

# Nudging Students' Creative Problem-Solving Skills

Dana Griffin, *University of Nebraska–Lincoln*

**ABSTRACT** People often make choices that go against their own best interests. In the controversial bestseller *Nudge*, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein argue that people can benefit from simple “nudges” to improve their decision-making. In an upper-level undergraduate course on political decision-making, I created a series of assignments around *Nudge*. In the project, students designed their own “nudges” to solve a variety of political and social problems. Students gave this assignment rave reviews, not only for the course content they learned, but also for what they discovered about their connections to society and its problems. In this article, I describe the assignment and report students' evaluations of it. This assignment could be tailored to any course on political behavior, public policy, or public administration.

*From this project, I learned that there are many different ways to help change social problems. Many things can be done to nudge [people] in the right direction, and we can come up with as many nudges as we want. What's important is to get people involved. And by understanding this concept, I know that I should do what I can.*

—Nudge Project participant

Many political science instructors hope that their students will become savvy, astute, and engaged political citizens as a result of the experiences they undergo in our classrooms. But in an age of waxing cynicism toward politics and waning political efficacy, the achievement of this pedagogical goal has become more and more difficult (Hetherington 1998; Bennett 1997).

In recent years, many instructors have turned to service learning to foster students' sense of civic connectedness (Niemi and Junn 2005; Hepburn, Niemi, and Chapman 2000). In service learning, students work with local organizations and community partners on the premise that “learning through doing” complements course concepts and learning objectives (Weigert 1998). However, service learning may unwittingly encourage the belief that the only way to help is through one-on-one action, rather than by teaching students to challenge the political and decision-making structures that underlie many social and political issues (Walker 2000).

The new challenge, then, is this: how can we build students' sense of civic connectedness while also fostering their ability to formulate macro-level solutions to political and social problems?

*Dana Griffin is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. She earned her Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota and researches and teaches in the area of political decision-making. She can be reached at [dgriffin3@unl.edu](mailto:dgriffin3@unl.edu).*

With this challenge in mind, I developed a series of assignments for my upper-level undergraduate course on political decision-making. Using the popular and controversial book *Nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein 2009) as a framework, I created a series of assignments that required students to come up with their own feasible solutions to a variety of political and social problems.

Students gave the Nudge assignment rave reviews. Several said that the experience made them more confident in their ability to effect social change. As a result of this project, several students met with local organizers to develop their nudges further, with the hope of eventually applying their ideas in the community.

In this article, I explain the general premise of “nudging,” elaborate the aims of the Nudge assignment, and explain how the assignment was conducted. Last, I report students' assessments of the project and discuss how a similar assignment could be used in other courses.

## WHAT IS NUDGING?

Recognizing that people do not always act in ways that serve their own best interests, Thaler and Sunstein suggest that in many instances, individual decision-making could be improved by using simple “nudges.” By appealing to individual psychology, effective nudges increase the likelihood of people making choices that reflect their underlying interests, while still respecting their freedom to choose. These aims form the basic premise of libertarian paternalism (Thaler and Sunstein 2003; Thaler and Sunstein 2009).

To illustrate the principle of nudging, consider the following example. As any instructor can attest, most students say they want to earn good grades. Yet, realistically, all kinds of temptations and obstacles (e.g., jobs, video games, partying, romantic escapades) discourage students from preparing for assignments ahead of time. The task expands to fit the time allotted. Understanding that students do not always take appropriate action to meet their goals,

an instructor can “nudge” students by giving smaller, incremental assignments that build toward a larger assignment. Students still have the freedom to not work ahead of time, but the likelihood that they will earn a good grade on the larger assignment improves drastically with a slight “nudge” in the right direction.

The idea of improving decision-making through nudging also has its skeptics (Mitchell 2005; Klick and Mitchell 2006; Rachlinski 2006; Rostbøll 2005). Given the range of competing viewpoints, I saw *Nudge* as an excellent tool for students to not only learn about major themes in the field of decision-making, but also see how concepts discussed in the classroom have genuine applications to public policy. I wanted students to achieve three learning goals through this assignment. First, they should be able to synthesize concepts discussed throughout the course to design their own nudges. Second, they should learn how to anticipate critics' responses by identifying potential problems and limitations of their solutions in advance. Third, the project should increase students' tolerance for uncertainty through the recognition that there may not be one “right” way to address the problem at hand.

Students read sections of *Nudge*, and I supplemented the readings with in-class lectures and discussions about the concept of libertarian paternalism. After students had gained a clear understanding of the idea of “nudging,” I distributed the assignment, which contained three separate elements.

In the first element, students worked in small groups to design one or more “nudges” that aimed to solve an assigned political or social problem. The one stipulation was that the nudge could not be a proposal to change existing law. Each group put together a short presentation to “sell” their nudge to a skeptical audience of their peers, using course concepts to justify how their proposed nudge would work. After the 15- to 20-minute presentation, groups fielded questions from a jury of their peers for about 10 minutes.

In the assignment's second element, the jury, students roleplayed the part of critics during other groups' presentations and offered constructive feedback for how their nudges could be improved. Students turned in their written ideas and comments at the end of each group's presentation. This element kept students thinking actively about “nudging,” sharpened their constructive criticism skills, and gave less talkative students an opportunity to provide feedback. The jury's written comments were easy to collect, summarize, and relay to the respective groups.

As the third element, students wrote individual papers describing and critiquing their own ideas, addressing the jury's concerns, and delving into the ethical issues surrounding the principle of choice architecture. The individual paper also gave students an opportunity to reflect on the project as a whole.

### CONDUCTING THE ASSIGNMENT

Students' internal motivation to succeed on an assignment increases when they can work on a topic that interests them personally (Pintrich 2003). For this reason, I solicited student input in deciding the nudge topics. Early in the semester, I asked students to brainstorm social and political problems that they thought were particularly pressing. During the last 10 minutes of a class period, students listed their suggestions on small, individual forms, which I then reviewed. Blending these ideas with a few of my own, I presented a list of eight political and social problems at the beginning of the next class period. Students then individually ranked five problems that interested them the most on another

form. After reviewing these ranked requests, I tried to assign each student either their first- or second-choice topic.

The final set of assigned problems was:

- Increasing political participation in areas other than voting
- Limiting the influence of moneyed interests on elected officials
- Encouraging people to speak up when they see something wrong
- Increasing exercise
- Reducing drunk driving

In the following class period, students received their group assignments. In total, five teams were assembled, with three to five group members each. I gave students a detailed assignment rubric that established the tasks on which the teams would be working and the criteria that would be used to evaluate their performance.

Over the course of the semester, I reserved three class sessions as designated times for students to work on their group presentations. With the power of nudging in mind, I purposely built time for this task into the course to prevent students from leaving the work until the last minute. The scheduled sessions allowed me to check in with each group regularly. In these sessions, students were unknowingly creating “drafts” of their projects. These scheduled periods resulted in more robust project ideas and increased the overall quality of the work that students submitted for their graded assignments.

Students also spent additional time outside of class working on their projects. In the project feedback forms, several students said that timing the presentations to occur immediately after Thanksgiving break made the group work more stressful, but they also reported that the in-class time likely reduced their overall stress and heightened the quality of their projects.

### OUTCOMES

Over the course of one week (three class sessions), each group delivered their in-class presentations. I was astounded by the creativity of solutions they offered. A sampling of some of their ideas follow.

#### Reducing Drunk Driving

Understanding the power of the anchoring heuristic, this group suggested an advertising campaign shaped around the slogan “.00 is the only safe limit” (as opposed to the legal blood alcohol limit of .08 used by most states). This group suggested that bars and restaurants place attention-grabbing advertisements throughout their establishments in restrooms, over the ATM, and on tables. These establishments could offer incentives for designated drivers, such as free non-alcoholic drinks and free appetizers for their group. Rather than subsidize these costs entirely, the businesses might make a tax-deductible donation to an outreach group (such as MADD), which could then use these contributions to offer these incentives. Businesses could also be encouraged to participate in the initiatives through the offer of free or discounted advertising in local newspapers or at sporting events.

#### Increasing Exercise

Students suggested that software programs might be developed to “pause” a computer after a certain period of time to allow the

user an exercise or stretch break. Users could override the pause by completing a short health and wellness tutorial.

### Limiting the Influence of Moneyed Interests on Elected Officials

Many voters use heuristic cues when casting their votes. This group suggested that a color-coded dot be placed next to the name of each candidate on the ballot. The red, yellow, or blue dot would indicate the percentage of campaign contributions received from corporations or organized interest groups.

From an instructor's perspective, this project was particularly fascinating, because students were simultaneously enthusiastic about and critical of their own ideas. Following the presentations, students refined their nudge proposals and responded to jury criticism in their individual papers. The individual papers also provided space for students to consider how their proposed nudge(s) either supported or went against the concept of libertarian paternalism.

### STUDENT FEEDBACK

To gauge student learning outcomes at the conclusion of the project, I asked students to give anonymous written feedback about the Nudge assignment. Ninety percent of students recommended that I use the project again in the future. Some of their comments are presented here:

- Nudges are hard and the problems they try to solve are even tougher. I became passionate about our topic. . . . It became much more than a simple [project] about a book and a problem. [This project] was a challenge because it forces student to think of class concepts and apply them.
- I learned it is really hard to design a good nudge! It is challenging to come up with a nudge to solve real problems. There are not many projects requiring such a level of creativity.
- [The project] helped me to realize the importance of nudges in day-to-day life, as without them, the world would be very different. [Until now], I was never aware of nudges. I always assumed that was just the way things were.
- If people take initiative, then anything is possible. [This project] made me think outside the box and take an optimistic view on many social issues in the community. . . . This is a great critical thinking project and really makes group members go deeper than the subject material.
- [This project] improved my thinking on how to solve a problem. . . . There can be various solutions to one problem.
- I learned that there are various problems today that do not have a very concrete answer. The main idea of each group is that public support is necessary for any of these nudges to be

successful. [The project] showed me how hard we as a society have to work to try and minimize these problems, since it is impossible to completely eliminate them. It was good to see that we are actually trying to solve real and not hypothetical problems.

### SUGGESTIONS

The Nudge assignment offered students a unique learning experience by developing their ability to actively apply their understanding of course concepts to formulate creative solutions to real political and social problems.

A similar assignment could be used in almost any class on decision-making in the discipline of political science, public policy, psychology, or business. This type of assignment could also be used as a supplement to service learning. Instructors could assign political and social problems to complement current events or focus on issues salient to the local community. This assignment is one way to promote students' civic connectedness while also building their creative problem-solving skills and developing their sense of efficacy. Although students may not realize it, with such an approach, instructors can "nudge" them toward all of these goals. ■

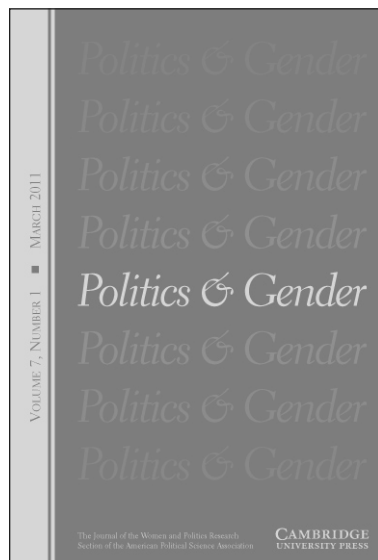
### REFERENCES

- Bennett, Stephen. 1997. "Why Young Americans Hate Politics, and What We Should Do about It." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30: 47–53.
- Hepburn, Mary, Richard Niemi, and Chris Chapman. 2000. "Service Learning in College Political Science: Queries and Commentary." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33: 617–22.
- Hetherington, Marc. 1998. "The Political Relevance of Political Trust." *American Political Science Review* 92: 791–808.
- Klick, Jonathan, and Gregory Mitchell. 2006. "Government Regulation of Irrationality: Moral and Cognitive Hazards." *Minnesota Law Review* 90: 1,620–63.
- Mitchell, Gregory. 2005. "Libertarian Paternalism Is an Oxymoron." *Northwestern University Law Review* 99: 1,245–78.
- Niemi, Richard, and Jane Junn. 2005. *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Pintrich, Paul. 2003. "A Motivational Science Approach on the Role of Student Motivation in Learning and Teaching." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 95: 667–86.
- Rachlinski, Jeffrey. 2006. "Cognitive Errors, Individual Differences, and Paternalism." *University of Chicago Law Review* 70: 207–29.
- Rostbøll, Christian. 2005. "Preferences and Paternalism on Freedom and Deliberative Democracy." *Political Theory* 33 (3): 370–96.
- Thaler, Richard, and Cass Sunstein. 2003. "Libertarian Paternalism Is Not an Oxymoron." *University of Chicago Law Review* 70 (4): 1,159–1,202.
- . 2009. *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. New York: Penguin.
- Walker, Tobi. 2000. "The Service/Politics Split: Rethinking Service to Teach Political Engagement." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33 (3): 647–49.
- Weigert, Kathleen. 1998. "Academic Service Learning: Its Meaning and Relevance." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 73: 3–10.

CAMBRIDGE

JOURNALS

Published for the **Women and Politics Research Section**  
of the **American Political Science Association**



# Politics & Gender

Editor:

Jennifer L. Lawless, *American University, USA*

*Politics & Gender* is an agenda-setting journal that publishes the highest quality scholarship on gender and politics and on women and politics. It aims to represent the full range of questions, issues, and approaches on gender and women across the major subfields of political science, including comparative politics, international relations, political theory, and U.S. politics. The Editors welcome studies that address fundamental questions in politics and political science from the perspective of gender difference, as well as those that interrogate and challenge standard analytical categories and conventional methodologies.

# Politics & Gender

Recommend *Politics & Gender*  
directly from its homepage -  
**FREE** online access for you  
when your library subscribes.

[journals.cambridge.org/pag](http://journals.cambridge.org/pag)

**FREE** email alerts.

Keep up-to-date with new material. Sign up at:  
[journals.cambridge.org/pag-alerts](http://journals.cambridge.org/pag-alerts)



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS