



RESEARCH MEMO #3

DOES PROCESS MATTER? EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE THAT POLICYMAKERS SHOULD ADVERTISE PROCESS AS WELL AS OUTCOMES

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About The Policy Lab

Our Lab has 3 main areas of focus

1. We use survey experiments to understand public opinion toward some of society's most pressing public policy issues such as fake news, political trust and artificial intelligence;
2. We do research on the Future of Women at Work to identify the barriers to achieving gender equality and inclusivity and to develop evidence based best practice for the workplace;
3. We examine the attitudes of Australians in relation to political and institutional trust, political outlooks and how these relate to attitudes towards a range of policy and societal issues.

We provide new evidence based on original data which helps governments and other public bodies develop creative solutions to pressing policy problems.

Executive Summary

This Research Memo summarises the findings of a recent academic article published by the authors (see full reference at the bottom of this memo). Using a unique survey experiment we found that the *process* by which a policy is developed is an important factor in citizens' judgement of the policy outcome. Our findings suggest that policymakers need to emphasise process when designing policy and communicate aspects of the policy process to the public.

DOES PROCESS MATTER? EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE THAT POLICYMAKERS SHOULD ADVERTISE PROCESS AS WELL AS OUTCOMES

One of the key factors that separates democracies from non-democracies is the process by which political decisions are made. Central to democratic thought is the idea that policy made in a procedurally fair manner is more legitimate than policy that violates central tenets of procedural fairness. Indeed, it would be troubling both normatively and empirically if all citizens cared about was outcomes, regardless of the process that led to them. Using a unique survey experiment we find that procedural fairness is an important factor in citizens' judgement of policy outcomes. Our findings suggest that policymakers need to emphasise process when designing policy and communicate aspects of the policy process to the public.

A UNIQUE SURVEY EXPERIMENT

What is the relationship between the policy process and citizens' support for policy outcomes? The empirical challenge is how to test this link given that the two often interact. To address this shortcoming, we designed a survey experiment in which we randomly divided respondents into two groups and presented them with a different version of a purported newspaper article describing a 'successful' policy. Respondents in the 'procedurally fair' group read that the policy was achieved following a fair process while respondents in the 'procedurally unfair' group read that the policy was achieved using an unfair (or undemocratic) process.

By presenting different information about the policy process, while keeping the information about the policy outcome constant, we were able to assess the unique impact of procedural fairness on public support for the policy outcome. This is one of the strengths of experimental research that the Lab specialises in.

The newspaper article was presented to respondents (well before COVID) as a real article published in '*WA Today*', a state-based newspaper from Western Australia (WA). (We excluded WA respondents from the sample). The article concerned a fictional town on the outskirts of Perth. We chose public transport as the policy example as a policy issue with few partisan overtones and one that is generally supported by the Australian public. Depending on the group, the article had a different headline: the 'procedurally fair' group read an article headlined: 'Fast train cuts commuting time, proves popular and surprisingly uncontroversial.' The 'procedurally unfair' group read a headline: 'Fast train cuts commuting time but remains controversial.'

Respondents in both groups read the same opening passage:

Joe Robbins lives 60 kilometres outside of Perth and used to spend several hours every day stuck in traffic. This meant missed time with his young kids, creating pollution from his car and the numerous costs and frustrations associated with travelling well in excess of 500 kilometres per week.

Today Joe walks to the nearby and newly built train station and it takes him less than 30 minutes to reach his workplace. Gowan, an area historically with little to no public transport, now has a fast train to the city. Joe now has more time with his kids and his carbon footprint is now a third of what it used to be due to reduced car emissions. He has cut his commuting

time in half and travel into work is considerably more pleasant than it used to be. Joe's wife said the mood of the household has changed remarkably as a consequence.

This is a win for the environment. But most of all it is a win for individuals like Mr Robbins. This has all been afforded by a highly effective local member, Bill Thompson, who is almost solely responsible for the project.

The second half of each article included a different description of the policy process.

The 'procedurally fair' group read:

This, like other projects of this kind, is not mired in controversy.

One of the reasons the rail line is so uncontroversial is because of the process by which it was achieved. Mr Thompson consulted with the community and citizens affected by the rail line. His office made deliberate attempts to engage those who had problems with the project. He held numerous consultation forums and invited public input. He also held a proper tendering process. He refused to cut deals that would enrich some local property developers. All in all, Mr Thompson showed high regard for fair processes that other politicians also, often grudgingly, abide by.

The results have been a startling success. Furthermore, the means by which they have been achieved are surprisingly uncontroversial.

The 'procedurally unfair' group read:

Where things become more controversial is the way that this policy was achieved.

One of the reasons the rail line is so controversial is because of the process by which it was achieved. Mr Thompson did not consult with the community and citizens affected by the rail line. His office made deliberate attempts to drown out dissent. He held no consultation forums and invited no public input. He did not hold a proper tendering process, as advised by state law. He also cut deals that enriched some local property developers who will now be given priority treatment in having housing developments approved and winning other lucrative government contracts. All in all, Mr Thompson showed little regard for fair processes that other politicians, often grudgingly, abide by.

The results have been a startling success. The means by which they have been achieved are controversial.

EVIDENCE THAT PROCESS MATTERS TO CITIZENS

After reading the article, respondents were asked to evaluate the policy. The findings (reported in full in our article) found that while only 15% of those in the 'procedurally unfair' group saw

the process by which the policy was achieved as positive or very positive, 93% of those in the ‘procedurally fair’ group did. Similarly, only 14% in the ‘procedurally unfair’ group approved or strongly approved of the means used by Mr Thompson compared to 93% in the ‘procedurally fair’ group.

We found similar findings when respondents were asked to rate the outcome of the policy. Respondents in the ‘procedurally fair’ group evaluated the policy as more successful and more legitimate. In percentage terms, 49% in the ‘procedurally unfair’ group called it a success compared to 89% in the ‘procedurally fair’ group. Importantly, respondents in the ‘procedurally fair’ group rated the outcome as more legitimate. 13% of respondents in the ‘procedurally unfair’ group called it legitimate or completely legitimate compared to 83% in the ‘procedurally fair’ group.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKING

The process by which policy is developed is central to how we think about democracy. In a democracy, a policy delivered through an unfair process is thought to be less legitimate than a policy delivered through a fair and transparent process. Indeed, previous work on ‘stealth democracy’ arguing that citizens only care about outcomes (Hibbing and Theiss Morse, 2002) is jarring to many from a normative perspective because it questions what is often regarded as a key component of democracy – how political decisions are made.

Our findings provide some grounds for optimism by showing that procedural fairness does matter in the evaluation of policy outcomes. Respondents in the ‘procedurally fair’ group in our study were much more likely to approve of the policy process. Importantly, perceptions of the process fed into perceptions of the policy legitimacy: that is, fair procedural arrangements increased perceptions of outcome legitimacy to the extent that participants perceived them to be fairer. These findings support the contention that ‘Citizens do not care only about “what” regimes deliver: they also care about “how” regimes work. When the state apparatus, political institutions, and public officials are perceived to be fair and transparent, impartial and fair, satisfaction with democracy also rises’ (Magalhães 2017, 169).

While we examined one important policy area future research should test to what extent the findings apply to different policies, policy outcomes, and political contexts. Further, we have examined an issue that we believe is important to many people and one without too many partisan overtones (in the Australian context). However, we do not know how the results would generalise to federal issues or controversial issues with strong partisan overtones and/or where complex trade-offs are required.

One of the unanswered questions relates to how much citizens know about the policy process and how governments and public agencies can advertise this. Another important question for policymakers concerns how to communicate procedural fairness at a time of distrust. Governments and policymakers will rightly want to advertise outcomes rather than process, and this is what governments and policymakers routinely do. However, our findings suggest that government (and other public agencies) should also highlight procedural fairness in their communications as this is an important component of how citizens view policy.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The findings described in this research memo are reported in full in:

Martin A, Mikołajczak G, Orr R. Does process matter? Experimental evidence on the effect of procedural fairness on citizens' evaluations of policy outcomes. *International Political Science Review*. March 2020. doi:[10.1177/0192512120908874](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120908874)

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Magalhães, Pedro C. (2017). Economic outcomes, quality of governance, and satisfaction with democracy. In Carolien van Ham, J. Thomassen, Kees Aarts, and R Andeweg (eds.), *Myth and reality of the legitimacy crisis explaining trends and cross-national differences in established democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.