

With gifts, size may not matter

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The gift scandal involving former Gov. Bob McDonnell has motivated members of Virginia's General Assembly to take up ethics reform this year. A central piece of this reform may well be a \$250 cap on gifts to state officials and members of their families. (Currently, there is no cap in Virginia.) The assumption seems to be that politicians are less likely to be influenced if they receive, say, a \$250 Seiko watch than a \$6,500 Rolex.

But a growing body of research in the social and behavioral sciences suggests that this assumption is wrong. Returning favors is such a deeply ingrained part of who we are that the size of the gift isn't all that important. According to the social psychologist Robert Cialdini, even a small gift — a flower from a Hare Krishna or a free sample of cheese at a supermarket — can make you feel obligated to reciprocate, in this case by donating a dollar or buying a hunk of cheddar.

In fact, we're usually not even aware of the influence a gift has on our behavior. Take those personalized address labels that sometimes come with a charity's plea for donations. You might think that this rather obvious ploy would backfire: Why would we give to an organization that wastes its money on a gimmick? But the data show that this "gimmick" actually increases the likelihood that we'll send in a check.

Scientists believe that our instinct to reciprocate played a crucial role in the development of human culture by enabling cooperation and smooth social exchange. Knowing that you'd scratch my back if I scratched yours made it more likely that I'd initiate the scratching.

Some of the most compelling evidence that we're driven to reciprocate comes from recent findings in developmental psychology. Toddlers are notoriously egocentric and rarely consider the consequences of their actions. And yet, in situations that call for reciprocity, they can seem almost Godfather-like.

In a 2010 study by Kristen Dunfield and Valerie Kuhlmeier, for example, 21-month-olds saw two actors, seated at a table. One actor gave several small toys to the children, one at a time. The other placed the same number of toys on the table, but she did not offer them to the children. Instead, the toys rolled to them, as if by accident.

Later, when the same two actors needed help reaching something that was beyond their grasp, most toddlers retrieved the item for the actor who had earlier deliberately given them toys rather than the one who had done so accidentally. Even the under-2 set is more likely to help someone who has helped them in the past.

By the time they are 3½ years old, children know enough about the way the world works to believe that other people who receive a gift should return the favor. In a 2008 study by Kristina Olson and Elizabeth Spelke, preschoolers encouraged a doll to share more stickers with someone who had earlier been generous to that doll than someone who had earlier been generous to a different doll.

When it comes to ethics reform in Virginia, instituting a gift cap seems like a bold move. The problem is that it doesn't actually address the root of the problem. The science shows that we are built to return favors, we do so automatically, and this is true even when the favor is small.

If members of the General Assembly are serious about ethics reform, they should ban gifts to elected officials altogether. To keep politicians from engaging in reciprocation, we need to eliminate the obligation they feel to reciprocate in the first place.