

Understanding and reducing opposition to system-level policies

Governments often hesitate to implement system-level policies—like CO₂ taxes, car bans or vaccination mandates—due to anticipated public resistance. We propose that people's psychological reactance driving this opposition is a transient phenomenon that dissipates once system-level policies are in place. Across secondary survey data ($N = 49,674$) and six preregistered experiments ($N = 4,629$), we show that people react more negatively to policies before they are implemented than after. This effect holds across different policy contexts and is linked to individuals focusing more on personal losses during the transition than on societal benefits. Highlighting societal gains can reduce initial resistance, while emphasizing personal losses maintains it. These findings suggest that public opposition to system-level policies is temporary, offering valuable guidance for designing more effective public interventions in response to pressing societal issues.