P276 / Public Acceptance of Policy Reforms: Behavioral Mechanisms and Policy Communication

Topic : Policy Design, Formulation & Instruments

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Public policy reforms are important instruments through which governments respond to economic, social, and institutional challenges. Their implementation, however, often depends on public acceptance, particularly when they alter established arrangements or impose immediate costs in anticipation of longer-term benefits (Ostry et al., 2009). How citizens understand these changes and evaluate their consequences is therefore central to the reform process.

Public responses reflect both the consequences of a reform and the processes through which people form judgments about them. Prior beliefs, perceptions of fairness, institutional trust, and social norms can shape how citizens assess expected costs and benefits. Policy communication enters this process through the information provided, the framing of reform objectives, and the presentation of accompanying measures. Understanding how these factors interact - and how their influence varies across cultural and institutional contexts - can help explain differences in public acceptance and inform reform design and implementation.

Energy-sector reforms provide a particularly relevant setting for examining these relationships because changes in prices, subsidies, and transition measures raise distributional concerns. Experimental research on energy subsidy reform shows that information provision and framing can influence policy preferences (Vieites et al., 2022; Hoy et al., 2023; Bharadwaj & Innocenti, 2025). Responses also depend on the proposed use of fiscal savings and accompanying measures (Harring et al., 2023; Bez et al., 2026). These findings invite closer examination of how communication and substantive reform arrangements jointly shape public evaluations. Increased expressed support does not, by itself, establish improved understanding or informed acceptance.

This panel seeks to examine the behavioral mechanisms through which perceptions of reforms are formed and how policy communication interacts with cultural, institutional, and policy-specific conditions. It encompasses public policy reforms generally, with particular attention to energy-sector reforms.

The central research question is: *Through which behavioral mechanisms does policy communication shape public acceptance of reforms, and how do these processes vary with cultural, institutional, and policy-specific factors?*

How are perceptions of reform costs, benefits, and fairness formed? How do prior beliefs, institutional trust, reference points, and cultural orientations condition responses to reform messages? How do social norms and expectations about government responsibilities influence these evaluations? When does communication improve understanding, and how does this relate to acceptance? Which mechanisms recur across reform settings, and which depend on context?

Contributions may test whether institutional trust conditions information effects, whether cultural orientations moderate responses to distributional framing, and whether changes in beliefs help explain changes in acceptance.

The panel connects research on perception formation with policy design and implementation. Experimental, quasi-experimental, theoretical, comparative, and mixed-methods contributions can clarify mechanisms, distinguish communication effects from responses to substantive reform arrangements, and assess the transferability of findings. Such evidence can inform credible communication and policy designs that address public concerns across diverse populations and settings.

References

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Harring, N., Jönsson, E., Matti, S., Mundaca, G., & Jagers, S. C. (2023). Cross-national analysis of attitudes towards fossil fuel subsidy removal. Nature Climate Change, 13, 244–249.

Hoy, C., Kim, Y. S., Nguyen, M., Sosa, M., & Tiwari, S. (2023). Building public support for reducing fossil fuel subsidies: Evidence across 12 middle-income countries (Policy Research Working Paper No. 10615). World Bank.

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Vieites, Y., Weiss, M., Andretti, B., Jacob, J., & Hallack, M. (2022). Increasing the acceptance of energy subsidy reforms: Behavioral insights for Latin America and the Caribbean (Technical Note No. IDB-TN-2488). Inter-American Development Bank.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites contributions examining how behavioral mechanisms and policy communication shape public acceptance of policy reforms. It welcomes research across policy domains, with particular attention to energy-sector reforms.

We seek papers explaining how citizens form perceptions of reform costs, benefits, fairness, and legitimacy. How do prior beliefs, reference points, institutional trust, and social norms influence these evaluations? How do cultural characteristics and expectations about government responsibilities condition responses to reform messages? Under what conditions do changes in information or understanding translate into changes in acceptance?

Experimental research on energy subsidy reform illustrates how information, framing, and accompanying measures can influence public responses (Vieites et al., 2022; Hoy et al., 2023; Harring et al., 2023). Contributions may build on this evidence or examine other reform settings to investigate which mechanisms recur across contexts and which depend on particular populations, institutions, or policy arrangements.

We particularly welcome studies examining interactions between communication and reform design, including compensation, distributional consequences, and implementation commitments. Research on heterogeneous responses, the persistence of effects, and circumstances in which communication generates resistance or leaves concerns unresolved is encouraged. Studies examining how citizens respond to uncertainty about reform implementation are also welcome.

Survey and field experiments, factorial and conjoint designs, and quasi-experimental studies are welcome, alongside theoretical, qualitative, comparative, and mixed-methods contributions. Papers should explain how their approach advances understanding of perception formation, behavioral mechanisms, or contextual variation. Studies distinguishing communication effects from responses to substantive policy changes are especially relevant.

Relevant domains include energy, environmental, fiscal, social, labor-market, and regulatory reforms. Contributions from developing and emerging economies, as well as comparisons across countries and policy sectors, are encouraged.

The panel aims to connect research on public acceptance with policy design and implementation, generating insights into how communication and reform arrangements can address public concerns across diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and institutional settings.