

Just Act Normal

Author: Beardsley, Timothy M.

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Just Act Normal

How can governments persuade their publics to participate in protecting the environment for the common good, even though the needed measures may be economically painful? In the article that begins on p. 164, Ann P. Kinzig and a distinguished group of coauthors make a provocative proposal. They call for more study of the way people's identities are influenced by their behavior and the behavior of those around them. Governments, they suggest, should actively manage long-term changes in social and personal norms so as to promote responsible individual choices—and not only with traditional tools such as regulation.

Norms of cooperation are typically much stronger than proenvironment norms are, they note, so simple proenvironment messages are not likely to be the only or even the best way to change behavior. The authors remind readers that active norm management can be more subtle, as with the use of opt-out schemes to encourage participation in some socially desirable activity; making public revealing information (for example, ensuring that energy meters in apartment buildings are visible to all); and taxing (or subsidizing) specific choices. Kinzig and her colleagues assert, however, that little is known about the factors that lead to success in campaigns to affect behavior and point out that some efforts have been ineffective or have backfired (Prohibition is exhibit A). Academics should engage more with policymakers to devise strategies for long-term norm management, they argue, helpfully providing an agenda for life scientists.

It is often thought that attempts to influence norms should be restricted to policies that are already widely accepted. But the authors note that leadership may sometimes mean going beyond people's comfort zones (as President Lincoln did in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation), in the hope that norms will follow. And that boldness may make some readers feel queasy.

It is not hard to imagine how the ability to manage long-term norms effectively, if it is achievable, could be abused. It could suggest measures that would be undemocratic and lead to some groups being unfairly penalized. Some citizens might not (at first?) understand why and how certain choices were being encouraged with government sanction. Yet, Kinzig and her colleagues, acknowledging that apprehension, write that they "feel strongly" that their recommendations can be carried out in a way that abides by the principles of representative democracy, including transparency, fairness, and accountability.

For sure, governments already blatantly, if crudely, influence norms—for example, with campaigns to improve energy efficiency. And in doing so, they do not do anything that not-for-profit organizations, as well as corporations and charities, do not also do. Just as the fear of possible harms from genetically modified organisms should not prevent careful development and testing of products, worries about possible abuses should not stop researchers from pursuing the proposal of Kinzig and her coauthors that academics pursue active norm management. Transparency will help avoid the most obvious dangers. The pressing need to improve environmental stewardship—not to mention other imperatives—demands nothing less. Their article should spur readers in many fields to think hard about how they might contribute.

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TIMOTHY M. BEARDSLEY
Editor in Chief

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