



IDHEAP

POLICY BRIEF

NUMBER 8 | JUNE 2024

The aim behind IDHEAP Policy Briefs is to make the general public aware of scientific research conducted at IDHEAP, underlining its pluridisciplinarity and multidisciplinary, while bringing out its implications for public policy, thereby asserting our place “at the heart of public service”.

Trust in the State, at both political and administrative levels is vitally important, since it fosters citizen cooperation and boosts the effectiveness of public policies. This issue of Policy Briefs asks what the potential sources of growing mistrust are and how they can be countered. The first article seeks to understand how right-wing populist groups take advantage of various crises, using them to erode the public’s trust in democratic institutions. The second contribution looks at the role of experts in building trust. It sets out to assess whether their individual characteristics, gender in particular, have an impact on their credibility with the public. Lastly, the third article focuses on the factors that favour the adoption of artificial intelligence, which has the potential to strengthen trust in government.

Wishing you excellent and interesting reading!

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What kinds of crisis are right-wing populists able to exploit?

Administration and Institutions unit Prof. Dr. Markus Hinterleitner

Introduction

For some time now, right-wing populism has been gaining ground in many countries and threatening democratic institutions through its anti-pluralist attitude. Populist rhetoric typically sets the “people” against an “out-of-touch elite” whom they hold responsible for problems of every kind. Crises provide a good opportunity to spread this narrative. However, crises are not objective realities, but are “constructed” in public discourse. **This is why populists regularly engage in “crisis performance”, i.e., they attempt to portray a controversial event as a serious crisis and lay responsibility for it at the door of government.**

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic represented an ideal opportunity for populists to increase their support among the population. And yet survey data show that the opposite happened: right-wing populists were unable to gain advantage from the COVID-19 crisis in the way that they did from other crises. **This conundrum prompted an international research team, in which the IDHEAP participated, to look at the question of which crises lent themselves particularly well to populist exploitation and for what reasons.**

The research process

To answer this question, **the team focused on the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), one of the most prominent populist parties in Europe, comparing its crisis performance during the European refugee crisis (2015-2016) and the COVID-19 crisis (2020-2021).** The advantage of analysing the performance of a single party in two different crises is that many factors likely to affect performance are bound to remain constant, making it easier to identify decisive factor(s). A qualitative content analysis of over 400 press statements made by the AfD was carried out using MAXQDA software. This approach allowed a systematic, rule-based and intersubjectively understandable analysis of texts. Definitions and anchoring examples helped to sort various parts of each text into theoretical categories.

Results and implications

The analysis showed that the AfD immediately produced a unique and catchy narrative for the refugee crisis, linked it with other crises, and proposed simple political measures (such as large-scale expulsions) to resolve it. Its performance during the COVID-19 crisis was very different, however. The AfD changed its crisis narrative several times and made sometimes contradictory announcements (for example, mass testing was first presented as a very effective solution and shortly afterwards rejected as a constraint on liberty). The main differences are summarized in Table 1.

Theoretical category	Refugee crisis	COVID-19 crisis
Number of crisis narratives	1 (refugees posed a cultural and economic threat for Germany)	3 (slow, indulgent response from the government; devastating economic consequences of lock-downs; violation of basic rights)
Links with other crises	5 (economic failures; public-order problems; drug-dependency problems; Eurocrisis; “energy turn”)	1 (migration crisis)
Contrasting the elite with the people	Yes (using numerous examples)	Yes (with very few illustrative examples)
Proposed political solutions	Bold and simple	More nuanced (and partially contradictory)

Table 1 | **Main differences between the AfD’s crisis performances**

These differences can be explained by the differing “distance” between these crises and the population which, according to “policy feedback theory”, affects the public’s ability to interpret political events. The refugee crisis was above all a media event—only a few people were directly concerned. This gave the AfD a great deal of latitude to exaggerate and make false statements (for example, about the criminality rate among refugees). During the COVID-19 crisis, the AfD’s room for interpretation was comparatively much smaller, since the population was directly concerned by the crisis and could thus more easily verify or judge political statements.



“... the team focused on the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), one of the most prominent populist parties in Europe, comparing its crisis performance during the European refugee crisis (2015-2016) and the COVID-19 crisis (2020-2021).”



The main result of the study is therefore that the “distance” from or “proximity” to the public determines a crisis’ potential for populist exploitation. The study results provide a basis for recommendations on how to politically counter right-wing populists. Political decision-makers should, on the one hand, clearly explain the effects of a crisis to the public (rather than downplaying them) and, on the other hand, criticize the often unrealistic solutions proposed by populist actors (rather than expressing general outrage at their declarations).

Reference

Hinterleitner, Markus, Valentina Kammermeier and Benjamin Moffitt (2023). How the Populist Radical Right Exploits Crisis: Comparing the Role of Proximity in the COVID-19 and Refugee Crises in Germany, *West European Politics*, early view.

Are female experts perceived as less credible than male experts?

Public Policy and Evaluation unit Prof. Dr. Pirmin Bundi

Introduction

Despite the acknowledged importance of experts in the formulation of public policies, gender biases persist, affecting the recognition of women's expertise in various fields. These prejudices manifest themselves in the under-representation of women in university departments and in the media. This raises the question of whether female experts are perceived as less credible than their male counterparts.

Our understanding of how the public perceives female experts, particularly in terms of gender differences, remains limited. This study extends the existing literature by examining the perceptions of various types of experts, thereby filling gaps in our understanding. It underlines the importance of taking individual characteristics into account when assessing source effects, which has often been neglected in earlier studies.

Surprisingly, our results contradict the assumptions of gender bias. They thus challenge conventional wisdom and offer a new perspective on the effect of gender in expert opinion.

The research process

In February 2022 we conducted an online survey among 1854 Swiss citizens. The sample was designed to be representative in terms of gender, education, political ideology and region, with a slight bias towards French-speaking citizens resulting from planned oversampling. In the experiment, respondents were presented with a factually correct expert opinion on the consequences of climate change, taken from reputable media and translated into German and French (see Box 1).

There are constant calls for political action to combat climate change. In recent years, [natural science | social science] has uncovered important insights into this issue. The following quote from a [female | male] professor of [environmental physics | sociology] at a Swiss university appeared in a newspaper article. The [female | male] professor studies the [natural science | social] consequences of climate change: 'Each additional 0.5°C of warming leads to a clearly identifiable increase in the intensity and frequency of extreme events such as heat waves, heavy rainfall, and droughts. In addition, climate change also aggravates problems such as poverty or terrorism', explains the [female | male] professor

Box 1 | Survey experiment

After reading the quoted material, respondents rated the (male or female) expert's credibility using a scale consisting of six pairs of adjectives. These covered expertise (competent/incompetent, well educated/less experienced) and reliability (sincere/insincere, fair/unfair, trustworthy/not trustworthy).

Results

The results of the survey experiment contradicted our initial hypotheses. **Female experts were not considered less credible than their male counterparts.** On the contrary, they were often given a higher credibility score, particularly by female respondents. This phenomenon was not observed among male respondents, who made no gender distinction in their credibility ratings (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the study showed that there was no significant difference in credibility between experts in natural sciences and experts in social sciences. **The study highlights the potential value of increasing the representation of women in expert opinion, not only for gender equality, but also for improving public receptivity to scientific evidence.** By exploring these nuanced dynamics, our study provides a better understanding of how experts can effectively communicate their recommendations to public decision-makers.

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Note : Interaction effect of experts' gender (male, female) and gender of respondent on expert's perceived credibility. Mean predicted perceived credibility surrounded by 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 1 | Credibility of experts according to the gender of experts and respondents

Reference

Bundi, P., Hanimann, A., Portmann, L., & Varone, F. (2024). The future might be female: How does the public perceive experts? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1-27.

Exploring artificial intelligence adoption in public organizations: a comparative case study

Strategy and Organisation unit

Prof. Dr. Oliver Neumann, Katharina Guirguis & Prof. Dr. Reto Steiner

Introduction

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in public organizations has been much debated. With the growing spread of AI technologies, citizens expect administrations to use AI for the public good—for example, to improve services, to provide fast, accurate answers, and to increase efficiency and effectiveness through automation. **Successful use of these technologies can be a decisive factor in strengthening public trust in politics and the administration (Aoki, 2020).**

Despite growing interest, empirical studies on the adoption of AI in the public sector remain limited. **This study is aimed at filling this gap by examining the process of adopting AI initiatives in Swiss public organizations.**

Using an exploratory qualitative research method, the study seeks to understand sector-specific challenges and favourable factors, considering adoption as an ongoing process. By introducing the dimension of time into an established framework of technology adoption, the study seeks to formulate propositions on the relevance of factors at different stages of adoption. In summary, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of AI adoption in the public sector, responding to the need for study on this.

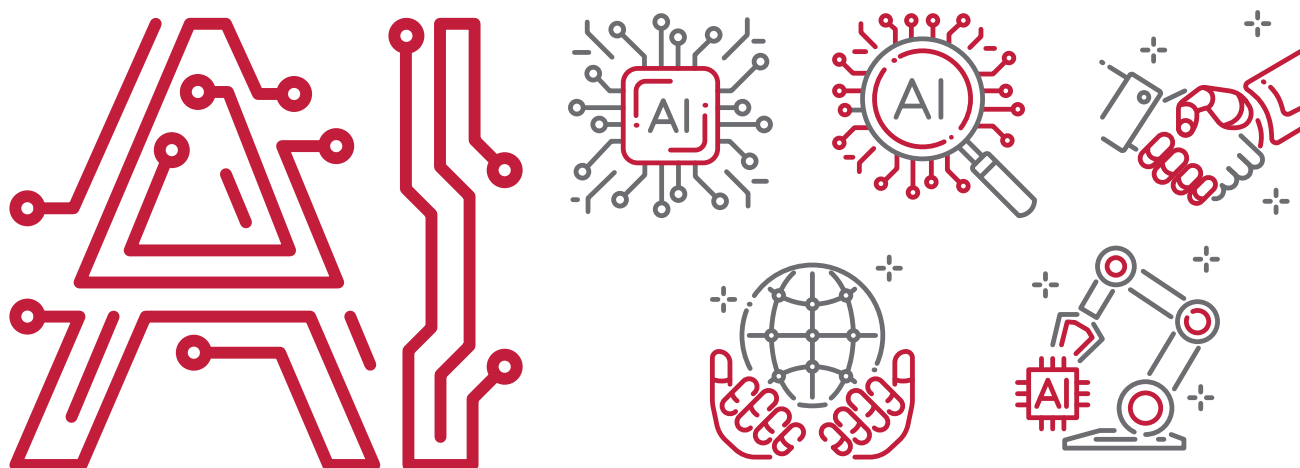
The research process

Using the TOE (Technology Organization Environment) framework, which evaluates technological, organizational, and environmental factors in technology adoption, the study examines factors that influence the adoption of AI projects. TOE takes account of characteristics of the technology, internal aspects of the organization, and environmental factors, thereby allowing a holistic analysis of technology adoption.

Eight cases representing various institutional levels and types of Swiss public organizations were selected based on the characteristics of the organizations (e.g. legal structure and size) and their involvement in AI projects.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 17 experts directly involved in AI projects. The interview questions were designed to explore factors related to the technology, the organization, and the environment, in accordance with the TOE framework. Internal representatives of the organizations and external project partners were interviewed to obtain a more complete picture. However, it should be noted that the relatively low number of interviews precludes the drawing of generalizable conclusions.

The study assessed the various AI maturity levels by observing variance in the years when projects were launched and their outcomes. “AI maturity level” refers to the sophistication and effectiveness of AI solutions implemented in an organization. The analysis compares cases with differing AI maturity levels, highlighting the progressive importance of technological, organizational, and environmental factors.



Results, discussions and implications for decision-makers

The analysis revealed 24 categories of factors based on the TOE framework, highlighting various elements that influence AI adoption in public organizations.

In organizations with less experience, intrinsic motivation, and partnerships are crucial factors, while in more mature organizations, top management support and internal resources are key. Interestingly, environmental factors appear to have a relatively insignificant effect at all AI maturity levels.



“The analysis compares cases with differing AI maturity levels, highlighting the progressive importance of technological, organizational, and environmental factors.”

The study proposes theoretical perspectives on the importance of various factors at varying AI maturity levels. However, its limitations include the focus on Swiss cases and the absence of ethical considerations in interviews. Future research should explore transnational differences and citizens’ perspectives. For successful AI adoption, decision-makers must consider nuanced factors, prioritizing management support and internal resources, while ensuring ethical implementation of AI to uphold public values.

References

Aoki, N. (2020). An experimental study of public trust in AI chatbots in the public sector. *Government Information Quarterly*, 37(4), 101490. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2020.101490>.

Neumann, O., Guirguis, K., & Steiner, R. (2024). Exploring artificial intelligence adoption in public organizations: a comparative case study. *Public Management Review*, 26(1), 114–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2022.2048685>.

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