

Obama's Effort to 'Nudge' America

For the past year, the Obama administration has been running an experiment: Is it possible to make policy more effective by using psychology on citizens?

The nickname is “nudging”—the idea that policymakers can change people’s behavior just by presenting choices or information differently. The classic example is requiring people to opt out of being an organ donor, instead of opting in, when they sign up for a driver’s license. Without any change in rules, the small tweak has boosted the number of registered organ donors in many states.

Nudging has gained a lot of high-profile advocates, including behavioral-law guru Cass Sunstein and former budget czar Peter Orszag. Not everyone likes the idea—“the behaviorists are saying that you, consumer, are stupid,” said Bill Shughart, a professor of public choice at Utah State University—but President Obama was intrigued enough that he actually hired Sunstein, a law professor at Harvard who co-wrote the best-known book about the topic, *Nudge*.

The president officially adopted the idea last year when he launched the White House’s Social and Behavioral Science Team (SBST), a cross-agency effort to bring behavioral science research into the policymaking process. Now the team has published its first annual report on this experiment.

How did it go? Mostly, the efforts appear to have worked, though it’s hard to know how much impact they’ll have. In part this is because the SBST’s efforts are small—just 15 proof-of-concept projects in its first year—and limited by agencies and laws in how bold they could be. Nevertheless, the findings produce a few key insights.

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Danny Vinik is the assistant editor of *The Agenda* at Politico. He previously was a staff writer at *The New Republic* and his work has appeared in *The Washington Monthly* and *Business Insider*.