

UCLA economists [Dora Costa](#) and [Matt Kahn](#) just released [this paper](#) about whether “nudges” from a utility to conserve energy — in this case information about energy consumption relative to neighbors and relative to earlier time periods — succeed in lowering usage. Though the authors find that many factors contribute to lowered consumption, including whether a home is gas or electric, political ideology matters too. In fact, nudges about relative consumption work well for political liberals but actually backfire with conservatives. Pairing utility information with voter registration, environmental organization contributions and purchase of energy from renewable sources, Costa and Kahn find that Democratic households with environmentalist leanings reduce consumption by 3 percent while Republican households with no such leanings actually increase consumption by 1 percent.

Ironically, then, if energy conservation is the goal, more heavy handed measures like increases in price or mandated building standards may be more necessary the more conservative the neighborhood. Of course those measures might also induce backfire of a political sort.