

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0448

Academics' Attitudes to Engaging in Public Discussions – Experimental Evidence on the Influence of Changing Conditions

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**Research Domain:** Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

**Abstract:** Growing demands and expectations on the side of policy makers and the public have changed the conditions for academics' engagement in public discussions. At the same time, risks related to this engagement have become apparent. Conducting a survey experiment among 4,091 tenured professors in Germany, we study how these conditions causally affect academics' attitudes toward engaging. Consistent with a crowding-out of intrinsic motivation, we find less positive attitudes when emphasizing demands for engagement by public authorities and public expectations toward science's societal relevance, especially among professors endorsing science–society relations. Effects are similar for emphasizing risks associated with engaging, but more pronounced for females and younger professors. Emphasizing public support for academics' engagement has no discernible effects. Our results suggest that implementing appropriate incentive structures and safeguarding against negative repercussions may promote academics' engagement and an adequate representation of the diversity of academics in the public.

**Paper:** The complexity of challenges facing society have made the expertise of academics an important input for public opinion formation and political decision-making. Against this backdrop, policy makers have begun to pay greater attention to the engagement of academics with the public and to devise policies that promote it (Burchell 2015; Mejlgaard 2018). Similar expectations as well as support for academics' activities in this area are voiced by the public (Funk et al. 2019; 2020; Wissenschaft im Dialog 2019). At the same time, risks associated with academics' exposure to the public have become apparent. Whereas these developments can be readily observed, their impact on academics remains an open question.

Considered from the perspective of academics, engaging with the public appears more a matter of personal conviction than a genuine part of the academic profession. Engagement activities are frequently perceived to have low priority (Rose et al. 2020; The Royal Society 2006) and career benefits commonly trail other motives in importance among those who engage (Kreimer et al. 2011; The Royal Society 2006; Torres-Albero et al. 2011), even though career benefits are not necessarily irrelevant altogether (Nisbet and Markowitz 2015; Peters et al. 2008). In line with this ambiguous character, academics' personal attitudes have been identified as a particularly relevant predictor of their engagement (Dudo 2013; Besley et al. 2012; Besley et al. 2018; Poliakoff and Webb 2007).

To investigate the influence of changing conditions on academics' attitudes toward engaging in public discussions, we conducted a survey experiment as a randomized controlled trial (RCT) among

4,091 tenured professors in Germany. The survey was implemented between October and November 2020 and targeted all professors at German higher education institutions governed by the state (except for those for the civil service) or the church. In the experiment, we ask respondents whether they favor a reduction or an increase of academics' engagement in public discussions in the future, and investigate how their answer behavior changes when we frame the question differently and provide selected pieces of information. For this, we randomly allocated respondents to either a control group, receiving no further information or framing, or one of four treatment groups. Each of the four treatments covers a specific facet of the conditions we investigate: the demands by public authorities implicit in the legal framework; expectations concerning academics' engagement among the public; public support for academics' engagement; and the risks associated with academics being exposed to the public.

Overall, we find high levels of support for an extension of academics' engagement in public discussions. However, an emphasis on higher education institutions' legal duties and on expectations among the public have a significant negative impact on these positive attitudes. We furthermore find that this negative impact is particularly strong for professors who have a positive stance on exchange relations between science and society. We rationalize these findings as the result of an oppositional behavior of professors and, in line with motivation crowding theory (Frey 1997; 2000; Frey and Jegen 2001), of a negative impact of external demands and expectations on their intrinsic motivation. An emphasis on the risks associated with being exposed to the public also has a significant negative effect on respondents' positive attitudes. This effect is particularly strong for younger and for female professors. We thus consider it plausible that the stakes of being exposed to the public are higher for these two groups. By contrast, an emphasis on support from within the public does not have a discernible impact.

Our findings show that academics' attitudes can be investigated as an object of external influences and that conditions currently in change are relevant in this regard. The study also highlights the usefulness and broader applicability of survey experiments for higher education and science research. The results furthermore have implications for higher education and science policy and management. Based on our findings, it can be questioned whether alluding to new duties of academics is a sensible strategy. A more promising approach to promote academics' engagement and an adequate representation of the diversity of academics in the public could consist in devising institutional incentive structures that are in line with the intrinsic motivation of academics and providing safeguards against potential negative repercussions.

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