

Public Consultation Design and Legitimacy Perceptions in Climate Adaptation Planning: Survey Experiment

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Abstract

Climate adaptation planning necessitates unprecedented levels of socio-economic transformation and infrastructure investment, raising critical questions regarding democratic legitimacy and public acceptance. As local governments increasingly deploy public consultation mechanisms to solicit citizen input on adaptation strategies, the precise relationship between consultation design features and subsequent public perceptions of policy legitimacy remains underexplored. This study investigates how variations in public consultation design influence citizens' perceptions of legitimacy in the context of climate adaptation. Utilizing a randomized survey experiment with a nationally representative sample, the research manipulates three core dimensions of consultation processes: inclusivity of participation, transparency of information, and the degree of citizen empowerment. The findings demonstrate that simply holding a consultation is insufficient to generate legitimacy. Instead, highly structured consultations that guarantee demographic inclusivity and provide binding decision-making power to participants significantly elevate perceived legitimacy. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that transparency acts as a critical mediating variable, amplifying the positive effects of empowerment. These results provide vital empirical evidence for public administration scholars and policymakers, suggesting that the institutional design of participatory mechanisms must move beyond superficial engagement to foster genuine democratic legitimacy in environmental governance.

Keywords: Public Consultation; Democratic Legitimacy; Climate Adaptation; Survey Experiment; Environmental Governance

1. Introduction

1.1 Background on Climate Adaptation Planning

The global imperative to address climate change has increasingly shifted from purely mitigative efforts to a dual approach that heavily emphasizes adaptation. Climate adaptation planning involves preparing for and adjusting to both current and projected impacts of climate change, which range from rising sea levels and intensified coastal flooding to prolonged droughts and extreme urban heat island effects. Unlike mitigation, which primarily deals with the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions on a macro scale, adaptation is inherently local and deeply contextual. Municipalities and regional governments are typically at the forefront of designing and implementing adaptation measures. These

measures often require significant alterations to local land-use policies, extensive infrastructure overhauls, and the reallocation of substantial public financial resources. Because these interventions directly impact the daily lives, property values, and livelihoods of residents, they frequently encounter resistance. The literature on environmental governance has consistently noted that technical solutions to climate vulnerabilities cannot be implemented effectively without a broad foundation of public support and societal consensus [1]. Consequently, public administrators face the formidable challenge of advancing urgent, scientifically complex infrastructure projects while simultaneously maintaining the democratic mandate required to execute them. In response to this challenge, there has been a widespread proliferation of public consultation and participatory governance mechanisms. These mechanisms are designed to integrate citizen feedback into the planning stages of climate adaptation projects, theoretically bridging the gap between technocratic policy formulation and democratic accountability.

1.2 The Problem of Democratic Legitimacy

Despite the enthusiastic adoption of public consultation processes by local and regional authorities, the extent to which these processes actually generate democratic legitimacy remains ambiguous. Democratic legitimacy, in the context of public administration, refers to the belief among citizens that a policy or an institution has the moral and legal right to exercise authority, and that its decisions ought to be obeyed and supported. Scholars often differentiate between input legitimacy, which concerns the fairness and representativeness of the decision-making process, and output legitimacy, which focuses on the effectiveness and problem-solving capacity of the resulting policies [2]. In the highly contested arena of climate adaptation, input legitimacy is particularly crucial because the benefits of adaptation measures are often deferred to the future, while the costs and disruptions are immediate. However, empirical observations suggest that many public consultation exercises fail to produce the desired legitimizing effect. Citizens frequently express cynicism regarding participatory mechanisms, viewing them as merely symbolic gestures designed to rubber-stamp pre-determined policy agendas rather than genuine opportunities for public influence. When consultations are perceived as manipulative or exclusionary, they can paradoxically diminish public trust and erode the legitimacy of the proposed adaptation plans. This phenomenon highlights a critical gap in public administration research: it is not the mere existence of public consultation that fosters legitimacy, but rather the specific institutional design and procedural characteristics of the consultation process [3]. Understanding which specific design features contribute to enhanced legitimacy perceptions is therefore of paramount importance for both theoretical advancement and practical application.

1.3 Research Objectives and Contributions

This research aims to systematically unpack the causal relationship between the design of public consultation processes and the resulting perceptions of policy legitimacy among citizens. The primary objective is to identify how variations in consultation design specifically the dimensions of inclusivity, transparency, and empowerment affect public willingness to accept and support contentious climate adaptation policies. To achieve this objective, the study employs a sophisticated survey experiment methodology, presenting respondents with carefully constructed vignettes that describe hypothetical but highly realistic climate adaptation planning scenarios. By randomly assigning different characteristics of the consultation process to different respondents, this methodology allows for the isolation of causal effects in a way that traditional observational studies cannot achieve. The contributions of this paper to the existing body of knowledge are manifold. Firstly, it provides rigorous

empirical evidence testing theoretical propositions about participatory governance in the novel and high-stakes context of climate adaptation. Secondly, it dissects the concept of public consultation into discrete, manipulable variables, offering a granular understanding of how specific procedural mechanisms operate independently and interactively. Thirdly, the study explores heterogeneous treatment effects, examining whether certain demographic groups or individuals with specific prior attitudes respond differently to consultation designs. Ultimately, this research offers actionable insights for policymakers seeking to optimize public engagement strategies and build robust democratic mandates for transformative environmental policies.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Public Consultation Mechanisms

The evolution of public consultation mechanisms represents a significant paradigm shift in public administration, moving from traditional top-down, technocratic governance models toward more collaborative and participatory frameworks. Early theoretical conceptualizations of public participation positioned citizen engagement as a fundamental democratic right, essential for educating the public and ensuring that government actions reflect the will of the populace. Over time, administrative scholars have developed complex typologies to categorize the varying depths of citizen involvement [4]. These typologies typically range from basic information provision, where the government simply informs citizens of impending decisions, to consultation, where feedback is actively solicited, and ultimately to full citizen empowerment, where decision-making authority is delegated to the public. In contemporary environmental governance, public consultation mechanisms encompass a wide array of formats, including town hall meetings, citizen juries, consensus conferences, and digital participatory platforms. The design of these mechanisms involves critical choices regarding who is invited to participate, how information is disseminated, and how the collected input is ultimately utilized in the policy formulation process [5]. The literature suggests that the effectiveness of any participatory exercise is deeply contingent upon these design choices. Poorly designed consultations, characterized by highly technical jargon, inconvenient timing, or a lack of clear feedback loops, tend to attract only highly organized interest groups or the most vocal proponents and opponents, thereby exacerbating inequalities in political representation and failing to capture the broader public interest.

2.2 Legitimacy Perceptions in Public Policy

The concept of legitimacy is foundational to political science and public administration, serving as the invisible currency that enables governments to function without constant reliance on coercion. Theoretical frameworks of legitimacy emphasize that it is socially constructed, residing in the subjective perceptions and evaluations of citizens rather than in objective legal statutes alone. In evaluating public policy, citizens draw upon multiple evaluative criteria [6]. Procedural fairness is consistently identified as a primary driver of legitimacy perceptions. The procedural justice literature posits that individuals are more likely to accept outcomes that are unfavorable to their personal interests if they believe the process leading to that outcome was fair, transparent, and unbiased [7]. This is highly relevant to climate adaptation planning, where policies such as managed retreat or the imposition of new building regulations inevitably create winners and losers. If the consultation process preceding these policies is perceived as fair, those bearing the brunt of the negative impacts are theoretically more likely to accept the policy as legitimate. Furthermore, the concept of discursive legitimacy suggests that processes which facilitate genuine, rational deliberation among diverse stakeholders generate higher levels of public confidence [8]. However, the translation of procedural fairness into perceived legitimacy is not

automatic. It is mediated by the perceived authenticity of the engagement. Citizens possess a strong capacity to distinguish between genuine attempts at collaborative governance and tokenistic exercises designed to manufacture consent.

2.3 Gaps in the Current Literature

While the theoretical linkages between participatory governance and legitimacy are well-established, empirical validation remains fragmented, particularly regarding the specific mechanisms of action. A significant portion of the existing literature relies on single-case studies or comparative case analyses, which provide rich contextual detail but struggle to isolate the causal impacts of distinct consultation design features. These observational studies often suffer from endogeneity issues, as policymakers may choose different consultation designs based on the anticipated controversy of the issue or the pre-existing levels of public trust in a given community. Furthermore, the specific context of climate adaptation introduces unique temporal and spatial complexities that have not been adequately addressed in general participatory governance research. Climate adaptation involves high levels of scientific uncertainty and necessitates long-term planning horizons that often exceed the typical electoral cycle. Consequently, public consultations on these matters require citizens to process complex risk assessments and make trade-offs between immediate economic costs and future environmental security. There is a pressing need for controlled, experimental research that can disaggregate the components of public consultation design and measure their precise effects on legitimacy perceptions in this specific, high-stakes context. This study addresses these gaps by utilizing a survey experiment to systematically manipulate consultation features, thereby providing robust, generalizable insights into the micro-foundations of democratic legitimacy in environmental planning.

3. Methodology and Research Design

3.1 Survey Experiment Rationale

To overcome the methodological limitations inherent in observational studies of public participation, this research employs a vignette-based survey experiment. Survey experiments combine the internal validity and causal inference capabilities of experimental design with the external validity and representativeness of large-scale survey sampling [9]. By presenting respondents with hypothetical yet highly realistic scenarios and randomly assigning different variations of the scenario texts, researchers can precisely isolate the effect of specific variables on respondents' attitudes and behavioral intentions. In the context of evaluating public consultation designs, a survey experiment is particularly advantageous because it prevents the confounding effects of prior knowledge, historical grievances, or pre-existing political controversies that inevitably influence perceptions of real-world policy processes. The experimental approach ensures that the only systematic difference between the groups of respondents is the specific design feature of the public consultation they read about. This methodological rigor allows for the establishment of definitive causal pathways between how a municipality structures its engagement efforts and how the public subsequently evaluates the legitimacy of the resulting adaptation plan [10]. The design implemented in this study is a fully crossed factorial design, which not only permits the estimation of the main effects of individual design features but also enables the analysis of interaction effects, revealing whether certain combinations of consultation characteristics are particularly synergistic or contradictory in generating perceived legitimacy.

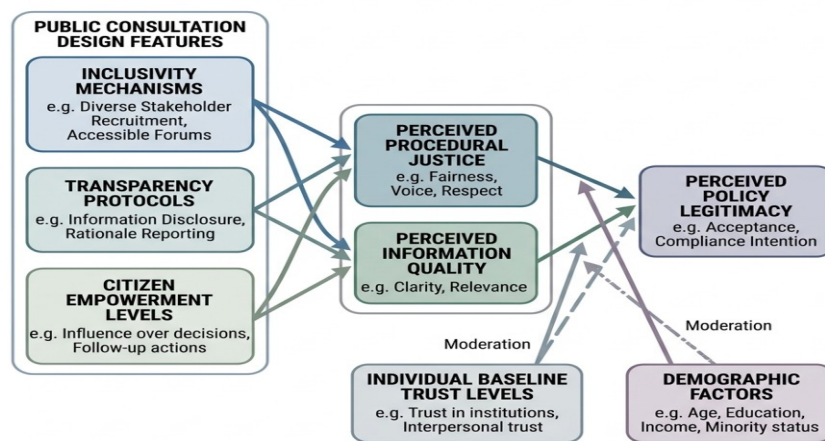


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Public Consultation Design and Legitimacy Perceptions

3.2 Participant Recruitment and Sampling

The empirical data for this study was collected through a comprehensive online survey administered to a nationally representative sample of adults. The sampling frame was designed to reflect the demographic composition of the broader population in terms of age, gender, geographic location, and educational attainment, thereby ensuring the generalizability of the findings [11]. Recruitment was facilitated through a professional public opinion research firm that maintains a large, high-quality opt-in panel of respondents. To maintain data integrity and prevent fraudulent responses, the survey incorporated multiple attention checks and utilized advanced response-time monitoring protocols. Respondents who failed the attention checks or completed the survey in an implausibly short timeframe were automatically excluded from the final analytical sample. The recruitment process yielded a robust final sample size that provides sufficient statistical power to detect even small treatment effects and complex interaction terms. Stratified quota sampling techniques were applied during the recruitment phase to guarantee adequate representation of individuals residing in areas historically vulnerable to climate impacts, such as coastal zones and floodplains, as these individuals possess a higher baseline salience regarding adaptation policies. Prior to beginning the experimental portion of the survey, participants were asked a series of pre-treatment questions designed to capture their baseline attitudes toward climate change, their generalized trust in government institutions, and their standard demographic information.

3.3 Experimental Vignettes and Treatments

The core of the survey experiment consists of a carefully crafted vignette that describes a fictional municipal government proposing a major climate adaptation initiative. The scenario details a comprehensive plan to construct an extensive network of flood defenses and green infrastructure intended to mitigate severe weather impacts over the next fifty years. This baseline scenario was held constant across all respondents to ensure comparability. Following the introduction of the policy problem, the vignette describes the public consultation process that the municipality intends to utilize to finalize the plan. It is within this description that the experimental manipulations occur. The study manipulates three distinct dimensions of consultation design: inclusivity, transparency, and empowerment. Each dimension is operationalized at two distinct levels, creating a two-by-two-by-two

factorial design resulting in eight unique experimental conditions. The treatments were assigned completely at random by the survey software platform.

Table 1: Experimental Vignette Dimensions and Treatment Levels

Dimension	Low Treatment Level	High Treatment Level
Inclusivity	Standard open invitation via municipal website	Proactive targeted outreach to vulnerable communities
Transparency	Summary report published upon completion	Continuous updates with detailed technical justifications
Empowerment	Advisory capacity with no binding commitments	Binding agreement to adopt majority consensus recommendations

The inclusivity dimension tests the difference between a passive approach, where the government simply opens the doors to whoever chooses to attend, and an active approach, where specific resources are deployed to ensure marginalized voices are heard. The transparency dimension contrasts a minimal compliance approach, characterized by a static final report, with a highly interactive approach that provides real-time access to the underlying scientific data and the rationales for rejecting alternative proposals. Finally, the empowerment dimension manipulates the actual authority granted to the participants, comparing a purely consultative exercise where policymakers retain absolute discretion with a delegated authority model where the public input directly dictates specific policy parameters.

4. Data Collection and Measurement Variables

4.1 Dependent Variables

The primary outcome of interest in this study is the perceived democratic legitimacy of the proposed climate adaptation policy and the process that generated it. Because legitimacy is a complex, multi-dimensional construct, relying on a single survey item would be methodologically insufficient and prone to measurement error. Therefore, perceived legitimacy is operationalized through a composite index constructed from a battery of distinct Likert-scale questions [12]. Following exposure to the experimental vignette, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement, on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with several statements designed to capture different facets of legitimacy. The first item measures procedural fairness, asking respondents whether they believe the decision-making process described was fundamentally fair and unbiased. The second item assesses normative acceptability, asking whether the municipal government has the moral right to implement the policy based on the consultation process conducted. The third item captures behavioral compliance, gauging the respondents willingness to voluntarily comply with the new regulations and potential tax implications resulting from the policy. Finally, the fourth item evaluates outcome acceptance, asking whether the respondent would support the final policy even if it contradicted their personal preferences. A principal component analysis was conducted on these items to verify their unidimensionality, and a reliability analysis confirmed a high degree of internal consistency. The responses were subsequently aggregated and standardized to create a robust, continuous dependent variable representing overall legitimacy perceptions.

4.2 Independent and Control Variables

The primary independent variables are the randomly assigned experimental treatment indicators representing the high and low levels of inclusivity, transparency, and empowerment. These variables are coded as binary indicators to facilitate clear interpretation in the regression models. In addition to the experimental treatments, the survey instrument collected a comprehensive suite of control variables to improve the precision of the experimental estimates and to enable the investigation of heterogeneous

treatment effects [13]. Key control variables include political ideology, measured on a standard liberal-to-conservative spectrum, as previous research suggests ideological orientation heavily influences both environmental attitudes and baseline trust in government. Prior knowledge and concern regarding climate change were measured using established scales from environmental psychology, capturing the salience of the issue for each respondent. Furthermore, the study measures generalized institutional trust, asking respondents to rate their confidence in local, regional, and national government entities prior to reading the vignette. This variable is crucial, as the effectiveness of any public consultation design may be heavily constrained by the pre-existing reservoir of trust in the implementing agency. Standard demographic controls, including age, gender, household income, and educational attainment, were also recorded. While the randomization of treatments theoretically ensures that these background characteristics are balanced across the experimental groups, including them as covariates in the subsequent statistical models reduces residual variance and increases the efficiency of the treatment effect estimations.

5. Empirical Results and Discussion

5.1 Main Treatment Effects

The empirical analysis begins with the estimation of the average marginal effects of the three consultation design dimensions on perceived legitimacy. Because the experimental treatments were randomly assigned and orthogonal to one another, the main effects can be efficiently estimated using ordinary least squares regression models without the strict necessity of including control variables. However, models both with and without demographic and attitudinal covariates were estimated to demonstrate the robustness of the findings. The results unequivocally demonstrate that the specific institutional design of a public consultation process has a profound and statistically significant impact on how citizens perceive the legitimacy of the resulting climate adaptation policy [14]. Moving from the low inclusivity treatment to the high inclusivity treatment resulted in a substantial positive shift in legitimacy scores. Respondents who read about proactive, targeted outreach efforts to marginalized communities viewed the process as significantly more legitimate than those exposed to the standard open-invitation model. Similarly, the transparency treatment yielded a strong positive effect. The provision of detailed technical justifications and continuous feedback loops led to higher evaluations of procedural fairness compared to the baseline condition of a static summary report.

Table 2: Ordinary Least Squares Regression Results for Legitimacy Perceptions

Variable	Baseline Model Estimate	Full Model Estimate
High Inclusivity Treatment	0.412	0.395
High Transparency Treatment	0.388	0.370
High Empowerment Treatment	0.545	0.532
Number of Observations	2850	2850

The most substantial main effect observed in the experiment pertained to the empowerment dimension. The transition from a purely advisory consultation format to one featuring binding commitments to adopt citizen consensus generated the largest magnitude increase in perceived legitimacy. This finding provides strong empirical support for theories of participatory governance that argue symbolic engagement is fundamentally insufficient for building democratic mandates on highly contentious issues. When citizens perceive that their input has actual institutional weight and cannot simply be ignored by technocrats, their willingness to accept complex and potentially burdensome adaptation policies increases dramatically.

5.2 Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

Beyond the average main effects, the analysis explored whether the impact of the consultation design variations differed systematically across different subgroups of the population. Examining heterogeneous treatment effects is crucial for understanding the boundary conditions of participatory mechanisms and for designing targeted engagement strategies [15]. A series of interaction models were estimated, multiplying the treatment indicators by key pre-treatment covariates. The most striking heterogeneous effect was discovered regarding pre-existing institutional trust. For respondents who entered the survey with high baseline levels of trust in local government, the specific design of the public consultation had a relatively modest impact on their legitimacy perceptions. These individuals were predisposed to view the municipality's actions favorably regardless of the procedural details. Conversely, for respondents with remarkably low baseline trust, the design of the consultation was paramount. In this low-trust cohort, the low transparency and low empowerment treatments resulted in severely depressed legitimacy scores, effectively validating their cynical expectations. However, when these low-trust individuals were exposed to the high transparency and high empowerment treatments, their legitimacy perceptions exhibited a massive upward trajectory, nearly converging with the high-trust cohort. This suggests that robustly designed, highly empowered participatory mechanisms are exceptionally powerful tools for overcoming deep-seated skepticism and bridging trust deficits in environmental governance.

5.3 Discussion of Findings

The results of this survey experiment provide a clear and compelling narrative regarding the mechanics of democratic legitimacy in climate adaptation planning. The data explicitly reject the notion that any form of public engagement is inherently beneficial. When consultation processes lack structural guarantees of inclusivity, fail to provide transparent rationales for decision-making, and offer no meaningful transfer of power, they fail to generate the normative acceptance required to implement transformative policies. The strong positive effect of the empowerment treatment highlights a critical tension in modern public administration. Technocratic planners often hesitate to delegate authority to the public due to concerns regarding technical competence and the urgency of climate threats. However, the findings indicate that hoarding decision-making power severely undermines the perceived legitimacy of the adaptation project, potentially leading to implementation failures, legal challenges, and protracted political gridlock. Furthermore, the interaction between transparency and empowerment suggests that these design features do not operate in isolation. High empowerment without adequate transparency may be viewed as irresponsible delegation, while high transparency without empowerment merely clarifies the extent to which public input is being ignored. Therefore, a holistic approach to consultation design, incorporating robust mechanisms across all three dimensions, is essential for cultivating genuine democratic legitimacy in the face of complex environmental challenges.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

6.1 Summary of Findings

This study set out to rigorously investigate the causal linkages between the architectural design of public consultation processes and the resulting perceptions of democratic legitimacy in the specific context of climate adaptation planning. Through the deployment of a large-scale, vignette-based survey experiment, the research successfully isolated the independent and interactive effects of three core procedural dimensions: inclusivity, transparency, and empowerment. The empirical evidence demonstrates conclusively that the procedural characteristics of engagement matter immensely. Highly structured consultations that proactively recruit marginalized populations, provide continuous and

detailed justifications for technical decisions, and embed binding mechanisms for public influence generate significantly higher levels of perceived policy legitimacy compared to standard, superficial engagement practices. Notably, the study revealed that delegating actual decision-making power to citizens constitutes the most potent driver of legitimacy, fundamentally altering how the public evaluates the moral and practical authority of contentious environmental policies [16]. Moreover, the analysis of heterogeneous effects demonstrated that robust consultation designs are particularly critical for securing the support of citizens who harbor high levels of baseline cynicism toward government institutions.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the experimental design provides strong internal validity and clear causal identification, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, although the vignettes were carefully constructed to maximize realism, survey experiments inherently measure intended behaviors and hypothetical attitudes rather than actual political behavior in a naturalistic setting. Future research should attempt to replicate these findings using field experiments or rigorous quasi-experimental evaluations of actual municipal consultation processes. Second, the study focused on a generalized scenario of climate adaptation infrastructure. The dynamics of legitimacy may shift when dealing with different types of environmental policies, such as carbon pricing mechanisms or biodiversity conservation efforts, which necessitate different frameworks for risk assessment and economic trade-offs. Third, the study was conducted within a single national context. Given that democratic norms and expectations of civic engagement vary significantly across different political cultures, cross-national comparative experimental research is needed to determine the global generalizability of these findings. Despite these limitations, the findings offer vital, actionable guidance for public administrators. To secure the massive societal transformations required for effective climate adaptation, municipal governments must abandon tokenistic participation in favor of deeply democratic, highly transparent, and genuinely empowering consultation frameworks. Designing engagement processes that respect the agency and intelligence of the public is not merely a normative ideal, but a pragmatic necessity for the survival and resilience of communities facing the escalating realities of global climate change.

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