

RESEARCH INSIGHTS



How Can Governments Build Trust?



Feedback on government performance can affect how much citizens trust government. The City of Buenos Aires ran an experiment testing different *framings* of government performance and their impact on citizen's perceptions of institutional trust.



Government perceptions were not changed by a language of empathy nor efficiency in communications, but trust was increased by providing positive feedback.



The effect of communications had a significantly smaller impact on those already familiar with performance information, suggesting that providing information can have a long-lasting effect on citizens' perceptions of government efficiency.

CONTEXT

In the last few decades, corruption scandals and poor performance of democracies have eroded public trust in institutions across Latin America. On the other hand, numerous studies have found that if citizens do not believe that a government will make good on its promises, their participation in the demand of public goods decreases, leading to negative welfare consequences. For this experiment, the City of Buenos Aires measured the effect that various framings of information about government performance had on perceptions of government transparency and trust in government.

THE PROJECT

An online questionnaire was designed to elicit information about transparency; perceptions of the competence, benevolence, and honesty of the government; and citizens' confidence in the government. All 1,999 participants were randomized between treatment and control and were contacted by phone. Those in the control group were asked about their perceptions regarding the transparency of the municipal government before they were shown the information treatments on the government's commitments, and those in the treatment group received the questionnaire afterwards.

Key Concept



TRUST

Refers to the situation when one party is willing to rely on the actions of another party in a future situation.

Key Concept



FEEDBACK

An effective tool to enhance awareness of choice consequences, as it allows to fill a knowledge gap and fosters the search for efficient alternatives.

RESULTS

These results have significant implications for government communication efforts.

1. First, they highlight the importance of actively providing information to citizens to enhance transparency.
2. Second, they highlight that individuals may not care that much about the framing of the message. Specifically, in this experiment, an angle of empathy was just as trustworthy as a message of government efficiency.
3. Finally, the effects on those exposed to this information for the first time turned out to be more than twice as large compared to those who were familiar with government performance.
4. Therefore, increasing transparency perceptions must go beyond providing information on a website. The channel between transparency and trust is mediated by several factors, including government performance.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. Providing feedback on government performance is important for building trust in government. Thus, providing information on good performance to citizens is an effective tool to maintain civic engagement.
2. If citizens believe governments only share their best results or that news reports may be fabricated, the value of the signals diminishes and may even disappear altogether. This confirms that trust can be linked to honest policymakers who are considered competent.
3. At the time of this study, there was a dedicated website on the government's commitment which more than 40 percent of respondents had never seen or heard of. To improve citizens' perceptions about transparency as much as possible, governments should make information available to all the citizens.

Key Concept

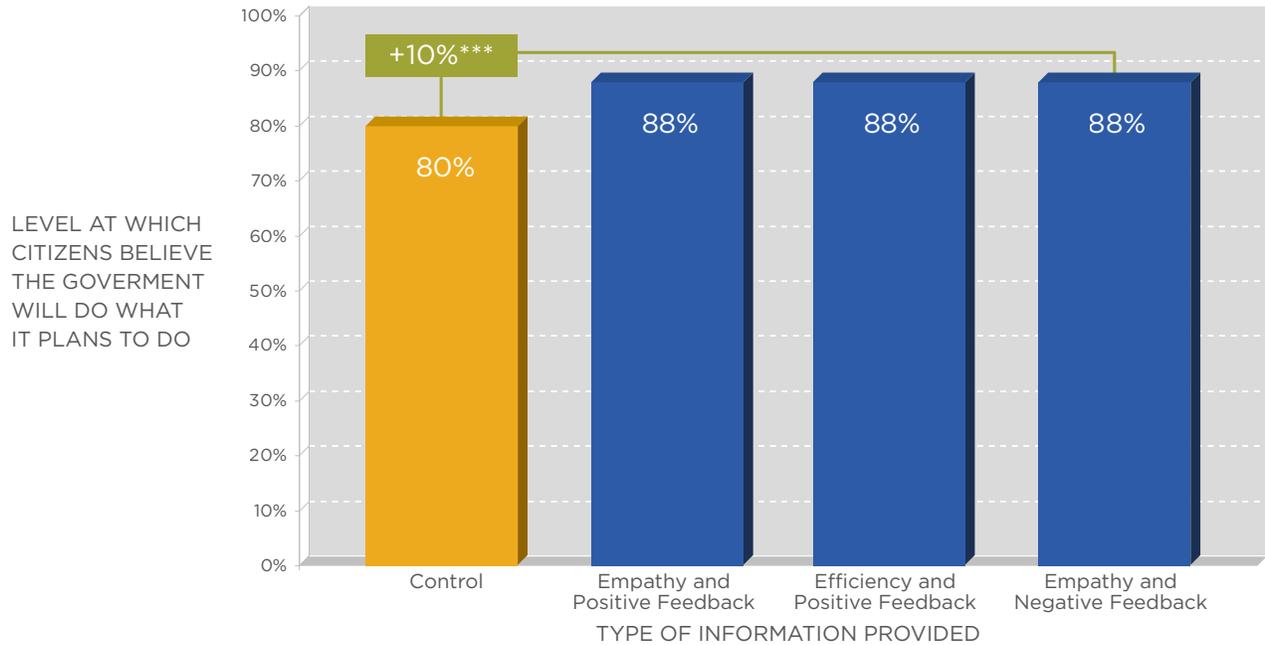


FRAMING EFFECT

Tendency to reach different conclusions depending on how the information is presented.

For example, options can be presented in ways that highlight positive or negative aspects of a decision, causing each option to be perceived as more - or less - attractive.

Figure 1: Information and Trust in Government



*, **, and *** denote statistical significance at the 10, 5 and 1 percent level, respectively.

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FULL STUDY

Alessandro, M., B. Cardinale Lago-marsino, C. Scartascini, and J. Torreal-day. 2019. "Transparency and Trust in Government: Evidence from a Survey Experiment."

DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH AND CHIEF ECONOMIST

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