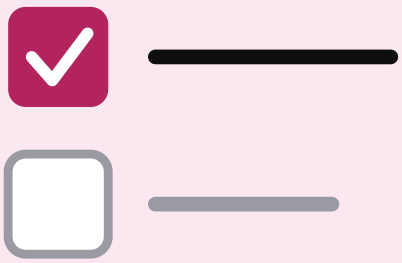
Concept

Default effect

We tend to stick with the option that comes chosen in advance, even when changing it takes very little effort.



In Spanish

Opciones por defecto

Origin

Madrian and Shea (2001); Johnson and Goldstein (2003)

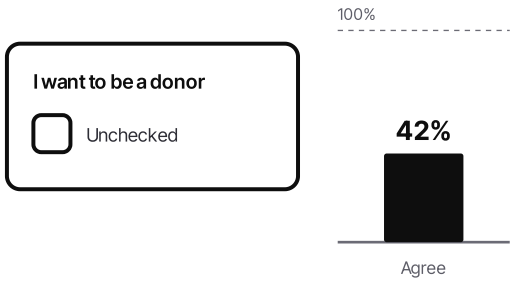
What problem it addresses

It explains why the option preselected in a form, a plan or a setting decides what most people end up choosing.

An example

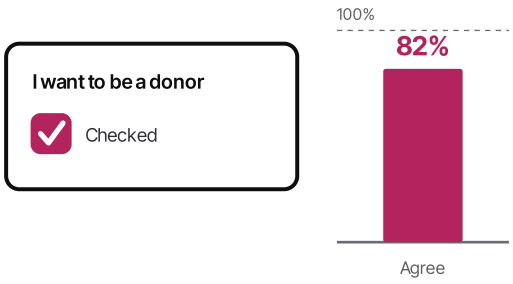
An online survey asked people whether they wanted to be organ donors. The only thing that changed was which box came checked.

You have to check the box to be a donor



Agree: **42%.**

You have to uncheck it not to be one



Agree: **82%.**

With no box checked, 79% agreed. People weren't against it: they simply stuck with whatever was set.

Why it happens

1 

Changing an option takes a little effort, and we often don't make it.

2 

The preselected option looks like a recommendation from whoever designed the form.

3 

Leaving it as it is feels safer, because you don't have to justify the change.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Preselect the option most people would choose on reflection and that serves them best.

Avoid

Leaving subscriptions, insurance or permissions the person hasn't asked for preselected.

Don't fall for it

A default is a design decision: check from time to time whether it still serves the person.

42% → 82%

Must check

Prechecked

What the research says

People who agreed to be donors depending on which box came checked (Johnson and Goldstein, 2003).

●●● **Solid evidence.** A meta-analysis confirms the effect is real, although its size varies a lot by context (Jachimowicz et al., 2019).

Connections

Used in

- Design for policy
- Product design
- EAST framework

Related to

- Decoy effect
- Tesler's law
- Nudge and choice architecture
- Deceptive patterns (dark patterns)
- Status quo bias
- Choice overload

Authors and works

2003	**Eric Johnson and Daniel Goldstein**	Showed the effect in organ donation, in an experiment and in data from European countries.
2019	**Jon Jachimowicz et al.**	Brought together dozens of studies to measure when and why defaults work.

Sources

Original sources

- Johnson, E. J., & Goldstein, D. (2003). Do defaults save lives? Science, 302(5649), 1338–1339. View source (https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1091721)
- Madrian, B. C., & Shea, D. F. (2001). The power of suggestion: Inertia in 401(k) participation and savings behavior. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 116(4), 1149–1187. View source (https://doi.org/10.1162/003355301753265543)

Academic reviews

- Jachimowicz, J. M., Duncan, S., Weber, E. U., & Johnson, E. J. (2019). When and why defaults influence decisions: A meta-analysis of default effects. Behavioural Public Policy, 3(2), 159–186. View source (https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2018.43)

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