Analysis

The Influence of Political Orientation on the Strength and Temporal Persistence of Policy Framing Effects

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 22 May 2016
Received in revised form 17 April 2017
Accepted 7 May 2017
Available online xxxx

ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to analyze how political orientation moderates the influence of framing effects on policy evaluation. Drawing on the theory of motivated reasoning, three interrelated experiments assess the strength and temporal persistence of framing effects in the context of an energy conservation program. In the first experiment (N = 183), the delivery mechanism of the policy is described as either a tax rebate or a subsidy. Party identification of potential beneficiaries moderates the existence and magnitude of framing effects. The second experiment (N = 603) presents alternative frames of communication, which focus on either the economic or environmental benefits associated with the policy. Effects of the communication frames on policy support in comparison to a neutral text are significant, but only when the policy is consistent with respondents’ pre-existing views on economic individualism and government spending. The third experiment (N = 603) investigates the temporal stability of framing effects after cognitive deliberation and finds that no change in policy support occurs over time. A key implication is that tailoring frames to the target audience increases effectiveness in policy design and communication. Considering the persistence of framing effects, early frames may have a disproportionate impact in public discourse.

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“How can even sincere democratic representatives respond correctly to public opinion when empirical evidence of it appears to be so malleable, so vulnerable to framing effects?”

[Entman (1993, p. 57).]

1. Introduction

Behavioral research indicates that arbitrary differences in contextual information can lead to preference changes in otherwise identical choice tasks (Tversky and Kahneman, 1986), contrary to the principle of ‘invariance’ proposed by Neumann and Morgenstern (1947). These empirical observations have given rise to the concepts of ‘framing’ and ‘framing effects’ which are defined as “subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of judgment and choice problems and […] changes in decision outcomes resulting from these alterations” (Iyengar, 1994, p. 11). Building on the pioneering work of Tversky and Kahneman (1981), a large body of research in psychology and behavioral economics has advanced the knowledge base on framing and developed typologies of different framing effects (Levin et al., 2002; Levin et al., 1998). A parallel stream of literature in policy research, most notably driven by Druckman (2001), has applied insights from framing theory in the fields of policy design (e.g. Madrian, 2014) and policy implementation, particularly regarding the communication of policy measures (Chong and Druckman, 2007a; Klar et al., 2013).

Consistent with literature on individual differences (e.g. LeBoeuf and Shafir, 2003; Smith and Levin, 1996), policy researchers have shown that the strength of framing effects depends on various moderating factors; in particular political orientation (Chong and Druckman, 2012; Faricy and Ellis, 2014). The concept of political orientation is typically structured along a uni-dimensional model from liberal to conservative or from right-wing to left-wing (Jost et al., 2003), or along a two-dimensional model encompassing a social and an economic dimension (e.g. Duckitt, 2001; Feldman and Johnston, 2014; Jost et al., 2009; Zumbrunnen and Gangl, 2008). Despite an increasing amount of research on the impact of political orientation on policy framing effects, empirical evidence in the field of environmental policy, while growing, is still in its early stages. This research gap seems surprising, given that the influence of political orientation could be particularly relevant to framing effects related to environmental policy instruments, which are often subject to ideological public discourses (Bornstein and Lanz, 2008; Söderbaum, 1999). Drawing on the theory of motivated
reasoning (Slothuus and De Vreese, 2010; Taber et al., 2009; Taber et al., 2001), this paper contributes to the few existing studies (e.g. Hardisty et al., 2010) by analyzing whether the impact of frames in both policy design and communication is contingent on political orientation. To the authors' knowledge, this paper ranks among the first analyses of the influence of political orientation on framing effects in environmental policy.

In addition, this paper makes a contribution to existing literature by analyzing how political orientation influences the stability of framing effects over time. Despite some pioneering longitudinal studies on framing effects (Druckman et al., 2012), research on the influence of political orientation on the stability of framing effects in the field of environmental policy is scant. Given that many environmental policy programs require political commitments over longer time horizons, it is important to understand the temporal dynamics of policy evaluation.

The empirical part of this paper consists of three independent but closely related experiments in the context of a residential energy conservation program. In contrast to many previous studies in the field of policy framing effects that rely on student samples (e.g. Faricy and Ellis, 2014), the experiments described herein strive to create a more realistic choice setting. To do so, both potential beneficiaries of a specific policy measure and a broader population are surveyed, given that policies need not only to be favorably evaluated by the general population but also to be effective at influencing potential beneficiaries to favor their uptake.

In the first experiment, the delivery mechanism for a government benefit for an energy conservation measure is described as either a ‘tax rebate’ or a ‘subsidy’. The experiment analyzes how political orientation moderates the impact of the framing of the delivery mechanism on the perceived importance of the benefit among potential beneficiaries. In the second experiment, the frames of a policy program for energy conservation measures highlight either economic or environmental aspects of the policy. The experiment analyzes how citizens’ political orientation moderates the impact of each of the frames on their policy evaluations. The third experiment investigates whether the framing effect induced by the second experiment diminishes after reasoning about government spending and, if so, whether political orientation influences the degree of change in opinion over time.

Overall, this paper contributes to knowledge about an important issue in environmental policy: the built environment, which includes residential, industrial and commercial buildings, is responsible for approximately 40% of total global energy consumption and 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Stbc, 2009). Given the environmental impact of energy consumption, reducing the energy demand of buildings is one of the key objectives in contemporary environmental policy (BFE, 2013b). To increase the effectiveness of the communication of sustainable energy policy, it is important to understand whether and how people react (a) to different delivery mechanisms of a government benefit and (b) to different communication frames. The findings of this study can help policy makers design better ‘tailed’ messages, similar to customer segmentation strategies in business and marketing.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. Political Orientation and Framing Effects

To understand how political orientation moderates the impact of framing effects on policy evaluation, the theory of ‘motivated reasoning’ provides a helpful framework. According to Kunda (1990), the basic premise of ‘motivated reasoning’ claims that individuals are subject to selective information processing, which drives them to reach conclusions that defend their preconceptions. Researchers suggest a close relationship between ‘motivated reasoning’ and political opinion formation (Taber et al., 2009; Taber and Lodge, 2006; Taber et al., 2001), demonstrating that citizens interpret policy-related information in a way that is consistent with the dominant beliefs of their ideological affinity group (Kahan, 2013). A closely related stream of literature suggests that motivated reasoning can lead to belief polarization, a process by which individuals with diverging prior beliefs update their opinions in opposite directions when presented with the same information (Cook and Lewandowsky, 2016). Some pioneering studies demonstrate an interplay between the mechanisms of motivated reasoning and framing effects; in particular, frames on politically contentious issues can activate political predispositions and thus induce individuals to interpret messages from the perspective of their pre-existing political beliefs (e.g. Hart and Nisbet, 2012; Slothuus and De Vreese, 2010). Extending these studies, the current work assesses how political orientation moderates the influence of framing effects on policy evaluations among both potential beneficiaries and the public. In particular, the authors analyze how frames related to the policy delivery mechanism influence policy uptake in the former and how communication frames affect policy support in the latter.

2.1.1. Framing of Policy Delivery Mechanism

To reduce energy consumption and its adverse environmental impacts, many countries have introduced different policy support measures such as direct payments or tax rebates for building owners who engage in energy conservation (International Energy Agency, 2013). Research suggests that the perception of such policy benefits among potential recipients is contingent on the description of their delivery mechanisms (Epley and Gneezy, 2007; Epley et al., 2006; Faricy and Ellis, 2014). Epley et al. (2006), for instance, show that a tax rebate framed as ‘bonus income’ is more likely to be spent than ‘withheld income’, because the former is perceived as a gain in wealth while the latter is considered a returned loss. Based on the utility function proposed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), they suggest that recipients evaluate a benefit comparatively rather than absolutely, and thus changes to the status quo are perceived as either gains or losses against a given reference point. Similarly, Lozza et al. (2010) show that not only the likelihood of saving but also the perceived importance of a fiscal bonus is significantly lower when the benefit is framed as a ‘bonus’ (gain) rather than a ‘tax rebate’ (loss reduction).

While these prior studies have analyzed only the average framing effect, the theory of motivated reasoning raises the question whether the perception of frames related to policy delivery mechanisms depends on citizens’ political orientation. Hardisty et al. (2010), for example, find that using the label ‘tax’ instead of ‘offset’ for a carbon dioxide surcharge significantly alters how favorably the surcharge is perceived among Republicans, but not Democrats. In a similar vein, the current paper argues that affiliates of tax-averse political parties acting as ‘motivated reasoners’ attach higher subjective value to a benefit framed as a ‘tax rebate’ rather than a ‘subsidy’. In contrast, we expect that the benefit frame will not make any difference for affiliates of other parties. This hypothesis is based on prior policy research that shows that right-wing political parties are more skeptical of direct public spending but hold more favorable attitudes toward tax rebates than left-wing parties (Faricy and Ellis, 2014).

H1. The party identification of policy beneficiaries moderates the impact of framing on the perceived importance of a government benefit.

2.1.2. Framing in Policy Communication

‘Frames in communication’, which refer to a particular perspective highlighted by a speaker (e.g. a politician), play a crucial role in public discourse and can influence support for policies (Chong and Druckman, 2007b). While the conventional communication frame in the area of environmental policy focuses mainly on environmental benefits, other possible communication frames include economic considerations (Scrase and Ockwell, 2010) and health benefits (Bernauer and McGrath, 2016). Bernauer and McGrath (2016) find that shifting communication frames for climate change policy from environmental to
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