Externality Framing Effects on Cognition

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Because most government regulation is based on arguments about “externalities” (effects on third parties), understanding how externality arguments affect public opinion and support for regulatory alternatives is critical. Prior scholarship suggests, without empirical support, that positive externality framings—focused on benefits to others—make people more likely to support incentives and education, whereas negative externality framings—focused on harms to others—make people more likely to support punishments and compulsion. Positive externality frames are also hypothesized to make people perceive problems as less important, but to be more effective in motivating individual action than negative externality frames. More than 4,000 surveys were administered posing the same questions about four issues (carpooling, vaccinations, antibiotics overuse, and pollution). One group of participants received a “positive externality framing” survey describing the benefits of addressing the issues, while the other group received a “negative externality framing” survey describing the harms of failing to address the issues. The results showed two statistically significant relationships between externality framing and the solutions people prefer: for the carpooling and antibiotics scenarios, people who saw the positive externality framing were more likely to support education, while those who saw the negative externality framing were more likely to support compulsion ($X^2=16.3$, $p=0.0000543$; $X^2=6.68$, $p=0.00973$, respectively). Additionally, contrary to scholars’ predictions, there was a statistically significant relationship between the positive externality framing and viewing an issue as more important. There was no statistically significant effect on individual willingness to act.

Awards Won:

American Psychological Association: Certificate of Honorable Mention