakoff, Bush's remark and Kerry's response perfectly explains the vast differences between two men representing political polar opposites.

John Kerry was in the middle of complimenting the president and his family on how well they handled the considerable pressure of living in the White House. Kerry began to joke about the Bush daughters, "I've chuckled a few times at some of their comments," but Bush interrupted. "I'm trying to put a leash on them," he said, to which Kerry immediately replied, "Well I don't know, I've learned not to do that." The audience laughed appreciatively for both candidates, and the debate continued. While this brief interchange might appear no more than a slight disagreement in parenting techniques, Lakoff believes it is the ultimate key to understanding why some people are liberals and others are conservatives.

### LAKOFF'S THEORY

It was during the 1990s that Lakoff began to wonder where people got their political attitudes from. Specifically, he was interested in why the two dominant political ideologies in America stood opposed on so many seemingly unrelated issues. "The question I asked myself," he recalls, "was this: What do the conservatives' positions on issues have to do with each other?"<sup>197</sup> What does being against gun control have to do with opposing gay marriage? Why should a person's opinions on foreign policy correspond to a particular stance on the environment, and what does abortion have

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<sup>197</sup> Lakoff 2004

to do with welfare spending? Is there some natural connection that explains the organization of these beliefs, or are they just historical remnants of coalition building?<sup>198</sup> These questions had been asked before, but Lakoff's answer was a completely new one that captured the imagination of his readers. In his earlier work, Lakoff argued that people construct political opinions on the basis of their moral identity.<sup>199</sup> For example, if one were to ask the average American to explain why abortion should be legal or illegal, they might give facts and figures to back up their position, but in the end it comes down to what feels right, a fundamental and unchangeable belief that abortion is either morally acceptable or unacceptable. There are two opposing frames through which Americans view the world of politics, Lakoff says. One frame is associated with liberal beliefs and the other with conservative. One missing piece remained in his theory: Lakoff had not yet explained the logic holding these frames together.

It is obvious that liberals and conservatives view the world differently; the real question is why. The incessant use of the phrase “family values” by conservative politicians first gave Lakoff the idea that perhaps the two opposing political frames in this country result from two opposing conceptions of the family. Because families occupy such a core part of life, it seems reasonable to infer that parenting values could function as a heuristic for more complex issues, including politics. His hypothesis, as another team of researchers succinctly summarized, was that “As people normatively understand proper relations between parents and children, so will they envision proper relations between government and its citizens.”<sup>200</sup> Consequently, the two frames underlying political identity correspond to two different styles of parenting: on the one hand the nurturant parent, and on the other the strict father.<sup>201</sup>

### *The Strict Father*

The strict father mentality is one that most people will recognize immediately. It starts with the assumption that humans are naturally flawed and want to do what feels good, not what is right. Children must to be taught right from wrong by a loving but stern authority figure—the father. The world is competitive, but those who work hard and stand by their morals will rise to the top.<sup>202</sup> Children must be corrected if they disobey their parents or resist learning discipline. Often, they must be spanked for their own good, because punishment will keep them from making mistakes again. For strict fathers, all kinds of social ills and perversions can be attributed to permissive parenting practices. They believe that those who deviate from traditional lifestyles, commit violent crime, or

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<sup>198</sup> Barker and Tinnik 2006, 249

<sup>199</sup> Lakoff 1996

<sup>200</sup> Barker and Tinnik 2006, 259

<sup>201</sup> Both men and women can technically be “strict father” types, as long as they agree with its overall outlook. In fact, this study finds that women are actually slightly more likely than men to identify with the strict father model.

<sup>202</sup> Lakoff 2004

rely on government assistance were never disciplined as children and never learned to be responsible adults.<sup>203</sup>

The political implications of such a mindset follow logically. Strict parents oppose taxing big business and wealthy business owners because they are doing their part and contributing to the economy. Government “handouts” and other programs that promote equality only encourage laziness and do not teach people responsibility. Lakoff argues that the strict parent’s focus on punishment as a correctional measure, along with the belief in absolute good and evil, explains why conservatives insist on a tough stance on crime and a strong military.<sup>204</sup>

#### *The Nurturant Parent*

Nurturant parents take a more interdependent view of the world, valuing egalitarianism and tolerance of other moral standards. While the strict father model presupposes a traditional family, the nurturant parent is gender-neutral and can be found in a traditional family, a single-parent family, or even same-sex relationships.<sup>205</sup> If there are two parents, they share the responsibility of raising and disciplining the child, which they believe is born good and can be made better through nurturance. The utmost goal is for the child to live a happy, fulfilled life so that it can grow up to nurture others and make the world a better place. Lakoff thinks that parents who fall closer to the nurturant end of the spectrum are more likely to have the values of tolerance and empathy accessible when they think about politics.<sup>206</sup> If he is right in guessing that nurturance underlies American liberalism, it would certainly explain much of the Democratic Party’s current platform, including universal healthcare, raising the minimum wage, workers’ rights, and more. On issues from gay marriage to social policy to foreign policy, the nurturant parent outlook leads logically to the opposite conclusions of the strict father.

#### *Implications*

If Lakoff’s theory is correct, it could have enormously significant consequences for politicians, campaigns, and researchers. Lakoff suggests that partisans can use parenting metaphors to harness the potential of undecided and independent voters, by far the most vital slice of the electorate. Since nonpartisans do not use one of the two parenting models but rather a mix depending on the situation, Lakoff argues that candidates of either party can activate the middle through careful word choice and by framing the political debate in ways that remind voters of their parenting values.<sup>207</sup> Apart from influencing elections and public opinion, Lakoff’s model could be a

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<sup>203</sup> Lakoff 1996, 197

<sup>204</sup> Lakoff 2004

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Lakoff 2004

very useful tool for political scientists. If he is right, it would be possible to predict people's feelings on a wide range of political issues simply by asking them a few questions about parenting.

While his insights certainly contributed a creative new take on the origins of ideological constraint, Lakoff's model lacked systematic data to back it up. He relied primarily on the face-value plausibility of his parenting theory, without offering scientific evidence. Therefore, a study testing the reliability of the parenting theory provides much-needed quantitative research on a topic that could have major repercussions for the ways political scientists think about ideological constraint.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Other researchers have designed experiments to test the parenting proposal, but for the most part these have been contradictory or inconclusive. Analyses of survey data from 2000 revealed that "the stronger one's views regarding childrearing—either in terms of nurturance or discipline—the more consistently liberal or conservative one's political attitudes tend to be,"<sup>208</sup> a finding that offers robust support to Lakoff's claims. Archival research, too, has revealed a correlation between statewide attitudes towards punishing children and presidential vote. As a general rule, red states approve of corporal punishment while blue states do not. In their book *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics*, Heatherington and Weiler describe a positive relationship between the percentage of a state's population that voted for Bush in 2004 and the share of parents who approved of using physical punishment to discipline children. At the top were Idaho, Wyoming, and Oklahoma, all of which voted nearly seventy percent for Bush, and where about sixty percent of parents approved of using physical punishment. At the other end were Massachusetts, Vermont, Rhode Island, and New York, with the lowest rates of Bush voters and corporal punishment.<sup>209</sup> While useful for highlighting trends, this type of data can only show correlations, not underlying causes. Heatherington and Weiler cannot conclude from these data that parenting attitudes *cause* worldviews. It might be that some other variable causes both strict parenting and Republican voting. The correlation between the two could well be spurious. Nonetheless, these statewide trends certainly bolster the authority of Lakoff's model.

Other researchers are more hesitant to accept the parenting hypothesis. In one creative experiment, linguist Alan Cienki studied presidential candidates' use of strict or nurturant expressions in presidential debates. He concluded that Al Gore was more likely to use nurturant language or gestures than George W. Bush, but the overall occurrence of such metaphors was extremely low. If parenting indeed represents the underlying frame through which all of politics is understood, it should have shown up more frequently in these important political talks. Another researcher testing

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<sup>208</sup> Barker and Tinnick 2006

<sup>209</sup> Heatherington and Weiler 2009, 2

Lakoff's conclusions stopped short of ever testing for ideological constraint.<sup>210</sup> Postlewait interpreted Lakoff's writing to mean that there should be two distinct camps of parents, with few people remaining in the middle. When she discovered that in reality parenting styles more closely resembled a normal distribution, she concluded that the results did not fit with Lakoff's depiction of two "radically opposed" styles.<sup>211</sup> However, Lakoff does not claim that that all people are either one type of parent or the other. In fact, he says there is a range of parenting styles and that the majority of people alternate between strict and nurturant styles depending on the situation. For these reasons, Postlewait's conclusion was shortsighted. Liberals and conservatives make up only a small portion of the population, so why should parenting purists be the majority? In fact, the finding that most parents fall in between strictness and nurturance only increases the importance for politicians to understand these frames. A liberal candidate running for office will have already locked down the vote of nurturant parents, but needs to figure out how to speak to and convince the swing voters in the middle, who use both frames and respond to both. This is where the political battle takes place, so understanding how to connect with these voters is essential.

#### HYPOTHESES

For the purpose of testing, Lakoff's theory has been broken into two smaller hypotheses. To pass the initial test of validity, the independent variable of parenting style must accurately predict broad political attitudes, such as party identification, ideology, and presidential vote. If it cannot, then Lakoff will have a hard time convincing others of his theory's reliability.

**H1:** Strict fathers will be more likely than nurturant parents to identify as

Republicans, to identify as conservatives, and to vote for Romney in 2012.

Later on, more focused hypotheses will test parenting style's relationship towards specific policies, but the foundation of Lakoff's theory rests on the assumption that people instinctively access their parenting values to interpret the political world. If nurturant parents are no more likely than strict fathers to call themselves Democrats or Republicans, conservatives or liberals, then Lakoff's theory will have been dealt a fatal blow and it will hardly be worthwhile to continue the study.

After testing for broad political identities, I proceed to test Lakoff's assertion that parenting styles tie together the diverse coalition of ideas that comprise liberal and conservative worldviews. Again, my independent variable was parenting style and I tested for sixteen different dependent variables on as many controversial political topics as possible. Studying these attitudes separately will enable comparison of which types of political views, if any, parenting can predict. For ease of interpretation these sixteen issues have been categorized into three groups: security, traditional values, and desire for equality.

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<sup>210</sup> Postlewait 2006

<sup>211</sup> Lakoff 1996, 35

**H2a:** Strict fathers will show more support than nurturant parents for defense and security issues.

Because strict fathers view the world as a dark and dangerous place, they are expected to favor vigorous law enforcement and a strong military. It also seems logical to expect that strict father types would be less trusting of others in general. Nurturant parents decidedly disagree. Five political attitudes dealing with security were measured, including federal defense spending, crime spending, the death penalty, gun control, and social trust.

**H2b:** Strict fathers will be more likely to approve of traditional family roles and socially conservative values than nurturant parents.

Recall that nurturant parents teach their children to be more tolerant and accepting of diversity, whereas strict fathers are likely to think that others should live by traditional roles and the customs of their own parents. Again, five attitudes—feelings about abortion, gay marriage, traditional gender roles, environmental protection, and white privilege—were tested to determine the influence of parenting. Lakoff's theory will only be strengthened if nurturant parents choose the more tolerant or liberal option.

The last group of issues dealt with the role and scope of the government and the extent to which it should be involved in promoting equality. Naturally, strict parents are expected to prefer a small government, allowing those who have learned discipline to flourish without interference. Nurturant parents, however, see the welfare state as essential to helping people back on their feet so they can become self-sufficient and give back to a society that cares for its citizens.

**H1c:** Nurturant parents will be more likely than strict fathers to endorse government intervention to promote equality.

Altogether, six attitudes were measured that correspond to views on equality, including feelings about government involvement in the economy, universal healthcare, welfare spending, size of government, affirmative action, and a general measure of the importance of having an equal society.

If parenting philosophy fails to consistently predict views on all of these topics, or if it only predicts views on one or two out of the three categories, then I have failed to find support for Lakoff's theory. If, after controlling for extraneous variables, parenting remains a strong predictor of all these political views, then substantial support will be given to the parenting theory put forward by Lakoff, lending a more systematic form of credibility to his anecdotal evidence

## DESIGN AND MEASUREMENT

### *Operationalization of Variables*

For all the necessary variables and controls in this study, data was drawn from the most recent American National Election Study (ANES), conducted at the time of the 2012 election. To operationalize the chief independent variable, parenting style, four questions were chosen from the



dataset that directly measured the nurturant/strict cleavage. For each question, respondents were offered two possible traits, one nurturant and one strict, and were asked to choose which they considered preferable for children have. The choices included “independence or respect for elders”; “curiosity or good manners”; “obedience or self-reliance”; and “considerate or well-behaved.” Nurturant responses received zeroes and strict responses ones. The resulting scale, which is labeled in the data as “parent score,” ran from zero to four, with higher scores indicating a stricter parenting style. Unfortunately, the ANES 2012 did not ask for respondents’ opinions on the use of corporal punishment to discipline children, one of Lakoff’s major distinctions between the two styles. Despite this omission, the parent score should provide a very good measure of the two frames Lakoff described. As Table 1 illustrates, the questions did not intercorrelate as highly as might be expected. However, Lakoff predicted most people to fall somewhere in the middle of the scale because most people are not strong liberals or conservatives and would therefore employ both models in everyday life. Each individual question correlated highly with the scale as a whole, and the removal of any single question did not significantly alter the findings of this research. The most common score was a three out of four, meaning the average American is more strict than nurturant, a result consistent with other studies of authoritarianism among the American population.<sup>212</sup>

**Table 1:** Correlation Matrix of Parenting Index and Individual Parenting Questions

|                                 | Independence/<br>Respect Elders | Curiosity/<br>Manners | Obedience/<br>Self-Reliance | Considerate/<br>Well-Behaved |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Independence/<br>Respect Elders | 1                               |                       |                             |                              |
| Curiosity/<br>Manners           | .331**                          | 1                     |                             |                              |
| Obedience/<br>Self-Reliance     | .326**                          | .350**                | 1                           |                              |
| Considerate/<br>Well-Behaved    | .133**                          | .282**                | .264**                      | 1                            |
| Parent Score                    | .624**                          | .716**                | .729**                      | .641**                       |

Note: One asterisk denotes significance at the .05 level, two asterisks at the .001 level

ANES data were also used to measure the dependent variables. The survey included questions that dealt with all sixteen issues mentioned in the hypotheses, as well as sociodemographics and other extraneous variables for which social scientists routinely control.<sup>213</sup> Because race has well-known effects on American political identity, and because some of the dependent variables such as

<sup>212</sup> Heatherington and Weiler 2009

<sup>213</sup> These included age (measured by group), gender (men were coded as zeroes, women as ones; therefore a positive relationship with “gender” actually indicates that females were likely to hold that particular attitude), education level (five categories were included, and a higher score indicated more years of education), and annual income (measured in 28 categories ranging from under \$5000 to over \$250,000, a higher score indicates a higher annual income).

affirmative action and white privilege dealt directly with racial issues, two dummy variables, white and black, controlled for race. Religion has also been shown to correlate with political beliefs, notably abortion and gay marriage, so a scale that combined two dimensions of religious behavior was created. Frequency of attendance at religious services and frequency of private religious practice were combined into an overall religiosity score. Last, party identification was measured in the form of a seven-point scale from strong Democrat to strong Republican, and another seven-point scale measured ideological self-placement from strong liberal to strong conservative. On both of these two indicators, the more right-wing answers were coded as higher. It should be noted that party ID and ideology were almost always controls and were therefore categorized as independent variables. However, hypothesis one required testing of these as dependent variables. When party ID was a dependent variable, ideology was still controlled for and vice versa.

#### *Testing the Relationships*

Each dependent variable was tested separately. For most of these, ordinary least squares regression was employed to determine the relative strength of parenting and all of the other sociodemographic and control variables. However, three of the dependent variables only had two possible outcomes. For vote for president, size of government, and role of government in the economy, binary logistic regression was used instead of OLS.<sup>214</sup> The results of the regression models allow us to see which factors are significant predictors for each of the nineteen separate dependent variables. When the parenting index receives a high T-score that means it is a good independent predictor of people's views towards that issue.

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<sup>214</sup> For size of government, respondents were asked to choose from “the less government, the better,” or “there are more things that government should be doing.” For government's role in the economy, respondents were read: “One, we need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems; or two, the free market can handle these problems without government being involved.”

## RESULTS

**Table 2: Political Identities**

|                        | Party ID    |             | Ideology    |                | Presidential Vote<br>(binary) |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
|                        | Beta        | T           | Beta        | T              | Exp (B)                       |
| <b>Parenting Score</b> | <b>.002</b> | <b>.164</b> | <b>.120</b> | <b>9.734**</b> | <b>1.159*</b>                 |
| Age                    | -.050       | -4.563**    | .061        | 5.370**        | 1.037                         |
| Gender                 | -.041       | -3.697**    | -.030       | -2.614*        | 1.138                         |
| Education              | .044        | 3.563**     | -.044       | -3.463**       | .912                          |
| Income                 | .052        | 4.326**     | .004        | .314           | 1.015                         |
| Party ID               | --          | --          | .606        | 48.958**       | 2.563**                       |
| Ideology               | .574        | 48.958**    | --          | --             | 2.339**                       |
| Religiosity            | .048        | 4.024**     | .137        | 11.301**       | 1.083*                        |
| White                  | .103        | 5.950**     | .002        | .094           | 1.664                         |
| Black                  | -.183       | -10.588**   | .019        | 1.054          | .055**                        |
| Constant               | --          | -.955       | --          | 10.717         | .000                          |
| R Square               | .477        |             | .448        |                | .799 (Nagelkerke R Square)    |

Note: One asterisk denotes significance at the .05 level, two asterisks at the .001 level

The higher the T-score, the stronger the predictive power of that variable. A negative T-score indicates a negative causal influence of that variable on the political attitude.

An Exp (B) that exceeds one denotes a positive relationship, while less than one denotes a negative relationship.

As Lakoff predicted, nurturant parents were much more likely to self-identify as liberal, even after controlling for party ID and other variables, while strict fathers were more often conservative. This relationship is statistically significant at the .001 level, and in fact proved to be one of the best predictors of how people defined their ideology, surpassing education, income, gender, and age. In fact, only party ID and religiosity showed stronger predictive power. However, looking as an independent predictor of party ID, parenting performed much worse than it did for ideology. This finding should not be mistaken as an assertion that nurturant parents are unlikely to be Democrats, because bivariate correlations show that they are. Instead, the regression model reveals that nurturant attitudes do not cause people to become Democrats. The variance in partisanship is instead explained by other factors, notably ideology and race.

Finally, the parenting effect was tested for presidential vote. Here, the relationship is small but significant at the .05 level. Even after holding party ID, ideology, and all other contaminating variables constant, nurturant parents were significantly more likely to cast a ballot for Obama than strict parents, who favored Romney. Despite the immense amount of attention focused on the notorious gender gap and the media's coverage of Romney's personal wealth, gender and income

were still eclipsed by the predictive power of parenting. At the theoretical level it appears that Lakoff was on to something, but examining the issues in closer detail will reveal the true influence of parenting on today's most controversial political debates.

*Hypothesis 2a: Security*

**Table 3:** Security

|                        | Defense Spending |                | Crime Spending |                | Death Penalty |                 | Gun Control |             | Social Trust |                 |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|
|                        | Beta             | T              | Beta           | T              | Beta          | T               | Beta        | T           | Beta         | T               |
| <b>Parenting Score</b> | <b>.104</b>      | <b>6.479**</b> | <b>.156</b>    | <b>9.595**</b> | <b>.177</b>   | <b>11.336**</b> | <b>.001</b> | <b>.041</b> | <b>-.139</b> | <b>-8.993**</b> |
| Age                    | .070             | 4.834**        | .046           | 3.107*         | .014          | 1.002           | .061        | 4.346**     | .083         | 5.914**         |
| Gender                 | .019             | 1.329          | .047           | 3.150*         | -.031         | -2.158*         | .149        | 10.665**    | -.007        | -.494           |
| Education              | -.101            | -6.233**       | -.066          | -3.979**       | -.062         | -3.915**        | .043        | 2.751*      | .144         | 9.122**         |
| Income                 | .003             | .219           | -.029          | -1.829         | .040          | 2.570*          | .028        | 1.821       | .119         | 7.798**         |
| Party ID               | .167             | 8.356**        | -.078          | -3.887**       | .155          | 8.052**         | -.248       | -13.125**   | .060         | 3.150*          |
| Ideology               | .212             | 10.864**       | -.013          | -.671          | .138          | 7.403**         | -.138       | -7.500**    | -.025        | -1.376          |
| Religiosity            | .016             | .995           | .039           | 2.433*         | -.159         | -10.348**       | .012        | .786        | .056         | 3.667**         |
| White                  | -.022            | -.987          | -.043          | -1.858         | .057          | 2.549*          | -.064       | -2.896*     | .098         | 4.446**         |
| Black                  | .019             | .851           | .022           | .927           | -.039         | -1.737          | -.018       | -.834       | -.074        | -3.294**        |
| Constant               | --               | 10.402         | --             | 35.748         | --            | 9.286           | --          | 25.406      | --           | 23.913          |
| R Square               | .169             |                | .069           |                | .144          |                 | .163        |             | .150         |                 |

Note: One asterisk denotes significance at the .05 level, two asterisks at the .001 level

The higher the T-score, the stronger the predictive power of that variable. A negative T-score indicates a negative causal influence of that variable on the political attitude.

The regression results for predicting distrust of others and the related desire for increased security were astounding. As indicated in Table 3, parenting emerged as one of the strongest, if not the best, predictor of attitudes on nearly every issue. Often, parenting's independent effect even surpassed the giants of party ID and ideology. Strict parents heavily favored increasing the defense budget; in fact, only party ID and ideology better predicted views towards defense spending. Parenting index actually proved to be the strongest predictor of views on the death penalty and crime spending, an extremely promising result for Lakoff, and after education, parenting proved to be the best predictor for social trust. The one exception was gun control, where parenting had almost no effect at all. One possible response to this anomaly is that for gun control, either side could technically be viewed as a security issue. For some people, gun access is vital to protecting their family from a hostile world. For others, there are many evil people in this hostile world who should not be able to get their hands on a gun. And yet most Americans recognize that there is a clear conservative and liberal side to the issue of gun control. Either Lakoff's model must be elaborated to

explain this discrepancy, or it must acknowledge that it simply cannot predict attitudes towards gun restrictions.<sup>215</sup> Overall, these results substantially strengthen Lakoff's hypothesis; strict parents trusted others less and were willing to spend more to ensure their security.

*Hypothesis 2b: Traditional Social Values*

**Table 4:** Traditional Social Issues

|                        | Gay Marriage |                             | Abortion     |                 | Gender Roles |                | Environment  |                | White Privilege |                 |
|------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                        | Beta         | T                           | Beta         | T               | Beta         | T              | Beta         | T              | Beta            | T               |
| <b>Parenting Score</b> | <b>-.158</b> | <b>-</b><br><b>11.476**</b> | <b>-.111</b> | <b>-8.074**</b> | <b>.112</b>  | <b>7.115**</b> | <b>-.042</b> | <b>-2.852*</b> | <b>.199</b>     | <b>13.550**</b> |
| Age                    | -.091        | -7.246**                    | .039         | 3.130*          | .121         | 8.411**        | -.052        | -3.933**       | -.054           | -4.013**        |
| Gender                 | .073         | 5.850**                     | .055         | 4.359**         | -.062        | -4.323**       | .026         | 1.932          | -.043           | -3.190**        |
| Education              | .078         | 5.597**                     | .066         | 4.696**         | -.079        | -4.938**       | -.007        | -.464          | -.169           | -               |
| Income                 | .000         | -.010                       | .049         | 3.627**         | .023         | 1.466          | -.045        | -3.156*        | -.023           | -1.558          |
| Party ID               | -.148        | -8.760**                    | -.122        | -7.234**        | .046         | 2.381*         | -.256        | -              | .151            | 8.363**         |
|                        |              | 14.281**                    |              |                 |              |                |              |                |                 |                 |
| Ideology               | -.215        | -                           | -.227        | -               | .137         | 7.215**        | -.257        | -              | .165            | 9.401**         |
|                        |              | 13.024**                    |              | 13.791**        |              |                |              | 14.784**       |                 |                 |
| Religiosity            | -.277        | -                           | -.348        | -               | .119         | 7.603**        | .014         | .979           | -.039           | -2.717*         |
|                        |              | 20.414**                    |              | 25.625**        |              |                |              |                |                 |                 |
| White                  | .060         | 3.064*                      | .000         | .023            | -.018        | -.792          | -.044        | -2.124*        | .000            | -.021           |
| Black                  | -.018        | -.895                       | .088         | 4.453**         | -.043        | -1.874         | .006         | .279           | -.194           | -9.180**        |
| Constant               | --           | 39.928                      | --           | 26.643          | --           | 9.631          | --           | 51.265         | --              | 14.895          |
| R Square               | .330         |                             | .333         |                 | .117         |                | .250         |                | .238            |                 |

Lakoff's model was again strongly supported on attitudes ranging from abortion to white privilege. Table 4 exhibits the absolutely immense influence of parenting style on acceptance of gays and lesbians. For homosexual marriage, parenting style surpassed age and even party ID; only religiosity and ideology performed better on this issue. On abortion, the T-score of over eight shows a high association between nurturance and pro-choice attitudes, and once again the only better predictors were religiosity and ideology. When asked whether it would harm the family for a woman to work outside of the home, strict fathers showed startlingly high preferences for traditional gender roles. While environmental issues may not have revealed the same level of predictive power as other issues, here too Lakoff's hypothesis was supported. It appears that nurturant attitudes towards children translate into environmental protection, a finding statistically significant at the .05 level.

Where parenting style really stood out was on measures of white privilege, or the ability of members of the majority race to ignore historical and institutional prejudices that maintain racial

<sup>215</sup> Interestingly, gun control was the only security issue where gender played such a major role. Women were much more likely to think it should be more difficult to buy a gun.

inequality. This variable was measured by asking respondents how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.” After controlling for a multitude of intervening variables, parenting stood out as the most significant variable measured, with a T-score of over thirteen. For white privilege, parenting is more important than whether one is black or white. Education represents the second strongest individual predictor, with increases in education resulting in drastically reduced white privilege. Returning to Lakoff’s theory, we can observe that it is clearly borne out on all social issues measured.

*Hypothesis 2c: Equality*

**Table 5:** Independence versus Interdependence (OLS Regression)

|                        | Equality     |                 | Healthcare   |                 | Welfare      |                 | Affirmative Action |                 |
|------------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|
|                        | Beta         | T               | Beta         | T               | Beta         | T               | Beta               | T               |
| <b>Parenting Score</b> | <b>-.084</b> | <b>-5.667**</b> | <b>-.042</b> | <b>-3.392**</b> | <b>-.067</b> | <b>-4.573**</b> | <b>-.096</b>       | <b>-6.250**</b> |
| Age                    | -.009        | -.683           | .001         | .107            | -.002        | -.140           | .003               | .211            |
| Gender                 | .001         | .063            | .020         | 1.755           | .023         | 1.692           | -.016              | -1.179          |
| Education              | .045         | 3.023*          | .035         | 2.787*          | -.053        | -3.538**        | .064               | 4.093**         |
| Income                 | -.003        | -.179           | .023         | 1.914           | -.161        | -11.118**       | -.044              | -2.885*         |
| Party ID               | -.180        | -9.919**        | -.446        | -29.462**       | -.203        | -11.310**       | -.240              | -12.755**       |
| Ideology               | -.265        | -15.002**       | -.253        | -17.182**       | -.231        | -13.192**       | -.151              | -8.233**        |
| Religiosity            | .009         | .635            | .020         | 1.637           | .041         | 2.864*          | .070               | 4.632**         |
| White                  | -.033        | -1.569          | -.042        | -2.376*         | -.036        | -1.740          | -.012              | -.554           |
| Black                  | .104         | 4.880**         | .080         | 4.511**         | .073         | 3.481**         | .241               | 10.829**        |
| Constant               | --           | 32.112          | --           | 33.540          | --           | 47.052          | --                 | 21.979          |
| R Square               | .226         |                 | .467         |                 | .244         |                 | .262               |                 |

Note: One asterisk denotes significance at the .05 level, two asterisks at the .001 level.

The higher the T-score, the stronger the predictive power of that variable. A negative T-score indicates a negative causal influence of that variable on the political attitude.

**Table 6: Independence versus Interdependence (Binary Logistic Regression)**

|                        | Big Government | Free Market |
|------------------------|----------------|-------------|
|                        | Exp (B)        | Exp (B)     |
| <b>Parenting Score</b> | <b>1.097*</b>  | <b>.952</b> |
| Age                    | .959**         | 1.000       |
| Gender                 | 1.316**        | .711**      |
| Education              | .913*          | 1.056       |
| Income                 | .983**         | .993        |
| Party ID               | .696**         | 1.453**     |
| Ideology               | .704**         | 1.505**     |
| Religiosity            | 1.035*         | .960*       |
| White                  | .675*          | 1.362*      |
| Black                  | 1.524*         | .612        |
| Constant               | 12.115         | .054        |
| Nagelkerke R Square    | .366           | .371        |

Note: One asterisk denotes significance at the .05 level, two asterisks at the .001 level  
 An Exp (B) that exceeds one denotes a positive relationship, while less than one denotes a negative relationship.

On the third set of issues, which can be seen on Tables 5 and 6, parenting style showed mixed results, and in general the impact of parenting on policy preference was weaker than for hypotheses 2a and 2b. Still, it remained a statistically significant predictor for some independent/interdependent issues. For the variable classified “equality,” respondents were asked whether the country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are. As predicted by Lakoff’s model, nurturant parents turned out to be more concerned about fairness. This relationship proved to be statistically significant at the .001 level, and only party ID and ideology proved to be stronger predictors. Nurturant parents were also significantly more likely than strict fathers to support the Affordable Care Act, affirmative action, and welfare spending, findings consistent with Lakoff’s predictions. While most of Hypothesis 2c’s dependent variables had lower T-scores than security and traditional social issues, many remained statistically significant at the .001 level, so while the relationship is perhaps weaker than Lakoff predicted it is certainly present.

However, parenting theory fails to explain attitudes on government involvement in the economy and views on the proper size of government.<sup>216</sup> Lakoff would have predicted nurturant parents to advocate more government involvement to help solve society’s inequalities, while strict fathers are supposed to distrust government and want it to do less. However, Table 6 shows that

<sup>216</sup> These two issues required binary logistic regression because respondents were only offered two choices. They were entered into a different table for this reason, and their Wald scores should not be compared to T-scores in OLS. It was a mere coincidence that the two measures that did not support Lakoff’s hypothesis were the two that required binary logistic regression.

while conservatives, Republicans, and men were more likely to endorse laissez-faire government, parenting had no significant effect. For size of government, there is a significant parenting effect, but it goes in the opposite way Lakoff's theory predicted it would. Strict parents were actually more likely to agree that there are more things that government should be doing. With only four out of six attitudes significantly predicted by parenting and one attitude directly contradicting his theory, it is difficult to say that Hypothesis 2c lends much support to Lakoff.

#### CONCLUSION

It appears that parenting might not be the single dominant political heuristic, as Lakoff predicted, but it certainly cannot be discounted. Few variables tested in political science have shown such a significant and consistent effect. The very fact that parenting's impact remains significant after controlling for party ID and ideology proves that Lakoff was on to something. The parenting index is off the charts for security and tradition, and even for many issues dealing with equality. However, it seems that parenting might be a poor predictor about people's views towards government. This is problematic, because Lakoff's central point was that the way people envision parent-child relations is the way they envision government-citizen relations. Parenting seems to be very important for politics—probably far more important than anyone suspected—but it is not always important in the exact ways Lakoff predicted. Nonetheless, he made a bold and original claim that largely passed the test of empirical scrutiny.



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