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**Sent:** Fri, 19 Jun 2015 13:06:55 -0400  
**From:** "Power, Samantha" <powers@state.gov>  
**To:** [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Cass' new study

Hi Mr. President – Cass has an important piece in the NYT today. It draws on some of your initiatives. Cheers, Samantha

[http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/sunday/when-america-says-yes-to-government.html?referrer&\\_r=0](http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/sunday/when-america-says-yes-to-government.html?referrer&_r=0)

When America Says Yes to Government

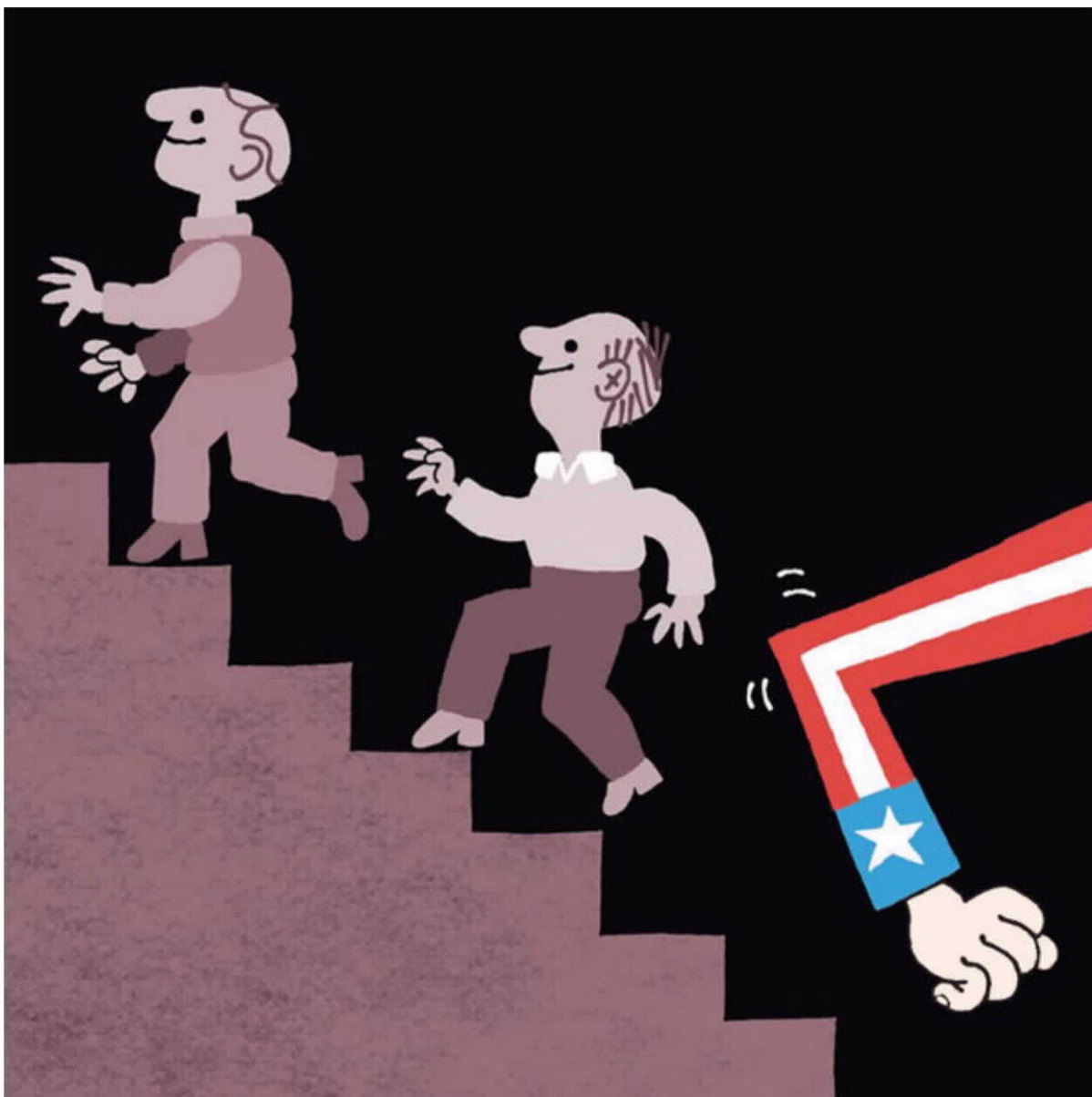
By CASS R. SUNSTEIN  
JUNE 19, 2015

In recent years, the federal government has adopted a large number of soft interventions that are meant to change behavior without mandates and bans. Among them: disclosure of information, such as calorie labels at chain restaurants; graphic warnings against, for example, distracted driving; and automatic enrollment in programs designed to benefit employees, like pension plans.

Informed by behavioral science, such reforms can have large effects while preserving freedom of choice. But skeptics deride these soft interventions as unjustified paternalism, an insult to dignity and a contemporary version of the nanny state. Some people fear that uses of behavioral science will turn out to be manipulative. They don't want to be nudged.

But what do Americans actually think about soft interventions? I recently conducted a nationally representative [survey](#) of 563 people. Small though that number may seem, it gives a reasonable picture of what Americans think, with a margin of error of plus or minus 4.1 percentage points.

The remarkable finding is that most Americans approve of these reforms and want a lot more of them — and their approval generally cuts across partisan lines.



JIM DATZ

Republicans and Democrats agree that soft interventions can help people meet their own goals with respect to health, safety and economic security. Americans might not like paternalism, but when they are asked about specific nudges, they tend to be supportive. And when they dislike some interventions — as they definitely do —

Republicans and Democrats usually agree as well, suspecting that government has illegitimate goals, or that it is acting inconsistently with people's interests or values.

About 87 percent of those questioned in the survey approve of the federal government's requiring calorie labels at chain restaurants. Nearly 85 percent favor an aggressive public education campaign from the federal government, "consisting of vivid and sometimes graphic stories and images," to discourage distracted driving. About 80 percent want the federal government to encourage automatic enrollment in pension plans. Indeed, 71 percent would support a federal mandate requiring large employers to adopt automatic enrollment. In every one of these cases, majority support cuts across partisan divisions.

There are many more ways that choices can be informed or influenced, and Americans want some of them to happen. About 82 percent favor a public education campaign to reduce obesity, at least if it consists of "information that parents can use to make healthier choices for their children." Over 75 percent would like the federal government to engage in a public education campaign to encourage people not to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.

More than 72 percent would favor a warning label

on products with unhealthily high levels of salt. About 70 percent would like state governments to require people to say, when they obtain their driver's license, whether they want to be organ donors. (Such a requirement could end up saving a lot of lives.)

More than 70 percent want the federal government to encourage electricity providers to enroll consumers automatically in a "green" energy source, while allowing consumers to opt out if they wish. Strikingly, 67 percent say that they would favor a federal law compelling large electricity providers to adopt such a system. In all of these cases as well, support comes from majorities of Democrats, Republicans and independents.

There is also a lot of agreement about which soft interventions should be rejected. Across political lines, a majority of Americans disapprove of a federal campaign to encourage mothers of young children to stay home — and also a campaign informing people that they can change their gender.

Most Democrats, Republicans and independents would reject a law requiring an automatic payment (subject to an opt-out provision) of a \$10 "climate change surcharge" on airline tickets. Most people do not favor a system in which the tax authorities assume that taxpayers want to give \$50 to the Red

Cross (even if people can opt out of the donation). Americans don't like the idea of giving their money automatically, or without an explicit choice on their part.

For some interventions, the level of approval or disapproval does vary significantly across political lines, and some soft interventions prove divisive. Over 62 percent of Democrats favor a system of automatic voter registration, recently adopted in Oregon and supported by Hillary Rodham Clinton. But more than 61 percent of Republicans reject it, perhaps because they think that people ought to take the trouble to register, perhaps because they believe that it is not in their political interest. Independents are evenly divided.

Intriguingly, majorities of both Democrats and independents favor a state law requiring "all large grocery stores to place their most healthy foods in a prominent, visible location." Most Republicans dislike this idea, though 43 percent support it. Most Democrats and most independents favor an unusually aggressive anti-obesity campaign from the federal government, one that shows "obese children struggling to exercise" and also interviews with obese adults who are saying such things as, "To me, obesity is like a terrible curse." By a slight majority of 53 percent, Republicans reject this campaign, perhaps because they see it as manipulative.

This is just one survey, of course, but other research supports the same conclusions.

A large [study](#) of citizens of the United States and Sweden, led by William Hagman of Linköping University in Sweden, finds broad support for health, safety and environmental nudges in both nations, with somewhat higher levels in Sweden. Another [study](#), led by David Tannenbaum of the University of Chicago, finds that both Republicans and Democrats frequently approve of soft interventions, such as automatic enrollment in government programs, even though their views can also be affected by whether they think that such interventions will support their own policy preferences.

The lesson for politicians everywhere is clear. There's every reason to think that whatever their political leanings, Americans will be highly receptive to numerous reforms designed to improve health, safety, economic security, environmental quality and democratic self-government — at least if those reforms do not eliminate their freedom of choice.

*A professor at Harvard and the author, most recently, of "Choosing Not to Choose."*

