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The Link Between Transparency, Understanding, and Policy Support

Advances in information and communications technology have, at once, placed pressure on governments to expand public disclosure and diversified the range of tools they can use to do so. In most cases, efforts to expand public disclosure of government information are viewed as beneficial.

As they relate to citizens, discussions surrounding the benefits of transparency often make two very important assumptions: 1) that irrespective of the way information is presented, citizens understand the content they are exposed to and 2) that citizens who understand government information will exhibit attitudes and behaviors that differ from those who do not. However, there have been few systematic attempts to evaluate these assumptions.

In a recent project, we explore the extent to which these assumptions hold. Specifically, we examine how different ways of presenting the same content shape citizen understanding and how different levels of understanding correlate with levels of policy support.

Using Transparency to Enhance Policy Support

Individuals who understand policies tend to support them more than those who do not understand them, even when the policies may not benefit them.

Given the link between understanding and policy support, transparency is proposed as a means of improving support for public policies, provided the information being publicly disclosed actually improves citizens' understanding of a policy.

When discussing the link between transparency and policy understanding, conventional wisdom tends to emphasize content and overlooks the importance of presentation. Specifically, conventional wisdom tends to adhere to the notion that the key to engendering a more informed public lies in bringing more government content into the public domain. However, if the principle objective of transparency is to engender a more informed and understanding public, this oversight is problematic.

In particular, as research from educational psychology suggests, our understanding of new information is heavily influenced by the way information is presented. In

this sense, our ability to understand content is heavily influenced by the way new content is presented. In our study, we focus on two dimensions of presentation – level of detail and format.

The level of detail, or number of facts and figures, embedded in a message is important because individuals face hard cognitive constraints. As the level of detail in a message increases, the harder an individual must work to understand the message, thereby decreasing the likelihood that the message will be understood. Put differently, the more details embedded in a message, the less likely that message will be understood.

Presentation format, or the way information in a message is organized, also bears on an individual's ability to understand new information. This is because the organization of content determines how hard an individual must work to pick out key points that are embedded in the message. One method of manipulating presentation format pertains to breaking text up into shorter, point-specific blocks of text. Put differently, reducing the density of information embedded in a message will make the content in the message easier to understand.

All told, we draw three hypotheses:

1) On average, exposure to less detailed policy content will increase policy understanding.
2) The positive effect of less detailed policy content on policy understanding will be stronger when information is in a segmented format and weaker when content is presented in block paragraph format.
3) Policy understanding will be positively correlated with policy support.

Research Design

To investigate these hypotheses we used a survey experiment where a nationally representative sample of U.S. citizens were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups – 1) low detail, block paragraph format 2) high detail, block paragraph format 3) low detail, segmented format 4) high detail, segmented format. We then examined the relationship between levels of understanding and policy support.

For the high detail treatment groups, specific facts and figures were embedded in the message, whereas for the low detail treatment groups, specific facts and figures were replaced with general terms, such as 'some' or 'a few'. For the segmented format, the message was divided into point-specific bullet points, whereas for block paragraph format, the information was presented in a single block of text. All of the messages possessed a similar number of words and were otherwise identical.

We assessed policy understanding along two dimensions: perceived understanding and objective understanding. To measure objective understanding, we asked participants nine multiple-choice items pertaining to the message they read. To measure perceived understanding, we asked participants two questions – the first asking them to rate their level of policy understanding, and the second asking them how many questions out of seven they would be able to correctly answer.

The policy in question dealt with an initiative by a local school district to increase STEM education opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. We gauged support by asking participants how much of their annual income (up to 5%) they would be willing to commit, on a one-time basis, to a policy like this.

Results

In evaluating hypothesis 1, we find that higher levels of detail had no significant effect on participants' levels of objective policy understanding – those assigned to the treatment groups with facts and figures, on average, answered 5.3 items out of nine correctly, whereas those assigned to the treatments that used general terms answered 5.51 items correctly, on average.

However, we also find that those assigned to the high detail treatment had lower levels of perceived understanding than those assigned to the low detail treatment group. All told, exposure to more detailed information did not affect objective understanding, but did result in participants feeling they understood the material less.

In evaluating hypothesis 2, we find that the effect of detail on objective and perceived understanding varied when the information was presented in a segmented format. Specifically, when combined with the segmented format, those exposed to the low detail policy information responded correctly to more questions than those exposed to the high detail policy information.

In fact, participants exposed to the low detail, segmented format condition had the highest levels of policy understanding, of the four treatment groups, whereas participants exposed to the high detail, segmented format had the lowest levels of policy understanding.

On the other hand, when information was presented in a block paragraph format, there was no significant variation across treatment groups in terms of understanding. All told, these results indicate that the effects of the message appear to vary significantly according to the way content is formatted.

Regarding hypothesis 3, including measures of objective and subjective understanding allows us to identify a nuanced relationship between policy understanding and policy support. Specifically, our results point to a negative correlation between objective policy understanding and policy support – those who scored higher in terms of policy understanding exhibited lower levels of support than those who scored lower. Conversely, those who had higher levels of perceived policy understanding scored higher in policy support than those with lower levels of perceived policy support.

Moreover, assessing policy support at different levels of objective and perceived policy understanding, we observe that individuals with the highest levels of policy support were those who felt they understood the policy the best, but in an objective sense, understood it the least.

Finally, our results also speak to the presence of a novel effect of policy transparency on policy support, which occurs via objective policy understanding. Interestingly, our results also point to a positive indirect effect of high detail policy information on policy support, but only when the information is presented in a segmented format. This is because information presented in the high detail, segmentation format reduced levels of objective policy understanding, which in turn mitigated the negative relationship between objective policy understanding and policy support. Put differently, by reducing objective policy understanding, the high detail, segmented format information actually increased policy support.

No significant indirect effects were found to occur via perceived understanding.

What Do These Findings Mean for Practice?

While governments are often under pressure to bring more information into the public domain, our findings indicate that if a central objective of public disclosure is to enhance citizens' understanding of government, bringing content to the public alone is not enough. Rather, in order for this information to be understood, efforts must also be made to present this information in ways that are readily understandable. In this study, we identify two methods of presentation that render government information more understandable: reducing the number of facts and figures in a message and segmenting the content.

Additionally, our findings speak to a need to think more carefully about the effects of policy understanding. Indeed, just as transparency can play an important role in empowering citizens to act in their own best interests, it can also breed confusion

and result in citizens supporting policies that potentially violate their best interests. In this sense, in order to ensure that transparency truly empowers citizens to act in their own best interests, efforts must be made not only to ensure that the right information makes its way to the public domain, but also that this information is presented in ways that are conducive to understanding.

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