



# Public acceptance of incentive-based spatial planning policies: A framing experiment



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## ABSTRACT

Sustainable spatial planning strongly depends on efficient policy measures. A successful implementation of efficient policies, in turn, crucially depends on their public acceptance. This paper examines whether the way the public is provided with information on spatial planning policies influences the latter's acceptance. Policy makers employ policy frames to influence voters. In a survey experiment among 644 Swiss participants we test goal framing and attribute framing effects by combining framing theory with a causal model for public policies. We show that policy frames can increase public acceptance of market-based spatial planning policies. Moreover, we find evidence that the framing effect differs for the target group of landowners and argue that the latter's personal involvement makes them respond to specific frames. We conclude that the effects of policy frames on public acceptance crucially depend on personal involvement and that target group populations react to frames differently compared to a less directly affected population.

## 1. Introduction

Sustainable land use management is an increasingly important political issue. Negative consequences of inefficient spatial planning such as urban sprawl can be observed currently in most industrialised countries (Hasse and Lathrop, 2003; Irwin and Bockstael, 2004; Peiser, 1989; Richardson and Bae, 2004). To counteract inefficient land use and to implement sustainable spatial planning, governments introduce new spatial planning measures. Over decades, politics used spatial planning policy instruments on the basis of command-and-control regulations. Over the last years, a debate over alternative policy instruments arose (Aidt and Dutta, 2004; Böcher, 2012). One of those alternatives consists of incentive-based economic instruments, which “use the market-based coordination mechanism of prices to influence actors' behaviour” (Böcher, 2012, p. 14; see also Dargusch and Griffiths, 2008). Market-based instruments serve as an efficient solution for environmental policy problems as their incentive-based structure leads to the lowest costs for target groups (Dargusch and Griffiths, 2008; Hahn and Stavins, 1992). However, market-based policy instruments are found to lack in democratic support (Cherry et al., 2012; Stadelmann-Steffen, 2011).

The chance of these new policy measures to be implemented crucially depends on their public acceptance. One way to impact the public acceptance is by providing the public with information on a policy

measure (Gärling and Schuitema, 2007; Kallbekken and Sælen, 2011; Mallett, 2007). Scholars have largely investigated governments' information provision and how it affects policy making (e.g. Gelders, 2005; James, 2011; Jennings and Hall, 2012). Providing information can change the level of acceptance of a policy (Boomsma and Steg, 2014) and communicating benefits of a new policy is an important factor for its public acceptance (Boomsma and Steg, 2014; Gärling and Schuitema, 2007; Kallbekken and Sælen, 2011; Mallett, 2007).

The influence of the means by which information is delivered on public acceptance of policies has received relatively little research attention so far. Hardisty et al. (2010) applied framing theories for environmental taxes by presenting them either as “offset” or “tax”. Their results indicated that replacing the term “tax” by “offset” in the context of a Pigovian tax increases participants' support of a measure and increases participants' preferences for the more expensive product. Similar conclusions were drawn by Kallbekken et al. (2011, p. 63) who find “evidence that framing the Pigouvian instrument as a tax can significantly decrease support for a Pigouvian instrument.” Cherry et al. (2012) investigated acceptance determinants of three environmental instruments, namely environmental taxes, subsidies and regulations including one variable capturing language. They found language to significantly influence voters' acceptance of the tax instrument but not for subsidy or regulation. Whether and how policy frames influence the acceptance of environmental policies therefore remains a puzzling

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question. Regarding existing studies investigating framing effects on environmental or spatial planning instruments, it is striking that no systematic distinction is made between different types of framing. Framing theory argues that different types of frames have “different underlying mechanisms and consequences” (Levin et al., 1998, p. 150). Accordingly, framing effects vary depending on whether the goal or the attribute of something is framed (Levin et al., 1998). In the context of policy instruments a clear distinction between these different framing types is essential as policy instruments are embedded in a policy which pursues specific goals. Policy interventions allocate costs and benefits to certain groups in the population. At the same time, insights from behavioural studies have shown that voters’ preferences are influenced by certain policy frames depending on whether they perceive themselves in a domain of loss or in a domain of gain (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Lee and Chang, 2010). Political actors who have the capacity to build and disseminate their policy frames are able to influence the policy-making and electoral outcomes (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993).

Policy frames are not perceived the same way by all actors and often depend on the personal context such as involvement (Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990). In particular, the individual perception of unfairness is seen as a driving factor for the resistance to efficiency-enhancing measures (Eriksson et al., 2006; Fujii et al., 2004). Hence, we distinguish the policy target group which is assumed to be highly involved and therefore has a different understanding of unfairness because of their involvement, namely landowners.

This paper provides a novel experimental approach by combining framing theory with the causal model for public policies. We investigate if and how the presentation of a spatial planning measure affects citizens’ acceptance of the measure by explicitly differentiating between two different types of frames. This study explores if behavioural insights can be applied to the analysis of public acceptance of spatial planning policies. It studies how public acceptance of market-based spatial planning policy instruments can be promoted by specific policy frames that governments provide to the public. In addition, a closer look at citizens’ involvement behind policy acceptance is taken by investigating framing effects for voters who are assumed to have different levels of involvement with the measure.

The following concrete research questions are addressed in this paper: Can the loss aversion assumption be applied to the public acceptance of spatial planning policies? Does the acceptance level of a policy measure differ depending on whether its goal or attribute is framed positively or negatively? Do the policy addressees of the policy instrument respond differently to policy frames than the rest of the voters?

To answer these research questions, we combine framing theory with public policy research by investigating the influence of policy framing on policy target groups. We test two types of framing, goal framing and attribute framing, with a survey experiment among voters in Switzerland by assigning them to four different treatments consisting of different framings of a new and efficient spatial planning policy.

We study acceptance of spatial planning policy instruments in Switzerland. This has both analytical and practical reasons. Analytically, the case of Switzerland has two main advantages: First, the direct-democratic system in Switzerland leads to a high level of familiarity of Swiss citizens with direct-democratic decisions. This, in turn, increases the proximity to reality of the experiment. Second, the policy area of spatial planning is highly topical and is a source of confrontation in Switzerland and its political system leads to some particularities in this area (Horber-Papazian and Jacot-Descombes, 2013; Knoepfel and Narath, 2007; Knoepfel and Narath, 2014): Spatial planning is only crudely regulated at the federal level. More precisely, the law on spatial planning in Switzerland can be described as being “defined as a framework law” (Knoepfel and Narath, 2007, p. 721). Thus, due to the principle of subsidiarity, the sub-state levels, namely the cantonal and municipal levels, have considerably large

competencies in the area of spatial planning. Regarding private actors, individuals who are affected by a spatial planning policy measure, such as landowners, are entitled to appeal and hence have a relatively large influence in the area of spatial planning (Horber-Papazian and Jacot-Descombes, 2013). Hence, Switzerland is a suitable case for the experiment due to both, the relatively large impact of individuals in the area of spatial planning as well as the individual’s possibility of being a veto player in this policy area by making use of direct-democratic instruments. Practically, the high level of subnational autonomy and the extensive property rights imply that sustainable land use must be achieved by either changes in the law or incentives addressing land owners or both. Both are studied in our public acceptance of market-based policy instruments experiment. Our findings therefore are directly relevant for political praxis.

The paper begins with conceptualising acceptance as the phenomenon to be explained. We then present the theoretical foundation of framing theories and link them to the causal model of public policies applied for spatial planning policies. In a next step, the hypotheses are formulated before we turn to the experimental survey design, presenting the procedure, method and data. Subsequently, the results are presented and discussed. We find that target groups do in fact respond differently to frames. We discuss the political implications of this finding in the conclusion.

## 2. The phenomenon to be explained: public acceptance of spatial planning measures

When investigating public acceptance, further clarification is required as it is a broad concept, which “has been used to describe many constructs” (Dreyer & Walker, 2013, p. 345; see also Schade and Schlag, 2003). Overall, research on acceptance of public policies in related policy areas such as environmental policies lacks in a clear definition of acceptance (Dreyer & Walker, 2013, p. 345; see also Ricci et al., 2008, p. 5875). In order to contribute to concept clarification (Dermont et al., 2017, p. 359) distinguish two main perspectives on acceptance in literature: A more general approach (Wüstenhagen et al., 2007, p. 2683) in contrast to a more specific perspective on acceptance (Batel et al., 2013). The general approach does not specify the actors involved and does not account for their reactions towards policies. In contrast, the more specific approach focuses on acceptance understood as “one among various reactions” towards a new policy, for instance (Dermont et al., 2017, p. 359). In this paper, we investigate acceptance in the form of a voting decision as a response to the presentation of a spatial planning policy measure. Hence, for this paper, we apply the latter and more direct perspective, which also represents an “actor-centered approach” (Dermont et al., 2017, p. 359) and therefore is well suited for democratic acceptance focussing on voters.

A further required specification of acceptance addresses the correct wording and its theoretical implications: While the terms *acceptability*, *acceptance* and *support* are sometimes used as synonyms in the literature, some scholars use one of the terms in a consistent manner without a clear definition (Dreyer and Walker, 2013, p. 345). Dermont et al. (2017, p. 361) argue, that such a heterogeneity of terms “is not just a matter of wording but makes a substantive difference” (see also Batel et al., 2013). Within representative democracies, citizens cannot directly express their acceptance of public policies by voting decisions but only indirectly via their electoral choices. In direct-democracies, in contrast, citizens can vote for or against the introduction of new policies. When making direct-democratic decisions, voters have two main options to express their acceptance, which are either voting for or against the ballot proposal.<sup>1</sup> Following these considerations, we define

<sup>1</sup> Of course, there might be other strategies such as in the form of a protest, thereby nullifying a ballot paper on purpose. These other strategies, however, do not change the final outcome of a direct-democratic decision, which is a percentage of people voting ‘yes’

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