

POLS 231- FIRST PAPER ASSIGNMENT- “CHOICE ARCHITECTURE”

OVERVIEW: Broadly defined, a government’s job is to improve a society’s stock of social welfare: if it can’t do this, it probably shouldn’t exist. In general, governments do this primarily through coercion, using the threat of force or sanction to compel people to drive on the right side of the road, not dump sludge in the water, pay taxes to fund the provision of national defense or public education, or any number of other things thought to contribute to the ‘common good.’

In *Simpler*, Sunstein offers what he sees as a way for governments to enhance citizens’ welfare without (overtly) resorting to coercion: by structuring people’s choices to simplify their decisions and ‘nudge’ them toward beneficial behaviors. Doing this, he argues, increases the chances that people will behave in ways that suit their own (and society’s) interests, while also preserving peoples’ rights to make their own choices. Sunstein has many supporters, but has also been attacked by both some elements of the right (which views ‘nudging’ as the first step toward a dystopian nanny state) and the left (which views ‘nudging’ as government taking a step back from its role as social protector).

ASSIGNMENT: Your job in this paper is to provide a critique of some aspect of the idea of choice architecture (which Sunstein defines fairly concisely on p. 9-10 of *Simpler*) as it applies to government. The paper is meant to be an analytic essay, in which you describe and develop a specific argument related to the concepts raised in the book and in class. Within this general framework, you can structure your paper in any way you wish. Some questions that you may wish to consider when you are writing include:

- Are the assumptions that go into Sunstein’s philosophy (namely, that people sometimes need help to make choices that are consistent with their own interests) reasonable?
- Are nudges really more coercive than the book suggests—i.e., is the line between government telling you to do something and ‘nudging’ you to do it more blurred than it seems to imply?
- Are certain kinds of nudges more defensible than others?
- Is there a difference between companies using ‘choice architecture’ strategies to market products, and government using it for ostensibly public goals?
- In a broad sense, is it government’s job to protect us from our own bad impulses?

Given that this is a relatively short paper, it wouldn’t be wise to address every question of the sort posed above, or to write a broad ‘book report’ on what you have read so far. Rather, the goal is to find a relatively precise idea (addressing some aspect of ‘choice architecture’), and to develop that idea in some depth.

LOGISTICS AND GRADING: Although you should make extensive use of class material in your paper, no outside research is expected. If you refer to specific ideas from course readings or notes, simple parenthetical citations (e.g., Sunstein, p. 18; class notes, 1/27) are fine. If you use material from outside the course, please cite it using an appropriate formal citation method.

Grading will be based on: 1) Your ability to develop a creative and coherent argument, 2) The organization and logical development of your paper, 3) Thoughtful use of the class materials in supporting your argument, and 4) writing style and other grammatical concerns. You will not be graded on the perspective that you take, only how well you support it. The finished paper should be approximately **5-6 double-spaced typed pages** using 12-point Times New Roman or similar font, and reasonable margins. The paper is due (preferably in hard copy) at the end of class on **February 19**. Late papers will be penalized one-third of a letter grade (e.g., from B to B-) per day.