Right Now

friendly. On the other hand, spending the money in a small, friendly state may be a waste of political capital.

Though there may be many reasons why small, uncompetitive states receive less money—including, perhaps, the fact that they expect less and so don’t even apply—the political ramifications stand out to Reeves. “My results show that in these (marginal) cases, small, non-competitive states receive less help because they are just not that important in terms of an election,” he says. “If a major tornado runs through the state, they will get aid. But if it’s something marginal—a flood, or a windstorm that doesn’t cause as much damage—I think those states should be a little irritated.”

~BRIAN TARCEY

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THE MINDS, THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’

Pliable Paradigms

IF EVER someone understood the challenges of changing people’s minds, it was Charles Darwin. After doing his research in the Galápagos Islands in the 1830s, Darwin spent the next 20 years developing his theory of evolution. He was slow to publish his ideas. Because they contradicted the prevailing creationist view, Darwin realized just how much they would offend fellow scientists and the general public, including his own devoutly Christian wife. In fact, when On the Origin of Species eventually appeared in 1859, the backlash was immediate. Scientific colleagues, the clergy, and the public all initially rejected his theory. But over time, thanks to the efforts of vocal defenders like Thomas Huxley, scientists began to change their minds and accept Darwin’s ideas.

What tipped the balance in Darwin’s favor? For that matter, how does a CEO get his employees to adopt new quality standards, or a wife convince her husband to quit smoking? How did modernists like Stravinsky, Picasso, and T.S. Eliot overthrow the romanticism of the nineteenth century? Cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner, Hobbs professor of cognition and education at the Graduate School of Education, says the ability to change someone’s mind (including your own) depends on seven factors, which he calls “levers.”

“The more you understand about the levers,” he says, “the more you ought to be able to bring about mind-change.”

Gardner describes these levers in a forthcoming book, Changing Minds: The Art
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telling stories, showing charts, and leading hands-on activities—to engage different intelligences.

Gardner admits that he’s most excited by “the intimate aspects of mind-changing” in one-on-one relationships, such as that between a therapist and patient, an employer and employee, or two old friends. Here again, resonance—the ability to create a bond with another person and take the temperature of that connection—plays a key role. Gardner had been wondering if resonance could be built across a deep divide when he came upon the case of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, who were bitter political rivals in the decades after the American Revolution. In their seventies, the two men famously changed their minds and reconciled, largely, he notes, by emphasizing their shared experiences.

The most intimate mind-changes may be those that occur in our own heads.

Here Gardner focused on monumental shifts, as when a government leader announces a major policy alteration. “People get emotionally attached to certain ideas, or publicly committed to certain ideas, and that makes self-mind-change especially difficult,” he notes. He was particularly fascinated by the case of anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl, who argued when he was young that the minds of primitive humans differed substantially from those of modern humans. During the next 50 years, however, Levy-Bruhl examined his arguments and in his private journals made an honest accounting of his errors and shifts in opinion—significant changes that occurred thanks to the lever Gardner calls reason.

He notes one additional factor—birth order—that may play a role in the ability to change one’s mind. Some research suggests that, throughout history, first-born children have been slow to accept new ideas, Gardner says (see “Born to Rebel,” July-August 1995, page 10). “You find that later-borns are much more likely to embrace radically new ideas in science like Darwinism, radically new ideas in religion, like Protestantism, or radically new ideas in politics, like communism.”

If you’re stuck trying to win over a group of first-borns, you have all the more reason to think about which levers will be most convincing. Even in the best circumstances, Gardner reiterates, mind-change isn’t a simple, or swift, proposition. He summons up the example of the New Testament figure who converted to Christianity only after a sudden bout of blindness. “For every Saul on the way to Damascus who has a real change of mind,” he says, “there are hundreds of people who don’t.” ~ERIN O‘DONNELL

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I‘M, LIKE, READING

Kids Turn New Pages

PARENTS in the 1960s generally expected their children to be passive observers who did as they were told. Today’s parents are more likely to encourage kids to participate in the world around them, express their ideas, and render judgments. Evidence of this sea change turns up in an unexpected and largely unexamined medium: children’s nonfiction books, reports Jay Gabler, Ed.M. ’98, M.A. ’00, a sociology graduate student whose doctoral dissertation examines various trends in the subject matter of children’s nonfiction books between 1960 and 2000.

Children’s books, he explains, have always “both explicitly and implicitly embodied social views regarding the world generally and childhood specifically. In the views of parents and publishers, childhood, over the past several decades, has come to be increasingly associated with an autonomous, thinking individual who can and should make decisions of his or her own—as opposed to having his or her actions dictated by tradition and authority.”