How to increase public support for policy: understanding citizens' perspectives

blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/how-to-increase-public-support-for-policy-citizens-frames-as-test-conditions/

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Policy-makers, we presume, want to solve social problems. Therefore, they select policy measures. In practice, these measures tend to trigger different reactions in society. How might a government avoid bad reactions, such as the tuition fees protests and 'bedroom tax' campaigns? **Peter van Wijck** *and* **Bert Niemeijer** *present a conceptual framework to which looks to align the perspectives of policymakers and citizens.*
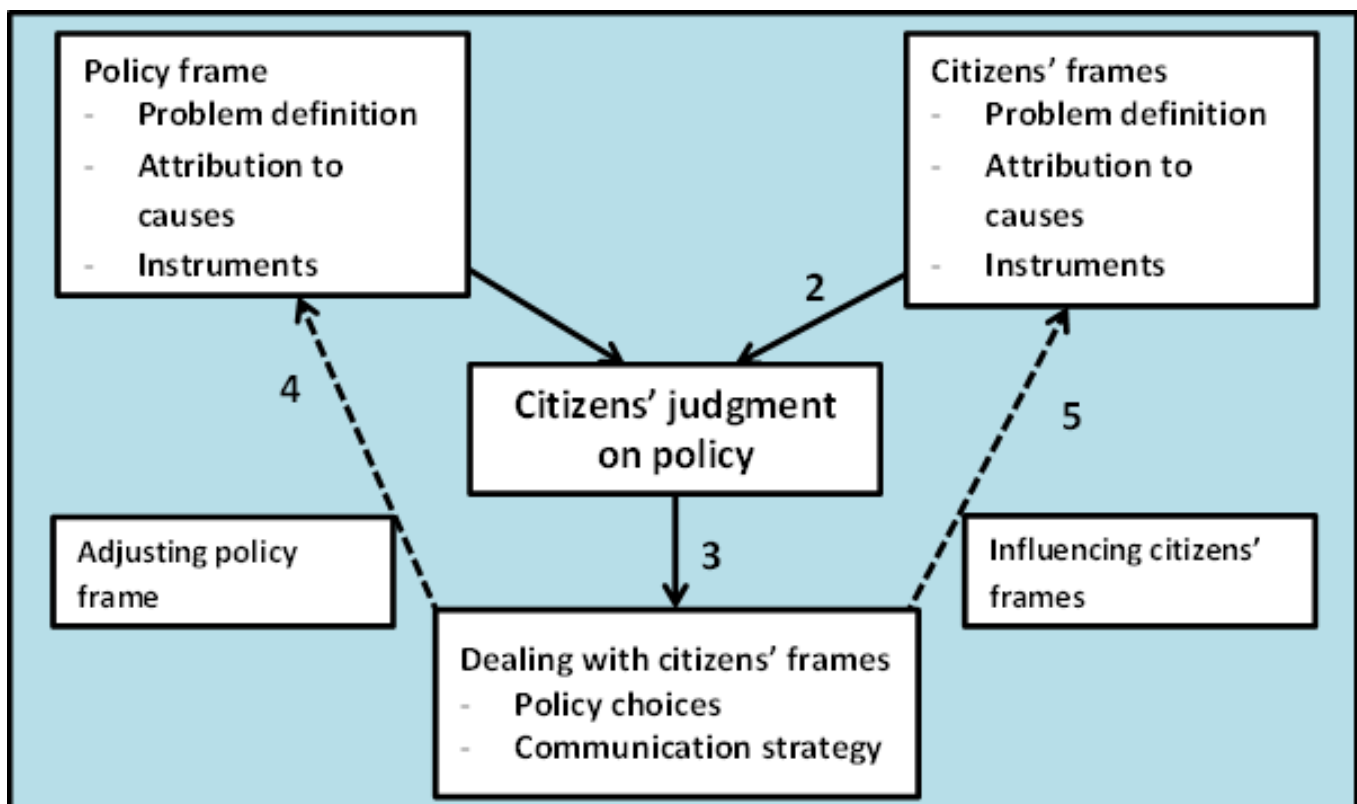
To increase public support, it is essential to anticipate what reactions they will have to policy. But how to do that? Our framework combines insights from scenario planning and frame analysis. Scenario planning starts from the premise that we cannot predict the future. We can, however, imagine different plausible scenarios, different plausible future developments. Scenarios can be used to ask a 'what if' question. If a certain scenario were to develop, what policy measures would be required? By the same token, scenarios may be used as test-conditions for policy-measures. Kees van der Heijden calls this 'wind tunnelling'.

Frame-analysis is about how we interpret the world around us. Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. Based on a frame, an individual perceives societal problems, attributes these problems to causes, and forms ideas on instruments to address the problems. Our central idea is that policy-makers may use citizens' frames to reflect on their policy frame. Citizens' frames may, in other words, be used to test conditions in a wind tunnel. The line of reasoning is summarized in the figure.

Policy frames versus citizens' frames

The starting-points of the figure are the policy frame and the citizens' frames. Arrow 1 and 2 indicate that citizens' reactions depend on both frames. A citizen can be expected to respond positively in case of frame alignment. Negative responses can be expected if policy-makers do not address "the real problems", do not attribute problems to "the real causes", or do not select "adequate instruments". If frames do not align, policy-makers are faced with the question of how to deal with it (arrow 3). First, they may reconsider the policy frame (arrow 4). That is, are there reasons to reconsider the definition of problems, the attribution to causes, and/or the selection of instruments? Such a "reframing" effectively amounts to the formulation of a new (or adjusted) policy-frame. Second, policy-makers may try to influence citizens' frames (arrow 5). This may lead to a change in what citizens define as problems, what they consider to be the causes of problems and what they consider to be adequate instruments to deal with the problems.

Two cases: support for victims and confidence in the judiciary

To apply our framework in practice, we developed a three-step method. Firstly, we reconstruct the policy frame. Here we investigate what policy-makers see as social problems, what they assume to be the causes of these problems, and what they consider to be appropriate instruments to address these problems. Secondly, we reconstruct contrasting citizens' frames. Here we use focus groups, where contrasting groups are selected based on a segmentation model. Finally, we engage in a "wind tunnelling exercise". We present the citizens' frames to policy-makers. And we ask them to reflect on the question of how the different groups can be expected to react on the policy measures selected by the policy-makers. In fact, this step is what Schön and Rein called "frame reflection".

We applied the framework to two cases within the Dutch ministry of security and justice. The first one is on support for victims, the second on confidence in the judiciary. Our case studies suggest that our approach actually helps policy-makers to put themselves in the shoes of different types of citizens. It helps policy-makers to understand why a policy measure may trigger dissimilar reactions from different groups.

The case on confidence in the judiciary provides an example. For the members of one of our focus groups, an increase in the efficiency of legal procedures helps in increasing confidence. The members of another focus group are hardly interested in efficiency; they want to be treated empathically. For this group, an increase in efficiency tends to decrease confidence in the judiciary. Our case studies indicate that presenting different citizens' frames legitimise policy-makers to think in terms that differ from the official policy frame. This helps policy-makers to understand why a policy measure that makes sense in terms of the policy theory may trigger different negative reactions in society.

Please note: this blog is based on the paper 'Scenario planning meets frame analysis: Using citizens' frames as test conditions for policy measures', published in Futures vol.77 (2016), pages 28-44.

About the Authors

Peter van Wijck is associate professor of law and economics at Leiden University, The Netherlands.

Bert Niemeijer is professor of sociology of law at VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands and Dean of the Academy of Legislation, The Hague, The Netherlands.