

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
Episode 53: [How Political Language Is Engineered with Drew Westen & Frank Luntz](#)

Tristan Harris: Let's take a tour of language designed to shape politics.

New Speaker: The left is obsessed with teaching children about sexual and gender identity. Marketing sneakers, or those goofy mouse ears to kids, that's one thing. But marketing complicated topics of sexuality and gender, that's grooming.

Speaker 3: Here's the problems I have with the Affordable Care Act. Number one, there is a provision in there that anyone over the age of 74 has to go before what is effectively a death panel.

Speaker 4: But now Florida governor Ron DeSantis is determined to make the happiest place on earth a living hell. Baby MAGA is mad that Disney opposes his Don't Say Gay bill.

Tristan Harris: Democracy depends on us choosing our views on political issues. But when the language used to describe those political issues is engineered in a laboratory to be divisive and can produce a 15-point difference in what we think about the political issues, are we choosing our views or is the language choosing our views for us?

Tristan Harris: I'm Tristan Harris. And this is Your Undivided Attention, the podcast from the Center for Humane Technology. Our guests today are Jedi masters of political communication. Drew Westen is a political psychologist and messaging consultant based at Emory University. And Frank Luntz is a political communications consultant, pollster and pundit. And in some cases, our guests have used their Jedi master powers of language in ways that increased partisanship. And yet whatever we might think of their politics, we can ask, how can we decode the divisive power of language and how can we use those Jedi powers to design language that doesn't divide, but unifies?

Tristan Harris: Frank Luntz and Drew Westen, welcome to Your Undivided Attention. I am so, so, so excited to have this conversation. I've wanted to have it for a while. I've known both of you separately. For those who do not know. Frank has been in the Republican polling and language political framing business for a long time. And Drew has done similar work for the Democratic party. I just want to welcome you both to the program and maybe say something nice or unflattering about each other. You get to pick.

Frank Luntz: No, I'll start. Drew, I was always afraid that the Democrats would actually listen to Drew. Nobody on the Democratic side has a better feel for how we behave and a better feel for our innermost priorities than you do. So Tristan, I have to give credit to my colleague here for really getting it, for understanding it. Drew, you're the best.

Drew Westen: Well, this is going to sound like a mutual operation society, but Frank, I've been using your book Words That Work in teaching for the last decade. I teach a course on political persuasion, The Psychology of Political Persuasion at Emory. I

tell my students the best book out there, no one's ever written as good a book on how to use words and how to speak to people. And you were really pioneering at this. You have a way of listening and hearing people that there's no one comparable on your side of the aisle either. So I appreciate the compliment, and right back at you.

Tristan Harris: Well, and this is a wonderful place to start. There's actually a famous... The last time, I think, you guys were together it was about 10 years ago at the New York Public Library. We were talking about how politics was divisive then and what you all were thinking about how we might use language in a different way, commenting on how the different parties were using it. I consider this another historic moment because whatever things have happened in the past, I consider you both to be the best in terms of holding up this tuning fork that can identify and find those resonant frequencies in people.

Tristan Harris: You can't invent the language from scratch. You have to know what it's resonating with. But it's an art and a science, and both of you are, I think, the best at it. What was a moment that had you recognize the power of language? I mean, it could be when you discovered one of these key phrases. Or just what was sort of a key experience or moment where you understood the power of language, Drew?

Drew Westen: For me, it was listening to people on my side of the aisle do it so poorly. If there's one moment that I remember it actually was 1988 watching the debate between Dukakis and George H W Bush. And when he got into his famous response to the question that Bernard Kalb asked him about if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty? And his response was, "No Bernard. I think you know that I've been in an opponent of the death penalty my whole life, and I see no evidence that it's a deterrent."

Drew Westen: And I just screamed at the television. Another one bites the dust. The first thing that you say in a situation like that is, "Bernard, if that happened to Kitty the first thing I'd want to do is I'd want to get my hands around that guy's throat and be the first one to do it. But let me tell you why I wouldn't." And then just talk genuinely about why you wouldn't, because he wouldn't.

Tristan Harris: Frank, I'm curious for you. Yeah, go ahead.

Frank Luntz: The one that comes to mind first is during the debate about Obamacare. I was in St. Louis and I still remember the focus group. I remember the window, I remember the facility. We're having this conversation, and the public kind of liked, moderately liked, what Barack Obama was trying to do. And we'd been through about two hours when someone raised their hand, a woman who was sitting in the front to my right. I even remember she was dressed in red, and she said, "You know, we've been talking about healthcare and I'm not really against what they're trying to do, because they're trying to help me, but I really don't want it to become a government takeover." And I said to her, "What do you

mean by that?" She says, "Well, government control, it means that they've got influence. But government takeover, it means I have no influence at all."

Frank Luntz: I look around the room and everyone's nodding their heads. And I was always looking at body language. I look at the physical reaction of my participants. Are they leaning forward or backwards? Do they have their arms folded or are they more welcoming? And they start to nod their heads. And the next person behind her to her left said, "That's exactly what this is. It is a government takeover." And then I hear this murmur from the 30 people in the room. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's a takeover. I don't want government running my healthcare."

Frank Luntz: And I knew at that moment that I had the language to challenge Obamacare, that I had the language that would make it very difficult for them to be successful. I never created that phrase. It came from a focus group participant. My language I'm not creating in a laboratory. My language comes from the voters themselves. I just know how to identify something when I hear it, and that one was clearly impactful.

Tristan Harris: And so in that example, what was the phrase? The phrase was government takeover of healthcare?

Frank Luntz: Yes. We had been using government control up to that point, and government control was significant. Government takeover was mind-blowing.

Drew Westen: Due to Frank, I knew it came out of focus group, but I thought it came out of more of your head than a participant's mouth. I didn't know that. But you know, what's so striking about Democrats is that they tend to either pick up language from the other side, or they step in stuff, into a metaphor or an image that's come from the other side that's been used against them. So that for example, government takeover is a great example where in trying to talk about extending Medicaid to people who don't have healthcare, Democrats call it Medicaid expansion. And what I always say is think about what expansion is. You're going right in the heart of a metaphor that Ronald Reagan talked about, about government is taking over your life. It's big.

Drew Westen: I think big government is the phrase that's used by the right for 40 years. So why would you want to talk about expansion? You want to talk about extending Medicaid to people who are working three jobs and still can't afford it. I mean, extending versus expansion are two completely different things that activate completely different networks in your head.

Frank Luntz: I'll give you the best example of Democratic failure was the phrase Defund the Police. Whoever came up with that cost so many Senate seats, so many House seats and that phrase doesn't go away. It's still powerful right now.

Frank Luntz: I'm listening to Joe Biden talk about inflation and he called it transitory. First, no one understands what transitory is. And second is people will think it's

temporary. Well, what good is temporary if meat prices have gone up 22%, if gas prices have gone up 33%, if used car prices have gone up 40%? And by the way, notice, I don't use the word inflation. Their prices, their costs. The average individual does not walk into a supermarket and say, "Oh my God, look at that inflation." They say, "I can't afford that."

Frank Luntz: So I don't get it after all this time. By the way, believe me, you'd be shocked at how little Republicans pay attention to what I tell them. I actually think that you would do better, Drew, preaching to Republicans, and I would do better preaching to Democrats.

Tristan Harris: It's funny because in my conversations with both of you in private, you actually speak very often about how little those who are communicating, actually listen to people like you at really framing these things. And when you say it, Frank, out loud, it sounds so obvious. Like of course, people don't relate to the phrase inflation as much as they would relate to the phrase, prices that are going up.

Tristan Harris: Of course, if you talk about global warming in terms of Celsius, when most Americans don't know what Celsius is, or even talking about two meters of sea level rise. It's like we're in the wrong unit of measure. And metaphorically. That's what we're doing all the time. We're using phrases that are not as accessible.

Tristan Harris: Just for fun, maybe this will allow you both to go on a little rant for a second. Where do you see the parties just screwing up over and over again? Because one other thing our listeners might be thinking is, if it makes a change but if it's only 2%, then it doesn't matter. But if it actually transforms the outcome, then it starts to matter.

Drew Westen: Oh, I mean, you're looking at the difference of 15 points in public approval when you say expanding versus extending. And the same thing actually is true of something as simple as whether you mention Medicaid or Medicare first in a message. The average person knows Medicare. They know that it's something that their parents, their grandparents have they really like. It's the most popular, other than social security. Those are the two most popular programs that the federal government has ever put into place.

Drew Westen: If you talk about Medicare, people are right with you. If you talk about Medicaid, what they are picturing is long lines, crowded clinics, poor healthcare given to people of color in the United States. That what's what they picture either consciously or unconsciously. So if you say we need to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to get care as good as Medicare, whether through their private insurance or whether they get Medicare itself. Or as a backup we can extend Medicaid to people who are having to take two or three jobs just to get by, so that they've got healthcare for themselves and for their kids.

Drew Westen: If you do it in that order, you do great. If you do it in the other order, and you first say something about Medicaid. We need to make sure that everyone has

access to Medicaid. You just watch the body language Frank is talking about. It just gets deflated. Frank is known for having introduced dial testing into our political lexicon as well as into our toolbox for developing and testing language.

Drew Westen: I do a lot of online dial testing where what people are doing is they're listening to messages, and as they're doing that, they're moving a bar on their screen one direction, like say to the right, if they like what they're hearing second by second, to the left if they don't. What it produces is a graph, a line that goes up and down that summarizes everybody's responses, or everybody in a group, whether it's Democrats, Republicans, independents, whether it's separated by males and females, et cetera.

Drew Westen: And you can see just these enormous differences from, if you start with Medicaid, you'll watch the dials drop and then you have to do your best to pull people back up with Medicare. Versus if you say Medicare first, and then you say, "And as a backup, everybody ought to be able to get Medicaid," you watch the dials keep going straight up, and that's including for conservatives who otherwise wouldn't have been happy with hearing about extending Medicaid at all.

Tristan Harris: Frank?

Frank Luntz: We have a similar example. If you talk about transparency, nobody understands it. Nobody can define transparency, but everybody can define accountability, which is why accountability is much more appreciated, much higher priority. Another example is the difference between evidence-based and fact-based. If it's evidence-based, it sounds like you're a lawyer and lawyers are very unpopular in the country. But if it's fact-based, these are statistical. These are provable. And so if you take a fact-based approach, you're dealing with hard information. If you take evidence-based, you're dealing with something that's more like intent rather than reality,

Drew Westen: Just to jump in. We're just kind of riffing off each other with different examples. But another example, people on the left like to use phrases like the unemployed or the uninsured. And you know what you're doing when you say the unemployed is you're taking real people with pain-lined faces and you're turning them into nameless, faceless abstractions. And what you want to do is exactly the opposite. You want to take abstractions and turn them into real people who just, as Frank said, you could visualize. So you want to talk about people who've lost their jobs, or people who've lost their jobs through no fault of their own. When you talk about it that way, you notice how you notice how I can put feeling in my voice in a way that you can't put intonation in your voice when you say the unemployed. I mean, what do I say? The unemployed. The unemployed. You know, English, isn't a tone language that way for abstractions.

Drew Westen: But you can do it similarly with the uninsured, or worse still the underinsured. No one knows who the underinsured are. They don't know exactly what that

means, or the underemployed. What does that mean? Does that mean you don't feel like working as much as you could? Does it mean you couldn't get enough jobs? Does it mean you're getting a job that's below your capacity? So why don't you just say if what you mean is people who have to work two or three jobs just to put food on the table for their family. If that's what you mean by the underemployed, say that, and people will get it. They can picture it and you could put that intonation in your voice that they in turn will feel, and it creates a completely different emotional response.

Tristan Harris: So we're going to take a quick interlude here with Aza I talking and then we'll go back to my conversation with Frank and Drew. The reason we wanted to have this episode, we've talked a lot about division and increasing conflict, and driving towards civil war and things like this on this podcast. When we hear the language used politically, we often think that's just kind of a read on what culture is, and what we miss is that a lot of this language is engineered in a political laboratory, almost like laboratory-generated political red meat that we hand to the masses of society to be as angry as possible.

Tristan Harris: Our guests had, in some cases, a role in some of this divisiveness by using these Jedi master powers of language for increasing the partisanship. And it's like, how do we use these capacities for healing culture to heal our divides as opposed to worsen them?

Aza Raskin: This is also an excellent bridge. We've had these political laboratories where the Drew Westens and Frank Luntzs of the world have crafted and identified viral strains of rhetoric. And the important thing to realize is that's now being democratized, which is, of course not the same thing as saying is good for democracy. Meaning everyone now has access to a focus group. Whenever you speak online it's as if you're speaking to a focus group that's videotaped, analyzed measured. There's someone there with a clipboard telling you exactly what's effective, and whether you want to or not, you are influenced by those measurements.

Tristan Harris: This episode is really about the arms race for reverse engineering human psychology for what is effective, as opposed to what is good. And the that's the key difference we really need to explore, is the difference between what works on the human mind at generating a response versus what's good for our society.

Aza Raskin: Being able to tell that difference is discernment. That is wisdom. And what that makes me think about is Robert. Sapolsky, a behavioralist. He calls the role of the prefrontal cortex of the human brain, its role is to help us do the righter thing when it is also the harder thing to do. So in some sense, this dynamic is sort of like a frontal lobotomy for society. It's making us do the thing that works, even though it's not the thing that's right.

Tristan Harris: I like that a lot. That's a good description. Yeah. Our prefrontal cortex is the part of us that usually is the inhibiting force or the executive control function. If the

prefrontal cortex is the thing that helps us do the righter but harder thing then like you said, this is the frontal lobotomy that makes us do the wronger thing because it's easy.

Tristan Harris: And so I think just to zoom out, this episode, you could say, oh, it's just about language and political framing, but really it's about what happens when we democratize godlike powers of seeing what resonates with human brains. And we can choose that the word, oh, they're grooming our children, and that's a very powerful kind of framing. They're grooming. What do you mean they're grooming my children? That just evokes this anger, this negative reaction. "I don't want them to be grooming my children for anything. Get your hands off my kids."

Tristan Harris: Right? And we have to inoculate ourselves to this growing adversarial interest to the sovereignty of human will. I'm reminded of this moment, when in 2018, Christopher Wiley, the Cambridge Analytica whistleblower that people know, came to our office at Center for Humane Technology in San Francisco. And he told me about this moment when he was physically touring trailer parks in the middle of the US, in the middle of the country. This is before the 2016 election of Trump. And they discovered phrases like "lock her up" or "build the wall." And when they discovered, especially this phrase, build the wall. Once you discover that a phrase like that works, you just play that chord every day on your political piano, right? And you just watch as people just churn in.

Tristan Harris: And it's as true on the left, as it is on the right. This stuff that we're exploring with Drew and Frank represents this bigger phase change that we can't put human feelings at the center if we found a back door into hacking human feelings. It's sort of like putting all of your security in a bank that we suddenly just released all the hacking tools, so now anybody can go into the bank. So why would you put your most sacred possessions in that bank when we now know it's hackable?

Tristan Harris: So we need to increase the security of the mind. And that's what this episode is partly about, is that by creating more awareness about how these things influence us and also how our own language influences us, we can both better empower ourselves in living our lives in a more empowering way and be more immune to this lab-generated political red meat that's constantly stoking our lower angels of our nature.

Tristan Harris: Drew, I know you did a famous study on the power of preframing people reading policies in an fMRI scanner and which party they were part of. Could you maybe speak to that research? What was that experience like for you?

Drew Westen: Sure it was motivated by it was right in the middle of the Kerry-Bush election. My colleagues and I decided, I'd been studying for a while the impact of motivated reasoning on politics, or just to put another way, the impact of how it is that we reason to conclusions that we want to come to. And the study was a

mirror imaging study where we put partisans on both sides into the scanner. And we presented them with a series of reasoning tasks. Some of them were taken directly out of political discourse. Some of them were things that had been said, and others we doctored a little bit to make them stronger.

Drew Westen: So they're lying down in the scanner. They're both hearing this, and they're seeing it as an image inside the scanner. A first slide comes up and it's John Kerry. And it says: In 1996, John Kerry said, "We have to have every aspect of social security examined and re-examined. We have a generation responsibility to fix Social Security so it'll be around for our seniors and for the seniors to come." And then the next slide comes up and it says: Just this year in 2004, John Kerry said on Meet The Press, "We should never means test Social Security. We have a generational responsibility to protect our seniors." And then the next slide comes up and says: Consider Mr. Kerry's words are conflicting and contradictory.

Drew Westen: So the task of the subjects was simply to rate on a four point scale the extent to which they were contradictory. And in that task, Democrats had a tough time giving it anywhere near or four, just as Republicans had a tough time when it was about George W. Bush giving anything anywhere near a near four.

Drew Westen: And in fact, what was going on was we knew from thousands at that point of reasoning studies using mirror imaging, that there's certain parts of the brain and certain circuits that turn on when people are reasoning. And our prediction, which turned out to be accurate, was those circuits of the brain didn't turn on at all in this reasoning task. What did turn on were, first, circuits involved in negative emotions, and they were just flashing like wild. And then what also got activated were some circuits that we had had hypothesized were involved. They're towards the very front of the skull right above your eyes and around your eyes, that we believed were involved in unconscious emotion regulation, that people are trying to basically regulate that emotional feeling. And some circuits right behind it, a part of the brain called the anterior cingulate that's involved in monitoring and dealing with conflict. What do you do when you're experiencing some kind of conflict?

Drew Westen: So all that stuff is what's going on. None of the reasoning circuits are going on. But then what happens within about 20 seconds when people come up with that rating. If they're giving it, "Nah, I didn't see anything contradictory at all," what they end up doing is they start coming up with rationalizations. And when they do that, all those circuits turn off. Everything that we've just seen is completely just shut down. Basically job well done. I no longer feel negative emotions. I no longer have to regulate my emotions. We begin to see the beginnings of activation of circuits that you normally see in reasoning that we think were about rationalization, because they're coming up with reasons, but they weren't real reasons.

Drew Westen: But the other thing that's pretty scary and this is leads us to where we are now, because we're looking at this stuff now on steroids in the Trump and post-Trump era, is that what else got activated afterwards were these circuits involved in reward, involving the neurotransmitter dopamine. And what essentially was happening was, once people had reasoned to a completely false conclusion that made no logical sense but it made them feel better, not only did it turn off the negative emotions, but they got reinforced for it with a burst of dopamine in reward circuitry in the brain.

Drew Westen: And what it means is that after you reason to a false conclusion, you actually like your candidate better. And there'd been some research using ratings of people when they were confronted with contradictions about Ronald Reagan's speeches and there was no way around them. If they were Republicans, they liked him better after they had, quote unquote, reasoned about those contradictions.

Frank Luntz: I try to say to the candidates, or the politicians, or the business people that I work with, "In the end, do you want to make a statement or do you want to make a difference?" And I'm trying to help them make a difference rather than just a statement.

Drew Westen: See, this is what's so impressive, Frank. Do you want to make a statement, or do you want to make a difference? It rolls off your tongue because it's just the way you think. It's emotional intelligence.

Drew Westen: Come back to energy examples. If you talk about renewables, it's a phrase that Democrats use all the time. The average person has no idea what you mean by renewables. You know, even if you say renewable energy, they're not quite sure what you mean. If you want to use the phrase and teach it to people, you can say something like, "Renewable energies, that is energies that'll never run out like the wind and the sun." Well then what you're doing is you're defining them in the sentence that you're using it. But you know, if you have to introduce a term, you're probably getting away from lived experiences. You want to be in the language of the kitchen table, not in the language of what James Carville calls the faculty lounge. If you want to be the smartest kid in the class, you're not going to be the kid who's leading the class.

Tristan Harris: So one thing just to make sure we don't run past it, was talking about motivated reasoning and how essentially people give a free pass to their side. So even though there's that inner conflict coming up when I'm listening to that thing about John Kerry, he said one thing when now one thing later, oh, he's a flip-flopper. That's what someone on the side that's predisposed to not like him is going to think. The side that likes him is going to say, well, let me find some reason to dismiss that. It was probably a while later. We all evolve and change our minds, but we do this all the time.

Tristan Harris: So Frank, maybe we can go to you. What was a key moment or experience when you saw the power of your dial testing or the instant response work that you

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had been doing that helped create and pioneer some of these phrases that became foundational in some of the political work that you'd done?

Frank Luntz: Probably going back to the Bush-Gore 2000 election. And it wasn't really the dials. It was the conversation that people were having. We did three focus groups in the three weeks after the election, but before it was called. The first one we did, we had 31 people show up for 30 slots. And the second one we did, we had 38 people for 30 slots. And the third session we did, we had over 50 people show up. I didn't recruit them. They heard about it and they wanted their voices to be heard.

Frank Luntz: And I saw the divisions. I saw the ugliness. I had a chance to watch 2016 and 2020 play out 20 years ago in the Bush- Gore battle. And I watched how people started off respectful, disappointed about the outcome, willing to accept defeat in some cases and looking forward to fighting again four years later. And by the end of that process, people were so angry and so vitriolic and vicious to each other, that we had to have security. A fight broke out in the bathroom, literally a fight where they had to call the cops. Having Americans start a physical fight with each other over an election that had already been determined was unexpected.

Frank Luntz: That was the warning sign of what would eventually blow this country apart in 2016. And it's just gotten worse ever since. That makes me regret quite often that I'm even in this profession, because I actually know how people think and feel, and it's not pleasant knowledge.

Tristan Harris: Yeah, well completely. And that's why the original intention here is you both are experts in the language that resonates with different groups and what activates us in a deep way. What's the language that we need to transcend these differences? So if the vaccine was good, we have to paint it as a bad thing, and then paint the entirety of it as being part of a political party so that the entire political party gets to be against the other political party. When Biden is in control of the economy, the Republicans have an incentive to paint everything that happens at the economy as bad because it's associated with whoever has the most power.

Tristan Harris: If you want to talk about briefly just that diagnosis that we actually perceive the entire economy or a policy in terms of our pre-partisan biases.

Drew Westen: If Donald Trump could have said to himself, I pushed through this vaccine development at warp speed. If he could have said, "Hey, listen, everybody take this. Everybody take it. It'll protect you from COVID." If he could have just done that, then Joe Biden could easily have said, "Listen, I got to hand it to president Trump. He really pushed for the development of a vaccine. It happened at warp speed. We couldn't be delivering it at the rate that we're delivering it now to the American people and getting COVID under control the way we would have if everyone had taken it if Trump hadn't supported it."

Drew Westen: That was a moment when, in the past, presidents would have been able to unite across the aisle because the first president wouldn't have said, "No, don't do it." President number two says, "No, don't do it because I'm not in the White House. I'm not going to tell you that to take the vaccine, because I'm not going to tell you whether I took it." That would never have happened before. And it did prevent Joe Biden from being able to do what I think was his natural proclivity. He wouldn't have had any trouble saying, "Yeah, I want to congratulate my predecessor for getting this through so fast. I think we're doing a really good job at delivering it and getting it out to everybody now."

Frank Luntz: Tristan, you're looking for language, for words to change the mood of our country, and the truth is it's not words. It's going to be people. That on the Democratic and Republican side, it's going to require people who are willing to say enough is enough. I'm not going to play that game. I'm not going to do that. Somebody like Tim Scott on the Republican side. Someone like Mitch Landrieu on the Democratic side. These are people who love their fellow countrymen, who appreciate the struggles that people have. People who look for the best in society, not the worst. That's the solving, that's the saving grace of the country. And we're going to need someone like that on both sides if we're ever going to pull the country together.

Drew Westen: I'll jump in with something about a place where a language could help us, but it's dependent on people of good faith. And that is the language of race. You know, we've been heading towards the situation we are in now for some time, because in 20 years, this country's going to be majority minority. That is primarily non-white for the first time. The majority of kids entering school now are non-white and it's making white people anxious. And what the Democrats are doing about it with phrases, as Frank said, like Defund the Police, which just scared the hell out of everybody, frankly. It scared the hell out of most Black people who don't want the police defunded in their areas. They want police who are with them. They want police who won't shoot them in the back, or who won't won't put a knee on their neck. But it's not like they don't want police in their neighborhoods.

Drew Westen: But Democrats use language around race that is so off-putting to the average person. Phrases like systemic racism. Less than 20% of Americans can define systemic racism. So every time you say systemic racism, every time you say implicit bias, less than 20% can define implicit bias. When you say those kind of words, you're making people feel both confused and accused. I'm going to tell we got to stop the systemic racism of our society engaged in, but I'm not going to tell you what it is.

Drew Westen: And the flip side is what the right then does, is they go off and running with something. They take the term critical race theory. They think it is you got critical. It's critical of America, critical of white people. So it's got all the right connotations. It's about race and we can make that a wedge issue. And it's a theory. It's not facts. It's got all the elements that create a tinderbox. So you got

the left on the one hand saying, "White people own up to your implicit bias and your systemic racism, but I'm not going to tell you what they are." And then you got the right saying, "And they're trying to teach our kids critical race theory." And you're off to the races.

Drew Westen: And it doesn't have to be that way. We can talk straight about these things. We can talk in ways that the average person understands, that the average Americans across colors and across political perspectives are united on. But you've got to want to do it.

Tristan Harris: So let me actually ask you both on this particular fault line of communication around race, what would be the way to communicate about this more effectively, that acknowledges what's true and what's real for people, but in a way that's actually more inclusive?

Frank Luntz: Simple. I don't understand. Teach me. Educate me. I am an open book. Fill my pages with what I need to know to understand, to empathize so that I can walk in your shoes.

Drew Westen: It's not hard. It's about plain language. It's about saying, "I think our kids ought to ought to learn about our history like they learn about chemistry, or they learn about math, as accurately as we can teach them." When we were growing up, most of us learned about the things that were amazing about our founders, who created those words that all men are created equal, but couldn't quite get to the idea that applied not only to women, but it also applied to people of different skin color. But that doesn't mean that they were bad people. It means that times change. And hopefully we improve and evolve in our values and in the way we see things.

Frank Luntz: The best message, the best idea I can offer is to remind people that their children are listening. They're emulating us. That probably the best advice that we could ever give an elected official is to remember that they're not just communicating to the current generation, that the next generation is in the room, and the next generation is paying attention. We have to treat each other the way that we want to be treated. We have to empathize with people so that we understand why they feel the way that they do. Just a simple, "I get it. I hear you," can go a long, long way in addressing these divisions.

Tristan Harris: Frank Luntz is a globally-recognized political and communications consultant, pollster, and pundit. He pioneered the instant response focus group technique and has conducted more than 2,500 surveys and focus groups in more than two dozen countries on six continents. In the past, he advocated for the use of the term death tax instead of estate tax, and climate change instead of global warming. His current focus is on transcending polarization and reversing some of these trends.

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Episode 53: [How Political Language Is Engineered with Drew Westen & Frank Luntz](#)

Tristan Harris: Drew Westen is a professor of psychology in the departments of psychology and psychiatry at Emory University. He's advised a range of organizations, including the Democratic caucuses of the US Senate and the House of Representatives. Westen is currently working on a follow-up to his 2008 book, *The Political Brain*, about how to talk with voters on the issues that they care about.

Tristan Harris: Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology, a nonprofit organization working to catalyze a humane future. Our executive producer is Stephanie Lepp. Our senior producer is Julia Scott. Mixing on this episode by Jeff Sudakin. Original music and sound design by Ryan and Hayes Holiday, and a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible. You can find show notes, transcripts, and much more @humanetech.com. A very special thanks to our generous lead supporters, including the Omidyar Network, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the Evolve Foundation among many others.

Tristan Harris: And if you've made it all the way here, let me give one more thank you to you for giving us your uninvited attention.