Nudging Voters

By John Hasnas and Annette Hasnas

A perennial complaint about our democracy is that too large a portion of the electorate is poorly informed about important political issues. This is the problem of the ignorant voter. Especially this year, with its multiplicity of candidates, keeping track of the candidates' various, and often shifting, policy positions can be extraordinarily difficult. As a result, many of those voting in the presidential primaries will cast their ballots with little idea of where the candidates stand on several important issues.

Isn't there some way to nudge the voters into making more informed choices? Well, actually, yes, there is. But in making this claim, we use the word nudge advisedly.

Among contemporary policy analysts, "nudge" is a term of art. It refers to creating a context within which people make choices--a "choice architecture"--that makes it more likely that people will select one option rather than another. The typical example of a nudge is a school cafeteria in which fruits and vegetables are placed in front in easy to reach locations and less healthy fare is placed in less visible and harder to reach locations. No one is forced to select the fruit or vegetables, but the choice architecture makes it more likely that people will.

The key feature of a nudge is that it is not coercive. It is an effort to influence choice, not to impose it. People are always able to "opt out" of the nudge. Thus, to nudge is to design the context in which individuals make decisions so as to influence their choice without eliminating any options.

We think that nudging can be employed to help voters make more informed decisions in the voting booth.

Imagine the following scenario. A bipartisan good government group creates a list of the most significant contemporary policy issues. It then invites all candidates to state their positions on the issues. In the current campaign, candidates could be invited to state where they stand on gay marriage, immigration, intervention in Syria, climate change, tax reform, the minimum wage, gun control, income inequality, etc. This information would be collected and fed into the relevant election commission computer. When voters enter the voting booth, they would have the option of electronically recording their policy preferences on the same form that the candidates completed. The computer would display a ranking of the candidates on the basis of how closely their positions aligned with the voter's. After receiving this information, voters would cast their ballots.
Our proposal is a nudge. It is completely non-coercive. No candidate would be required to complete the list of his or her policy positions, although refusing to do so might be viewed negatively by voters. No voter would be required to utilize the option. All would remain free to simply walk into the booth and cast their vote. Even those who utilize the option remain free to disregard its results and vote for whomever they please. The proposal simply alters the choice architecture of voting to build in access to a source of information about the candidates. Yet, it makes it more likely that citizens will cast more informed votes than they do at present.

Nudging voters in this way has much to recommend it. In the first place, it greatly reduces the cost to voters of educating themselves about the candidates. Rather than having to expend the time and effort to research the candidates’ policy positions and decipher misleading political advertisements, voters can get the relevant information at the touch of a button precisely when they need it.

Secondly, our nudge ameliorates the effect of money in politics. Well-financed candidates or their super-PAC surrogates often use their resources to drown out or distort the message of their less well-endowed rivals during campaigns. But the size of a candidate’s war chest cannot affect the ranking the voter receives in the voting booth. This is determined exclusively by the candidates’ policy positions, and is insulated from the distortions of political advertising. Thus, our nudge makes it possible for even the most impoverished candidates to command the voters' attention when it matters most.

Finally, our nudge reduces politicians’ ability to profit from pandering. Candidates often try to appeal to different segments of the electorate by tailoring their policy prescriptions to fit the audience they are addressing. By requiring candidates to take a definite stand on the issues and basing each voter’s ranking on those explicit commitments, our nudge undermines the effectiveness of any such pandering.

We think our proposal will have widespread appeal. Voters should like it because it integrates complex information about the candidates into a user-friendly form that can help them vote intelligently. Candidates should like it because it helps them circumvent the attacks ads and misrepresentations of their positions that are characteristic of contemporary campaigns. Even journalists should like it because it incentivizes candidates to put their policy positions on record, which would facilitate their reporting.

We realize, of course, that you cannot please everyone. Our proposal is not likely to be popular with unscrupulous politicians who want to appear to be all things to all people or otherwise exploit voter ignorance to get elected. But perhaps that is another point in its favor.

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