

# **Nudge Nudge, Think Think: Two Strategies for Changing Civic Behaviour\***

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Policy makers want to change the behaviour of citizens to tackle a range of acute social problems, such as obesity, climate change, crime, binge drinking, petty crime and community cohesion. Even though behaviour change interventions generate fears about the rise of a ‘nanny’ or ‘big brother’ state, politicians of many political hues appear to have overcome their liberal qualms. They are prepared to use the power to the state to try to change civic behaviour for the wider benefit. The key to getting political consensus in this controversial policy field is the idea that citizens are not being told what to do but, rather they are being asked to make choices in different ways leading to outcomes that are beneficial to them and to their fellow citizens. American Democrats and British Conservatives have embraced this challenge as have governments in many other countries. The goal is to preserve citizen choice, but also to steer it towards more positive outcomes for individuals and society as a whole.

Many of these strategies have been captured under the evocative concept nudge.<sup>1</sup> This label encapsulates the desire to nudge citizens into changing their civic behaviour. The assumption is that if critical public problems, such as global warming, are going to be tackled citizens will need to be steered towards different patterns of behaviour and to be engaged in the process of change. The approach stems from behavioural economics and psychology. It argues that citizens can be offered a ‘choice architecture’ that encourages them to act in a way that achieves benefits for themselves and for their fellow citizens. We want to contrast this approach with another emerging strategy that comes from the very different intellectual stable of normative theory and political science. It holds that citizens, given the right context and framing, can think themselves collectively towards a better understanding of problems and more effective collective solutions,

avoiding thereby a narrow focus on their short-term self-interest. Through deliberation and dialogue citizens can make informed and better choices about collective actions and the direction of public policy. The shared formula with nudge is that behaviour change involves citizens choosing a different path.

So there is nudge in one corner of the argument and think in the other. Both have very different ways of viewing the world and present a different account of change. The two strategies do not seem to be to be compatible – at first at least. They appeal to different sensibilities we have about what is politically possible and the extent of social change that different kinds of people think can be achieved. They are of course simplifications, but they are useful ones nonetheless.

Of course, nudge versus think is not the only take on what governments can do to encourage civically-minded behaviour. The traditional tools in the armoury of governments – regulatory and economic instruments – can and are used to shape civic actions. Tax incentives can provide a fiscal incentive to reduce carbon usage or rewards offered for good behaviour on housing estates.<sup>2</sup> The law can be used to compel people to be civic, such as those aimed at stopping dog fouling on footpaths and in parks. But there are several limitations to these traditional incentives. First, reward and punishment can be very costly or difficult to enforce. Second, these incentives are often crude instruments. Simply providing people rules to follow may not be enough. They may not recognize the rule as applying to them or they may need some additional intervention to encourage them to pay attention to the rule because, as we shall see, citizens selectively attend to the management of tasks in order to meet the challenge of information overload. Third, in some instances incentives require a normative clarity about the balancing of values that

may be lacking if they are going to be the policy instrument of choice. Where the harm or benefit of certain actions is more easily judged, then, the traditional tools of reward and punishment might hold sway. Those that engage in late-night violence against fellow citizens after excessive drinking need to be detected and then locked up or fined. But when it comes to those of us who may be wasting energy by our household practices, governments need to consider the option of more subtle tools and balance concerns with the environment with concerns about individual liberty. Finally, there is a limit to which regulatory and fiscal incentives can be used to shape civic behaviour: the public would not accept the level of intervention that is needed to affect large-scale change across numerous policy areas. For governments wanting to connect with its citizens the choices really are nudge or think. Whether it is nudge *and* think we come to later on in the article.

So we first explore the different logic of these two strategies of nudge and think. They hold different understandings of human behaviour and theories of change and as a result argue for different approaches to creating action in the civic realm. Policy makers need to understand the competing logics at play in order to understand what they are doing when they reach for either strategy. The first section of the paper sets out the key features of the two strategies and reports on how interventions based on the two strategies have been adopted by policy makers. A second section compares the approaches and looks at their strengths and weaknesses. In the coda we ask a series of questions: can the two strategies learn from each other and can they be brought together in a coherent manner?

## **The nudge strategy**

In psychology a cognitive revolution has occurred over the last few decades and its insights have been taken up in political science, sociology and particularly economics.<sup>3</sup> This new social science thinking has started to interest policy makers. Of course, the concept of bounded rationality and related work on human decision-making have a long pedigree in public administration, psychology and behavioural economics. But what is new is the charge led by behavioural economics to use these insights to adapt the way that government intervenes to shift civic behaviour. In the UK in 2004 the Labour government's policy unit published a paper on the changing state of knowledge about decision making behaviour and its implications for policy. Moreover, it has followed this work up in 2007 by identifying policy instruments for achieving cultural change.<sup>4</sup> What has given the argument a much higher profile is the work of Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, particularly the publication of their book *Nudge* in 2008. In the same year Cameron's Conservatives endorsed the idea of nudges. Local authorities have become enthusiastic nudgers, such as Barnet which is looking at ways to reduce litter and to encourage recycling. In the USA President Obama's advisers are said to be keen on ideas stemming from the work of behavioural economics. Indeed, Sunstein has been appointed in the new administration to head up the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs.

Nudging is emerging as an important strategy that public authorities can adopt to change civic behaviour. The good news, according to Thaler and Sunstein, is that policy-makers may nudge citizens into civic behaviour if policy-makers take into account the cognitive architecture of choice that faces citizens and work with - rather than against - the grain of biases, hunches and heuristics. While not denying the power and relevance of

incentives - using sticks and carrots to change behaviour – they argue that the key lesson from the insights of cognitive psychology need to be applied by designing interventions that recognise that citizens are boundedly rational decision-makers.

What lies beneath the idea of bounded rationality? Individuals are decision-makers constrained by the fundamental human problem of processing information, understanding a situation and determining consequences. There are limits to their cognitive capacity and the world is a complex place to understand: ‘Humans are goal directed, understand their environment in realistic terms, and adjust to changing circumstances facing them. But they are not completely successful in doing so - because of the inner limitations. Moreover, these cognitive limitations make a major difference in human affairs - in the affairs of individuals and in the affairs of state and nation.’<sup>5</sup> Decision-making is conditioned by the cognitive limitations of the human mind.

Individuals reason, but not as heroic choice makers. When faced with a decision they do not think about every available option or always makes a great choice that is optimal to their utility, as assumed by mainstream economists. Their cognitive inner world helps them to focus on some things and ignore others and it is driven by habits of thought, rules of thumb, and emotions. Rationality is bounded by this framing role of the human mind. People will selectively search based on incomplete information and partial ignorance and terminate that search before an optimal option emerges and choose instead something that is good enough. This is not to say that the behaviour of agents needs to be judged as irrational. On the contrary, people are rational in the sense that behaviour is generally goal-oriented and, usually, we have reasons for what we do. It is just that rationality rests on the interaction of the cognitive structure and the context in which

individuals are operating and as a result sometimes they make poor decisions. Moreover, citizens may have developed heuristics or coping mechanisms to deal with cognitive limitations that are undermining or distorting of beneficial change messages. Policy makers need to consider how interventions can shape how attention is paid and to what issues; how the problem space is represented, defined and understood by actors; the role of heuristics in controlling the search for alternatives and options for action; and the impact of emotional attachment and loyalty on the framing of the decision-making environment.

Thaler and Sunstein identify five further broad ways of changing civic behaviour to push it in a positive direction in *Nudge*. First, an understanding of choice architecture should lead policy makers to recognise that citizens often have a default option that they revert to in the absence of other strong signals. So a good nudge is one that installs an intervention that leads people towards a positive choice by, for example, enrolling them on a pension scheme automatically unless they actively opt out. Second, policy-makers should expect error and design systems so that citizens learn immediately and effectively about mistakes that they will inevitably make. Third, it is important to give feedback in a timely and effectively way so that people understand their implications of their actions. For example, houses could be fitted with a light and sound indicator when a lot of energy is being used in order to get householders to consider taking measures to save energy. Fourth, policymakers could support citizens by paying more attention to the way they construct mind maps when making decisions and encourage the adoption of mind maps that facilitate better decisions. Is this my choice or is it a choice that should be framed by my responsibilities to others? Finally, given the problems that people have in making

complex decisions, policymakers could provide opportunities for collective filtering so that people can learn from others about what works or what choices might suit them as a person, given the tendency we all have to follow those we regard as like-minded.

### **The think strategy**

An alternative and much less popularized strategy for transforming civic behaviour emerges from the deliberative turn that has dominated democratic theory over the last couple of decades.<sup>6</sup> While there are a number of different conceptions of deliberative democracy, they share a common insight: the legitimacy of political decision making rests on public deliberation between free and equal citizens. Deliberative theorists recognise that preferences are not exogenous to institutional settings. As such, decision-making procedures should not just be concerned with simply aggregating pre-existing preferences (e.g. voting), but also with the nature of the processes through which they are formed. Legitimacy rests on the free flow of discussion and exchange of views in an environment of mutual respect and understanding.

Underpinning this conception of politics is a particular theory of civic behaviour that has an epistemic and moral dimension. Free and equal public deliberation has an educational effect as citizens increase their knowledge and understanding of the consequences of their actions. But the value of deliberation does not simply rest on the exchange of information. The public nature of deliberation is crucial. Because citizens are expected to justify their perspectives and preferences in public, there is a strong motivation to constrain self-interest and to consider the public good. David Miller refers to the 'moralising effect of public deliberation', which tends to eliminate irrational

preferences based on false empirical beliefs, morally repugnant preferences that no one is willing to advance in the public arena and narrowly self-interested preferences.<sup>7</sup> Citizens are given the opportunity to think differently and as such deliberative theorists argue that they will witness a transformation of (often ill-informed) preferences. Deliberative democrats provide a clear account of civic behaviour: under deliberative conditions citizens' behaviour is shaped in a more civic orientation as they consider the views and perspectives of others.

Deliberative democrats are often charged with being far too utopian in their ambition: their aim appears to be to imbue all of politics with the virtues of mutual respect and understanding. While this may be a laudable ideal, it is of no great help to those wishing to make interventions in the here and now. That said, the insights of deliberative democrats have inspired a growing number of democratic theorists and political scientists to seek out forms of 'empowered participatory governance'<sup>8</sup> or 'democratic innovations'<sup>9</sup> that institutionalise to a greater or lesser extent the procedures and norms of deliberation. The deliberative turn in democratic theory has been accompanied by a rise in interest amongst practitioners and policy makers in new forms of citizen engagement, such as participatory budgeting, the mini-publics of citizens' assemblies and juries and online forums enabled by developments in information and communications technology (ICT).

The shared characteristic of these democratic innovations is that they embed processes that mobilise citizens – particularly those from traditionally marginalised social groups – to engage in structured deliberations about issues of public concern. Participatory budgeting as first established in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil successfully

mobilises thousands of citizens in an annual cycle of participation to make decisions about the form and location of investments in the municipal budget. While there is a competitive element to the process – the higher the mobilisation from a neighbourhood, the more likely investment is to follow – the sophisticated design creates spaces in which citizen representatives are exposed to the plight of other neighbourhoods and in which general rules for the distribution of resources are debated and confirmed. Typically this leads to rules and decisions that benefit the poorest sections of the city’s population and PB as practised in Brazil has in some cities witnessed significant redistribution of resources towards poor neighbourhoods. Analysts have been impressed by the way in which participants develop a sense of solidarity and the extent to which elements of the process embody the procedures and norms of deliberation.

Designers of the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly (BCCA) took a quite different approach to engagement and enabling deliberation. Following the tradition of earlier mini-publics such as deliberative polling and citizens’ juries, participants were selected randomly (in this case also employing stratified quotas to ensure gender, geographic and age-group representation). The BCCA was charged with making recommendations on electoral reform for the province. The Assembly’s activities were carefully structured over a series of weekends. It had an education phase in which participants learnt about the range of possible electoral systems and their potential impact, a consultation phase in which participants took evidence from interested parties, and a deliberation phase during which the participants debated the merits of competing systems. Only after this intensive process did the Assembly members make a decision on whether to recommend a new electoral system. The provincial executive had agreed

beforehand that recommendations from the Assembly would be put direct to a public referendum, linking the deliberative forum to a public ratification process. Analysts have been impressed by the level of motivation and commitment shown by selected citizens and the extent to which the deliberative ideal was approximated in the Assembly's work.

While the method of engagement differs in the two cases – PB and BCCA – there are important resemblances in their mobilization structure. First, they carefully construct 'safe havens' in which deliberation is enabled: in other words, there is a recognition that the norms and procedures of deliberation need to be nurtured and do not necessarily emerge naturally. Second, part of the motivation to participate is that citizens have a meaningful influence on significant political decisions: on the distribution of the municipal budget in Porto Alegre; on the future of the electoral system in British Columbia. The rhetoric of many governments towards democratic innovations often fails to materialise because of their unwillingness to embed such impacts.

The evidence from studies of democratic innovations indicates that ordinary citizens are willing and able to deliberate on public issues when such interventions are carefully constructed. Institutional design is crucial in altering behaviour: bringing citizens together from diverse backgrounds (often mobilising participants from politically marginalised social groups) and getting them to think about issues differently within the deliberative forums. Democratic innovations can be used to promote a civic orientation amongst participants. Developments in the world of ICT offer the promise that direct face-to-face contact is not essential, hence increasing opportunities for deliberation. But as in other spheres, the design and impact of initiatives is vital.<sup>10</sup>

## **Nudging and Thinking Compared**

The two approaches of nudge and think are fundamentally different. For the decision-makers, they represent different models of how to intervene in society at large. They are not just part of the menu of choices from which policy-makers may neutrally select. Like the Hare and the Tortoise, they represent conceptions of human action, which generate different ways of going about the business of changing people's behaviour. There is a fundamental contrast between the preferred courses of action that follow and what they can be expected to produce.

To help clarify these differences, we set them out in the following table, with the elements to each approach summarised in the two columns. At the same time, we recognise that this is a (helpful) simplification of the complexity of the two approaches.

**Table 1: nudge and think compared**

	<i>Nudge</i>	<i>Think</i>
View of preferences	Fixed	Malleable
View of subjects	Cognitive misers, users of shortcuts, prone to flawed sometimes befuddled thinking	Reasonable, knowledge hungry and capable of collective reflection
Costs to the individual	Low but repeated	High but only intermittently
Unit of analysis	Individual-focused	Group-focused
Change process	Cost-benefit led shift in choice environment	Value led outline of new shared policy platform
Civic conception	Increasing the attractiveness of positive-sum action	Addressing the general interest
Role of the state	Customise messages, expert and teacher	Create new institutional spaces to support citizen-led investigation, respond to citizens

The first difference is in the underlying view of human behaviour. Nudgers tend to assume that individuals are fixed in their preferences and in the way they make decisions. People tend to exhibit a great deal of inertia and are happy to fall back on past lines of thought and behaviour unless they are encouraged to do something different. They might have some underlying preferences that the world could be a better place but these are not coherently developed or cannot easily change. With preferences and decision-making practices fixed, then the options for change centre on reminders and cues that accept where the individual is and puts in place a choice environment whereby society might gain from realising these preferences. The nudge strategy plays to the role of the state as educator and the role of the policy-maker as paternalistic expert, steering citizens down paths that are more beneficial to them and society at large. Once these are known the designer of public policy can use these to good effect so that the result is hardly noticed

by the individual. The nudge strategy accepts citizens as they are and tries to divert them down new paths to better decisions.

Deliberative theorists have a different account of what makes humans tick. They believe that preferences can be transformed; though they share with the behavioural economists the view that the conditions need to be right for change to happen. A particular democratic institutional framing is needed to deliver the environment which promotes listening and reasoned argumentation between citizens – and the type of reflection that can lead to a shift in preferences. The deliberation strategy assumes that the individual can step away from their day-to-day experience, throw off their blinkers and reflect on the wide range of policy choices and dilemmas. People can be knowledge hungry, learn to process new information and demands and reach new heights of reflection and judgement.

The think strategy is more demanding than the nudge strategy in the effort required by the individual to engage. Nudge relies on the impact of any intervention being low cost. In fact, it can only work through being low cost. Or else the individual will not cooperate. In contrast, the deliberative experience requires some considerable costs to get going. There needs to be some investment in acquiring information and then in debating with others, often in a particular context away from the individual's normal environment. These costs have policy implications so need to be seen alongside the benefit. The costs are partly a function of the unit of analysis. While both can be individually and collectively achieved, nudge is about affecting individual choices, just like in classical economics, though of course if the nudge is done in concert with others it

stands more chance of success. Deliberation by definition cannot happen alone in spite of the powerful role individuals play in the process.

How does change come about? For both strategies, change is achieved by altering how the individual sees the attractiveness of a different course or action. The nudge strategy seeks to improve the messages that citizens receive and the opportunities they have to participate so they see the costs in different more congenial ways. For the deliberative democrat the change is about tapping into and giving life to values that are discovered and brought out through debate and reflection. Once these values are uppermost, the costs and benefits to the individual will look different and the motivation to make sacrifices to achieve them will alter. This links to the civic conception implied by each approach. The nudger does not think that the individual is entirely selfish as there is a civic conception in its scheme. But the civic is limited to small acts, which might amount to a bigger societal change. The deliberative democrat would not be happy unless the general interest has been considered. Civic behaviour in deliberative forums is understood in these terms. Finally, these two approaches differ as to the expected state action. For the nudger the state needs to get the messages right and provide low-level incentives and costs to promote the right kind of behaviour; although it may require frequent and repeated application to be effective. The role of the policy maker is as expert, able to see the right course of action and smart enough to design interventions to get there. These actions may be quite modest, even though they require a lot of thought and usually involve the modification of a routine or procedure. In contrast, for the think strategy to be successful, the policy maker needs to be open-minded and willing to act as an organiser of citizen-driven investigation. Crucially the state needs not only to provide

institutions that can help citizens deliberate. But if the strategy is to be sustainable, it has to follow up on the recommendations that emerge, otherwise participants are likely to be disempowered and further disengaged from the political process.

### **Strengths and weaknesses of nudge and think**

The policy maker might argue that more of both nudge and think could be desirable despite their different antecedents and focus. But such a position needs to take account of the strengths and weaknesses of each strategy for delivering policy outcomes. Again we use a table to convey the information, with the approaches set along the top and strengths and weakness represented on the stem.

**Table 2: Strength and weaknesses of nudge and think**

	<i>Nudge</i>	<i>Think</i>
Strengths	Goes with the grain of decision-making, low cost, sustainable-renewable, wide application	Addresses the root of the problem, new ways of thinking, may lead to the changes needed
Weaknesses	Does not address fundamental divisions, overall modest outcomes	Time consuming, prone to manipulation and failure

The strengths of the nudging strategy rests on its consistency with what we know about human action. The relative inertia and lack of use of cognitive capacity means the nudge actions go with the grain of this aspect of human behaviour. Nudge gets individuals to cooperate in ways they are comfortable with. It is low cost and sustainable.

The strengths of think is the way it can get to the root of problems, which arguably is needed if large-scale effective civic action is to be embedded. To get things

done effectively it may need the collective big think rather than a series of mini nudges. Small nudges to improve energy efficiency or increase recycling rates will not be enough on their own to combat climate change, which is likely to require large-scale recognition on the part of citizens that more major shifts in lifestyle are probably necessary. Think may produce changes that are genuinely innovative partly because of the amount of effort and the degree of reflection involved.

The weaknesses of nudging have to do with its inability to address the fundamental problems, and as such it arguably generates fairly modest outcomes as a result. The very ease of nudging may lead to false sense of security about these changes. In contrast, the pitfalls of the think strategy typically relate to the capacity of organisers and facilitators to create the right conditions for deliberation: there needs to be sensitivity to the emotional dynamic of groups and a meaningful commitment on the part of sponsors to follow-up recommendations. We know that in the case of PB and the Citizens Assembly in Canada, described above, these pitfalls were in the main avoided; but most advocates of the think strategy concede that effective deliberative engagement can be difficult to achieve.

## **Conclusions**

Governments accept they cannot rely on issuing commands or creating incentives: they must deal directly and engage with the citizen, whose participation helps to co-produce public outcomes. We identify two broad strategies that currently dominate governments' attempts to shift civic behaviour. The division is best captured by the summary terms nudge and think, but may be more formally designated as behavioural economics versus

deliberative democracy. We have set these out as two antinomies, because of their different disciplinary underpinnings. They have differences in conceptions about human nature, expectations of the citizen and judgements about what is likely to work.

No government should want to get rid of either tool. Indeed it is possible to envisage situations where a think strategy helped to identify and legitimise nudge strategies that worked. Moreover citizens when being nudged might want to talk about the issues, that is, a nudge may lead to a demand to think! Further, while the two strategies may appear very different at first glance, there is a sense in which there is much in common: both nudge and think strategies can be seen as a response to the contingencies created by our bounded rationality. Nudge as we have already argued embraces bounded rationality and tries to work with it. Think tries on the contrary to challenge bounded rationality. By sharing group understandings and information - on the principle that two heads are better than one – a think strategy can claim to be about lessening the effects of bounded rationality.<sup>11</sup>

Our guess is that out there in the world there is not such a considered view and the two strategies have their lists of advocates and opponents. According to temperament some are pessimistic about human nature but think we can engineer change; others want to go to the heart of the citizen as republican to engender change from within. The two perspectives attract different sorts of reformers. Yet our argument is that the two approaches might have something to learn from one another and will need to find a way of rubbing along with each other. Our article aims to clarify the debate by specifying its terms.

We could go a stage further and suggest that nudge needs to break from the individualising focus stemming from its supporters in behavioural economics and psychology and give more attention to the way that collective and institutional settings help determine the success or failure of a nudge. Reading the dynamic of individual decision-making is not enough since that practice takes place in particular institutional and culture settings and is deeply affected by those settings. Nudges will need to be sensitive to these issues. A nudge to encourage recycling in a stable well-to-do neighbourhood might not work so well in a mobile or disadvantaged community. A nudge in a more formally organized hierarchical setting may have different effects to one in a loose network setting. Equally proponents of the think strategy need to understand more about how decision-making is undertaken in deliberative settings<sup>12</sup> and take into account the insights from the cognitive revolution in social sciences. Deliberation may simply reproduce short cut decision-making in new forms or in jolting people out of the normal patterns of thinking may create considerable anxiety and resistance. To be a successful practitioner of nudge it appears you might need to understand what makes deliberation work and to be an effective practitioner of think you may need to understand the dynamics of nudge.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup>. See Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. See also 2009 Penguin edition.
- <sup>2</sup>. Simon Bastow, H. Beck, Patrick Dunleavy and Liz Richardson. 'Incentive schemes and civil renewal' in Tessa Brannan, Peter John and Gerry Stoker (Eds.) *Re-energizing citizenship: strategies for civil renewal* Basingstoke Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
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- <sup>5</sup>. Bryan Jones, *Politics and the Architecture of Choice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 27.
- <sup>6</sup>. Michael Saward, *Democracy* Cambridge: Polity, 2003, p. 121.
- <sup>7</sup>. David Miller 1992. 'Deliberative Democracy and Social Choice', *Political Studies (Special Issue: Prospects for Democracy)* 40: 54-67, p.61
- <sup>8</sup>. See Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, *Deepening Democracy. Institutional innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* London: Verso, 2003.
- <sup>9</sup>. Graham Smith, *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.
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