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Citizens' support for behavioural public policy and trust in government: evidence from two online experiments

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ABSTRACT

We explore citizens' support for behavioral interventions by distinguishing interventions that exploit citizens' bounded rationality through choice architecture (Nudge) from those that challenge bounded rationality by promoting reflection through deliberative forums (Think). We also examine the role of trust in government in shaping these preferences. Findings from two experiments involving 3,010 US participants show that citizens are more willing to support Think rather than Nudge. Whereas the adoption of Nudge, as compared to Think, does not seem to influence trust in government, encouraging higher levels of trust in government has a stronger effect on support for Nudge than for Think.

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KEYWORDS Behavioural public administration; nudging; behavioural public policy; trust in government; experiments

Introduction

Over the last 15 years, behavioural approaches to the study of public policy and administration have seen an impressive growth, reflected also in a debate about the novelty and the benefits of applying such an approach to policy and administrative issues (Battaglio et al. 2019; Belle, Cantarelli, and Wang 2024; Bertelli and Riccucci 2022; Bhanot and Linos 2020; Esmark 2019; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017; Tummers 2019). Behavioural public policy seeks to use available knowledge about citizens' deviations from what is deemed rational behaviour to improve policy outcomes (Angner 2012). Nudging (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) is the most well-known example of such a behavioural public policy: It aims, in non-restrictive ways, to change

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people's behaviours in a direction that people themselves would have preferred upon deliberate reflection and with unbounded rationality (Beattie et al. 1994; Sunstein 2020).

Nudging appeals to policymakers on a number of dimensions. It is regarded as 'cheaper' to governments than other traditional forms of public policy (e.g. financial or regulatory 'sticks' and 'carrots'). Furthermore, Nudges are supposed to be based on credible evidence, often produced by 'gold standard' randomized controlled trials (John 2011). Finally, Nudge is said to enjoy normative appeal: the label 'libertarian paternalism' suggests that policy interventions preserve individuals' freedom without prohibiting any options, while, at the same time, pushes people to make choices that are deemed as desirable from the perspective of those in charge of designing such nudges.

The excitement regarding nudging in particular and behavioural public policy more generally can be measured in numbers of publications, events, and other institutional manifestations (such as dedicated journals). As with all 'policy booms' and 'bandwagons' (Dunleavy 1988; Ikenberry 2019), excitement also attracts contestation and questioning. The world of research on behavioural public policy has been concerned with questions of 'performance' ('does it work?') and 'acceptance' ('why does it gain appeal, and why now?'). In terms of 'performance', several studies have synthesized available evidence on nudging in order to show to what extent this policy technique can be effective (DellaVigna and Linos 2022; Mertens et al. 2022). Other scholars have focused on challenges and limitations of nudging, with arguments ranging from limited effectiveness (Maier et al. 2022) to poor fit with political institutions of a liberal democracy due to citizens' manipulation and lack of accountability (e.g. Abdulkadirov 2016; Baldwin 2014; Oliver 2019; Rizzo and Glen Whitman 2009). One strand of this scholarship has paid particular attention to the distinction between transparent and non-transparent nudges (e.g. Bruns et al. 2018; Hansen and Maaløe Jespersen 2013; Loewenstein et al. 2015), while others have focused on the role of citizens' agency in behavioural interventions (e.g. Banerjee et al. 2024; Szollosi, Wang-Ly, and Newell 2025).

In terms of 'acceptance', one central debate concerns the question of whether nudging attracts higher level of public support than other, more traditional and resource-intensive policy techniques (Andersson and Almqvist 2022; Arad and Rubinstein 2018; John, Martin, and Mikołajczak 2023; Sunstein, Reisch, and Kaiser 2019; Tannenbaum, Fox, and Rogers 2017). After all, acceptance and therefore legitimacy are central for policy obtainment (Page and Shapiro 1983). This literature shows that the degree of support for nudging and other policy techniques varies depending on several characteristics, including individuals' political orientation (Sunstein, Reisch, and Kaiser 2019), agreement with the intended policy goal (Andersson and

Almqvist 2022; Tannenbaum, Fox, and Rogers 2017), perceived fairness of nudges (John, Martin, and Mikołajczak 2023), and domestic political debates (Loibl et al. 2018; Sunstein, Reisch, and Rauber 2018). In addition, a number of studies report a negative association between individualistic attitudes and support for nudging (Arad and Rubinstein 2018; Hagman et al. 2015).

Less attention has been paid, as yet, to variations in public support or acceptance, for different behavioural public policies. Exploring support for various behavioural policies is of critical importance given the considerable differences in implementation assumptions that can be identified. For example, implicit in the Nudge-type approach is the view of an individual who is disengaged with policy and policymaking. Sub-optimal (non-)choices are explained by various kinds of biases. Changes to underlying choice infrastructures are seen as an effective (and legitimate) way of making individuals choose their preferred options, although it has been noted that specific choice architectures may benefit some while harming others (Weimer 2020). Such a view contrasts with more deliberative implementation approaches that highlight the importance of participation and transparency for generating acceptance and adoption by target populations. In the area of behavioural public policy, ideas drawing on these more deliberative approaches have been introduced under the ‘Think’ label (John et al. 2013; John, Smith, and Stoker 2009).

A second, related question concerns the role of ‘trust in government’. The existing research that focuses on levels of support contrasting Nudge with ‘other’ policy interventions highlights the importance of ‘trust’, especially in view of the critical importance of the paternalist design of choice architectures. At the same time, the literature identifies the considerable concern with the ‘invisible’ application of Nudge interventions – if the ‘efficient secret’ of Nudge is the non-transparent manipulation of citizens, then this raises considerable concerns for legitimacy (that cannot be explained away by simply noting that private markets invisibly manipulate choice architectures in any case). Moreover, it also raises the issue as to whether the ‘transparent-making’ of Nudge, namely the realization by citizens that they are being manipulated in their choices, further reduces trust in government.

This article moves beyond the existing literature bias of exploring differences in support for behavioural versus ‘other’ policy instruments. It does so by focusing on differences in support between behavioural interventions, particularly Nudge and Think. More specifically, the study examines differences in public support between Nudge and Think approaches, which have been included in several classifications of behavioural public policy techniques (e.g. Belardinelli 2024; John 2025), while investigating the role of trust in government in shaping such support. Nudge reflects the well-known idea of altering individuals’ choice architecture, whereas Think builds on the importance of establishing reflective decision-making fora. First, we expect

citizens to prefer Think over Nudge, especially as the contentiousness of the policy goal increases, because citizens' input in the decision-making process – which is present under Think but not under Nudge – becomes more important when views are diverse. In other words, we expect contestation to play a moderating role in the relationship between the behavioural policy approach and public support.

Empirically, we use reducing meat consumption in schools as the more contentious policy goal, compared to the less contentious goal of increasing private savings for retirement. Second, we expect a two-way relationship between behavioural public policy and trust in government. On the one hand, trust in government is expected to play a mediating role. In other words, the manipulative dimension of Nudge is expected to negatively affect trust in government, which in turn helps explain lower support for Nudge. On the other hand, support for Nudge requires higher levels of trust in government, compared to Think. Therefore, we expect baseline levels of trust in government to have a positive relationship with support for Nudge, consistent with previous studies (e.g. Sunstein, Reisch, and Kaiser 2019).

The contribution of the article is threefold. First, this article contributes to the literature by investigating the role of trust in government in shaping the level of support for different behavioural public policy techniques. Second, it explores differences in acceptance of types of behavioural intervention, namely Nudge and Think. In doing so, we also measure the perceived effectiveness of the two approaches, as this is often – rightly or wrongly – considered to be closely related to policy support (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), even though we do not explicitly theorize about it. Third, it explores the extent to which different types of policy areas with assumed differences in public support matter for the support for behavioural policy interventions.

Using an online survey administered on a representative sample of 3,010 US citizens, we implement two pre-registered¹ experiments to test the causal effect of alternative behavioural approaches on citizens' support for public policy and to investigate the relationship between public support for behavioural public policy and trust in government institutions. We find a support for the relationship between encouraging trust in government and support for Nudge. Furthermore, we find higher levels of support for 'Think' over 'Nudge' type policy interventions even though neither is perceived to be particularly effective.

Nudge and think

Fundamental to the interest in behavioural approaches in public policy is the question of individual choice. In the view of the 'Nudge'-informed literature that draws on Kahnemann and Tversky, individual choice is inherently bounded because of various biases, and the task for those concerned with these seemingly suboptimal choices is to 'de-bias' such behaviours.

Accordingly, for example, individuals may be encouraged to switch for cheaper electricity (Ghesla, Grieder, and Schubert 2020), opt for healthier food (Wilson et al. 2016), coproduce in emergency preparedness (Qiu, Zhang, and Yi 2025), consume water wisely (Li and Wang 2024), or pay their tax (Antinyan and Asatryan 2025) or credit card bills (Medina 2021) in a timely manner. This approach is often termed ‘libertarian paternalism’, as individuals are prompted to default into ‘optimal’ options – based on nudgers’ criteria – while still being free to choose otherwise (by incurring the transaction costs of actively choosing differently).

The literature on behavioural policy interventions has evolved to include, appropriately or not, various types of interventions under the Nudge label. For example, Tor (2026) has proposed a definition of nudges that includes a range of interventions primarily using behavioural processes to achieve policy goals. In this classification, Tor excludes information-disclosure interventions from the behavioural toolkit, suggesting also that Think interventions may not be universally accepted as behavioural interventions. From a different standpoint, Sunstein and Reisch (2023) have distinguished architectural nudges from educational nudges. We focus on the former, as they are more closely aligned with the ‘pure’ form of nudging originally defined by Thaler and Sunstein’s (2008) as ‘any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives’ (p. 6). In other words, we are interested in nudges that target unconscious intuitive judgement, rather than those targeting conscious reasoning.

Nudge’s emphasis on ‘paternalism’ implies considerable trust in government given its heavy reliance on (transparent or disguised) ‘choice architectures’. The design of these choice architectures is usually introduced as problem-free: the designers are presented as being less prone to biases than those individuals whose ‘sub-optimal’ choices they seek to improve (Lodge and Wegrich 2016). Equipped with insights and the wisdom of Nudge theory (and Nudge Units), the biases of irrational politicians and public servants can be ‘de-biased’. The Nudge-based perspective therefore relies heavily on the skills and knowledge of policymakers and assumes a certain level of trust by the general public in the supposedly unbiased decision-maker; if trust was not present, it is not unlikely that revelations about choice architectures would be met by open hostility and counter-learning by target populations, especially if policies touch issues of higher contestation. In other words, for ‘paternalism’ to exist, the legitimacy of the ‘pater’ (e.g. the choice architect) needs to be present. The question of trust in the choice architect is even more central in view of findings that challenge the assumption of an unbiased choice architect, as noted in the context of research on medical doctors (Blumenthal-Barby and Krieger 2015), judges (Peer and Gamliel 2013), politicians (Stolwijk and Vis 2021) or public managers and public sector employees (Bellé, Cantarelli, and Belardinelli 2018).

In sum, given the centrality of choice in Nudge, the reliance on choice architectures represents a central pillar of Nudge-informed behavioural policy interventions. Choice architectures support individuals by utilizing individuals' heuristic decision-making. Nudge interventions can entail different degrees of manipulation of citizens' behaviour that are not always transparent to the public (Baldwin 2014; Rizzo and Glen Whitman 2009).

Such a view of effective implementation that relies on passive engagement by exploiting defaults and other biases contrasts with views that emphasize the importance of active engagement and participation (e.g. Kim and Lee 2012). Effective implementation is seen as a matter of participation and deliberation in not just deciding on overall policy goals but also in terms of establishing implementation strategies. Literature drawing on these approaches is inspired by the idea of deliberative democracy and 'ecological rationality' (Ewert 2020). Drawing on these strands of the literature, John, Smith, and Stoker (2009) have developed the notion of 'Think' (see also Banerjee et al. 2024, Banerjee and John 2024). They suggest that such a behavioural approach supports individual decision-making (towards desired policy goals) by enabling individual and collective reflection.

According to the 'Think' perspective, individuals' preferences are not conceived as fixed, nor as absolutely right or wrong – rational or irrational. Instead, preferences are dynamic and can be influenced by the process through which they are formed. Deliberation provides an educational effect, expanding individuals' knowledge and understanding of diverse preferences and the consequences of their actions (John, Smith, and Stoker 2009). In the words of Fearon (1998), 'democratic deliberation has the capacity to lessen the problem of bounded rationality' (1998, p. 50). This occurs through two different mechanisms. Firstly, individuals participating in deliberative processes are exposed to new information, which can update their preferences. Much of the work on agency and behavioural public policy emphasizes the role of additional information in promoting individual autonomy and personal freedom, identifying several behavioural approaches that, through their informational elements, go beyond nudges, such as boosts and nudge + (Banerjee and John 2024; Banerjee et al. 2024; Szollosi, Wang-Ly, and Newell 2025). Secondly, the public nature of the process encourages individuals to carefully consider how to justify their own preferences in front of an audience while listening to others' justifications (Fung and Olin Wright 2001; John 2011; Miller 1992). This second mechanism distinguishes Think from interventions of simple information provision, like 'Boosts' (Grüne-Yanoff and Hertwig 2016) or informational nudges (Sunstein and Reisch 2023).

Accordingly, the legitimacy of public decisions rests on deliberation between free and equal citizens, a strong assumption that relies on carefully crafted participatory venues. These deliberations enhance individual decision-making

towards desired policy outcomes (John, Smith, and Stoker 2009). Similar to Nudge, therefore, boundedly rational individuals are not forced to make any specific decision. Unlike Nudge, however, individuals' choices are shaped by deliberation and interaction with peers, rather than by a choice architect guiding behaviour towards a specific direction.

Regarding questions of overall support for behavioural interventions, this article assumes that citizens will be more supportive of policies that allow for their own input, namely Think rather than Nudge. We expect such variation to be particularly prominent in areas of high contestation. Prominent scholars have long advocated the idea that public deliberation can help address contested arguments and achieve greater consensus (Fishkin 1991; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Habermas 1996), while others have been more sceptical (Mutz 2006; Sanders 1997, Sunstein 2002; Stasavage 2007). From the citizens' perspective, however, the dynamics are much simpler. When there is high disagreement about what is important and which policy goals should be pursued, citizens are expected to place greater value on having the opportunity to provide their own views, as in Think, hoping that final public decisions will align more closely with their preferences. A recent meta-assessment of the literature on polarization and participation confirms this idea (Kołczyńska 2024). In a nutshell, we expect contestation to play a moderating role in the relationship between the behavioural policy approach and public support, and therefore citizens to be more supportive of Think in areas of high rather than low contestation. To assess this expectation, we contrast an area with assumed high degree of contestation (namely an initiative to reduce meat consumption in schools as part of a governmental carbon reduction policy) with an area of less contestation (namely, the mandatory change in choice architecture to support retirement savings).

H1. Citizens' support for public policy is higher under Think rather than Nudge.

H1b. The difference in citizens' support for public policy between Think and Nudge is higher when the policy goal is highly contested.

Trust in government

Nudge and Think represent fundamentally distinct ways of drawing on behavioural insights for public policy. This article is interested in the two approaches' underlying differences in terms of trust in government underpinning. It explores the extent to which citizens' trust in government can shape (non-)support for alternative behavioural policy approaches. Such questions are central to public policy more generally: any exercise in

authority (e.g. the execution of public policy) requires public acceptance; exploring how behavioural policy interventions are supported (or not) in different contexts is central to our understanding of policy.

Trust in government has already attracted the attention of scholars interested in understanding support for behavioural public policy. Prior studies have treated trust in government as a determinant of Nudge approval (Sunstein, Reisch, and Kaiser 2019). In the words of Krijnen, Tannenbaum, and Fox (2017) 'if decisionmakers distrust the benevolence and competence of a choice architect, however, they will tend to be sceptical of the options the architect appears to endorse' (p. 5). In sum, the idea that citizens' trust in choice architects can influence approval of nudges is not new (Krijnen, Tannenbaum, and Fox 2017; Steffel, Williams, and Tannenbaum 2019). While we share the view that nudges require trust in the government institutions responsible for designing and implementing them, we are also interested in examining trust as a mediator of the relationship between the policy approach and public support.

When comparing Nudge and Think interventions, we expect to observe a negative effect of the Nudge on citizens' trust in government. That is, citizens, when confronted with a transparent Nudge, are expected to respond negatively to such an intervention (in contrast to those perspectives that would expect overall support for a particular default setting). The transparency of the Nudge is relevant here not due to the potential effect of transparency per se. A considerable amount of literature has investigated the effect of government transparency on citizens' trust, providing mixed evidence (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013; G. Porumbescu 2015, 2017). What matters in this context is that transparency makes it clear to citizens that choice architectures are being modified to promote a certain decision outcome. Some authors argue that transparent nudges are ethically more acceptable than non-transparent ones (Hansen and Maaløe Jespersen 2013), while others show that Nudge transparency does not diminish effectiveness (Bruns et al. 2018; Loewenstein et al. 2015). We expect transparent nudges to have a negative effect on trust compared to deliberative approaches.

When citizens are aware that some actors are modifying the environment to influence their choices, their support for such a strategy will also depend on how much they trust choice architects. Evidence showing that approval of nudges increases with the trustworthiness of choice architects (Evers et al. 2018; Osman et al. 2018) is consistent with our argument. Nonetheless, existing evidence primarily focuses on variation in trustworthiness between experts – or scientists – and policymakers. Our interest lies in variations in trust within government policymakers. We would therefore also expect individuals with higher levels of trust in government to be more supportive of nudge than those individuals with low levels of trust. That is, higher levels of trust in government will make nudge interventions more acceptable in the

eyes of citizens, as it would be easier to accept that policymakers shall de-bias citizens' choices when trust in government is high.

In view of support for Think, the level of trust in government is, we argue, likely to matter less. According to this argument, in view of low levels of trust, support for opportunities to actively engage in deliberating about policy choices should be expected to increase (e.g. Lenard 2008; Parkins et al. 2017). If citizens were highly trusting in the choices of their government, they should, therefore, also be expected to be less interested in being involved in decision-making (e.g. Webb 2013). Such an expectation is consistent with existing evidence showing that political trust operates as a disincentive, rather than a resource spurring participation (e.g. Holum 2023; Ouattara and Steenvoorden 2024). In the words of Citrin and Stoker, 'the trusting may be satisfied with government and view it as needing little monitoring, so trust could weaken the impulse to participate in politics' (2018, p 62). If this line of argument was to hold, we should expect approval levels for Think to decline in view of higher levels of trust (e.g. opposite to the relationship we expect to see in the context of Nudge). An opposite finding would suggest that citizens require high trust in government to ensure meaningful participation. We acknowledge that evidence supporting this alternative view does exist (e.g. Y. Liu 2024; B. Liu et al. 2024). However, resolving this debate is not necessary for our purpose. What matters in our context is that the effect of trust on support for behavioural public policy is more consequential when the policy takes the form of choice architecture than when it relies on a deliberative strategy requiring direct citizen input. When trust increases, citizen support for any type of policy approach may be higher, but we expect this effect to be stronger for Nudge than Think.

We therefore expect a mediating effect of trust in government in shaping preferences over different behavioural public policy interventions. Previous studies have tested and confirmed the hypothesis that citizens with higher trust in public institutions would be more willing to approve Nudge interventions (Sunstein, Reisch, and Kaiser 2019). We are interested in testing a two-way relationship between behavioural public policy and trust in government. On the one hand, the manipulative aspect of Nudge interventions (Baldwin 2014), together with their poor accountability (Abdukadirov 2016; Rizzo and Glen Whitman 2009), is said to potentially undermine citizens' trust in government. On the other hand, approval of Nudge interventions requires a high degree of trust in architects of citizens' choices, who are supposed to fix their 'irrational' behaviour. A consequence of these theoretical predictions would be that, if confirmed, nudging has the potential to undermine the same trust in public institutions that it needs in order to be supported by citizens.

H2. Compared to Think, Nudge has a negative effect on trust in government, which in turn explains lower support for Nudge.

H3. Higher levels of trust in government make citizens more supportive of behavioural public policy, but the effect is stronger under Nudge than under Think.

Methods

To test our theoretical expectations, after receiving IRB approval on 31 March 2023 and pre-registering the study on 3 May 2023, we recruited a sample of 3,010 participants that reasonably resembled the US adult population through the *Qualtrics* professional service company. Quota sampling ensured representativeness of the sample on variables of age, gender, ethnicity, and region. In addition, we asked respondents to report their education, income, and political preferences. Data were collected between 9 May 2023 and 7 June 2023. The empirical strategy of this study is based on a parallel encouragement design (Imai, Tingley, and Yamamoto 2013) to test the causal effect of different behavioural approaches on citizens' support for public policy and the causal mediation effect of trust in government.

Randomized experiments are widely recognized as the 'gold standard' to identify unbiased estimates of causal effects. However, a common criticism is that experiments do not explain causal mechanisms (Deaton 2009). To overcome this limitation, Imai, Tingley, and Yamamoto (2013) propose a parallel encouragement design in which each participant is randomly assigned to one of two experiments: whereas in one experiment only the treatment is randomized, in the second experiment, besides randomly assigning the treatment, participants are 'randomly encouraged to take certain values of the mediator, after the treatment has been randomized' (Imai, Tingley, and Yamamoto 2013, 6). Such a design-based approach, which has already been adopted in public management studies (see G. A. Porumbescu et al. 2021), to testing causal mediation differs from the most common approach (i.e. Baron and Kenny 1986) used to identify causal mechanisms, which 'requires strong and untestable assumptions that are similar to those made in observational studies' (Imai, Tingley, and Yamamoto 2013, 6).

Consistent with such a design, after agreeing to participate in our study and having responded to demographic questions, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experiments: Experiment 1 or Experiment 2. Within each experiment, all participants were asked to imagine a specific policy scenario and randomly assigned to a treatment group.

Participants in Experiment 1 were randomly assigned to either a Nudge or a Think public policy approach, but no manipulation of trust in government was conducted. Experiment 1 allowed us to test citizens' preferences towards Nudge and Think interventions and to test whether these alternative behavioural interventions influence trust in government. It should be emphasized again that these two policy approaches are fundamentally different. They involve different processes, levels of control over decision outcomes, and costs for decision-makers. These differences are accordingly reflected in the vignettes, consistent with previous experimental studies aiming at measuring effects of different behavioural policy approaches (e.g. John, Martin, and Mikołajczak 2023). Table 1 provides the full text of the experimental scenarios related to increasing enrolment in private pension schemes. The text of all the experimental vignettes, together with the measures of our outcomes and control variables, are included in online Supplementary Material A.

In Experiment 2, besides randomizing the policy intervention in the same way as in Experiment 1, we randomly encouraged subjects to take either a high or a low level of trust in government by exposing them to different statements as to the 'trustworthiness' of government. The random encouragement of trust in government, if effective, allows us to test the causal effect of different levels of trust in government on support for public policy separately for Nudge and Think interventions.

After being exposed to the information about the policy scenario according to their experimental group, participants were asked to complete the same survey measuring to what extent they approve the policy, to what extent they believe the policy will be effective in achieving the policy goal, and to what extent they trust government institutions.

To increase the validity of our findings, we performed the same two experiments in two different policy contexts with assumed differences in overall contestation, namely the enrolment in private pension schemes and the adoption of vegetarian food in school meals as part of a hypothetical carbon reduction policy. While both of the vignettes were deliberately hypothetical, they do represent 'real' world initiatives (Lombardini and Lankoski 2013). The example of 'opt in vs opt out' in mandatory retirement savings has been widely trailed and adopted, making it a low contestation issue. In contrast, we expected the scenario of vegetarian school meals to be highly contested: food is assumed to be central to individual identity despite the emergence of initiatives such as 'Meatless Mondays' (such as in New York's public schools, (Smithers 2019)) or 'Veganuary'.

Figure 1 provides a visualization of the randomization process. The same process applies to the two policy contexts that we selected and that we randomly assigned to subjects.

Table 1. Experimental vignettes for the private savings for retirement policy goal [the text in *italics* displays our experimental manipulations].

<i>Nudge</i>		<i>Think</i>
Governments around the world have developed different policies to make people save more money to retire comfortably.		Governments around the world have developed different policies to make people save more money to retire comfortably.
Please imagine a hypothetical policy whereby <i>by default employees are enrolled in a specific 401(k) retirement plan that was previously selected by their employer, while keeping the possibility for employees to opt out of the retirement plan. In other words, unless explicitly otherwise requested, employees automatically invest part of their salary in a specific 401(k) plan that they did not chose.</i>		Please imagine a hypothetical policy whereby <i>employers are required to organize forums with employees to discuss the importance of saving money for retirement, the opportunity for them to enrol in a retirement plan, as well as advantages and disadvantages of different options. Employees can then decide whether to enrol in a retirement plan or not.</i>
<i>No encouragement</i>	<i>Low encouragement</i>	<i>High encouragement</i>
	In thinking about this policy, please consider that government policymakers <i>have their own interests and values, and deal with limited information. They therefore design and implement policies based on a lot of compromise and in the face of uncertainty.</i>	In thinking about this policy, please consider that government policymakers <i>draw on expert advice. They want to increase citizens' welfare by designing and implementing policies based on sound evidence.</i>

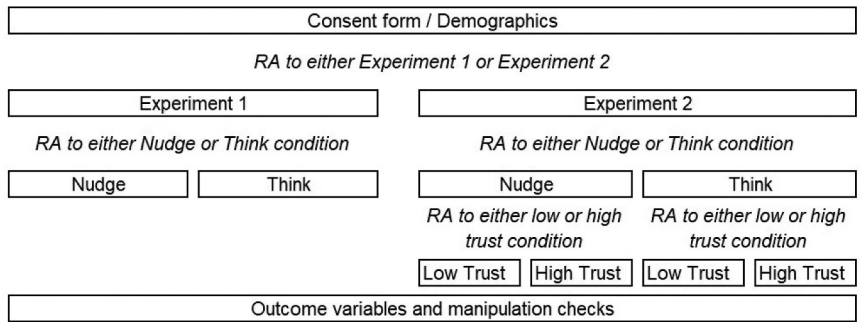


Figure 1. Randomization process. Note: RA = Random Assignment. In addition to the process shown in the figure, each participant was randomly assigned to only one of the two policy goals: either increasing private savings for retirement or reducing meat consumption in schools. The randomization process depicted in the figure is identical for both policy goals.

Manipulations

Three variables are manipulated:

- (1) *Treatment – Behavioural policy technique*: this variable has two different levels that vary the behavioural approach informing the policy

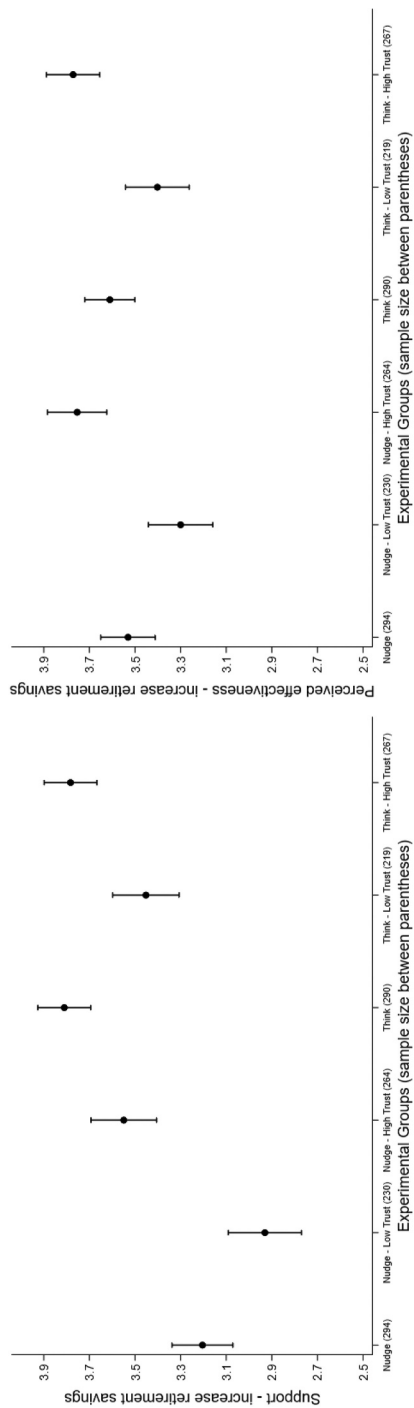


Figure 2. Mean support for and perceived effectiveness of behavioural approaches aimed at increasing retirement savings, by experimental condition. Note: Experimental groups with no trust level specified (i.e. ‘Nudge’ and ‘Think’) come from Experiment 1; the other experimental groups come from Experiment 2.

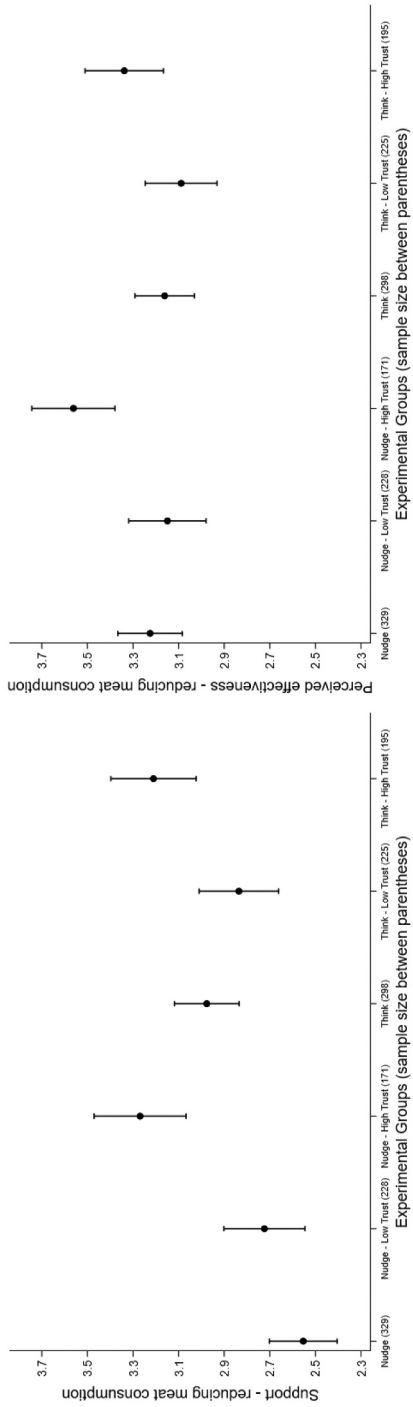


Figure 3. Mean support for and perceived effectiveness of behavioural approaches aimed at reducing meat consumption in schools, by experimental condition. Note: Experimental groups with no trust level specified (i.e. ‘Nudge’ and ‘Think’) come from Experiment 1; the other experimental groups come from Experiment 2.

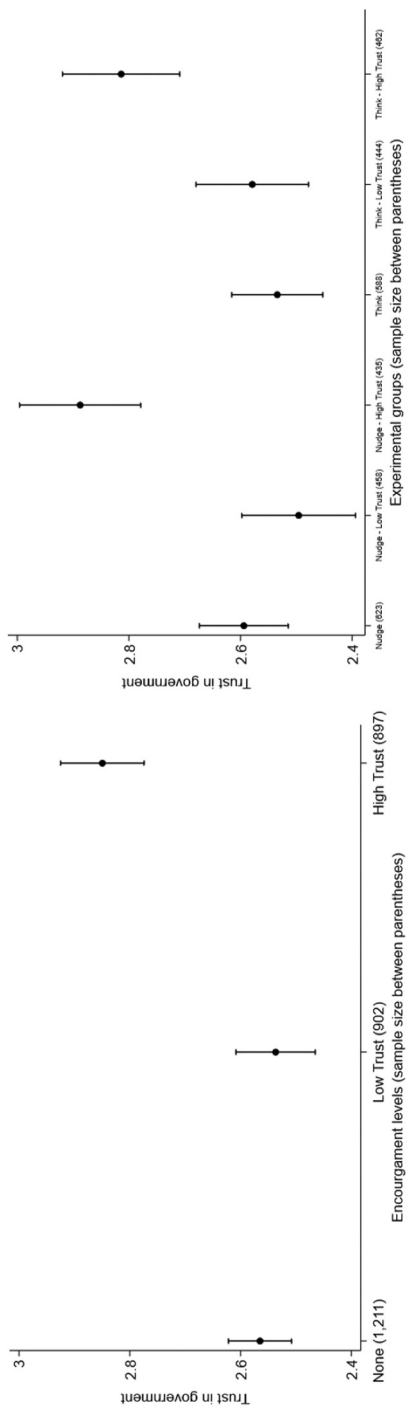


Figure 4. Mean trust in government, by encouragement level and by behavioural approach. Note: Experimental groups with no trust level specified (i.e. 'None', 'Nudge', and 'Think') come from Experiment 1; the other experimental groups come from Experiment 2.

intervention: interventions aimed at directing citizens' choices towards specific outcomes, while making it transparent that deviating from the intended outcome is still possible, through reliance on their bounded rationality (i.e. Nudge), and interventions aimed at fostering citizens' deliberative decision-making process through confrontation in public forums (i.e. Think).

- (2) *Encouraged mediator – Trust in government*: we randomly encourage participants to take two different levels of trust in government: low and high. In the low-trust condition, participants are primed to consider that government policymakers have their own interests and values, deal with limited information, and that they design and implement policies based on considerable compromise and in the face of uncertainty. In the high-trust condition, participants are primed to consider that government policymakers draw on expert advice and want to use evidence to design and implement public policy that can increase citizens' welfare.
- (3) *Policy goal* – this variable has two levels: increasing private savings for retirement and reducing meat consumption in schools. These were selected based on the intended goal of varying how contentious the policy goal in the scenario can be, as the latter policy goal is supposed to be highly contentious.

Measures of key outcomes

After providing participants with information about the policy scenario, we measure our outcome variables in a random order.

- *Policy support* – Based on previously adopted measures (John, Martin, and Mikołajczak 2023), participants are asked to indicate, on a scale from one to five, to what extent they would approve or disapprove the hypothetical policy described in the scenario.
- *Perceived effectiveness* – Consistent with previous studies (John, Martin, and Mikołajczak 2023), on a scale from one to five, we measure perceived effectiveness of the presented policy approach in achieving the intended policy goal.
- *Trust in government* – Participants are asked to indicate, on a scale from one to five, to what extent they trust government institutions. Our measure is based on prior research (Sunstein, Reisch, and Kaiser 2019) and captures two key components of government trustworthiness, namely competence and benevolence (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013).

Manipulation checks

An item asked respondents to report whether they agree or disagree as to the desirability of the policy outcome of their policy scenario. This measure allows us to test whether the policy goal of reducing meat consumption is indeed conceived as more controversial than increasing retirement savings. In the final part of the survey, participants were asked to respond to a few manipulation checks, so that we were able to screen out respondents who did not pay attention to the policy scenario. All these items are included in online Supplementary Material A.

Results

This section presents the results of our experiments and their relation to our hypotheses. For the sake of parsimony and to enhance accessibility of our results, we include only three figures in this section, showing mean outcomes and related confidence intervals, by experimental groups. Additional analyses are reported in online Supplementary Material B.

Our sample of respondents resembles the US adult population in terms of sex, age, education, ethnicity, and geographic area of residence. Among the 3,010 participants in our experiments, 51.6% are female, 70.4% are aged 35 years or older, and 66.4% are White. High school is the highest degree attained by 23.3% of participants, and 55% have an income greater than \$ 49,999. Observable demographic characteristics of participants in our online survey, as well as balance tests across experimental conditions in Experiment 1 and 2, are reported in Table A1 in online Supplementary Material B, whereas Table A2 reports descriptive statistics of our outcome variables.

We succeeded in differentiating policy goals based on how contentious they are. Participants report significantly ($p < 0.000$) higher average levels of and lower variation in desirability of increasing retirement savings ($Mean = 4.36$, $SD = 0.834$, $N = 3,010$) than of reducing meat consumption ($Mean = 3.11$, $SD = 1.328$, $N = 3,010$). In other words, in the eyes of citizens, reducing meat consumption for environmental reasons is less desirable and more controversial than increasing retirement savings.

Policy support

Unsurprisingly, we find a statistically significant effect of our manipulation of policy goal on citizens' support for policy. More specifically, support for policy by participants in our sample is 0.58 points higher ($p < 0.000$) for the goal of increasing retirement savings ($Mean = 3.47$, $SD = 1.148$, $N = 3,010$)

than for the goal of reducing meat consumption ($Mean = 2.88$, $SD = 1.349$, $N = 3,010$). In addition, the perceived effectiveness of the retirement savings policy is 0.34 points higher ($Mean = 3.57$, $SD = 1.038$, $N = 3,010$) compared to when it aims at reducing meat consumption ($Mean = 3.23$, $SD = 1.238$, $N = 3,010$). This difference is also statistically significant ($p < 0.000$).

Turning to behavioural interventions, Experiment 1 is designed to test differences in support for policy between Nudge and Think approaches. Consistent with our *hypothesis 1*, participants expressed significantly higher levels ($p < 0.000$) of support for Think interventions ($Mean = 3.39$, $SD = 1.206$, $N = 588$) than for Nudge interventions ($Mean = 2.86$, $SD = 1.317$, $N = 623$). This difference in support however does not extend to differences in expected effectiveness ($p = 0.825$) of Think ($Mean = 3.38$, $SD = 1.077$, $N = 588$) and Nudge ($Mean = 3.37$, $SD = 1.196$, $N = 623$). This finding indicates that legitimacy of public policy does not lie exclusively in its perceived effectiveness. Instead, legitimacy is derived from other aspects of the policy process and the ways outputs and outcomes come about. Table A3 in the online Supplementary Material B reports results from linear regression models in which perceived effectiveness is included as an independent variable. Whereas perceived effectiveness has a positive relationship with support, when keeping perceived effectiveness fixed, Think interventions still attract more support than Nudges.

These results hold when performing the same analysis separately for the two different policy goals. In other words, differently from what is predicted by *hypothesis 1b*, a controversial policy goal does not make preferences for Think interventions stronger (see Table A4 in online Supplementary Material B). By contrast, using the whole sample of respondents from both Experiment 1 and 2, the difference in support between Think and Nudge interventions is significantly smaller under the controversial policy goal (Table A5 in online Supplementary Material B), which is the opposite of what we expected. [Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#) report the mean levels of support and perceived effectiveness by experimental group, along with 95% confidence intervals, for behavioral interventions aimed at increasing retirement savings and reducing meat consumption, respectively.

Experiment 2 is designed to investigate the role of trust in government in shaping the relationship between specific behavioural public policy techniques and support for policy. Our manipulation of trust was effective in shaping average levels of trust in government: participants randomly encouraged to take lower levels of trust in government reported trust in government institutions 0.31 points less ($Mean = 2.54$, $SD = 1.096$, $N = 902$) than their counterparts randomly encouraged to take higher levels ($Mean = 2.85$, $SD = 1.150$, $N = 897$). The difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.000$). Participants in Experiment 1, namely those that were not exposed to any information regarding government 'trustworthiness', report levels of trust in

government ($Mean = 2.56$, $SD = 1.011$, $N = 1,211$) that are not significantly different from those reported by participants in Experiment 2 randomly encouraged to take low levels of trust ($p = 0.540$). In other words, our encouragement of high levels of trust was effective in increasing trust in government, whereas our encouragement of low levels of trust did not decrease it.

Trust in government and policy support

Experiment 1 allows us to test whether the policy approach, either Nudge or Think, has a causal direct effect on trust in government. Our data do not support *hypothesis 2*, according to which Nudge interventions will have a negative effect on trust in government, as trust in government of participants randomly exposed to Nudge ($Mean = 2.59$, $SD = 1.013$, $N = 623$) is not statistically different ($p = 0.303$) from those randomly exposed to Think ($Mean = 2.53$, $SD = 1.008$, $N = 588$). [Figure 4](#) reports mean levels of trust in government by experimental group, along with 95% confidence intervals. This result holds when restricting the analysis to those either exposed to the policy goal of increasing retirement savings or to those exposed to reducing meat consumption.

Overall, participants in Experiment 2 randomly encouraged to take high levels of trust in government show significantly higher levels ($p < 0.000$) of support for policy by 0.51 points ($Mean = 3.49$, $SD = 1.208$, $N = 897$) than their counterparts randomly exposed to the low level of trust in government encouragement ($Mean = 2.98$, $SD = 1.288$, $N = 902$). When focusing on Think interventions, respondents randomly encouraged to take high levels of trust in government report 0.4 points more ($p < 0.000$) support for policy ($Mean = 3.54$, $SD = 1.162$, $N = 462$) than respondents randomly encouraged to take low levels of trust in government ($Mean = 3.14$, $SD = 1.255$, $N = 444$). As for Nudge interventions, the difference in support for policy between the high encouragement group ($Mean = 3.44$, $SD = 1.254$, $N = 435$) and the low encouragement group ($Mean = 2.83$, $SD = 1.303$, $N = 458$) is 0.61 points ($p < 0.000$).

Importantly, the effect of encouraging higher levels of trust in government on policy support is bigger under Nudge than Think interventions, and the difference is statistically significant at the 10% level ($p = 0.073$). Therefore, this evidence is consistent with our *hypothesis 3*, even though not strong enough to meet the conventional significance thresholds. When trust in government is higher, citizens become more supportive of behavioural public policy, but the effect is stronger for Nudge interventions. Perceived effectiveness is also significantly affected by different levels of trust in government, albeit there is no difference in this effect between behavioural techniques.

From a different perspective, when encouraged to take high levels of trust in government, support for policy does not change between Nudge and Think interventions. By contrast, when encouraged to take low levels of trust in government, citizens' support for Nudges is significantly lower than support for Think interventions. These results suggest that the type of policy intervention may be particularly relevant in shaping public support for policy when citizens have low levels of trust in government. At higher levels of trust, they are indifferent between different behavioural approaches.

Discussion

This article has sought to move the discussion away from debates about Nudge versus other 'traditional' policies to questions of differences across behavioural policies. Behavioural public policy is characterized by competing implementation models. On the one hand, Nudge-based models emphasize the need to exploit biases and rely on 'passive' acceptance of devices, such as choice architectures. On the other hand, Think-based approaches emphasize the importance of active engagement and deliberation. This article has sought to advance understanding of citizen support for Think and Nudge types of implementation approaches in areas that were expected to offer contrasting degrees of contestation. It has also emphasized the importance of levels of trust in government when it comes to the support for and perceived effectiveness of behavioural public policy interventions. In order to assess the strength of the argument, this article also exposed citizen responses (in the context of a US representative sample) in view of different policy areas, defined by highly divergent degrees of contestation. The main conclusions are summarized in [Table 2](#). As ever, the limitations of experimental research in generating generalizable findings in view of our vignettes need to be acknowledged.

This article highlights that individuals are, in general, more supportive of active rather than passive engagement: there is a significantly higher degree of support for Think-related over Nudge-based interventions, even though the perceived likelihood of 'success' is broadly similar. Of course, Nudge-enthusiasts might suggest that the results reflect wishful thinking on behalf of respondents – we all may wish to be engaged, but, in the end, err on the side of non-intervention. Even if this objection was correct, it would still have considerable implications for Nudge; it would suggest that we should be dismissive of legitimacy concerns relating to the availability of procedural participation. Our data suggest that higher perceived effectiveness can contribute to increasing support for policy. However, they also show that, when perceived effectiveness is held constant, support is lower for behavioural strategies such as Nudge, which restrict opportunities for active engagement. As the real world offers evidence of highly varying 'success' of Nudge (e.g.

Table 2. Summary findings.

Construct	Summary findings
<i>Support for behavioural public policy</i>	– Citizens are more supportive of behavioural approaches allowing for active (Think), rather than passive (Nudge), engagement; – Holding constant perceived effectiveness, support is still higher for behavioural strategies such as Think, which increase opportunities for active engagement, compared to Nudges.
<i>Trust in government</i>	– Higher levels of trust in government are associated with higher levels of support for and perceived effectiveness of behavioural public policy; – The premium in support for Think interventions, compared to Nudges, seems to be higher when average trust in government is lower; – Nudges do not cause a decrease in trust in government.
<i>Level of contestation over policy goal</i>	– Support for behavioural public policy is higher when the policy goal is less contentious; – The premium in support for Think interventions, compared to Nudges, is lower when the policy goal is more contentious.

DellaVigna and Linos 2022; Maier et al. 2022), a reliance on output or outcome legitimacy for Nudge seems to be built on rather fragile foundations (or, to use the British civil service word ‘courageous’).

Second, trust in government clearly matters when it comes to support for and perceived effectiveness of policy interventions. Both Think and Nudge fare similarly in high-trust environments. However, both approaches enjoy greater support when participants express higher levels of trust in government; this effect is even stronger for Nudges, although it should be noted that the *p-value* for this analysis did not meet conventional significance thresholds ($p = 0.073$). Nevertheless, this finding of the importance of high trust has significant implications for government communications, but also, more generally, for the broader setting of behavioural public policies. While we did not confirm our expected negative effect of Nudge on trust in government – nor the mediating effect of trust in government – the finding that Nudges receive less support than Think approaches when there is low trust in government should be particularly concerning at a time when representative democracy and governments appear to face a crisis in confidence. For example, in the US, where data for this article were collected, trust in the federal government has remained consistently low for decades and, in 2025, reached near-record lows, with only 17% of Americans expressing confidence in the government’s ability to do what is right most of the time, marking one of the lowest trust levels recorded in almost seven decades of polling according to the Pew Research Center (2025). Additionally, that the type of policy approach did not produce any effect on trust in government, contrary to our expectations, may also be due to the nature of our artefactual scenario, which exposed participants to a particular behavioural public policy approach only once. Repeated reliance on

choice architecture and manipulative mechanisms (Abdukadirov 2016, Baldwin 2013; Rizzo and Glen Whitman 2009) may produce the expected effects in the long term, which is a matter for future research. Clearly, this is just one of several possible explanations for why we did not observe the expected effect of Nudge on trust. We believe this is worth exploring, but acknowledge that alternative explanations may point in different directions. Without any ambition to cover all possible explanations, one potential alternative account might suggest that citizens may simply not be particularly concerned about the manipulation of choice architectures by policymakers, as long as their choice is not restricted. Alternatively, trust may decrease only when citizens become aware that choice architects consider them 'irrational'. One might also argue that it is difficult to lower trust in government beyond a certain point; that our manipulation of trust in government in Experiment 2 was effective at increasing trust levels, but not at decreasing them, is consistent with this view.

Furthermore, where behavioural policies are being applied also matters; maybe unsurprisingly, support for behavioural policies increases as overall agreement with the policy objective increases. With respect to this point, the preference towards active engagement, compared to passive engagement, is weaker when the policy goal is more controversial. This directly contrasts with our expectation that citizens' support for Think approaches will be stronger under more controversial policy scenarios. An interesting implication, which deserves further exploration, is that procedural participation may be less supported when underlying conflicts become more apparent in an open process. In other words, seeking to address high degrees of contestation over policy goals through procedural means does not receive as much support by citizens as is generally assumed.

In sum, policymakers interested in promoting the adoption of behavioural interventions should carefully consider their context. Low levels of trust in choice architects may make citizens sceptical of proposed choice architectures and more likely to deviate from desired behaviours. In such contexts, Think approaches may receive higher levels of support. At the same time, policymakers should be cautious in expecting citizens to engage in deliberation when the policy area is highly contested. Unfortunately, as is often the case in public policy, we cannot conclude that there is a single best policy approach among those investigated in this study.

Our study is not immune to the widely diagnosed limitations associated with survey experimental studies. Our experiments compare two different behavioural policy approaches. These differences were reflected in the experimental scenarios presented to participants, allowing us to test the overall effect of these approaches on support and perceived effectiveness, as well as how this effect may be partially explained by

trust in government. However, the design does not enable us to identify other potential mechanisms driving the effect, such as the different costs involved in a deliberative process or the collective action required under Think. Additionally, trust in government is a multifaceted concept that has long been debated in social science. In revising the literature, Grimmeliikhuijsen et al. (2013) identify three key dimensions that make government appear trustworthy to its audience: competence, benevolence, and integrity. While our measure of trust in government is synthetic and based on prior research (Sunstein, Reisch, and Kaiser 2019), our manipulation directly addresses competence and benevolence, but does not refer to integrity. The rationale of such a manipulation is that a low-intensity treatment maintains greater contextual realism while also inducing variation in judgements across participants (Bellé et al. 2019).

In conclusion, it is somewhat surprising that an approach that claims to be 'evidence based' has, as yet, paid limited attention to questions of trust, degrees of contestation, and most of all, different perspectives as to effective ways of implementation. The literature has been very strong at considering individual interventions and/or comparing behavioural and non-behavioural approaches. To advance our understanding, however, it is essential to explore differences between behavioural approaches and to be explicit about competing theoretical assumptions. This article has made a first step towards such an agenda.

Note

1. The pre-registered experiment can be found on the OSF platform, at the following link: <https://osf.io/95xny/overview>

The pre-registered protocol includes an additional empirical part based on observational data that we do not explore in this article. Additionally, we revised the presentation of our hypotheses following the feedback received during peer review.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

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Data availability statement

Data are available on the OSF platform, at the following link: https://osf.io/4x7du/?view_only=92f31276c37b4480903818fda4e42c64.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, prior to completing the survey.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the survey was obtained prior to data collection on 31 March 2023, from the Institution of one of the authors (Protocol #18456).

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