Share

ATTITUDES, MEDIA & GOVERNANCE • 28 NOV 2023 HANS HENRIK SIEVERTSEN, SARAH SMITH

How do the views of experts and the public differ on big policy questions?

Economics affects all our lives, but it can be hard to understand. Research shows that on certain topics, the opinions of economic experts are different from those held by a representative sample of members of the public. This highlights the need for better communication.

Public trust in economists is low. People have limited understanding of what economists do beyond forecasting. What's more, when it comes to big issues, it can seem as though economists are talking a different language – espousing views that are not only jargon-filled but often radically different from those held by the public.

Comparing the opinions of members of the American public on a range of topical policy issues with those of an expert panel of economists, researchers observed that 'economists' opinions seem to be more distant from those of the US population on those topics where economists agree the most among themselves' (Sapienza and Zingales, 2013). In essence, if there is consensus among economists, it seems that they disagree with the public.

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

A decade after this study was published, new research compares expert and public opinions on a range of economic issues. The analysis reveals that experts are more likely to express an opinion than members of the public, and they have a higher level of consensus.

On two topics, the pattern in the earlier study remains: experts agreeing among themselves but their views differing from those of the public. These topics are 'greedflation', which refers to companies raising prices to artificially high levels to increase profits during periods of inflation, and 'price gouging', a similar idea where prices are increased to levels deemed unreasonable or unfair. On both of these topics, experts' views are more pro-market that the public's.

On other issues, notably the need to secure reliable supplies of semi-conductors, there is a shared consensus between experts and the public. Highlighting issues like these where opinions align – as well as engaging with the public on why views differ – may be important for building trust.

How were opinions gathered?

The expert opinions for the new study were gathered from Chicago Booth's US Economic Experts Panel, which has been running since 2011. The panel is currently made up of 41 distinguished experts (six women and 35 men) in different fields of economics who hold positions in (and PhDs from) a small number of elite US economics departments. Its purpose is to explore economists' views on different policy issues.

Individuals agree to be on the panel knowing that around twice a month, they will be polled by email for their views on current topics. Responses, and a summary, are made publicly available via the panel website. For the study, ten recent policy statements (see Box 1) were selected on which to compare expert and public views.

The public's opinions were gathered via a survey using Prolific, with respondents shown the ten statements and asked their opinion in the same way as the experts. The sample was 100 people, specified to be balanced by gender.

Compared with the experts, the public sample has a higher share of women (52%) and is much younger. The average age of the panel members is 61 (with a range of 45-81), whereas 71% of the public sample is below the age of 45. The experts' age, where unknown, was estimated from the year they obtained their PhD, assuming that someone is 25 years old when awarded this degree.

Box 1: Policy statements

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

Members of the public and expert economists were shown the ten statements below and asked whether they agree or disagree. Responses are on a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree and strongly agree). A 'no opinion' response is also allowed. Experts have the additional option of not responding on particular questions.

1. Use of **artificial intelligence** over the next ten years will lead to a substantial increase in the growth rates of real per capita income in the US and Western Europe over the subsequent two decades.
2. There needs to be more government regulation around **Twitter**'s content moderation and personal data protection.
3. It would serve the US economy well to make it unlawful for companies with revenues over $1 billion to offer goods or services for sale at an excessive price during an exceptional market shock (**price gouging**).
4. Efforts to achieve the goal of reaching **net-zero** emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050 will be a major drag on global economic growth.
5. Given the centrality of **semiconductors** to the manufacturing of many products, securing reliable supplies should be a key strategic objective of national policy.
6. A significant factor behind today's higher US inflation is dominant corporations in uncompetitive markets taking advantage of their market power to raise prices (**greedflation**).
7. **Financial regulators** in the US and Europe lack the tools and authority to deter runs on banks by uninsured depositors.
8. When **economic policy**-makers are unable to commit credibly in advance to a specific decision rule, they will often follow a poor policy trajectory.
9. A **windfall tax** on the profits of large oil companies, with the revenue rebated to households, would provide an efficient means to protect the average US household.
10. A ban on advertising **junk foods** (those that are high in sugar, salt, and fat) would be an effective policy to reduce child obesity.

How did opinions compare?

In the same way as the earlier study (Sapienza and Zingales, 2013), the new research creates two summary opinion measures: respondents' opinions; and the degree of consensus.

- **Opinion:** This measures if respondents express an opinion (= 1), that is, the response is one of agree, agree strongly, disagree, disagree strongly; or if the

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

response is uncertain or no opinion, or, in the case of the experts, if they provide no response (= 0).

- **Agree**: This measures the degree of consensus, that is, if the respondent agrees or agrees strongly with the statement (= 1), or disagrees or disagrees strongly (= 0). This is missing in the case of no opinion.

These two measures are summarised, for each statement, in Table 1.

Table 1: Expert versus public opinions

	Expert	Expert	Public	Public	
Statement	Opinion	Agree	Opinion	Agree	Distance
Artificial intelligence	0.46	0.96	0.43	0.51	0.44
Twitter	0.53	0.70	0.51	0.65	0.05
Price gouging	0.70	0.07	0.40	0.80	0.73
Net zero	0.47	0.26	0.51	0.35	0.10
Semiconductors	0.76	1.00	0.41	0.95	0.05
Greedflation	0.74	0.12	0.50	0.66	0.54
Financial regulation	0.61	0.44	0.43	0.56	0.12
Economic policy	0.63	0.92	0.48	0.92	0.00
Windfall tax	0.65	0.54	0.43	0.77	0.23

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

Junk food	0.53	0.83	0.54	0.61	0.22
Average	0.61	0.58	0.46	0.68	0.25

Opinion = proportion who agree/disagree (compared to uncertain, no opinion, no response)
Agree = proportion who agree (compared to disagree)
Distance = absolute difference between shares of experts and public agreeing

The study shows, perhaps unsurprisingly, that experts are more likely to give an opinion than members of the public (61% compared with 46%). Most members of the public are happy to give opinions on some but not all questions (11% give two or fewer opinions; 6% give eight or more opinions).

Members of the public were asked about their level of economics knowledge and those who report a higher level (equating to one-third of the public who report themselves as being seven or more out of ten) are more likely to give an opinion (51% per cent).

Whether experts give an opinion varies more widely across topics than is the case for the public, which is likely to reflect varying levels of certainty among the experts on different topics. More than 70% of experts give an opinion on semiconductors, greedflation and price gouging, while less than 50% give an opinion on net-zero emissions and artificial intelligence.

There is greater consensus among the experts than among members of the public. On average, 81% of experts agree or disagree (the modal opinion) compared with 71% of public respondents.

Using the (absolute) difference in the proportion of who agrees with the statements, it is possible to calculate a measure of the distance between experts and the public. The average distance between experts and the public in the new study is 0.25 (in Sapienza and Zingales, 2013, the distance was 0.35).

The average distance is the same if the focus is only on members of the public who report a higher level of economics knowledge – perhaps surprisingly, (self-reported) economics knowledge does not seem to make people's views align more closely with the experts.

The average distance hides very close alignment between experts and members of the public on some issues (economic policy, Twitter, semiconductors and net zero) but big differences on others (price gouging and greedflation).

Is it the case that expert opinions are 'more distant from those of the US population on those topics where economists agree the most among themselves' (Sapienza and

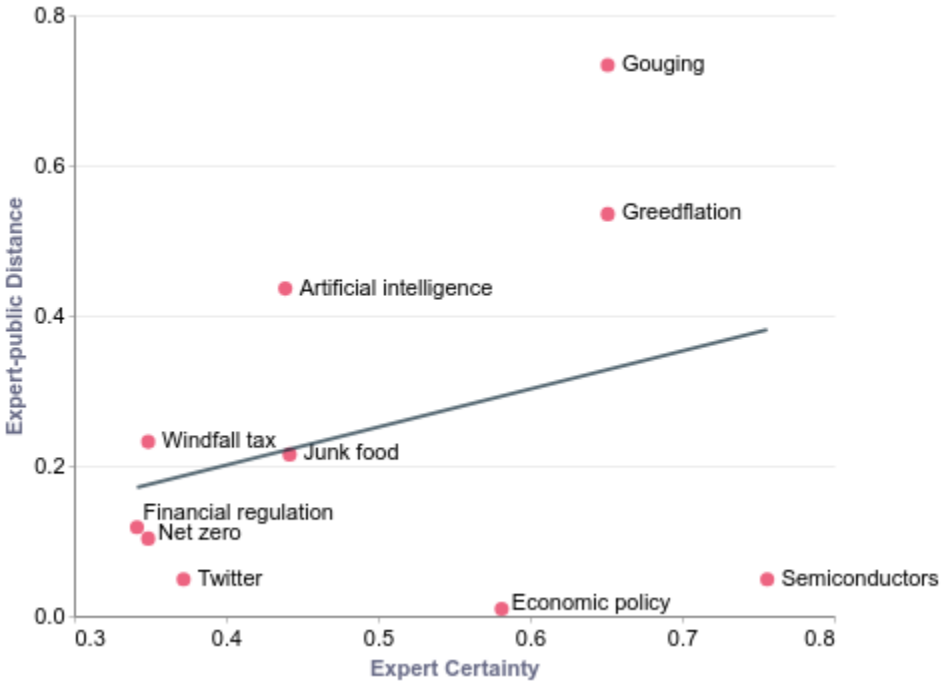
Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

Zingales, 2013)?

Figure 1 plots the distance between expert and public opinions against a measure of expert certainty (equal to the share of experts expressing an opinion multiplied by the share who hold the modal opinion).

On price gouging and greedflation, experts are very certain, and their opinions are distant from those held by the public. The experts' opinions on these topics are more pro-market – they do not believe that corporate greed contributes to inflation nor that price gouging should be regulated.

Figure 1: Distance between expert and public opinions against levels of expert certainty



Distance = absolute difference between shares of experts and public agreeing
Certainty = proportion expressing an opinion x proportion expressing the modal view

Source: Authors' calculations

On these two issues – price gouging and greedflation – the experts are more pro-market and anti-government regulation than the public.

Yet this is not always the case. For example, experts are more likely to agree on the need to regulate Twitter and the likely effectiveness of a ban on advertising of junk food. Expert views on these issues – and on a windfall tax on oil companies – align more closely to the public's view. But as in the earlier study, the experts are also more uncertain on these issues (Sapienza and Zingales, 2013).

Notable exceptions to previous research are experts' opinions on semiconductors, and to a lesser extent economic policy-making, where experts are certain in their views,

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

but these are almost identical to opinions held by the public.

Conclusion

Large differences between expert opinions and those of the public may undermine public trust in economists.

Economists' opinions are often well founded on theory and evidence. For example, a recent investigation by the UK's Competition and Markets Authority found no evidence that supermarkets were driving the recent increase in food prices. Rather, in a competitive sector, profit margins were being squeezed during a period of rising grocery prices.

But a combination of poor communication and low levels of economic understanding may work to reduce expert credibility. Emphasising areas of agreement and improving communication on areas of disagreement may help to bridge the divide.

Where can I find out more?

- Economic experts versus average Americans: A study by Paola Sapienza and Luigi Zingales.
- US economic experts panel: About the survey on policy issues run by Chicago Booth's Clark Center for Global Markets.
- Public understanding of economics: A project by the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence (ESCoE).
- ING-Economics Network survey of public understanding of economics: A report from 2019.

Who are experts on this question?

- Hans Sievertsen
- Johnny Runge
- Sarah Smith

Authors: Hans Sievertsen and Sarah Smith

Photo by Nikolaev for iStock

Authors

Hans Henrik Sievertsen

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

University of Bristol and The Danish Center for Social Science Research

View Profile

Sarah Smith
University of Bristol

View Profile

Recent Questions

View all articles

ATTITUDES, MEDIA & GOVERNANCE

What's worth reading over the 2024 holiday season?

SCHOOLS, UNIVERSITIES & TRAINING

What can the UK learn from the latest global data on pupil performance?

ATTITUDES, MEDIA & GOVERNANCE

What's worth reading over the 2023 holiday season?

Do you have a question surrounding any of these topics? Or are you an economist and have an answer?

ASK A QUESTION

OR

SUBMIT EVIDENCE

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF

Funded By

Contributing organisations

Explore our developer-friendly HTML to PDF API Printed using PDFCrowd HTML to PDF