

During the election season, there seem to be signs everywhere that simply implore voters to elect a candidate to a particular office. The sheer number of signs seems to defy economic logic.

According to standard economic theory, we would expect a candidate to have his staff offer lawn signs to people as long as the benefit from doing so is greater than the cost of making and distributing the signs. The first sign will significantly help the candidate since it can be placed in a busy intersection and provide name recognition to the candidate. The next sign can be placed at the second busiest intersection, which will provide the candidate with a bit less name recognition, but it will still help the candidate substantially. The third sign will be placed in the third best spot. Eventually, new signs will stop providing name recognition and they will serve to remind the voters about the candidate. Even in this case, each extra sign will provide less and less additional benefit for the candidate.

I would argue that the standard economic story doesn't explain why 10 houses in a row had signs calling for Trump's election. While I am as forgetful as the next person, after the second sign the additional reminder to vote for Trump was not really necessary. I knew from the previous two signs that he was running and I was not about to forget this information before I passed the third house. Surely, for many of these signs, the benefits to the candidate were close to zero and lower than the cost of making and distributing the sign.

This seemingly irrational behavior can be explained with behavioral economics. Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman explains that our brain does not want to exert effort if it does not have to. Generally, if we feel at ease and in a safe environment, we can operate at a low level of attention. In this case, we believe what we see is correct and not dangerous. If something does not seem right, we pay close attention to our environment. We apply our cognitive resources to help figure out what's going on, which can help us survive in potentially dangerous situations.

Repetition causes a person to feel at ease. If we encounter something often and it has never hurt us, our mind tells us that what we are seeing does not pose a danger, causing us to feel at ease. If something is repeated enough, the familiarity of the words put us at ease and we take the words to be true, when they are really just familiar. In the election case, when a candidate litters the town with election signs, he or she is just increasing the familiarity that voters have with the candidate. This will make voters feel safe with the candidate and earn the candidate goodwill when the voters go to the election booth, helping the candidate win the election.

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