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Sunday Review

The Curious Politics of the 'Nudge'

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Gray Matter

By **CRAIG R. FOX** and **DAVID TANNENBAUM**

HOW do we really feel about policy “nudges”?

Earlier this month, President Obama signed an executive order directing federal agencies to collaborate with the White House’s new Social and Behavioral Sciences Team to use insights from behavioral science research to better serve the American people. For instance, studies show that people are more likely to save for retirement when they are automatically enrolled into a 401(k) retirement saving plan that they can opt out of than when they must actively opt in. The idea behind Mr. Obama’s initiative is that such soft-touch interventions, or “nudges,” can facilitate better decisions without resorting to heavier-handed strategies like mandates, taxes and bans.

The response to the executive order has been generally positive, but some conservatives have been critical, characterizing it as an instance of government overreach. (“President Obama Orders Behavioral Experiments on American Public” ran a headline on the website The Daily Caller.) However, it is worth noting

that when a similar “behavioral insights team” was founded by the conservative government of the British prime minister, David Cameron, it met resistance from the political left. (“Brits’ Minds Will Be Controlled Without Us Knowing It” ran a headline in *The Guardian*.)

Is it possible that partisans from both ends of the political spectrum conflate their feelings about a general-purpose policy *method* (such as nudges) with their feelings about a specific policy *goal* (or about those who endorse that goal)? We think so. In a series of recent experiments that we conducted with Todd Rogers of the Harvard Kennedy School, we found evidence for a “partisan nudge bias.”

In one experiment, we presented participants of varying political persuasions with short descriptions of various behavioral policy nudges (e.g., designating enrollment in a program as a default). To explain how such policy tools could be applied, we illustrated them using either an example of a liberal policy priority (e.g., encouraging low-income individuals to enroll in food stamps programs for which they were legally eligible) or a conservative policy priority (e.g., encouraging the wealthy to take advantage of capital gains tax breaks they were legally eligible for). The participants were then asked to rate how ethical, manipulative and coercive they found the nudge to be, as a general policy approach.

We found that the illustrations — which were arbitrary examples, logically speaking — greatly influenced their evaluations. In almost every case, respondents on the left of the political spectrum supported nudges when they were illustrated with a liberal agenda but opposed them when they were illustrated with a conservative one; meanwhile, respondents on the political right exhibited the opposite pattern.

In another experiment, we found that even when both the nudge and the policy that it promoted were held constant, people’s evaluations were strongly biased by the political party that endorsed the policy. For instance, we told participants that the government could increase participation in an employer-sponsored retirement savings program by automatically enrolling employees. This proposal was modeled after a key provision of a law signed by George W. Bush and

later extended under the Obama administration. For some participants, we mentioned that the policy was endorsed by the George W. Bush administration; for other participants, we mentioned that it was endorsed by Mr. Obama.

Again, we found that both liberals and conservatives were strongly affected by the administration mentioned. Conservatives found the use of automatic enrollment defaults more acceptable when they learned that it was endorsed by Mr. Bush than by Mr. Obama, whereas liberals had the opposite response.

It is one thing to show that laypeople are biased in their evaluation of nudges; it is another thing to show that experienced policy makers are similarly biased. In a final experiment, we approached sitting United States mayors at a summer conference and described the use of automatic enrollment defaults, then illustrated how they would work with either a liberal or conservative policy application. Here again, mayors tended to favor use of the policy tool when it was illustrated with an example that accorded with their own politics, but opposed using the very same tool when it was illustrated with an example that did not.

OPPOSITION to these policy interventions can certainly stem from principled beliefs. We found that people with more strongly libertarian sensibilities tended to be more resistant to nudges. However, we also found that evaluations of nudges were affected roughly three times as much by political preferences as by libertarian values.

Perhaps more important, we also found that when behavioral policy tools were described without mention of a specific policy application or sponsor, the bias disappeared. In this “blind taste test,” liberals and conservatives were roughly equally accepting of the use of policy nudges.

This last finding is good news, because scientifically grounded, empirically validated behavioral innovations can help policy makers improve government initiatives for the benefit of all Americans, regardless of their political inclinations.

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