



# The permissibility of nudging for sustainable energy consumption



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## ABSTRACT

Nudges modify decision frameworks in order to steer people's choices in particular directions. Modifying energy consumption choices through nudging has shown significant promise for promoting sustainable consumption behaviors. However, policy makers have been reluctant to embrace nudges, due to concerns over potential ethical objections. This paper argues that the major ethical objections to nudging are not ultimately convincing when applied to energy production and consumption. The most common ethical objections claim that nudging is paternalistic and reduces human autonomy. It is argued here that energy production and consumption are “massively architected,” which means that they are strongly influenced by factors external to individuals. The infrastructure and framework for producing and consuming energy is largely determined prior to human decision-making. As a result, it is not clear how nudging for sustainable energy consumption could be paternalistic or autonomy-reducing. Ethical objections should thus not be a deterrent for policy makers pursuing nudges for sustainable energy consumption.

## 1. Introduction

Interest has risen recently in the use of “nudges” to improve sustainable energy consumption. Nudges aim to steer choices in particular directions by modifying people's decision frameworks, characteristically through methods other than rational persuasion. For example, an energy company could enroll consumers in “green” energy programs by default, instead of requiring them to “opt in,” thereby increasing enrollment in such programs. Many policy makers remain reluctant to embrace nudges, however, due to concerns over potential ethical objections. This paper outlines, within an energy policy context, the most prominent objections to nudging. Though the objections are compelling, I provide reasons to think they are not ultimately prohibitive against nudging for sustainable energy consumption.

Perhaps the most common objection to nudges is that they are paternalistic. A closely related objection is that nudges reduce human autonomy and agency. In short, these objections claim that nudges inappropriately interfere with people's decisions, in a way that reduces people's ability to live their lives the way they want to live them.

Proponents of nudging often argue that these objections rely on mistaken views of both policy change and human agency. Our choices are always under the influence of circumstantial factors and unconscious biases that are not under our direct control. Moreover, a significant degree of external influence—like nudges—is required as part of governance and policy-making. Nudging merely alters the set of factors influencing our decisions.

I argue that this response from nudging advocates is essentially right but is *especially* convincing in the context of nudging for sustainable energy consumption. Energy consumption is massively influenced by external factors and is thus already subject to nudge-like interventions. I provide additional substance to this reply by examining empirical research on energy consumption and proenvironmental behaviors. Recent studies of nudges for sustainable energy consumption indeed illustrate that energy consumption is outside of people's rational control. I argue that energy production and consumption are “massively architected,” following the terminology introduced by [Thaler and Sunstein \(2008\)](#), which means that production and consumption is largely determined by factors external to individuals (e.g. social norms and energy infrastructure). Ethical objections to nudging fail, I argue, precisely because energy production and consumption are massively architected.

Before discussing the ethics of nudging, I will first provide a brief introduction to the concept of “sustainability” as well as an overview of nudging, including salient examples of nudging for sustainable energy consumption.

## 2. What is nudging? Which nudges matter for energy sustainability?

There are many ways we might understand nudges and the concept of “sustainability” with respect to energy consumption. My aim is to capture the most typical uses of these terms. By “sustainable” I am

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referring here to efforts to 1) reduce overall energy consumption, and 2) shift the sources of energy consumption (e.g., wind and solar instead of oil and coal). The goal of many nudging projects is to help reduce consumption, in order for current energy production systems to meet demand, as well as to facilitate the adoption of more efficient energy production systems. Advocates of renewable energy also frequently encourage mixed sources, in order to avoid reliance on any one form. My discussion aims to capture all of these views on sustainability.

There are two main types of nudges that have been proposed for achieving sustainable energy consumption and that I will focus on throughout the paper. Perhaps the most common type of nudge frames information in a way to promote certain choices over others. For example, “green defaults” attempt to change the source of people’s energy by changing the choice framework provided by energy suppliers (for reviews, see [Momsen and Stoerk, 2014](#); [Sunstein and Reisch, 2013, 2014, 2016](#)).

An illustrative example comes from [Pichert and Katsikopoulos \(2008, 2011\)](#), who found that people preferred a default renewable energy option over a cheaper non-renewable. In their experiment, people were asked to imagine that they had moved to a new town and had to choose between two electricity suppliers. The results showed that people would pay more for a supplier offering sustainable energy when it was presented as the default than when it had to be actively chosen against an unsustainable supplier. And importantly, people would stick with a default sustainable option even if the alternative was cheaper. The experiment suggests that sustainable suppliers could become more popular over time by changing people’s default choice frameworks.

The second main type of nudge uses social norms to alter behavior. Social norms could be directed at many aspects of energy usage, but the most common have targeted consumption behaviors. For example, a number of studies have shown that simply informing people of the average consumption in their neighborhood can significantly alter household energy consumption. Research on the well-known Opower program has shown that these effects persist, leading to long-term reductions in energy consumption. [Allcott \(2011, Allcott and Mullainathan, 2010\)](#), for instance, used Opower to contact and track the consumption behavior of 80,000 households in Minnesota. The Opower reports informed people about how their own energy use compared to their neighbors, in addition to providing tips on decreasing their consumption. On average, these reports reduced energy consumption 2%. Though it might not seem like much, 2% is a greater reduction than has been observed through other methods, like raising the cost of energy usage ([Allcott, 2011](#)). This sort of feedback about local norms could, over time, work to reduce people’s energy consumption to more sustainable levels (also see [Allcott, 2016](#) and [Benartzi et al., 2017](#)).

These two types of nudges—defaults and social norms—provide excellent test cases of the ethical permissibility of nudging. They are effective and relatively easy to implement. They can also be implemented by a wide range of actors, including both the government and private sector, as well as potentially consumers themselves.

### 3. What’s wrong with nudging?

There has been a great deal of recent discussion about the ethics of nudging ([Barton & Grüne-Yanoff, 2015](#); [Grille & Scoccia, 2015](#); [Rebonato, 2012](#); [White, 2013](#)). Here I discuss three objections to nudging that I take to be the most compelling and most deserving of attention from policymakers. I will also briefly summarize the most common replies to these objections. Further details of my own position will come in [Section 4](#), once the basic framework of recent debates has been outlined.

#### 3.1. Nudging is paternalistic

[Thaler and Sunstein \(2008\)](#) claim that nudging “tries to influence choices in a way that will make choosers better off, as judged by themselves” (p. 5, their emphasis). Despite the expressed support for personal choice in this quote and in their other writings, critics have claimed that nudging is problematically paternalistic. Changing the default energy supplier to a renewable source, for instance, is making a decision about what is best for consumers—namely, that they should consume renewable energy. Nudging also assumes that people will not decide to support renewable energy without some assistance, and in some cases provides that assistance without the consumer’s consent (e.g., adding frowny faces in an energy report to express disapproval; [Sunstein, 2016](#), ch. 7). Even without overt coercion, or forcing people to take any particular action, it might be problematic that nudges push behavior in a certain direction (for extended discussion of different conceptions of paternalism, including a discussion of nudges, see [Dworkin, 2013](#)).

This objection is also sometimes framed as a problem with the deception involved in nudges. Paternalism is particularly problematic when it is difficult to detect. [Hausman and Welch \(2010\)](#) argue that manipulation by nudging is totally different from rational persuasion or appealing to reasons, “To the extent that they are attempts to undermine that individual’s control over her own deliberation, as well as her ability to assess for herself her alternatives, they are *prima facie* as threatening to liberty, broadly understood, as is overt coercion” (p. 130). Instead of simply informing people about energy-efficient light bulbs, for instance, we might design labels in a way that will encourage certain light bulbs over others. Though this might seem like a very subtle form of manipulation, [Hausman and Welch](#) think that “a huge difference in aim and attitude remains” between nudging and influence by rational persuasion.

The main line of reply to these objections has been that nudging and “choice architecture” are inevitable. As [Sunstein \(2015\)](#) says, “When choice architects act, they alter the architecture; they do not create an architecture where it did not exist before. A certain degree of nudging, from the public sector, cannot be avoided, and there is no use in wishing it away” (p. 44). The above objection seems to assume that there is some point at which people are sufficiently rational and uninfluenced by external forces. But this is likely false.

I am in broad agreement with this reply. As I will argue more fully below, energy consumption in particular is an area where some degree of external influence—like nudges—is required as part of governance and policy-making. Nudges are indeed paternalistic. But this is not problematic if a non-paternalistic option is impossible (at least if we accept “ought implies can”). Energy provision, I will argue, is an inherently paternalistic service.

#### 3.2. Nudging reduces human autonomy

A second, related objection to nudging is that it reduces human autonomy. Even if nudging is not problematically paternalistic, repeated directed interventions from external parties could reduce people’s ability to live their lives as they want to live them. [Hansen and Jespersen \(2013\)](#) note that the degree of involvement in people’s personal lives required by nudging is relatively new in human history. Because nudges are intentionally directed at unconscious processes by government entities, they introduce new ethical problems. As [Hansen and Jespersen](#) say, “there seems to be a clear and important distinction to be made between a given context that *accidentally* influences behavior in a predictable way, and someone—a choice architect—*intentionally* trying to alter behavior by fiddling with such contexts” (p. 10; their emphasis). [Sunstein \(2015, 2016\)](#) himself strongly emphasizes that significant manipulation is indeed a problem for nudging, *regardless* of whether the goals are legitimate or not (e.g., even if pursuing the public good).

Another formulation of this objection is that it produces a

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