

How the science of human behavior is beginning to reshape the US government

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The Conversation:

Back in September, President Barack Obama signed an executive order that marked a major turning point in the role that behavioral science plays in helping the federal government achieve policy goals.

The order, which directs federal agencies to incorporate insights from behavioral science into their programs, may turn out to be one of the most important acts of his second term. That's certainly the view of Cass Sunstein, a Harvard legal scholar and coauthor of the bestselling book on behavioral economics, *Nudge*.

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The White House team, created and led by Maya Shankar, a cognitive neuroscientist, partnered with an array of government agencies including the Departments of Defense, Education and Agriculture, to turn behavioral insights into more effective policy. As she puts it:

It's not enough to simply design good federal programs. We have to make sure that those programs effectively reach the very people they are designed to serve. Behavioral science teaches us that even small barriers to accessing programs, whether it is a complicated form or burdensome application process, can have disproportionate negative impacts on participation rates.

The psychologist Barry Schwartz, who penned an op-ed in the *Atlantic* in 2012 calling for a Council of Psychological Advisors, summed it up well when he said: "It's fantastic to actually have an agency in government who takes psychology seriously. There's a long way to go before it becomes a sister to the Council of Economic Advisors, but if it proves itself to be helpful, I can imagine it."

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