

# Reactance or Rationalization? Predicting Public Responses to Government Policy

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## Abstract

The public's attitudes toward new governmental laws and regulations are frequently at the forefront of public policy debates. Will the public react negatively to a newly implemented public safety regulation or embrace the change? Does the public's initial favorability toward a proposed environmental policy indicate public opinion and compliance if such a law passed? Social psychological research directly explores these questions and provides insight into how specific policy designs and implementations can shape public response to new regulations. People may exhibit one of two contrasting responses to policies: reactance or rationalization. When a rule is imposed, individuals often display reactance—exaggerating the value of the behavior being banned or restricted. However, individuals also frequently show an opposite, perhaps less conspicuous, tendency—They rationalize government policy; that is, they diminish alternatives and actively justify why the imposed regulations are favorable. In experiments, two factors—individuals' attentional focus and a policy's apparent absoluteness—determine whether people react against or rationalize policies that seek to restrict their behavior. In other evidence, people's motivation to defend the status quo may hinder—but also facilitate—support for public policy changes. The implications can guide public policy design and implementation.

## Keywords

psychological reactance, system justification, rationalization, restrictive policy, policy attitudes

## Tweet

People either rationalize or resist government regulation, depending on their motives for system support or personal autonomy.

## Key Points

- Psychology helps predict public response to government policy, including public safety, emigration reform, and environmental regulation.
- Sometimes people rationalize restrictive policies, their response triggered by needing to view the governing system as legitimate and desirable.
- Reactance is a resistant response induced by individuals' desire for freedom and autonomy.
- Decisions made by policymakers designing and implementing new policies can shape public attitudes toward them.

## Introduction

On March 29, 2004, Ireland became the first country in the world to institute a workplace-smoking ban. The new law prohibited people from smoking in most enclosed workplaces, including restaurants and pubs. When initially

proposed, the ban met largely negative reactions. The Vintners' Federation of Ireland called the legislation “unnecessary, unworkable, and unjustified.” Ireland's national tobacco-control advisor publicly doubted that pub-goers would comply with the new law once it came into effect (Selcraig, 2014). Only 59% of the public favored the ban (Action on Smoking and Health, 2004). Yet, after it came into effect, something unexpected happened—public opinion shifted, and people overwhelmingly complied with the new regulation. One month after the smoking ban, compliance was 97% (Office of Tobacco Control, 2004). Four months later, polls showed that 82% of the public supported the ban (Howell, 2005).

This historical event suggests two potential psychological responses to new government policies—*reactance* and *rationalization*. “Reactance” is people's tendency to respond negatively to restrictions—resisting the constraint and increasingly valuing the restricted behavior (J. W. Brehm, 1966; S. S. Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Conversely, “rationalization” is the

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opposing tendency: the propensity to adapt to constraints—adjusting in favor of the restriction to psychologically cope with unchangeable circumstances (Festinger, 1957; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002). Both psychological processes, though contradictory, have strong scientific support (Laurin, Kay, Proudfoot, & Fitzsimons, 2013). That is, people often react against rules and regulations, but they also frequently rationalize and adapt to them. An emerging program of social psychological research directly explores when people respond each way in confronting restrictive policies.

Initial public responses to Ireland's smoking ban suggest reactance against the proposed change. However, the ultimate turn of events suggests rationalization. Pre-implementation, public sentiments indicated non-compliance or even backlash. As the ban's implementation neared, individuals dissented, and public attitudes were largely negative. Despite the new regulation's initial unpopularity, once enacted, the public responded positively. Favorability toward the smoking ban jumped 23% once the ban was actually in place. This shift in public opinion suggests a transition from psychological reactance to its opposite, rationalization.

What variables influence whether an individual reacts against a new restriction or rationalizes it? While Ireland's smoking ban usefully contrasts reactance and rationalization, any historical event is multiply determined and ambiguous about causality. However, experimental research directly investigates the causal link between specific contexts and policy attitudes—specifying when, all else equal, people will show reactance or rationalization toward the regulations that govern their behavior. Decisions made by policymakers during the design and implementation of new policies can shape public attitudes toward them.

This article reviews experiments that identify two factors—attentional focus and perceived policy absoluteness—that trigger whether people react against or rationalize restrictive policies (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Laurin, Kay, et al., 2013). A broader research program, from the perspective of system justification (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), demonstrates people's general tendency to embrace the status quo. People's motivation to defend their socio-political system may either hinder or facilitate support for public policy changes. Although people's tendency to idealize prevailing socio-political structural arrangements makes them unlikely to respond positively toward policy changes (Kay et al., 2009), this motivation may be harnessed to garner support for new rules and regulations, via “system-sanctioned change” (Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010).

This article does not argue for any specific policy or political position. Rather, it presents scientific evidence demonstrating how policy design and implementation may trigger individual-level tendencies either to react against or to rationalize the imposed changes, providing insights into how one might devise and roll out new policies. In contrasting psychological reactance (J. W. Brehm, 1966) with rationalization processes suggested by system justification (Jost et al.,

2004), our goal is not to advocate one perspective over the other. Rather, we outline what the empirical evidence suggests about situations predicting a particular psychological process and associated attitudinal outcome.

The research cuts across several policy domains—including public safety laws, emigration reform, and environmental regulations. Much of the research focuses on government-imposed restrictions that limit the public's behavioral freedoms. Therefore, because the psychological effects of perceived restrictions are central to understanding how individuals may be motivated to respond, our insights pertain specifically to policies that limit individuals' behavioral choices.

### **Reactance Versus Rationalization: Motivational Underpinnings**

Individuals' responses to restrictions—whether rationalizing or reacting against them—are, at least partly, a motivated process, stemming from underlying psychological needs triggered by the constraining rule. Although rationalization is triggered by needing to view the governing system as legitimate, reactance is induced by individuals' desire for autonomy.

Psychological reactance approaches (J. W. Brehm, 1966; Wicklund, 1974) predict that individuals will respond with backlash to rules that attempt to restrict their freedom; that is, they will react against such attempts with hostile attitudes toward the restrictive rule and increasingly positive attitudes toward the particular choice that was lost. Reactance against perceived restrictions appears in a variety of public policy relevant domains. For instance, public health messages warning people about smoking's harmful effects can “boomerang,” increasing smokers' desire for a cigarette (Hyland & Birrell, 1979). Banning environmentally harmful phosphate detergents can increase consumer favorability toward the banned detergents (Mazis, Settle, & Leslie, 1973). Appeals to healthy eating can lead people to make unhealthier food choices (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004). These responses fit reactance's central premise—that attempts to limit or control individuals' behavior threaten personal choice, so people adopt contrary attitudes to reassert their independence.

Conversely, system justification (Jost et al., 2004) suggests the opposite prediction—people adapt behavior and shape preferences to match restrictive policies. This tendency can stem from individuals' need to avoid the psychological threat of acknowledging that their governing system might have drawbacks (Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Kay & Zanna, 2009). That is, people desire to see their social system as just and will rationalize a system's rules to preserve their positive view. Much as individuals often rationalize their own counter-attitudinal choices by bringing their attitudes in line with the actions they have taken (Aronson, 1973; Festinger, 1957), people also rationalize their system's imposed choices, enabling them to stay satisfied under adverse circumstances.

Individuals may rationalize system policies by adjusting their attitudes, adopting new beliefs, or endorsing explanations that bolster the legitimacy of a government decision. For example, told of new policies that restrict their ability to leave their country, individuals become more supportive of their country's government and its policies (Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010). Likewise, after reading about how society restricts women from high-level positions in business, both men and women viewed this reality as more legitimate (Kay et al., 2009). Note that rationalization is not mere passive acceptance of unwanted constraints, but an active process of bolstering support for the current state of affairs. Hence, while individuals may, at times, exhibit reactance in the face of regulations that constrain their behavior, they also demonstrate a capacity to rationalize these restrictive contexts.

Suppose, in an effort to reduce traffic congestion and mitigate air pollution, the government instituted mandatory “no-drive days” wherein owners of private vehicles in all major cities were allowed to drive their cars within city limits only 4 out of 7 days per week. How would the public respond? Psychological reactance and system justification offer contrasting predictions. If such a rule was imposed, would city drivers adopt more negative attitudes toward driving restrictions and experience an enhanced desire to drive their cars whenever and wherever they wanted? Or would they rationalize this new constraint on their driving behavior, downplaying its inconvenience and increasingly favoring public transport? The next section describes key factors predicting which response will more likely ensue.

### Scientific Evidence: Factors Promoting Reactance Versus Rationalization

Two key psychological factors influence whether people react against government restrictions or rationalize them: attentional focus and the policy's apparent absoluteness.

#### *Attentional Focus*

Reactance may occur mainly when people fully devote their attention to carefully assessing their attitudes about a particular restriction (Laurin, Kay, et al., 2013). Reactance is driven mainly by consciously held values, such as the importance of freedom and choice. Without attentional focus, rationalization may be more likely. Rationalization is driven by a more unconscious need to maintain a positive view of the system that governs one's behavior—a desire mainly outside of individuals' awareness (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Thus, while rationalization processes likely unfold without conscious attention, when attentive, individuals are more likely to use explicitly held values to guide their decision making.

Experiments support this analysis. In general, research participants rationalize restrictive policies when distracted or cognitively taxed or when their attention is not drawn to the

restrictive nature of the policy. But when their attention is drawn directly to it and they have time to deliberate, reactance ensues instead. In one such study (Laurin, Kay, et al., 2013, Study 2), Canadian participants were told about a fictitious policy change in Canada, presented as a real change in regulations surrounding citizens' ability to emigrate. Participants in one randomly assigned group were told that a highly restrictive policy change was coming into place—one that would make it increasingly difficult for them to emigrate out of Canada in the future. Participants in a baseline group were told about a non-restrictive policy change—that new policy was going to make it increasingly easier for them to leave Canada.

After learning about the change in emigration policy, participants in both groups were asked two questions about their attitudes toward restricted emigration: First, they rated how bothered they would be to not be able to move out of Canada—a question designed not to directly cue careful thinking. The second question, conversely, probed participants more directly about their attitudes toward having their emigration rights taken away—asking them explicitly whether they thought there were valid reasons for preventing people from moving out of their country.

Consistent with the prediction that people rationalize restrictions when they are not cued to think carefully, participants told that policy changes would hinder their leaving Canada reported that they were less personally bothered by restricted emigration—in effect, downplaying its subjective negativity compared with baseline participants. However, rationalization only occurred when these participants were asked the first indirect question about their personal preference. By contrast, when participants were asked the second question that directly tapped their opinions on the issue of restricted emigration, the opposite occurred: Participants exhibited reactance against the restrictive policy—expressing more critical attitudes toward such a policy compared with baseline participants. All participants were fully debriefed.

In another illustrative study (Laurin, Kay, et al., 2013, Study 3), individuals' attention was manipulated using a different method—putting time pressure on some participants. Using the same fictitious emigration policy, all participants answered the direct question that tapped whether they agreed that there are few valid reasons for restricting emigration, with agreement indicating more criticism of the policy. However, some participants learned that they were under time pressure and should answer the question as fast as possible. The other participants learned that they had as much time as they needed and to think carefully about the question.

When participants had time to carefully consider their response, they showed reactance. That is, participants who learned their emigration freedoms would be restricted more strongly believed that there were few valid reasons for restricting emigration, compared with baseline. However,

when instructed to give their opinions quickly, participants demonstrated the opposite tendency—They were less critical of such a policy compared with baseline.

In these illustrative experiments, reactance is the likely response when people have the attentional resources to carefully consider their response and when people's attitudes are directly assessed, providing a clear opportunity to express their opposition to the imposed restriction. Conversely, rationalization is most likely to occur when policy-relevant attitudes are assessed more indirectly and in situations only allowing for individuals' initial "gut" response.

### Absoluteness

The absoluteness of a restrictive policy has also been shown to predict whether people are likely to react against it or rationalize and adapt to it. People are motivated to idealize their existing social system and its rules (Kay et al., 2009). Beyond this general tendency to rationalize what currently exists, people justify their system when it seems particularly stable (Laurin, Gaucher, & Kay, 2013). That is, when current practices seem unlikely to change, people are more likely to rationalize—psychologically adapting to the inevitable.

People apparently adapt to, and rationalize, restrictive policies that seem permanent and unchangeable—that is, absolute. Conversely, when policies seem uncertain or changeable, reactance may become viable, as people perceive their freedoms as potentially retainable.

Consider, for example, a study examining attitudes toward reducing speed limits (Laurin et al., 2012, Study 1). In this experiment, participants in one group were told about new legislation in their municipality that would reduce speed limits for drivers and that this legislation was definitely coming into effect (i.e., it was absolute). In another group, participants were told about the same legislation, but they learned that it would come into effect only if the majority of government officials voted for it, which they likely would (i.e., it was non-absolute). Remaining participants, assigned to a baseline control group, were only told that experts had found that reduced speed limits improved road safety but were given no information about new speed limit restrictions. This design tested how the policy's apparent absoluteness would affect participants' attitudes toward speed limit restrictions. All participants in the study were asked how much they supported reducing speed limits and how annoyed they would be at such a change.

Participants told that the policy was definitely coming into effect (i.e., was absolute) rationalized—They expressed more support and less annoyance toward reduced speed limits compared with baseline participants. However, participants told that the policy was only *likely* reacted against it compared with baseline. Only frequent drivers responded this way, that is, people who would actually be personally affected by the policy change. This underscores the motivated nature of reactance and rationalization—Individuals

only need to rationalize or react when their own outcomes are potentially affected by the restrictive policy.

Another experiment (Laurin et al., 2012, Study 2) focused on responses to a ban on cell phone use while driving. In this experiment, participants were either assigned to a baseline group or were told about a new law that would prohibit them from using their cell phone while driving. The absoluteness of this policy was varied by telling different groups of participants that this ban was either definitely taking effect, was very likely to take effect, or was somewhat likely to take effect. This allowed for a comparison, to baseline, of responses when the restriction was absolute and when it was non-absolute, but to different degrees. After learning about the ban, all participants were asked how important it was to them to use their cell phone while driving.

When the cell phone ban was only *very likely* or *somewhat likely*, that is, uncertain, participants reacted against it, rating cell phone use during driving as more important to them compared with baseline participants. However, participants told that the policy was definitely coming into effect downplayed how important it was to them compared with baseline, providing evidence of rationalization. Again, this pattern of results was only seen when the restriction applied to participants personally.

Altogether, people may respond to restrictions imposed on them with rationalization when the policy is sure to come into effect, and respond with reactance when there is any degree of uncertainty surrounding whether the policy will be enacted.

### Embeddedness in the System

A more broadly defined factor influencing how people may respond to new policies is how much the policy seems tied to the overarching social system. People tend to see what currently exists as inherently good (Eidelman, Crandall, & Pattershall, 2009). Individuals are also motivated to bolster the current state of affairs and derogate what deviates from it, judging the way things are as the way things should be (Kay et al., 2009). This motivation leads people to endorse the legitimacy of the current social system (Jost et al., 2004).

This research does not directly focus on rationalization versus reactance in the context of restrictions, but instead speaks more broadly to when people are more or less likely to rationalize and justify policy decisions. It points to a more general phenomenon: People's tendency to see their social system positively may hinder support for changes to that system (both restrictive and non-restrictive). Generally, people's preference for the status quo will lead them to justify existing policies, particularly ones that they perceive as strongly embedded within the current social structure. This may be true even when the policy in question is abhorrent to many. For instance, Americans have increasingly justified the military's use of torture in the Middle East, when these practices seem part of long-standing traditions, rather than newly implemented (Crandall, Eidelman, Skitka, & Morgan, 2009).

This tendency to prefer the status quo suggests that policies especially central to the overarching socio-political system (i.e., pertaining to its core values or ideologies) are likely to be most strongly defended. Psychological motivation to bolster the status quo, while usually predicting people's tendency to favor existing regulations over alternatives, may actually be harnessed to garner support for policy changes (Feygina et al., 2010). In this study, it was predicted that individuals' motivation to justify their current system would lead to lack of support for pro-environmental policy reform; however, when support for pro-environmental policy changes was framed as preserving the overarching system, this tendency would attenuate. In other words, by framing a policy change as enhancing the prevailing system, rather than changing it, participants should be increasingly motivated to endorse it.

To test this prediction, American research participants were assigned to one of two groups. Participants in the control group were told that researchers were interested in the relationship between people and the environment. Participants in the other group were told this same information and were also told that being pro-environmental was patriotic and protected the American way of life. All participants were then asked about their pro-environmental behavioral intentions (i.e., to recycle, to reduce their carbon footprint), as well as whether they would sign a series of petitions supporting pro-environmental policy reforms.

Participants in the control group who possessed a strong desire to defend the existing American system were less inclined to engage in pro-environmental behaviors and showed less support for pro-environmental policy changes compared with participants with weaker system-justifying tendencies. In other words, the system justification motive made individuals increasingly hostile to system changes. However, when participants with a strong motivation to defend the American system were told that being pro-environmental was in service of the system, the effect reversed—These participants were *more* favorable to pro-environmental behaviors and more supportive of petitions aimed at making pro-environmental policy changes, compared with participants with a weaker system justification motive. In this case, the system justification motive made individuals more likely to embrace policy change. This research demonstrates that the desire to defend the status quo may have opposing effects, with the potential to hinder, but also facilitate, support for system changes. This study is unique in demonstrating that individuals' desire to defend their existing socio-political system may actually be harnessed to increase support for policy change, when that change is framed as preserving, rather than threatening, the status quo.

## Implications for Policy Design and Implementation

What factors predict whether the public will react negatively to a government regulation or embrace the change? Does the public's initial favorability toward a proposed policy indicate

public opinion and compliance if such a law passed? The illustrative research suggests preliminary insight into these questions and, in doing so, suggests some practical implications to test for public policy design and implementation.

First, the potential role of attentional focus in predicting policy responses (Laurin, Kay, et al., 2013) suggests that the public may be more likely to react negatively to restrictive policies when circumstances draw attention directly to how the policy limits their freedom. In contrast, rationalization, and more positive attitudes toward the restriction, seems more likely when the situation does not cue individuals to explicitly evaluate the regulation's constraining nature. This implies that the way restrictive policies are framed to the public may trigger these opposing tendencies. Consider, for example, the framing of legislation in the United States preventing same-sex couples from obtaining civil marriage licenses. Some advocacy groups frame this policy as "banning the freedom to marry," whereas others construe it as "protecting the institution of marriage." The former framing seems much more likely to elicit reactance in those personally affected by the legislation, compared with the latter framing, because it explicitly draws attention to the policy's restrictive nature.

Furthermore, question wording and time pressure may shape how individuals respond to policy-related questions in public opinion polling. How pollsters frame opinion questions about public policy—especially issues that are not commonly discussed—may elicit different responses, depending on whether the question affords consideration of a policy's restrictive nature or not. Polling techniques that include explicit instructions to carefully consider one's answers are more likely to elicit reactance toward restrictions, whereas polling styles that create time pressure may be more likely to elicit rationalization of restrictions.

Likewise, restrictive policies perceived as absolute may be rationalized and accepted by the public, whereas non-absolute policies may be more likely to elicit negative reactions. Communicating to the public that a particular restriction is not absolute may be likely to elicit reactance against the policy, or, on the flip side, prevent rationalization. For instance, some Americans' reticence to embrace the Affordable Care Act, even after it passed, may be attributable to the continued litigation surrounding the policy, which likely suggests to the public that the future of the act is uncertain and calls into question its permanence (Ubel, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2011). As another example, while marijuana has long been a controlled substance, the American public generally favors marijuana legalization (Nagourney, 2014). Although it is difficult to infer causality, the public's not rationalizing the restrictions on marijuana may be due to the law appearing non-absolute. Marijuana has always been seen as readily available (i.e., the policy is not absolute in enforcement), the law bans it sometimes but not always (e.g., allowances for medical use), and public dialogue about legalization continues.

Together, these illustrative studies on attentional focus and absoluteness suggest that specific choices made by policymakers in designing and implementing new regulations can have predictable effects on public opinion. If policymakers' goal is to elicit debate, then presenting the policy as non-absolute, drawing individuals' attention to regulations' restrictive nature, and asking them to carefully consider their opinions might be effective strategies. This approach resembles that taken by the Quebec government regarding a newly proposed policy that would ban public sector employees from wearing religious symbols in the workplace. In this case, the government released detailed information about the proposed legislation and held public hearings for people to voice their opinions on the issue. Government officials publicly stated their intention to start a public dialogue surrounding the proposed law (Shingler, 2014). Conversely, if rationalization and compliance are the goal, then communicating permanence might be a more effective strategy.

System justification perspectives suggest a general takeaway for policymakers: Merely enacting a particular policy will likely increase the public's favorability toward it because individuals are motivated to resist changes that threaten the status quo and, conversely, bolster what constitutes the current state of affairs. This effect is evident in the tendency for U.S. presidents to receive a boost in their approval ratings immediately following their election (Cohen, 2012). It is also suggested by the seemingly unexpected shift in public opinion observed in Ireland following the enactment of the smoking ban. A clear implication to be drawn from these examples, in combination with the illustrative research presented, is that policymakers may overweight the predictive value of pre-implementation polling results on public opinion toward policy changes. Furthermore, explicitly connecting a new regulation to the espoused values of the social system, and underscoring how the policy supports those values, may be effective ways to garner public support for policy changes (Feygina et al., 2010).

## Conclusion

Individuals exist within systems of rules that govern which behaviors are permissible and which are not. Although laws and regulations are a necessary part of a functional social system, people often feel hostile toward regulations that limit their behavior and develop a heightened desire for whatever has been restricted. However, other times, people are adept at coming to terms with the constraints of reality, even when these constraints run contrary to their objective self-interest. We identify individuals' attentional focus and policy absoluteness as individual-level contextual variables that moderate the expression of these seemingly distinct psychological phenomena. Also, people's generalized tendency to justify existing systems of governance may impact how they respond to policy changes.

To be sure, certain policy-related attitudes may be immune to influence by these types of factors: for instance, attitudes that individuals have spent a lifetime considering or those based on strongly held moral convictions (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). However, some scientific evidence suggests that specific variables—how absolute a restriction is perceived to be, how carefully people consider the restriction in question, and how closely the policy is tied to the overarching system—may play an important role in shaping attitudes in a variety of public policy domains. This research potentially provides insights for policymakers regarding how different forms of policy design may affect public responses to new regulations.

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