

Expert Communication Styles for Trust Formation in Legislative Hearing Settings: Field Study

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Abstract

The interaction between domain experts and policymakers within legislative hearing settings serves as a critical juncture in the formulation of evidence-based public policy. Despite the growing reliance on scientific and technical expertise in modern governance, the precise mechanisms through which experts construct and convey their testimonies, and how these communication styles influence the formation of trust among legislators, remain underexplored in empirical field settings. This study presents a comprehensive field investigation into the communication strategies deployed by experts during legislative hearings and their subsequent impact on policymaker trust. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach that combines direct observation of legislative proceedings, linguistic analysis of testimony transcripts, and post-hearing interviews with committee members, this research systematically categorizes expert communication into distinct stylistic typologies. The analysis reveals that highly technical communication, characterized by dense jargon and abstract data presentation, often inadvertently diminishes both cognitive and affective trust among legislators. Conversely, communication styles that effectively integrate analogical reasoning, clear narrative structures, and accessible language significantly enhance perceived credibility and facilitate stronger trust formation. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the institutional affiliation of the expert interacts with their communication style to produce varying trajectories of epistemic reliance. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on science communication in political environments and offer practical implications for experts seeking to optimize their advisory roles in legislative contexts.

Keywords: Expert Communication; Trust Formation; Legislative Hearings; Public Policy; Legislative Hearing Settings

1. Introduction

The modern legislative process is characterized by an increasing reliance on specialized knowledge and technical expertise. As public policy issues grow in complexity, encompassing domains such as artificial intelligence regulation, climate change mitigation, and advanced public health interventions, legislators find themselves frequently confronted with specialized information that exceeds their generalist capacities. In this context, the legislative hearing functions as a primary institutional mechanism for bridging the gap between specialized epistemic communities and democratic decision-making bodies. During these hearings, invited experts deliver testimonies, answer inquiries, and attempt to translate complex phenomena into actionable policy recommendations. However, the transmission

of knowledge from expert to policymaker is rarely a straightforward process of information transfer [1]. Rather, it is a highly contextualized communicative event where the style, tone, and structure of the expert's presentation significantly influence how the information is received, interpreted, and ultimately integrated into the legislative process.

A central challenge in this dynamic is the establishment and maintenance of trust. Trust operates as the fundamental currency of legislative hearings, serving as a heuristic that allows policymakers to accept technical claims without possessing the capacity to independently verify the underlying scientific methodologies. When legislators trust an expert, they are more likely to internalize the provided information and reflect it in subsequent policy drafting [2]. Conversely, when trust is absent or compromised, even the most rigorous scientific evidence can be dismissed, marginalized, or politically instrumentalized. The communication style of the expert is therefore not merely a superficial attribute of their testimony but a profound determinant of their epistemic authority and policy impact [3]. Despite the recognized importance of this dynamic, empirical research focusing specifically on how different communication styles manifest in the high-stakes, real-world environment of legislative hearings remains fragmented. Much of the existing literature on science communication relies on controlled laboratory experiments or surveys of general public audiences, which fail to capture the unique institutional pressures, partisan dynamics, and time constraints inherent to legislative committees [4].

This paper addresses this critical gap in the literature by presenting a comprehensive field study of expert communication styles and trust formation within actual legislative hearing settings. The primary objective of this research is to systematically document the diverse communicative strategies employed by experts and to analyze how these strategies correlate with varying dimensions of trust among legislators [5]. By moving beyond the sterile confines of the laboratory and into the complex reality of the legislative chamber, this study captures the nuanced interplay between linguistic choices, non-verbal cues, institutional affiliations, and the resulting perceptions of credibility and reliability. The investigation seeks to answer fundamental questions regarding the efficacy of technical versus accessible language, the role of narrative in conveying complex data, and the specific communicative behaviors that mitigate or exacerbate the inherent skepticism of political actors.

The structure of this paper is designed to provide a thorough exploration of these dynamics. Following this introduction, the literature review and theoretical background section synthesizes existing research on epistemic authority, science communication, and the multidimensional nature of trust in institutional settings. The methodology section details the mixed-methods field study design, explaining the selection of legislative hearings, the linguistic coding of transcripts, and the procedures for gathering data on legislator trust. The results and analysis section presents the empirical findings, highlighting the differential impacts of jargon, narrative, and hedging on trust formation. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes these findings, discussing their theoretical implications for the study of evidence-based policymaking and offering practical guidance for experts navigating the legislative arena. Through this comprehensive examination, the paper aims to advance our understanding of how communication bridges the divide between expertise and democratic governance.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1 Epistemic Authority and the Role of Experts in Policymaking

The integration of specialized knowledge into the democratic policymaking process has long been a subject of theoretical inquiry across the disciplines of political science, sociology of scientific knowledge, and public administration. At the core of this inquiry is the concept of epistemic authority,

which refers to the socially recognized right of certain individuals or groups to claim valid knowledge within a specific domain [6]. In legislative settings, experts are invited to testify precisely because they are presumed to possess this authority. However, the theoretical landscape has shifted away from the traditional deficit model, which assumed that policymakers simply lacked information and that experts merely needed to deposit facts into the legislative reservoir [7]. Contemporary scholarship recognizes that legislators operate under conditions of bounded rationality, facing severe constraints in terms of time, attention, and cognitive processing capacity.

Consequently, policymakers cannot fully process the technical intricacies of every issue they vote upon. Instead, they rely on heuristic cues to determine the validity of the information presented to them. The expert's testimony is evaluated not solely on its intrinsic scientific merit, which is often inaccessible to the lay legislator, but on secondary indicators of credibility. The legislative hearing thus functions less as a peer-review panel and more as a theater of credibility, where the expert must perform their authority in a manner that resonates with the political and institutional norms of the committee [8]. This performance is heavily dependent on communication style, which serves as the primary vehicle for projecting both competence and an understanding of the policy context. When experts fail to align their communication with the cognitive needs and institutional realities of legislators, their epistemic authority can be rapidly diminished, regardless of their standing within their home discipline.

2.2 Communication Styles and Information Processing

The study of communication styles in the context of expert-layperson interactions has identified several critical dimensions that influence information processing and reception. A primary tension exists between technical accuracy and accessibility. Experts are socialized within their academic or professional disciplines to use highly specific terminology, precise methodological caveats, and abstract data representations. While this technical style is appropriate and necessary for intra-disciplinary communication, it often manifests as dense jargon when deployed in legislative hearings [9]. Extensive research in cognitive psychology indicates that high jargon density imposes a heavy cognitive load on lay listeners, leading to diminished comprehension, decreased engagement, and negative evaluations of the speaker. When policymakers encounter dense technical language, they may perceive the expert as aloof, out of touch with practical realities, or even deliberately obfuscating the issues to avoid accountability [10].

In contrast to the technical style, accessible communication relies on analogies, metaphors, and clear narrative structures. The use of narrative is particularly potent in the policy arena, as human cognition is inherently attuned to storytelling. Narratives provide a cohesive framework that links abstract data to concrete human impacts, making complex issues more salient and easier to remember [11]. Furthermore, effective expert communication in political settings often involves the strategic framing of information. Framing refers to the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of an issue to promote a particular problem definition or moral evaluation. Experts who can successfully frame their technical knowledge in terms that align with the legislative goals and values of the committee are generally more successful in capturing attention and influencing the debate. However, experts must navigate this carefully, as overly aggressive framing can lead to accusations of political bias, thereby undermining the objective neutrality that is the foundation of their epistemic authority.

2.3 Mechanisms of Trust Formation in Institutional Contexts

Trust is a complex, multidimensional construct that forms the bedrock of the expert-policymaker relationship. In the context of legislative hearings, trust can be conceptualized as the willingness of a

policymaker to rely on the information and recommendations provided by an expert, rendering the policymaker vulnerable to the expert's judgment [12]. Theoretical frameworks on interpersonal and institutional trust generally distinguish between two primary dimensions: cognitive trust and affective trust. Cognitive trust is based on rational evaluations of the expert's competence, credentials, track record, and perceived objectivity [13]. When a legislator reviews an expert's curriculum vitae and recognizes prestigious institutional affiliations, they are establishing a baseline of cognitive trust. Affective trust, on the other hand, is rooted in emotional bonds, perceived shared values, and assessments of the expert's warmth, empathy, and benevolent intentions toward the public good.

In the high-pressure environment of a legislative hearing, both dimensions are in constant flux, continuously modulated by the expert's communication style. A highly articulate, data-driven presentation may bolster cognitive trust by demonstrating intellectual rigor, but if delivered in a cold or condescending manner, it may simultaneously destroy affective trust [14]. Conversely, an expert who communicates with great empathy and relies heavily on emotional anecdotes may build high affective trust but could suffer a deficit in cognitive trust if they fail to provide sufficient empirical backing for their claims. The most effective communication styles manage to balance these dual requirements, projecting both authoritative competence and relatable warmth. The legislative context introduces additional layers of complexity to trust formation, as trust must be negotiated publicly under the scrutiny of opposing political factions, media representation, and interest group lobbying, making the communicative performance even more delicate.

3. Methodology and Field Study Design

3.1 Research Context and Selection of Legislative Hearings

To empirically investigate the relationship between expert communication styles and the formation of policymaker trust, this study employed a robust mixed-methods field design, situated within the actual proceedings of national and regional legislative committees. The research was conducted over a period of eighteen months, focusing on committees that regularly deal with highly complex, technical issues requiring extensive expert testimony. Specifically, the study targeted hearings related to environmental policy, public health infrastructure, technology and telecommunications regulation, and advanced infrastructure planning. These domains were selected because they consistently feature a high volume of expert participation and involve significant knowledge asymmetries between the testifying experts and the legislative members [15].

The sampling strategy involved the systematic selection of eighty distinct legislative hearings across these four policy domains. Criteria for inclusion required that the hearing featured at least two independent expert witnesses representing academic institutions, scientific advisory boards, or specialized industry research centers. Hearings that primarily featured testimony from political activists or non-expert constituents were excluded to maintain focus on the dynamics of specialized epistemic authority. In total, the study observed and analyzed the testimonies of one hundred and eighty-seven unique expert witnesses [16]. The research design utilized both real-time observation of the hearings and detailed retrospective analysis of the official transcripts and video recordings to capture both the linguistic content and the paralinguistic delivery of the testimonies.

Table 1: Overview of Selected Legislative Hearings and Expert Participants

Hearing Domain	Number of Experts	Primary Communication Style Observed	Average Testimony Duration
Environmental Policy	48	Highly Technical	15 minutes
Public Health	56	Blended Narrative	12 minutes

Hearing Domain	Number of Experts	Primary Communication Style Observed	Average Testimony Duration
Technology Regulation	42	Highly Technical	18 minutes
Infrastructure Planning	41	Pragmatic Direct	14 minutes

3.2 Data Collection Procedures and Observational Framework

The data collection process was multifaceted, designed to capture the nuance of the communicative act and the corresponding reactions of the policymakers. The primary data source comprised the verbatim transcripts and video recordings of the expert testimonies and the subsequent question-and-answer sessions with committee members. During the real-time observations, researchers utilized a standardized coding protocol to document non-verbal cues, such as the expert's eye contact with the committee, posture, vocal pacing, and instances of visible frustration or hesitation. Simultaneously, researchers recorded the immediate visible reactions of the legislators, noting behaviors such as active listening, distraction, or aggressive posturing during questioning.

To measure the dependent variable of trust formation, the study integrated a series of structured, post-hearing interviews with a sample of participating legislators and their senior policy staff. Securing candid assessments from elected officials is notoriously difficult; therefore, interviews were conducted under strict protocols of anonymity and focused on the policymakers' evaluation of specific testimonies rather than general political ideologies [17]. The interview instrument was designed to elicit responses regarding both cognitive and affective dimensions of trust. Policymakers were asked to rate the perceived credibility of the expert, the clarity of the information provided, their confidence in the expert's methodological soundness, and their perception of the expert's understanding of the practical realities facing the committee. Additionally, researchers tracked the subsequent integration of the expert's specific terminology or recommendations into the final committee reports and drafted legislation, serving as a behavioral proxy for established trust [18].

3.3 Measurement of Communication Variables

The independent variables concerning expert communication style were operationalized through rigorous content analysis of the testimony transcripts. Using specialized natural language processing software supplemented by manual qualitative coding, each testimony was analyzed across several linguistic dimensions. The first major variable was Jargon Density, calculated as the ratio of highly specialized technical terms to the total word count of the testimony. A custom dictionary of domain-specific jargon was developed for each of the four policy areas to ensure accurate measurement. The second variable was Narrative Integration, which measured the extent to which the expert employed storytelling techniques, such as presenting information through a sequential plot, using character-driven examples, or grounding abstract data in specific, relatable scenarios.

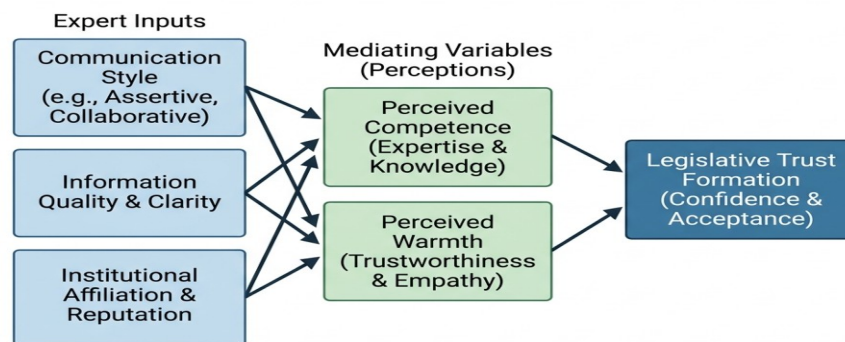


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Expert Communication and Trust Formation

Additional variables included the use of Analogical Reasoning, quantified by the frequency of metaphors and comparisons used to explain technical concepts to lay audiences. The study also measured the prevalence of Hedging and Uncertainty language. In academic discourse, hedging is a standard practice used to express the probabilistic nature of scientific findings, utilizing words like suggests, may, or under certain conditions. In the legislative context, however, the impact of such language on perceived credibility is heavily debated. By quantifying the frequency of hedge words, the study aimed to evaluate how expressions of scientific uncertainty influence legislator trust [19]. The communication variables were then synthesized to categorize each expert into one of several stylistic typologies, ranging from Highly Technical to Blended Narrative and Pragmatic Direct.

3.4 Analytical Strategy and Statistical Modeling

The analytical strategy employed a sequential mixed-methods approach. Initially, qualitative thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the interactions between experts and legislators, particularly during the unscripted question-and-answer periods. This qualitative foundation provided the context necessary for interpreting the quantitative data. Subsequently, the quantitative data derived from the transcript coding and the post-hearing legislator surveys were subjected to multiple regression analysis. The models were designed to isolate the specific impact of the various communication variables on both cognitive and affective trust, controlling for factors such as the expert's institutional affiliation, the partisan composition of the committee, and the specific policy domain.

The regression models tested the main effects of Jargon Density, Narrative Integration, and Hedging on trust scores. Furthermore, the analysis explored potential interaction effects. For instance, the models investigated whether the negative impact of jargon was mitigated if the expert possessed a particularly prestigious institutional affiliation, or whether the positive impact of narrative was dependent on the specific policy domain being discussed. The robust statistical approach allowed for a granular understanding of which communicative choices yield the highest dividends in terms of building trust within the specific constraints of the legislative environment.

4. Results and Analysis of Trust Formation

4.1 The Detrimental Effects of Jargon Density on Cognitive Trust

The analysis of the transcribed testimonies and the corresponding legislator feedback revealed profound insights into the mechanics of trust formation. One of the most striking findings of the study was the consistently negative relationship between high Jargon Density and the formation of cognitive trust. Contrary to the assumption held by some experts that technical language signals rigorous competence, the data demonstrated that when testimonies exceeded a certain threshold of specialized terminology, legislators reported significantly lower levels of trust in the expert's overall credibility. The post-hearing interviews indicated that high jargon density induced cognitive fatigue among committee members. When legislators struggled to decipher the terminology, they frequently attributed their confusion not to their own lack of expertise, but to the expert's inability to communicate effectively, which they interpreted as a deficit in pragmatic competence [20].

Furthermore, the qualitative analysis of the question-and-answer sessions showed that highly technical communication styles often triggered defensive or adversarial questioning from legislators. In instances where experts relied heavily on abstract mathematical models or dense biochemical descriptions without sufficient translation, policymakers were more likely to challenge the underlying assumptions of the research or question the funding sources of the expert's institution. The mechanism at play appears to be one of alienation; when experts fail to adapt their language to the legislative audience, they reinforce the boundary between the scientific community and the political arena. This alienation severely undercuts cognitive trust, as policymakers are hesitant to rely on evidence they cannot independently explain to their constituents or fellow caucus members.

4.2 The Role of Narrative and Analogical Reasoning in Affective Trust

In stark contrast to the alienating effects of jargon, the strategic use of Narrative Integration and Analogical Reasoning emerged as powerful catalysts for trust formation, particularly concerning the affective dimension. The regression models indicated a strong, positive correlation between the frequency of narrative structures and higher scores in legislator-reported affective trust. Experts who contextualized their data within human-centric stories or historical precedents were perceived by committee members as more empathetic, warmer, and more genuinely committed to the public good. The narratives served as cognitive bridges, allowing legislators to map complex technical inputs onto familiar policy landscapes.

Table 2: Impact of Communication Styles on Dimensions of Policymaker Trust

Communication Variable	Cognitive Trust Impact	Affective Trust Impact	Behavioral Intention (Policy Adoption)
Jargon Density	Strong Negative	Moderate Negative	Strong Negative
Narrative Integration	Moderate Positive	Strong Positive	Strong Positive
Hedging and Uncertainty	Moderate Negative	Neutral	Moderate Negative
Analogical Reasoning	Strong Positive	Moderate Positive	Strong Positive

The effectiveness of analogical reasoning was equally pronounced. When experts used well-crafted metaphors to explain mechanisms like algorithmic bias or epidemiological modeling, it not only improved comprehension but also significantly boosted cognitive trust. The ability to translate complexity into accessible analogies was interpreted by legislators as a marker of true mastery over the subject matter. Importantly, the most successful communication style observed in the field was the Blended Narrative approach, where experts anchored their highly rigorous empirical findings within an accessible narrative framework. This style effectively satisfied the dual requirements of legislative trust: it provided the hard data necessary for cognitive validation while delivering the emotional and practical context necessary for affective resonance.

4.3 Navigating Scientific Uncertainty and Hedging

The analysis of Hedging and expressions of scientific uncertainty provided complex, nuanced results. In academic settings, hedging is essential for maintaining accuracy and credibility. However, the regression analysis of the legislative field data revealed that a high frequency of hedge words had a moderate negative impact on cognitive trust and a notable negative impact on the behavioral intention of legislators to adopt the expert's policy recommendations. Policymakers operate in an environment that demands definitive action; they seek certainty to justify political risks and legislative mandates. When experts presented their findings heavily laden with caveats and probabilistic language, legislators often interpreted this not as scientific rigor, but as evasiveness or a lack of confidence in the underlying data.

This dynamic creates a significant structural tension for testifying experts. The qualitative interviews with legislators highlighted a phenomenon where political actors exploit scientific uncertainty to advance pre-existing ideological agendas. If an expert stated that a particular chemical compound may contribute to adverse health outcomes under specific conditions, opposition legislators frequently seized upon the uncertainty to argue against regulatory action. However, the study also found that experts who employed pragmatic directness—stating their conclusions firmly while clearly delineating the boundaries of their knowledge in plain language rather than academic hedging—were able to maintain high levels of trust. The key differentiator was the stylistic presentation of uncertainty: framing it as a known parameter of the current scientific consensus rather than a personal lack of conviction [21].

4.4 Non-verbal Dynamics and Institutional Affiliation

Beyond the linguistic content of the testimonies, the field study underscored the critical importance of non-verbal communication and institutional context in the trust-building process. Observational data indicated that vocal pacing, sustained eye contact, and an open physical posture significantly correlated with higher affective trust scores. Experts who read strictly from prepared statements without engaging the committee visually were consistently rated lower in both credibility and persuasiveness. The legislative hearing is an inherently performative space, and experts who demonstrated comfort and responsiveness in this environment were rewarded with greater epistemic reliance.

Furthermore, the data revealed interaction effects between communication style and the expert's institutional affiliation. Academic experts affiliated with prestigious universities were generally afforded a higher initial baseline of cognitive trust compared to industry-affiliated experts. However, this academic advantage was fragile; if the academic expert employed a highly technical, jargon-dense communication style, their trust scores plummeted more sharply than an industry expert making the same communicative error. Conversely, industry experts faced initial skepticism regarding potential conflicts of interest, meaning they had to rely more heavily on transparent, narrative-driven communication to build affective trust and overcome the baseline deficit in perceived objectivity.

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1 Synthesis of Empirical Findings

This comprehensive field study provides robust empirical evidence detailing the intricate mechanisms through which expert communication styles influence trust formation in legislative hearings. By moving the analytical focus into the authentic, high-stakes environment of parliamentary and congressional committees, the research illuminates the stark realities of science communication in the political arena. The findings definitively demonstrate that the unvarnished transmission of technical data is insufficient for establishing epistemic authority. Instead, high jargon density and overly abstract

presentations actively erode both cognitive and affective trust, alienating policymakers and triggering defensive skepticism. In contrast, communicative strategies that utilize analogical reasoning, clear narrative integration, and pragmatic directness are highly effective in building the multidimensional trust necessary for experts to influence policy outcomes.

5.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The theoretical implications of this study challenge the traditional deficit model of science communication, reinforcing the paradigm that policymaker comprehension and trust are highly dependent on the communicative competence of the expert. The research expands the application of the elaboration likelihood model within political science by demonstrating how linguistic choices act as heuristic cues that determine whether technical information is centrally processed or marginalized by legislators. From a practical standpoint, the findings offer actionable guidance for scientists, researchers, and institutional advisors preparing for legislative testimony. Experts must recognize that the legislative hearing requires a fundamental translation of their knowledge. Preparation should focus not merely on the accuracy of the data, but on the architecture of the message, prioritizing accessible analogies, eliminating unnecessary jargon, and strategically managing the presentation of scientific uncertainty to project both competence and practical relevance [22].

5.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study offers significant advancements in understanding expert-policymaker interactions, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The research was conducted within specific policy domains characterized by high technical complexity; the dynamics of trust formation may differ in hearings focused on profound moral or constitutional issues where technical expertise plays a secondary role. Additionally, while the study controlled for partisan affiliation, the deep polarization of contemporary political environments means that ideological alignment may sometimes override even the most effective communication strategies. Future research should expand this methodological approach to a comparative international context, examining how different parliamentary traditions and cultural norms regarding authority and expertise influence the efficacy of various communication styles. Further exploration into the long-term decay or endurance of legislator trust following a single expert encounter will also provide deeper insights into the lifecycle of epistemic authority in public policy.

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