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### Nudging by Governments And a Large Grey Area

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## Nudging by Governments And a Large Grey Area

A lot of talk and interest is currently taking place about nudging; How to influence citizens' decisionmaking process subtly to achieve mostly noble objectives. What comes to mind is how to distinguish between nudging, marketing and other perhaps more direct and indirect means used by governments to influence citizens' opinions and behaviors. To what extent this is ethical, and when do governments' actions fall in a grey area where it is difficult to determine their propriety?

The language synonyms for the word *nudging* are multiple and include: poking, prodding, elbowing and coaxing. All the words amount to the same thing; the procedure of gently pushing someone, literally or metaphorically, to act in a specific desired manner.

The concept of nudging gained a lot of momentum when it was introduced to the field of behavioral economics in 2008 through the book *Nudge* by Thaler and Sunstein. Since then many, "Nudge units," were developed in many governmental and international organizations with the aim of figuring out ways and means of subtly influencing citizens and politicians' behaviors. The United Kingdom government established a nudging unit in 2010 and was then followed by Singapore, the Netherlands, Australia, Germany and the United States. During Obama's era an executive order was issued urging governmental agencies to incorporate behavioral economics into their programs. The idea of a nudge is how to introduce changes to the surrounding environment, aka, "Choice architecture," so that a person automatically is more prone to choose a certain outcome. The recommended change according to Thaler and Sunstein should not entail a clear banning or restriction of any option, or the provision of a significant economic reward.

Examples of effective nudging abound especially in the health sector, where for example patients are sent reminders of their next appointments, food arranged in a specific order to lead to more healthy choices or using fun shaped bread rolls to get children to eat more whole wheat bread. Workplace nudging is also becoming popular, where for example, organizations may continuously inform their employees of the number of satisfied customers per day and therefore urge them to always try more to increase the level of customers' satisfaction. Recently, research about nudging has focused on digital nudging, including default settings that nudge, and the promotion of digital apps that direct behavior.

Lots of studies have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of nudging policies—many of them with positive results.

However, one of the debatable issues about nudging is whether it is an old concept that has been repackaged, but this is not that bothersome. The more serious concern is about the ethics of nudging. Sunstein in 2015 argued that nudging is ethical so long as it promotes, "Welfare, autonomy and dignity," but he still warned of possible risk of manipulation taking place.

I think there is a huge grey area present where it is not clear to what extent the nudging efforts of governments move into being manipulative. What about government sponsored ads that provide inaccurate information about products or services? Is it still nudging?

In elections, when food or other benefits are distributed to voters after they are done, is this an incentive, a nudge or an interference with the fairness and equity of the voting process? And similarly, when buses are used to transport voters to the voting booth, is this nudging? And what about propaganda advertising that may be misleading citizens about the merits of national projects or initiatives and exaggerating their usefulness? What about the marketing campaigns

by political candidates, especially in the United States, that allow for the defaming of potential competitors?

There is also a concern about using big data to nudge or manipulate people's choices. The data collected through social media and its use to influence people's views and decisions is a big concern. Some are already fearful that elections may never be free or fair again as a result. Through big data analysis, governments have the ability to target individuals based on their unique values, preferences and behaviors. This goes beyond simple nudging. There is the well-known case of how Facebook was accused of giving access to data, unknowingly collected from its users, and how some feared this data was used in manipulating voting decisions during the United States elections. The word, "Unknowingly," was itself debated. Users sign off acceptance agreements without reading the fine print, but they are still held responsible for their actions. As a result, their personal data may be exchanged with other tech companies without their full awareness and cognition. How this data is then used is another question.

To conclude, governments will continue to nudge even more so than before with big data analytics advancing at a fast rate. It may be acceptable to do so in some cases where there are no violations of ethical standards. However, citizens should become more aware of their rights, should call for more transparency from their governments and should become more vigilant and cautious when provided with data that directs their choices one way or another.