
Climate change: no fair

By Kevin Lewis

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Environmentalists are undoubtedly frustrated that so many people discount the threat of climate change in the face of strong evidence. However, according to researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, the very fact that the public is bombarded with dire warnings is part of the problem. For people who tend to believe that the world is fair and just — or even for people who read statements to that effect — exposure to an article or video with a dire message about climate change induced more skepticism and less willingness to change behavior. Dire messages seemed to be challenging just-world beliefs in these people, thereby provoking a defensive response. On the other hand, a positive message, with a focus on solutions, reduced skepticism among those with just-world beliefs.

Feinberg, M. & Willer, R., “Apocalypse Soon? Dire Messages Reduce Belief in Global Warming by Contradicting Just World Beliefs,” *Psychological Science* (forthcoming).

Referees and race

The basketball players of the NBA are overwhelmingly black. Most of the referees are white. Does this matter? Based on an analysis of over a decade of NBA regular season games, two economists have found that white players earned fewer fouls when being refereed by predominantly white refereeing crews. Black players appeared to receive equal treatment from referees of both races, suggesting that there has either been a pro-white bias from white referees or an antiwhite bias from black referees. These findings are especially surprising because the NBA has supposedly developed an elaborate monitoring system for its referees, the most successful of whom can make several hundred thousand dollars a year.

Price, J. & Wolfers, J., “Racial Discrimination among NBA Referees,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (November 2010).

Rule of the fattest

There is another reason your parents were right to be concerned about who your friends are: Physical fitness may be contagious. Researchers followed an incoming class of Air Force Academy cadets, who are randomly assigned to squadrons — living groups that dominate the social life of the cadet. It turns out that a cadet’s fitness is strongly influenced by the least-fit cadets in the squadron. In other words, the slackers bring everyone else down — a conclusion that will surely merit extra attention from higher-ups.

Carrell, S. et al., “Is Poor Fitness Contagious? Evidence from Randomly Assigned Friends,” *National Bureau of Economic Research* (November 2010).

Spend it if you got it

To one degree or another, we all suspect there’s waste in government. The hard part, though, is specifically identifying what constitutes waste. A new paper by economists at Harvard and Stanford — one of whom just returned from an appointment at the Office of Management and Budget in the Obama administration — offers solid evidence for one particularly infamous type of waste: end-of-year “use it or lose it” spending. Not only does information technology spending across the federal government jump by a factor of seven in the last week of the fiscal year, but those end-of-year projects are much more likely to earn lower quality scores, based on cost overruns, delays, and management evaluations. The authors recommend allowing the rollover of unused funds.

Liebman, J. & Mahoney, N., “Do Expiring Budgets Lead to Wasteful Year-End Spending? Evidence from Federal Procurement,” *Harvard University* (November 2010).

The Schindler effect

In the Academy Award-winning film “Schindler’s List,” a well-off German businessman risks his life to save hundreds

of Jews during the Holocaust. Now a new study suggests a kind of Schindler effect — that wealth encouraged helping. Analyzing data from records of Gentile rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust, a graduate student has found that the number of Jews rescued in a given country was positively correlated with that country's gross domestic product per capita, and that rescuers tended to be of higher socioeconomic status. Although having more resources could make it easier to rescue people, specific factors like the number of rooms in one's home did not explain the results, nor did they explain the number of Jews saved. And, given the danger in being associated with Jews, the well-off arguably had more to lose.

Hoffman, M., "Does Higher Income Make You More Altruistic? Evidence from the Holocaust," *Review of Economics and Statistics* (forthcoming).

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