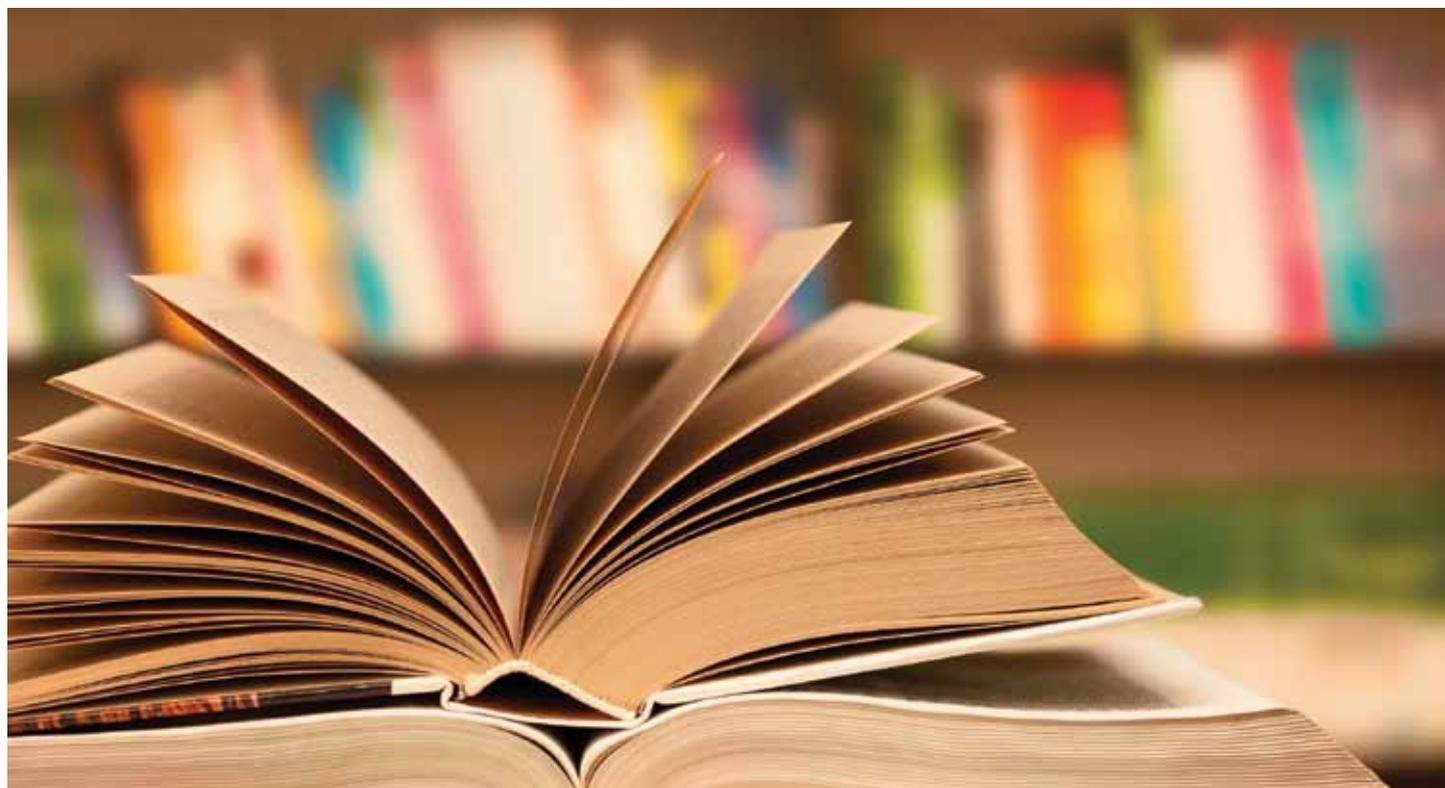


Pledges and publicity: an experiment in civic behaviour



Can citizens be encouraged to adopt behaviour that benefits the collective good? Peter John reports the results of an experiment in attracting donations of books for schools in South Africa through a pledge scheme in two electoral wards in Manchester.

The UK government is interested in whether 'nudges' can change behaviour, including by increasing charitable donations. The effect of many of these nudges can be tested easily using 'randomised controlled trials' to discover their impact in practice – as the following study demonstrates.

In this case, a randomised controlled trial was used to test whether a pledge scheme could encourage people to adopt civic behaviour. The basic idea behind pledging is that if people make a commitment to do something positive for society, they are more likely to do it. Once people make a choice or take a stand, they are perceived as encountering personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently.

The experiment sought to test the effect of pledging in the specific context of a request for people to donate books to schools in South Africa. The book collection was organised with Community Heart (UK registered charity no. 1052817), which takes books from the UK to set up school libraries in South Africa.

Letters were sent to 12,000 households in two electoral wards in Manchester asking them to donate books to help set up the libraries. Out of 32 wards in Manchester, the two wards selected were the least deprived ward and the ninth most deprived.

Households were randomly allocated to three different groups:

- A pledge group, in which households were sent a letter advertising the book collection and asking them to pledge a book by postcard, email or telephone. A few weeks later, they were sent a reminder letter with details of drop-off points.
- A pledge and publicity group, in which households were sent two similar letters and, in addition, were told that a list of book donors would be displayed in the local drop-off points, typically a local library. Figure 1 shows the letter that was sent to this group.
- A control group, in which households were sent two similar letters, without the pledge or the offer of publicity.

The combination of a pledge campaign with publicity for the donors can significantly raise donations

All households were asked to take donated books to one of six book collection points, three in each area, during Children's Book Week, between 27 February and 6 March 2010. Afterwards, the results and the names of book donors were displayed in all the collection points.

The specific research questions addressed were: were those asked to make a pledge more likely to donate books compared with people not asked to pledge? And does making it public encourage people to pledge and donate books?

In total there were 948 donors, representing 8% of households that were sent a letter. Asking households to pledge increased book donations from 7.3% to 8.2%. This is a 12.5% increase but the difference is too small to be statistically significant.

The combined approach of asking for a pledge and promising local publicity increased book donations from 7.3% to 8.9%. This is a 22% increase that is statistically significantly different to the control group at the 5% level.

Pledges may encourage people to volunteer, to give blood or to undertake environmental action

The effect of publicity was to increase the proportion that pledged to give, but this was not significantly different to simply asking people to pledge with no publicity. Some people within the control group made a pledge, which may suggest possible spillover effects (which would tend to reduce the estimated effect).

The response to the book collection was highest in less deprived neighbourhoods: 11.4% of households in the least deprived ward gave, compared with 4.8% of households in the more deprived ward. Donation levels were also higher in areas with a high proportion of retired residents and those with a low proportion of single person households. After taking these measures into account, the effect of an area having high numbers of children under 16 or a high number of religious people was not significant.

Policy implications

The research shows that the combination of a pledge campaign with publicity for the donors significantly raised donations. This is the first time that these nudges have been tested in relation to civic behaviour. There may be other areas where they produce a similarly positive response.

Examples include a pledge to undertake environmental action, such as recycling, energy saving or alternatives to car travel; a pledge to volunteer or campaign for a cause, with a promise that a list will be displayed as a thank you to those who gave their time; and a pledge to attend an annual workplace blood donation session, with a thank you list of donors displayed afterwards.

Peter John is at University College London.

Figure 1
An invitation to pledge

