Randomized Controlled Trial

Measuring the Credibility of Nonpolitical Institutions

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Abstract

This survey experiment examines how the credibility of nonpolitical institutions shapes individual beliefs and preferences. Fielded in Italy, it delivers identical information about labor automation while randomizing the sender—trade unions, business organizations, newspapers, or an unspecified source. By isolating the sender effect, the design identifies how source attribution drives belief updating and behavioral responses. A pre-post structure captures prior beliefs and tracks changes over time in both beliefs and policy preferences. The experiment aims to provide new evidence on the persuasive power of nonpolitical institutions and their influence on public opinion.

1. Motivation

Nonpolitical institutions play a crucial role in shaping the fabric of society. Institutions such as trade unions, business associations, media organizations, scientific bodies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) all contribute to the functioning of a democratic society. Although this concept is barely new—at least since Tocqueville's (1835) assertion that democracy depends on more than just the act of voting—the incorporation of nonpolitical institutions in the political economy literature has been challenging. Apart from a growing body of research in media economics, existing theoretical and empirical models primarily focus on voters and politicians, often neglecting the influence of other players on equilibrium outcomes in representative democracies. However, the strategic behavior and credibility of nonpolitical institutions affect public policy in many ways, both directly (through social dialogue and implementation) and indirectly (by shaping the information set of voters and politicians).

In this project, following Brady and Schlozman (2022), institutions are defined as "nonpolitical" (or "nonpartisan") if they are either private entities or government bodies that are not elected, do not legislate, and strive to maintain nonpartisanship. If trust in nonpolitical institutions is low or highly heterogeneous, democratic decision-making becomes jammed. If the credibility of nonpolitical institutions—and of the signals they send in the public discourse—is low or highly heterogeneous, democratic decision-making becomes jammed. According to Rauch (2021), journalism, academia, the courts, law enforcement, and science are evidence-based institutions that all suffer in front of the current "epistemological crisis." According to Brady and Schlozman (2022), declining and polarized trust in nonpolitical institutions erodes institutional legitimacy, creates stalemate, and prevents the solution of shared problems.

2. Question

A key concern regarding current survey methodologies for measuring the credibility and trustworthiness of institutions is highlighted by Brady and Kent (2022, p. 48): "How do we know that confidence questions are capturing something real?" Moreover, even if they do, the impact of credibility on political and economic outcomes still needs to be tested.

The same applies to potential remedies for the trust crisis. In other words, experimental variation is necessary to establish causal evidence on both the causes and consequences of declining credibility in nonpolitical institutions.

As a first step in a broader research agenda, I plan to conduct a survey experiment in Italy that administers the same information treatment while randomizing the identity of the sender. In other words, different experimental groups will receive identical information attributed to different nonpolitical institutions. Although this approach has not been applied to institutions before, there is evidence that the identity of the sender in randomized controlled trials (RCTs) can influence outcomes (Druckman, 2001; Cavallo et al., 2016; 2017; Alsan and Eichmeyer, 2024; Korlyakova, 2021).

I will build on previous studies on labor automation (Arntz et al., 2022) to align with existing literature and provide out-of-sample benchmarks. The information will be designed to operate through the updating of beliefs and perceptions, rather than priming. The experimental design will follow a "pre-post" structure with the elicitation of first-stage beliefs and updated posteriors (Stantcheva, 2023). This approach will allow me to examine the credibility and influence of different nonpolitical institutions—such as trade unions, business organizations, and newspapers—on individual decision-making. By systematically varying the sender of the information, I will assess the credibility of these institutions and measure their impact on both beliefs and behavior.

3. Framework

The survey experiment will be based on the following empirical framework. Define the message delivered to treated individuals as $m \in M$, where M is the information space, and the sender of the message as $s \in S$, where S is the space of potential senders. For example, in the case of two senders, s_1 and s_2, we will have the following four treatment arms in the survey experiment (with arms increasing in the number of senders).

1) Individuals receiving the information treatment m_t by s_1:
$$s = s_1; m = m_t.$$
2) Individuals receiving the information treatment m_t by s_2:
$$s = s_2; m = m_t.$$
3) Individuals receiving the m_t with no specified sender:
$$s = 0; m = m_t.$$
4) Individuals receiving no information treatment:
$$s = 0; m = 0.$$

This framework is based on two control groups: 3) receiving the information from no specified sender, as it happens in most survey experiments, and 4) receiving no information at all. This will allow us to ask key corroborating questions to respondents in group 4): How much do you trust s_1 and s_2? How likely is it that s_1 or s_2 sent the message m_t? Of course, these questions will be asked at the end of the survey, to avoid any bias on the elicitation of outcomes (y) and beliefs (b). The chain of causation we are interested to disclose is the following: $s \rightarrow b \rightarrow y | m$, where the mediating effect of beliefs is conditional on the message used in the empirical analysis.

For the statistical framework to work, we need this preliminary (testable) hypothesis to be verified:

$$H_P: E[y \mid m= m_t, s=0] \neq E[y \mid m=0, s=0].$$

The main (trust) hypothesis that can be tested in this framework is the following:

$$H_T: E[y \mid m= m_t, s= s_1] \neq E[y \mid m= m_t, s= s_2].$$

I also plan to develop a structural model to estimate the trustworthiness of institutions under mild assumptions on individual belief updating. The effect of m_i on preferences will be decomposed into a belief-updating and a direct influence component.

4. Design

The survey will be conducted by the professional polling company SWG through fieldwork for CAWI. The goal is to randomize information m, which will be the same for all treatment groups except the control group, but the source of this information will differ across the groups receiving the treatment. The sample will be divided into five groups of 650 individuals each. The information will be provided in a graphic format resembling a newspaper headline to increase its impact.

- Group A (650 individuals): Receives m from "major trade unions."
- Group B (650 individuals): Receives m from "major business associations."
- Group C (650 individuals): Receives m from "major newspapers."
- Group D (650 individuals): Receives m without a specified source.
- Group E (650 individuals): Does not receive m (control group).

Versions of information treatment, m.

- m_A (Trade Unions): "Major trade unions warn: 66% of jobs at risk due to artificial intelligence. *Cgil* and *Cisl* discuss a recent study."
- m_B (Business): "Major business associations warn: 66% of jobs at risk due to artificial intelligence. *Confindustria* and *CNA* discuss a recent study."
- m_C (Newspapers): "Major newspapers warn: 66% of jobs at risk due to artificial intelligence. *Corriere* e *Repubblica* discuss a recent study."
- m_D (No Source): "66% of jobs are at risk due to artificial intelligence. A recent study discusses this issue."

Note that there is no deception involved, as the information treatments simply state that the specific nonpolitical institutions “discussed” the study in question. In fact, as shown by a press review conducted in preparation for this survey, when a study estimated that 66% of jobs in developed countries could be at risk due to generative AI, major newspapers, trade unions, and business organizations all discussed its findings. Therefore, the statements in the information treatments are accurate.

In line with best practices in the literature (Haaland et al., 2023), the survey will measure: (a) the quantitative prior on the number of jobs at risk due to automation, along with its second moments; (b) the qualitative posterior on the perceived impact of AI and its second moments; (c) the quantitative posterior on the number of jobs at risk and its

second moments (elicited at the end of the survey to avoid biasing earlier responses); (d) policy and individual preferences regarding job security, wages, training, and voting behavior in an upcoming referendum on Italian labor market reform. As in the model, the effect of the sender of the information on preferences will be decomposed into two components: belief-updating vs. direct influence. The analysis will explore heterogeneity across trust in political and nonpolitical institutions, ideology, populist attitudes, age, gender, social capital, occupation, contract type, and sector. Open-ended questions will elicit respondents' reasoning and emotional reactions related to the outcomes. An attention check will screen participants before receiving the information treatment.

5. Implications

This experiment has the potential to deepen our understanding of how nonpolitical institutions influence individual choices. Additionally, the empirical findings will contribute to the evolving paradigm of nudging in public policy—a concept that has gained significant attention not only in behavioral economics but also in policymaking circles. This project will explore whether greater emphasis should be placed on the identity of the *nudger*—the institution delivering the nudge—rather than solely on the content of the nudge itself. Understanding how the credibility and perceived motives of the nudging institution influence public behavior will provide deeper insights into how institutions can more effectively shape policy outcomes and public decision-making. Furthermore, this project will contribute to the assessment of survey experiments—an increasingly used methodology in the social sciences. By providing randomized benchmarks on respondents' beliefs about the sender of information treatments, this research will offer valuable insights into the validity and robustness of these methods, which often do not specify the sender.

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Survey starting date: April 14, 2025.
Survey end date: May 5, 2025.
Total sample: 3,250 respondents.
Treatment arms: 5 (including control group).
Ethics clearance: Received on April 9, 2025, by the Ethics Committee at the European University Institute (Project code: 20250226_NANNICINI)

Pilot Questionnaire (English translation)

Block A: Individual Characteristics, Opinions, and Priors

1. Municipality of residence / Province / Region

2. Age

3. Gender

4. Education level

5. What is your current employment status?
   - Permanent employee
   - Temporary employee
   - Self-employed
   - Unemployed
   - Student, retired, or not in the labor force

6. Specific sector/profession in which you work

7. Political preferences are often classified in terms of left and right. Considering these two extremes, where would you place your political orientation?
   - Left
   - Center-left
   - Center
   - Center-right
   - Right
   - I don't identify with these categories

8. How much do you agree with the following statement? "Traditional politicians care only about their own interests, not those of ordinary people."
   - Strongly disagree
   - Somewhat disagree
   - Neither agree nor disagree
   - Somewhat agree
   - Strongly agree

9. How would your family and friends describe you?
   - A person who is very interested in politics
   - A person who is occasionally interested in politics
   - A person who is not interested in politics at all

10. How much trust do you have in each of the following institutions?

(Scale to be included next to each institution: 1. No trust, 2. Little trust, 3. Neutral, 4. Some trust, 5. A lot of trust. Randomize the order of institutions.)

- Trade unions
- Business associations
- Press & TV
- Universities
- Political parties
- Government & Parliament
- European Union
- Armed forces

11. From 1 to 100, in percentage terms, how many jobs do you think will be at risk in developed countries due to artificial intelligence? (Explain probability concept.)

12. How certain are you about the answer you just provided?

- Very uncertain
- Somewhat uncertain
- Neither uncertain nor certain
- Somewhat certain
- Very certain

13. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that one should be very careful when dealing with others?

- Most people can be trusted
- One should be very careful when dealing with others
- Don't know / Prefer not to answer

13b. To prove that you are reading our questions carefully, please type “red” as your response to the next question. What is your favorite color?

Block B: Randomized Information Treatments

The information will be provided in a graphic format resembling a newspaper headline to increase its impact. Below the graphic, question 14 should appear.

- Group A (650 individuals): Receives m from "major trade unions."
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- m_D (No Source): "66% of jobs are at risk due to artificial intelligence. A recent study discusses this issue."

14. What do you think about this information? What reaction does it provoke in you?

Block C: Posteriors and Outcome Variables

15. How much do you agree with each of the following statements?
(Scale: 1. Strongly disagree, 2. Somewhat disagree, 3. Neither agree nor disagree, 4. Somewhat agree, 5. Strongly agree. Randomize the order of statements.)
- "We should tax multinational corporations more."
- "We should establish a basic income to allow everyone to live."
- "We should invest in lifelong free education for all."
- "We should make it more difficult for companies to fire workers."

16. A person is given the opportunity to avoid being laid off for the next ten years, provided they give up a percentage of their salary. In your opinion, what is the maximum percentage one should be willing to forgo?

17. What kind of impact do you think artificial intelligence will have on jobs in developed countries?
- Very negative
- Negative
- No impact
- Positive
- Very positive

18. How certain are you about the answer you just provided?
- Very uncertain
- Somewhat uncertain
- Neither uncertain nor certain
- Somewhat certain
- Very certain

19. What kind of impact do you think artificial intelligence will have on your current or future job?
- Very negative
- Negative
- No impact
- Positive
- Very positive

20. How certain are you about the answer you just provided?
- Very uncertain
- Somewhat uncertain
- Neither uncertain nor certain
- Somewhat certain
- Very certain

21. How much do you agree with each of the following statements?
(Scale: 1. Strongly disagree, 2. Somewhat disagree, 3. Neither agree nor disagree, 4. Somewhat agree, 5. Strongly agree. Randomize the order of statements.)
- "To be sure I wouldn't be laid off for the next ten years, I would accept a job I don't like."
- "I would be willing to invest my savings in a high-quality training course."

20. In a few months, a referendum will be held, promoted by the CGIL trade union, against the Jobs Act, the labor reform introduced by the Renzi government. If you were to vote in this referendum, would you vote to abolish or keep the Jobs Act?
    - Abolish the Jobs Act
    - Keep the Jobs Act
    - Don't know / Prefer not to answer

21. What do you think societies should do to address the challenges posed by the development and spread of artificial intelligence?

22. Question for Groups D and E only
From 1 to 100, what probability do you assign to the statement "Artificial intelligence will put 66% of jobs at risk" having been made by each of the following: major trade unions, major business associations, major newspapers, major universities, major political parties, social media?
(Show again—or show for the first time to the control group—the graphic with the information but without the sender.)

22b. Question for Groups A, B, and C only
From 1 to 100, how likely did you expect the statement "Artificial intelligence will put 66% of jobs at risk" to come from the following source: major trade unions (A), major business associations (B), or major newspapers (C), depending on group assignment? What probability would you assign to it having been made by the other categories?
(Show the graphic with the information and the sender as presented to the assigned treatment group.)

Block D: Final Quantitative Posteriors

Note: These items may be affected by anchoring or respondent fatigue and should be interpreted with caution. Their inclusion at the end of the survey aims to minimize bias on earlier responses but may limit their reliability.

23. Following our discussion, from 1 to 100, in percentage terms, how many jobs do you think will be at risk in developed countries due to artificial intelligence?

24. How certain are you about the answer you just provided?
    - Very uncertain
    - Somewhat uncertain
    - Neither uncertain nor certain
    - Somewhat certain
    - Very certain