

BY ROBERT J. BARRO

STICKS AND STONES MAY BREAK MY BONES...



INVECTIVE: One crosses pro-life and green groups at one's peril. But not all the e-mail was strewn with obscenities. Turns out I have some fans, too

Robert J. Barro is a professor of economics at Harvard University and a senior fellow of the Hoover Institution (rjbbweek@harvard.edu).

For my first column of the new millennium, I will report on readers' e-mail responses to my previous columns. These reactions reveal which ideas are of interest and which are applauded or condemned. I classified the responses (objectively!) into favorable, unfavorable, and neutral.

Among 27 articles, the average number of e-mails received was 22, of which 41% were favorable, 39% unfavorable, and 20% neutral. The total number of e-mails came to 607. Unfortunately, data are unavailable for my earliest columns, including one that argued that beauty was as valid as intelligence as a basis for high wages. The many outraged letters I received suggest that this article would have attracted many e-mails.

The most responses were to the column on Colombia in which I favored movement toward drug legalization in the U.S. I expected the attention but not the positive response: Of the 112 e-mails received, 70% were favorable, and 18% were unfavorable. "At last someone has the nerve to speak the truth about our retarded drug policies," said one. "As a convicted drug trafficker currently on federal probation and confidential informant, I speak from experience." Another e-mail read: "As former chief of counter-drug strategy for U.S. Southern Command, I long advocated the legalization of drugs." This limited sample reinforces my belief that a candidate for major U.S. political office will someday campaign on drug legalization.

DEEPLY GORED. Readers tended to dislike my criticism of the environmental extremism that I perceived in Al Gore's writings. This column generated the second-highest response, 67 e-mails. They were overwhelmingly negative. "I don't think I have ever read such a narrow minded, off-base, ignorant piece of work," said one. Also unpopular was my discussion of research that linked recent reductions of crime rates in part to expansions of abortion rights in the early 1970s. I received 55 e-mails, which were again overwhelmingly negative. Said one: "The Scarecrow got smarter when the Wizard gave him his degree. Evidently, advanced degrees don't have the same effect on everyone." But I took heart from a lonely supporter: "Every time I see your picture in BUSINESS WEEK, my heart jumps.... I never thought anyone will dare to write anything this politically incorrect."

I have learned that one crosses the environmental and pro-life groups at one's peril. Many of the replies from both sides used obscenities and

characterized me as lacking in intelligence. I also found that both groups think in absolute terms with no willingness to take a cost-benefit approach (each tree and each fetus is worth an infinite amount). Most interesting, Gore was insufficiently pure for many environmentalists: "Some of us believe that Gore is in fact almost as much a puppet as is Bush, which is why we plan to vote for Nader." Of course, this sentiment led to Bush's election. As a demonstration of objectivity, I also criticized Bush in a column that complained about the term "compassionate conservatism." This column was unpopular. Of the 30 e-mails I received, 60% were unfavorable. But the critics used no obscenities.

SOUTHERLY WIND. I was heavily attacked for a column that attributed some of Brazil's economic woes to nationalistic tendencies. Of the 51 e-mails, only 20% were favorable. Naturally, most of the adverse commentary came from outraged Brazilians. I have to admit that Brazil's policies have improved, partly thanks to the wisdom of the central bank governor, Arminio Fraga.

Respondents liked my account of my lunch with the U2 rock star, Bono. Of 28 e-mails for this column, 64% were favorable. However, writers seemed more interested in Bono than in my discussion of his views on world debt forgiveness.

Much less popular was my analysis of Chile, especially the credit I gave retired General Augusto Pinochet for his pro-market policies. Some 26 people e-mailed me in response, and 69% were negative. The 23 e-mails I received on my column criticizing the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, split down the middle, with nearly half favorable and half negative. Perhaps some of the conference organizers sent in negative comments, since I was not invited to this year's meeting.

There was substantial, mostly positive response to two columns on the Fed's monetary policy, an area that regained prominence with the recent cut in interest rates. Of the total of 51 e-mails, 65% were positive. The model discussed in my columns accorded with many analysts in projecting rate reductions for January-February of this year, but the half-point move was larger than expected.

One reasonable criticism of this survey is that my sample is not representative because readers with extreme opinions are the ones who tend to write. I also fear that this column will influence the quantity and nature of future responses, although I'm uncertain about how. Perhaps readers will send their opinions.