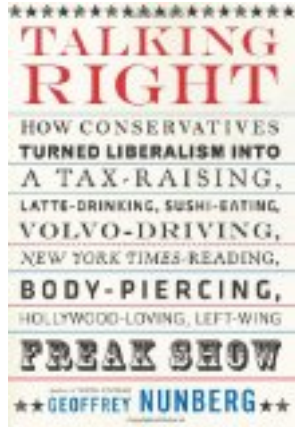


Talking Right

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[Original link](#)



Government, John Dewey famously said, is the shadow cast by big business over society. And political language, Geoffrey Nunberg argues in *Talking Right*, is the shadow cast by government. Democrats, he points out, seem to think language has a talismanic power, that if only they can find the right catch phrase or slogan, they can pull people over to their side. “Liberal” must become “progressive”, “family values” must become “valuing families”. There’s an intellectual cleverness to such stunts, and as a Berkeley linguist, Nunberg must want to believe in them. But he doesn’t. The words, he explains, are just a side-effect of the larger political situation. Dewey explained that attempts to change the shadow will have no effect without a change in the substance, and Nunberg heartily agrees.

It’s hard to see how it could be otherwise, but Democrats have suffered from a stubborn literalism in political discourse: thinking they can beat the charge of big government by launching programs cutting down on bureaucratic waste, thinking they can reclaim the issue of values by pointing to their love of tolerance and fairness, thinking they can dodge the charge of latte-sipping by donning a hunting cap and rifle. In reality, the issues go much deeper: big government is an attack on the notion that government can do good, values refers to a feeling of national morals run amok, and the latte-sipping charge is an attempt to distract voters from bigger issues of class. Nunberg even chastises his colleague George Lakoff for assuming that the current packages of political positions have any deeper meanings, rather than just being accidents of history.

Nunberg is an essayist—his commentaries for NPR’s *Fresh Air* are a national treasure—and his style, while eminently readable, doesn’t translate well to a

long book, where his points get lost in a field of anecdotes. But beneath all the stories about how conservatives eat more brie and liberal used to be a mantle claimed by everyone, Nunberg's point is a familiar one: if the Democrats want to win, they must begin telling full-throated populist stories about how the economic elite are capturing the wealth of our country and how we need government to take it back. The point is no less true for being popular, and it's heartening to find that investigation from yet another perspective yields the same conclusions.

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