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The Conservative Advantage

In January 2005, I was invited to speak to the Charlottesville Democratic Party about moral psychology. I welcomed the chance because I had spent much of 2004 as a speechwriter for John Kerry's presidential campaign. Not a paid speechwriter—just a guy who, while walking his dog every evening, mentally rewrote some of Kerry's ineffectual appeals. For example, in Kerry's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, he listed a variety of failures of the Bush administration and after each one he proclaimed, "America can do better" and "Help is on the way." The first slogan connected to no moral foundation at all. The second one connected weakly to the Care/harm foundation, but only if you think of America as a nation of helpless citizens who need a Democratic president to care for them.

In my rewrite, Kerry listed a variety of Bush's campaign promises and after each one he asked, "You gonna pay for that, George?" That simple slogan would have made Bush's many new programs, coming on top of his tax cuts and vast expenditures on two wars, look like shoplifting rather than generosity. Kerry could have activated the cheater detection modules of the Fairness/cheating foundation.

The message of my talk to the Charlottesville Democrats was simple: *Republicans understand moral psychology. Democrats don't.* Republicans have long understood that the elephant is in charge of political behavior, not the rider, and they know how elephants work.¹ Their slogans, political commercials, and speeches go straight for the gut, as in the infamous 1988 ad showing a mug shot of a black man, Willie Horton, who committed a brutal murder after being released from prison on a weekend furlough by the "soft-on-crime" Democratic candidate, Governor Michael Dukakis. Democrats have often aimed their appeals more squarely at the rider, emphasizing specific policies and the benefits they'll bring to you, the voter.

Neither George W. Bush nor his father, George H. W. Bush, had the ability to move audiences to tears, but both had the great fortune to run against cerebral and emotionally cool Democrats (Michael Dukakis, Al Gore, and John Kerry). It is no coincidence that the only Democrat since Franklin Roosevelt to win election and then reelection combined gregariousness and oratorical skill with an almost musical emotionality. Bill Clinton knew how to charm elephants.

Republicans don't just aim to cause fear, as some Democrats charge. They trigger the full range of intuitions described by Moral Foundations Theory. Like Democrats, they can talk about innocent victims (of harmful Democratic policies) and about fairness (particularly the unfairness of taking tax money from hardworking and prudent people to support cheaters, slackers, and irresponsible fools). But Republicans since Nixon have had a near-monopoly on appeals to loyalty (particularly patriotism and military virtues) and authority (including respect for parents, teachers, elders, and the police, as well as for traditions). And after they embraced Christian conservatives during Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign and became the party of "family values," Republicans inherited a