

Task 1, Option 4 – Was America Conceived in Racism?

Introduction

In the summer of 2020, the United States experienced a period of racial unrest that may have involved the largest number of protestors in the country's history¹. The event of George Floyd's murder and the resultant protests forced Americans to recognize police biases and other forms of systemic racism. Yet the protests also brought up the controversial subject of racism as part of American identity. This analysis seeks to explore the viewpoints of whether the idea of America was conceived in racism and in what ways such history impacts public policy.

Yes: America was Conceived in Racism

A *Newsweek* debate in 2017 presented the idea that the very birth of the United States is rooted in racism. Joel Daniels wrote that, while we typically believe that "American Fortitude" will help us get ahead, citizens need to discuss the fact that so much of the nation's wealth was created by slaves². For much of American history, African Americans have been considered less than human by those that enslaved them and those that traded them, yet this condition was not limited to people with black skin: indentured servitude, among white men during the colonial era, was also a condition of early-America wealth building. Daniels argues that in response to having both poor white and black men, society sought to prevent a potential uprising and thus convinced white servants that they were "above" the black ones – thus planting the seed for white supremacy.

Daniels goes on to point out that the very US Capitol was built using slave labor: incidentally, the White House, the Smithsonian Institution, and Georgetown University were as well³. President Andrew Johnson himself said the following in 1866: "This is a country for white men, and by God, as long as I am president, it shall be a government for white men". Daniels states that we, as a nation, need to clearly define racism in order to recognize it. With rhetoric such as "Make America Great Again" and past atrocities such as policy, zoning, and defunded programming, we need to understand that racism isn't over and that our country is very good at it.

No: America was Not Conceived in Racism

Ryan P. Williams took the stand to refute Daniels' position. He wrote that the Founding Fathers thought slavery was a violation of natural law, which was one of the philosophies that the birth of the country was founded on, and that they made sure their system of government was strong enough to eventually eradicate slavery⁴. The argument that slavery was "good for slaves", a major facet of the "Lost Cause Narrative", came much later. Conditions such as the "fugitive slave cause" and Jefferson's rhetoric of "all men are created equal" survived because most Fathers found slavery abhorrent: concessions that kept the practice alive were only made to ensure that South Carolina and Georgia, whose economies were rooted in slavery, would agree to the founding of a strong federal Union. All in all, the Founders thought

¹ Buchanan, L.; Quoc Trung, B.; & Patel J. K. (2020, July 3). Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History. The New York Times. Retrieved September 23, 2021 from

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>

² Daniels, J.L. (2020, July 15). America Was Conceived in Racism | Opinion. Newsweek. Retrieved September 20, 2021 from <https://www.newsweek.com/america-was-conceived-racism-opinion-1518072>

³ Pasley, James. (2019, September 6). 15 American landmarks that were built by slaves. Business Insider. Retrieved September 22, 2021, from <https://www.businessinsider.com/american-landmarks-that-were-built-by-slaves-2019-9#mount-vernon-in-virginia-16>

⁴ Williams, R.P. (2020, July 15). America Was Not Conceived in Racism | Opinion. Newsweek. Retrieved September 20, 2021 from <https://www.newsweek.com/america-was-not-conceived-racism-opinion-1518091>

they were putting slavery on the road to extinction. Although the actual process took many more years and a bloody Civil War to be realized, we cannot think about the morality of those that began the United States in such black-and-white terms. The Founder's intentions mean that we cannot accuse them of using slavery to build the country.

Ward Connerly of the *Wall Street Journal* also believes that, while there were undeniable infringements on individual liberties in the past two-hundred fifty years, America was not built on Racism⁵. It was the American Creed of "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" that led to the formation of this nation which allowed for systemically racist policies to be torn down. Timothy Sandefur of the Cato Institute shares a similar sentiment. While he praises many aspects of the 1619 project, he refutes the claim that slavery is "the country's very origin" and "[slavery is] nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional"⁶. He reiterates that most Founders were strongly against slavery and that the myth of white supremacy was crafted in the 1830s. When people in the South realized after a series of judicial challenges that the Constitution did not defend or offer any legal protections for slavery, they quickly sought succession. For the 1619 Project to say that the Constitution "preserved and protected slavery" is to bring life to the same revisionist lie used to create white supremacy. Indeed, America is unique in that it is one of the few nations to seek abolition from the start. That our country managed to do so less than a century after its founding, when slavery is one of the oldest institutions known to mankind, is a sign of its progress and anti-racist conception.

How Technology Ruined Good Intentions

While it may have been the Founder's intention to phase out slavery, their plan precludes the fact that slavery continued for nearly a hundred years after the Constitution's ratification. One of the factors for slavery's long tenure may be technological. The introduction of Eli Whitney's cotton gin led to a boom in harvesting cotton which, combined with English innovations in spinning and weaving, increased worldwide demand for cotton and suddenly made slavery invaluable to America's economy⁷. Such innovation can be seen in the increasing value of a slave due to the profit they could help generate (Figure 1)⁸. What a slave's work was worth likewise increased over time (Figure 2)⁹. The spike in 1837 can be explained by discussions to improve America's infrastructure which inflated land prices and, incidentally, cotton prices. Whatever the verdict on whether America was conceived in racism or not, the cotton industry was unquestionably built on slavery.

Elitism in America: Not Just Racial

While this analysis does not seek to minimize the echoing effects that slavery has had on people's lives, it is worth noting that slavery did not build wealth equitably amongst those who were not enslaved.

⁵ Connerly, Ward. (2020, July 24). America Isn't a Racist Country. Wall Street Journal Opinion. Retrieved September 22, 2021, from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-isnt-a-racist-country-11595628914>.

⁶ Sandefur, Timothy. (2019, August 21). The Founders Were Flawed. The Nation Is Imperfect. The Constitution Is Still a 'Glorious Liberty Document'. Cato Institute. Retrieved September 22, 2021, from <https://www.cato.org/commentary/founders-were-flawed-nation-imperfect-constitution-still-glorious-liberty-document>

⁷ Cain, Louis P. & Williamson, Samuel H. (2021) Measuring Slavery in 2020 dollars. MeasuringWorth. Retrieved September 22, 2021, from www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php

⁸ Average Price of a Slave Over Time. | Cain, Louis P. & Williamson, Samuel H. (2021) Measuring Slavery in 2020 dollars. MeasuringWorth. Retrieved September 22, 2021, from www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php

⁹ Labor Income Value of Owning a Slave in 2020 Prices. | Cain, Louis P. & Williamson, Samuel H. (2021) Measuring Slavery in 2020 dollars. MeasuringWorth. Retrieved September 22, 2021, from www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php

Texas is a prime example. Though the state only practiced slavery for twenty years, slaveholders held 73% of state wealth in 1860 but only accounted for 27% of the population¹⁰. A similar disparity exists today: 50% of state wealth belongs to just 10% of tax filers.

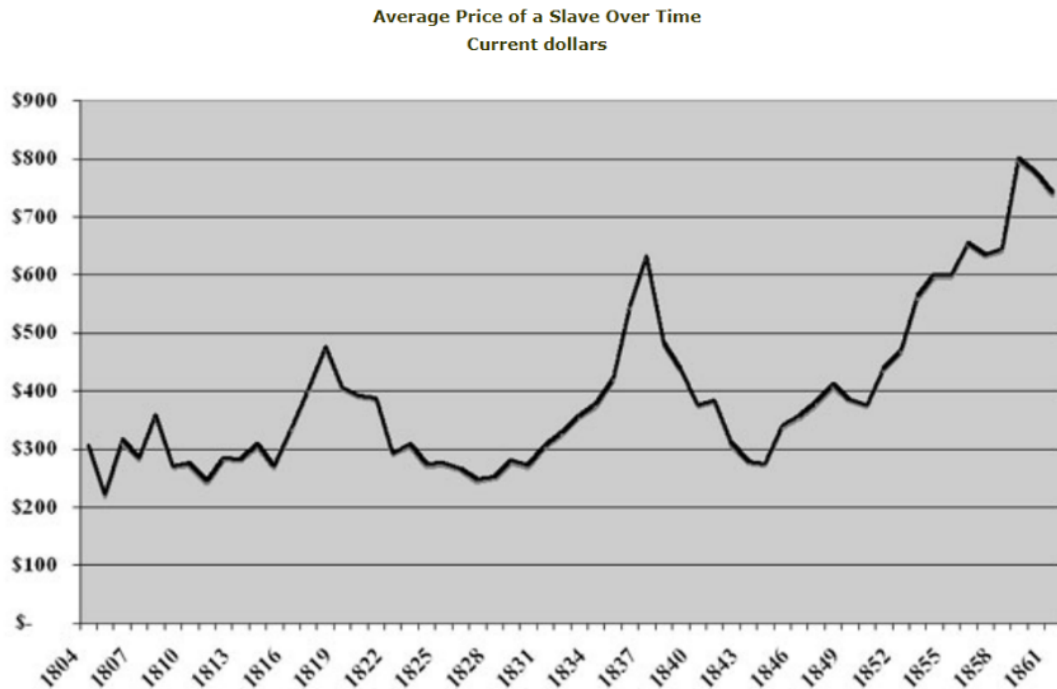


Figure 1: Average Price of a Slave Over Time, 2020 Dollars

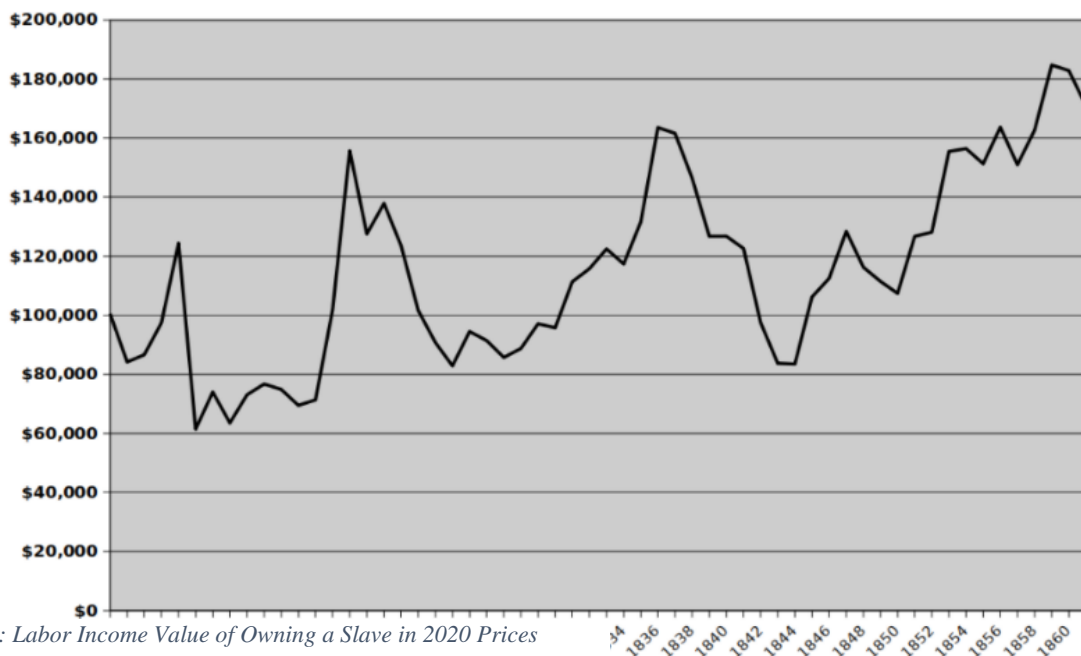


Figure 2: Labor Income Value of Owning a Slave in 2020 Prices

¹⁰ Berry, Daina Ramey. (2017, July 19). American slavery: Separating fact from myth. The Conversation. Retrieved September 22, 2021, from <https://theconversation.com/american-slavery-separating-fact-from-myth-79620>

A look at the 1860 Lorenz Curves for both the North and the South shows how wealth at the time was distributed (Figure 3)¹¹. Wealth was far more unequal then than in 2018 (Figure 4)¹², but even though both curves indicate most of the wealth was amassed by the top 40% of families, the top 10% of Southern wealth was 7 points more than Northern wealth. This indicates that slaveowners had more wealth than their non-slaveowner Northern counterparts.

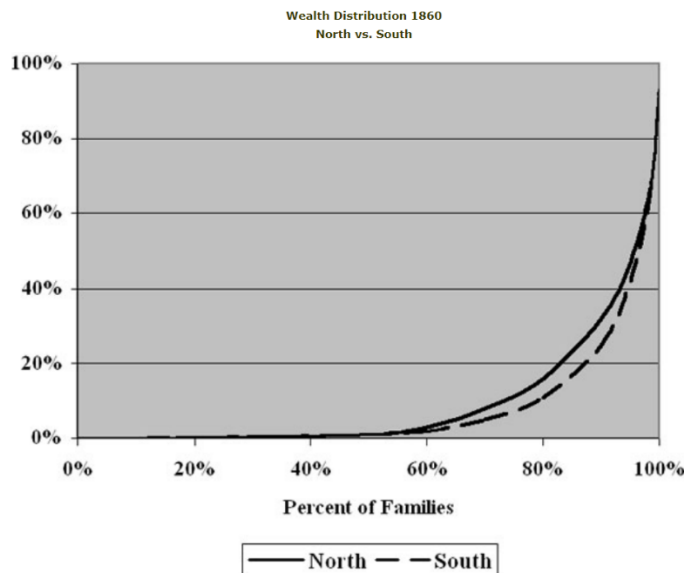


Figure 3: Wealth Distribution 1860, North vs. South

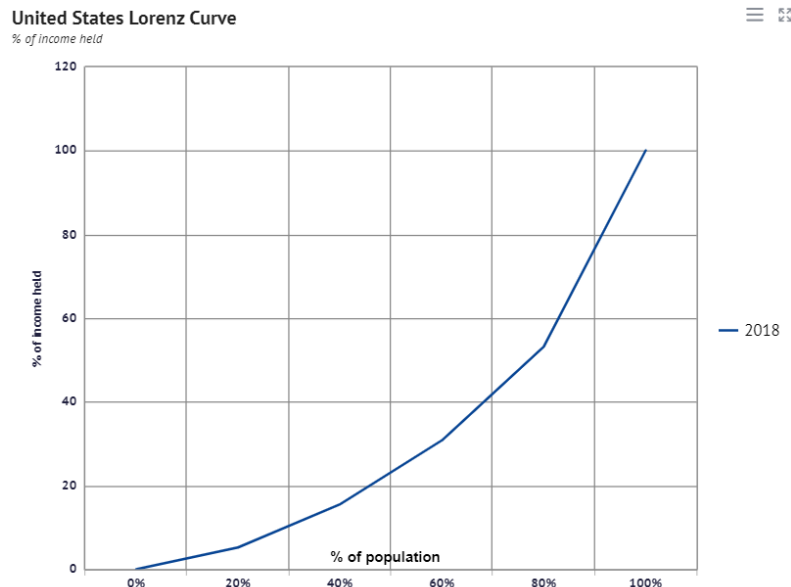


Figure 4: United States 2018 Lorenz Curve

Considerations for Public Policy

Whether or not America was purposefully conceived in racism does not negate the fact that slavery was the backbone of America's cotton industry, which contributed to its emergence as a world superpower and lined the pockets of many Southern elites. This presents a picture of unfairness. Wealth is easily handed down and increased from generation to generation, but African Americans faced a century of roadblocks to the traditional ways one could build wealth, such as through property or education. Conner Wood makes a terminological differentiation and writes that while elitists think less of others for not having what they have, elites care about other institutions, organizations, and individuals¹³. He then shares an idea professed by the philosopher John Rawls that because elites are where they are because of society, they have responsibilities that come with their position.

However, implementing policies that rectify society's past wrongs may not be either feasible or wise. While it is clear that denying an entire race basic opportunities has disparate impacts on wealth even

¹¹ Cain, Louis P. & Williamson, Samuel H. (2021) Measuring Slavery in 2020 dollars. MeasuringWorth. Retrieved September 22, 2021, from www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php

¹² United States 2018 Lorenz Curve. (n.d.) Knoema. Retrieved September 23, 2021 from <https://knoema.com/crmndag/gini-coefficient-and-lorenz-curve-around-the-world?country=United%20States&Time=2018-2019>

¹³ Wood, Conner. (2017, December 13). Elitism is a Problem – being Elite is the Solution. Patheos. Retrieved September 23, 2021 from <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/scienceonreligion/2017/12/elitism-a-problem-elites-are-solution/>.

today, such as how a Black family's net worth is ten times less than the average white family¹⁴, legislative drafters must carefully consider all consequences of policies that would take from the "haves" and give to the "have-nots".

Those with economic power could have the potential to sway any legislation that is not aligned with their interests, making such proposals doomed from their inception. Additionally, as tempting as it is to increase taxes on those whose ancestors historically benefitted from slavery, wealth taxes may be less effective than one would think. European countries found that after they increased wealth taxes, net revenue was small compared to cost of implementation¹⁵. Fraud was prevalent because the rich, having resources such as the best lawyers and accountants at their disposal, have learned to be very good at evading taxes. There is also the argument that a wealth tax discourages investment and saving because it changes the rich's behavior: such a policy, in this light, would not be the most effective course of action to find funding for mitigating past wrongs.

Reparations are not only politically unfeasible but potentially dangerous. In an era of increased white domestic terrorism, fanning the flames of racial resentment may not be the way to move forward, regardless of how wrong it is for such sentiments to exist in the first place. America has become more polarized than at any other point in its history and many white conservatives perceive their statuses as being "threatened"¹⁶. To institute a policy that would exasperate the feeling of economic, political, or social deprivation would only exacerbate such divides.

The most just way to address the United States' racism would be to tap into the wealth that was created with the help of slavery and use it to aid those that were affected by it: but how could this be done considering America's current political environment? If creating new policies to address inequitable history is a concern due to the attention they would generate, a solution would be to additionally fund and restructure existing programs that are watchdogs for discrimination and help citizens become homeowners. Barring a change in attitudes towards taxes, such as reframing them to be a patriotic activity, one might explore a policy that has the same impact as taxing the rich without the accompanying consequences. A way to do this that fosters a spirit of goodwill rather than resentment may be to implement substantial tax credits for those that donate to or offer free assistance to NGOs that help with minority wealth-building and education. While one may get into the philosophical debates of whether offering monetary incentives for good deeds means that they deserve their inevitable positive media coverage, the end result is the same: higher investment in historically marginalized groups by those who benefited from such policies. This would help *direct* philanthropy, which as of right now is done in whatever manner the philanthropist chooses. Widen the pool of those who would be eligible for these tax credits, such as for small business, and the beneficial impact has the potential to expand.

Policymakers have the opportunity to change the narrative from '*punishment/reimbursement*' to one of '*collaboration*' and working together on a history that ultimately hurt society as a whole. In today's turbulent times, policymakers should take any opportunity to build bridges while improving society.

¹⁴ McIntosh, K.; Moss, E.; Nunn, R.; & Shambaugh, J. (2020, February 7). Examining the Black-white wealth gap. Brookings. Retrieved September 23, 2021 from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/>

¹⁵ Schrager, A. & Akers, B. (2020, October 8). Issues 2020: What's Wrong with a Wealth Tax. Manhattan Institute. Retrieved September 23, 2021 from <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/whats-wrong-with-a-wealth-tax>

¹⁶ Gest, J.; Reny, T.; & Mayer, J. (2017, July 20) Roots of the Radical Right: Nostalgic Deprivation in the United States and Britain. Retrieved September 22, 2021, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414017720705>

Conclusion

There is no denying that slavery had an economic influence on America's founding that "can be conservatively described as large"¹⁷. Technological advancements increased the country's dependence on an egregious institution that was initially designed to be phased out. The impacts of this system are still felt throughout the years: not only in the descendant ethnicities that bear the consequences of said biases, but in the amassed wealth that elites have acquired, which perpetuated racial income inequality into the modern era. Whatever way America chooses to face its roots on a policy level, it must remember that those who provided forced labor were real people who had freedoms denied to them for other's benefit.

¹⁷ Cain, Louis P. & Williamson, Samuel H. (2021) Measuring Slavery in 2020 dollars. MeasuringWorth. Retrieved September 22, 2021, from www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php

Task 2, Option 3: “Nudging”

Introduction

In 2008, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein released a book that took the world by storm and presented a theory in which people’s decisions are influenced by the way they are presented¹⁸. *Nudge* highlighted the concept of choice architecture and how it has profound implications for economics and public policy.

Nudging Definition and Successes

“Nudging” is an approach that seeks to create decision-making conditions in line with human psychology. Most human behavior is conditioned by our environment due to a heavy reliance on automatic processing systems: additionally, since humans are social creatures, most of our actions are done in ways to present a “positive self-image, especially when we believe others are watching”¹⁹. This methodology has been successfully used across sectors. Corporate research has discovered that etching a fly on the bowl of urinals reduced custodian cleaning costs and that being exposed to moral symbols reduced unethical requests from supervisors²⁰. Changing conversations on the end of customer-support can help customers think about long-term benefits of their products and increase customer retention by 14%²¹. Indeed, an unnamed version of nudge theory may have been utilized by private companies well before 2008 in the form of various marketing techniques, a robust science since the dawn of civilization, lending credence to its veracity²². These two concepts are not the same, however: to see the differences between “nudging” and “marketing”, see Figure 1²³.

Governments also favor nudging because it is a way to influence people without introducing new regulation. People who are “nudged” aren’t forced to decide: merely putting fruit at eye-level is easier rather than banning junk food²⁴. Government letters stating that physicians’ prescriptions rates were higher than average reduced prescriptions by 11% in antipsychotic drugs for elderly patients. Nudging was used to reduce littering in Scotland from 39% to 15% by painting waste bins a bright green color and painting green footsteps on the sidewalks leading up to it²⁵. Texas had a similar result when they launched the campaign “Don’t Mess with Texas”, aimed at young men, who were most prone to littering: litter on

¹⁸ Thaler, Richard & Sunstein, Cass. (2008). *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. Yale University Press. September 19, 2021.

¹⁹ Internal Revenue Service, Deloitte, and ASR Analytics. (n.d.) Behavioral insights toolkit. Retrieved September 24, 2021 from <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/17rpirtsbehavioralinsights.pdf>

²⁰ Brazao, Vasco & Ramos, Tania (2019, July 9). Is It Time to ‘Nudge’ Compliance?. Corporate Compliance Insights. Retrieved September 24, 2021 from <https://www.corporatecomplianceinsights.com/nudge-compliance-ethical-behavior/>

²¹ Gunter, A.; Lucks, K.; & Sperling-Magro, J. (2019, January 24). Lessons from the front line of corporate nudging. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved September 24, 2021 from <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/lessons-from-the-front-line-of-corporate-nudging>

²² Hardy, J. (2016, September 14). The History of Marketing: From Trade to Tech. History Cooperative. Retrieved September 24, 2021 from <https://historycooperative.org/the-evolution-of-marketing-from-trade-to-tech/>

²³ Graphic. Gravert, Christina 2017. IS IT A NUDGE? Retrieved September 24, 2021 from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/09/nudging-solutions-to-complex-social-problems/>

²⁴ Kelman, Steve (2019, September 11). Government Steps Out on ‘Nudges’. The Business of Federal Technology. Retrieved September 24, 2021 from <https://fcw.com/blogs/lectern/2019/09/kelman-nudge-gsa.aspx>

²⁵ Brain Rae, Douglas Eadie, & Martine Stead. (2015, June). Nudge study: Implementation toolkit—promoting the use of street litter bins. Zero Waste Scotland. Retrieved September 24, 2021 from <https://www.zerowastescotland.org.uk/sites/default/files/ZWS%20Litter%20Nudge%20Study.pdf>

Texas highways was reduced by 72% within a decade²⁶. These cases have shown that working with human nature can create effective societal change.

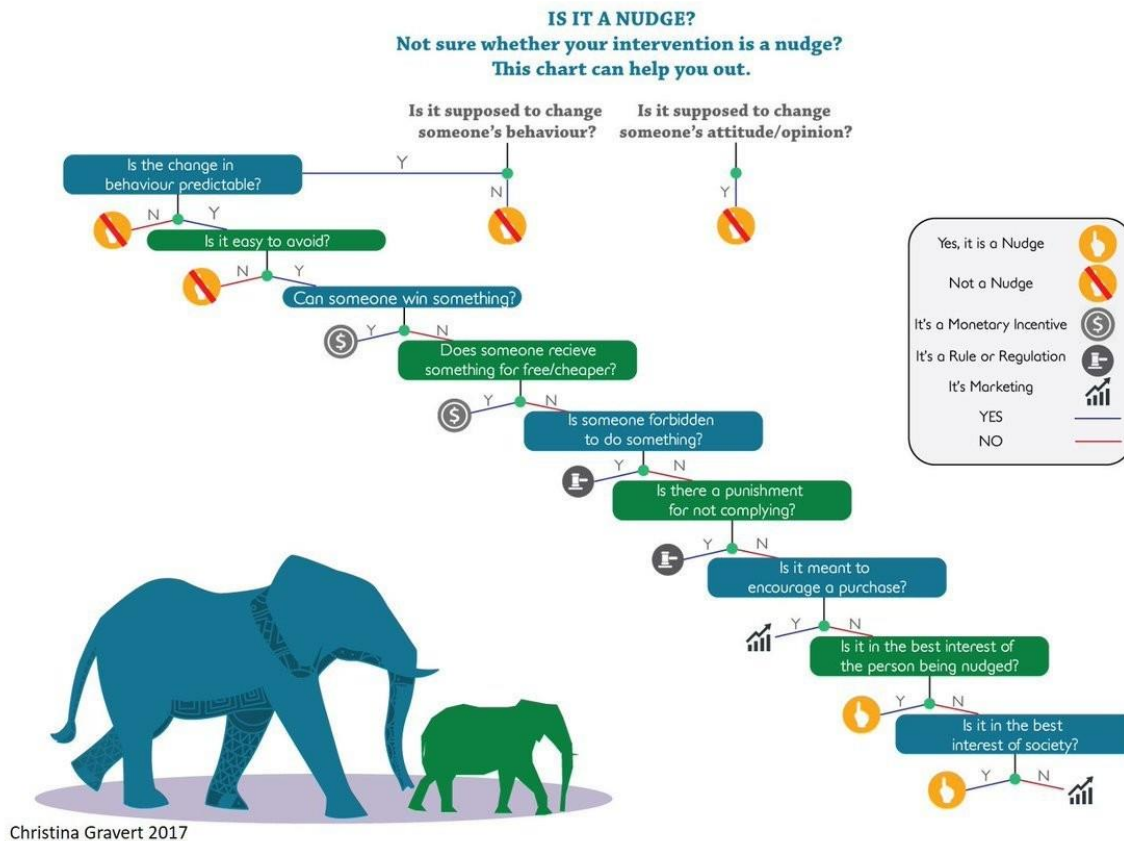


Figure 1: Is it a Nudge?

Criticism: Nudge or “I won’t budge”?

While “Nudging” has had its successes, there are times that it can be ineffective or even backfire. Not all decisionmakers are “naïve and passive”: some overthink and try to read into how the decision is presented to them, which ultimately confounds the desired result. Organ donations often comes up in “nudging” conversations, with the presumption that an “opt-out” system would yield more participating donors than “opt-in”. However, such an assumption has proven to not be the case. In 2020 the Netherlands passed a new organ donation bill that made “opt-in” the default: the country since saw the number of registered nondonors spike to 40 times the number under the original policy²⁷. A separate assessment of opt-in and opt-out policies found no negligible difference in participation and that an opt-

²⁶ Guszcza, J. Et al. (2019, June 24). Nudging for good: Using behavioral science to improve government outcomes. Deloitte. Retrieved September 20, 2021, from <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/government-trends/2020/government-nudge-thinking.html>

²⁷ Krijnen, J. (2018, September 18). Choice Architecture 2.0: How People Interpret and Make Sense of Nudges. Behavioral Scientist. Retrieved September 24, 2021, from <https://behavioralscientist.org/choice-architecture-2-0-how-people-interpret-and-make-sense-of-nudges/>

out default could “harm efforts to bolster donations”²⁸. This could be a result of citizens seeing the policy as a way to bolster donations and opting out to signal their dissatisfaction: or, to put it more aptly, to act out of spite. While “nudging” theory was based on human psychology, it needs to consider the ever-persistent phenomena of human stubbornness.

Additionally, while nudging has been shown to be effective under certain conditions, how do we determine if the desired decisions are in the best interest of society? Anti-abortion billboards are prevalent along West Virginia Route 522 and North Carolinian signs proclaiming that drivers must accept Jesus or else burn in hell are certainly campaigns meant to influence people’s decisions, yet these do not promote outcomes that are objectively beneficial to society. The documentary *Super Size Me*, released four years prior to *Nudge*, brought to life how corporations can encourage poor health decisions through simple actions such as asking, “Would you like to super-size that?”²⁹. This innocuous question had the potential to double someone’s caloric, sodium, and saturated fat consumption in just one meal. Such cases illustrate how nudging, while usually beneficial, can be used in ways that are not so (Figure 2³⁰).

What is ‘nudging’ and can it benefit the workplace?

‘Nudging’ refers to a method of steering one’s behavior in intended direction by using subtle shoves. From unappealing pictures on cigarette packs to default side orders on menus in burger restaurants, ‘nudges’ work with identifiable trends in irrational, emotional and intuitive human behaviour.

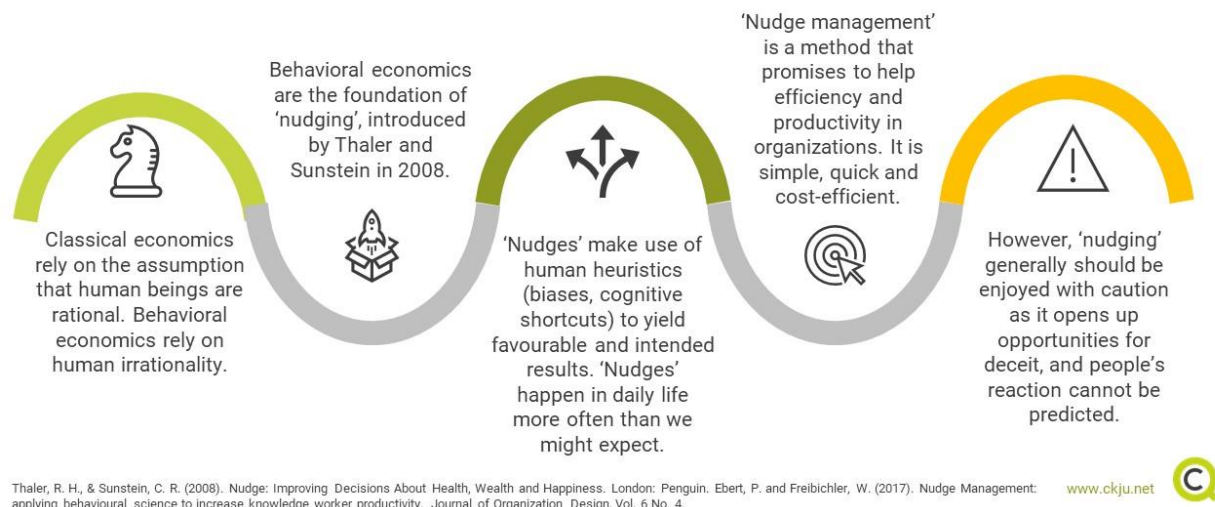


Figure 2: What is ‘nudging’ and can it benefit the workplace?

Implications for Public Policy

While policymakers can nudge people by carefully considering how they present choices, it may be necessary to take nudging a step further to yield effective policy. Nudging 2.0, an approach published nine years after *Nudge* that builds upon this theory, states that choice architects need to understand the

²⁸ Etheredge HR. Assessing Global Organ Donation Policies: Opt-In vs Opt-Out. *Risk Manag Healthc Policy*. 2021;14:1985-1998. Retrieved September 24, 2021 from <https://doi.org/10.2147/RMHP.S270234>

²⁹ Lee, Christina (2004). *Super Size Me*. *The Film Journal*. Archived from the original on May 12, 2014. Retrieved September 24, 2021, from

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140512124655/http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue9/supersizeme.html>

³⁰ Grapic. (2017). What is ‘nudging’ and how can it benefit the workplace? Retrieved September 24, 2021 from <https://www.ckju.net/en/blog/nudging-better-management-how-can-behavioral-economics-benefit-workplace/31620>

“implicit interaction” between architect targets and the designers of choice architecture³¹. People encounter “social sensemaking” both when they try to determine what the choice architect is trying to achieve and when they think about how their decision will be seen by others. For example, potential female blood donors could decline to give when monetary incentives are offered because they would infer that people may think they donate out of self-interest. If the “benevolence and competence” of policymakers is questioned, then this distrust will undermine the choice architecture presented. Considering this, performing a social sensemaking audit before implementing policies and developing policy tools that take social sensemaking into account will yield more successful policy. A checklist that can be used to determine the strength of such policies can be seen below in Figure 3³¹.

Choice designers must also understand that simplification is key because people can only handle so much information before their cognitive load is overwhelmed³². However, since oversimplification can be seen as manipulative, more information must be made available for those who want it.

A yes answer to any of the questions below signifies that the choice architecture is especially likely to trigger social sensemaking by decisionmakers.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> P reference uncertainty	Are decisionmakers uncertain about their preferences?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> D istrust	Are decisionmakers suspicious of the choice architect?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I mportance	Is the decision especially meaningful to decisionmakers?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> C hange	Is the choice architecture noticeably different or abnormal?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> T ransparency	Is the strategic modification of choice architecture explicitly communicated to decisionmakers?

Figure 3: Checklist to determine strength of choice architecture

The World Bank is highly aware of nudging’s potential regarding global policy. Their Mind, Behavior, and Development Unit (eMBeD) uses behavioral sciences to “diagnose, design, and evaluate behaviorally informed interventions” that have an impact on policy challenges such as “increasing student

³¹ Krijnen, J. M. T., Tannenbaum, D., & Fox, C. R. (2017). Choice architecture 2.0: Behavioral policy as an implicit social interaction. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 3(2), 1–18. Retrieved September 21, 2021 from <file:///C:/Users/youfo/OneDrive%20-%20George%20Mason%20University%20-%20O365%20Production/PUBP%20503.%20Culture.%20Organizations%20and%20Technology/01%20BSP%20Krijnen.pdf>

³² Internal Revenue Service, Deloitte, and ASR Analytics. (n.d.) Behavioral insights toolkit. Retrieved September 24, 2021 from <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/17rpirsbehavioralinsights.pdf>

learning, raising savings rates, promoting energy and resource conservation, increasing productivity, improving sanitation practices, strengthening institutions, and reducing corruption”³³. Because of this, the World Bank claims that behavioral sciences have the power to fight global poverty and reduce inequality. Already this approach has helped reframe the thinking of Peru students so that they understand intelligence is not fixed; introduce low-cost toilet interventions in India; and increase infant care in Haiti. Time will only show the extent to which nudging raises average quality of life for all world citizens.

Conclusion

“Nudging” is an approach that seeks to influence, rather than regulate, human behavior. As with any method that takes advantage of human nature, Nudging has its successes and its inevitable failures. Policymakers must carefully analyze how proposals can affect the stakeholders who will invariably be faced with an increasing amount of decisions daily in a more technological and complicated world. Since policymakers are human and thus are prone to the same biases as their targets, it is only by being cognizant of such conditions that the effectiveness of policies will be strengthened for years to come.

³³ The World Bank. (n.d.). Mind, Behavior, and Development. Retrieved September 24, 2021 from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/embed>