

The public strongly supports methane regulations in Europe

Cost information and benefit framing have minimal effects on support for methane regulations on oil and gas, which remain high regardless of different messaging strategies.

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The Policy Problem

Methane (CH₄) is a short-lived but highly-potent greenhouse gas and is estimated to have contributed to one-third of all human-caused global warming relative to the pre-industrial period. Curbing methane emissions is therefore crucial to addressing the climate crisis. However, while there have been extensive studies around public opinion for climate policies generally and those that aim to reduce CO₂, we lack research around public opinion for methane policies specifically. Though another greenhouse gas, methane is distinct from CO₂ because it is both a pollutant that is released from oil and gas production and an input into the energy system as natural gas, where it is frequently used for heating and cooking. This means that the public has everyday experience with methane gas and it has economic value. Health problems caused by methane pollution are also more localized than those of CO₂, including contributing to the formation of ground-level ozone. Given these distinct characteristics, what does the public think about policies that directly tackle methane pollution?

Key findings and proposed solutions

- Support for methane regulations is very high: 80%-90% of respondents support policies that restrict methane pollution from the oil and gas industry.
- Support for methane regulations remains high and is very resistant to change in response to cost information or to framing that emphasizes climate, health, or security-related benefits of the policy.

- The links between 'natural gas' and 'methane' appear tenuous and conditional in the public mind. Thus, the connection between local health problems and global climate changes associated with methane may also be sensitive to word choice.

What We Found

Overall, support for methane regulations in Europe is very high. This support remains high even when individuals receive information that the regulations will increase household energy costs. Support was also not sensitive to different frames about the potential benefits of methane regulations, whether for the climate, for public health, or for national security (e.g., by limiting Russia's influence over European gas markets). We hypothesize that this is due to methane being both a pollutant released during oil and gas production as well as an energy input (e.g. as a fuel for use in home heating), the public's everyday experience with methane gas, and the proximity of problems caused by methane pollution. With the exception of Italy, where the word for natural gas is 'metano', respondents were more likely to draw an association with home heating and cooking if the words 'natural gas' were used instead of 'methane.' Conversely, respondents were more likely to associate methane, rather than natural gas, with both air pollution and greenhouse gases (again, with the exception of Italy). Despite public knowledge about methane not being strong, there is still high concern about its association with climate change. Our findings help explain the success of recent policies to curb methane emissions from imported oil by the EU in November 2023 (see here: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_23_5776).

What We Did

We conducted the first ever cross-national survey of public attitudes toward methane regulations in the energy sector. We surveyed 5,629 individuals in four European countries (Poland, Italy, France, and Germany) to gauge their knowledge of methane emissions and preferences for methane regulations. We asked people questions about their perception of changes in methane emissions; how big a problem methane is for the climate; and their overall support for various kinds of policy proposals to limit methane emissions. We then conducted an experiment where we randomly varied the framing of one policy proposal around regulations on the methane emissions footprint of imported gas. The experiment tested the impact of cost information—whether the regulation would increase or decrease household heating and energy costs—and of framing the benefits of reducing methane for either the climate, general public health, or energy security.

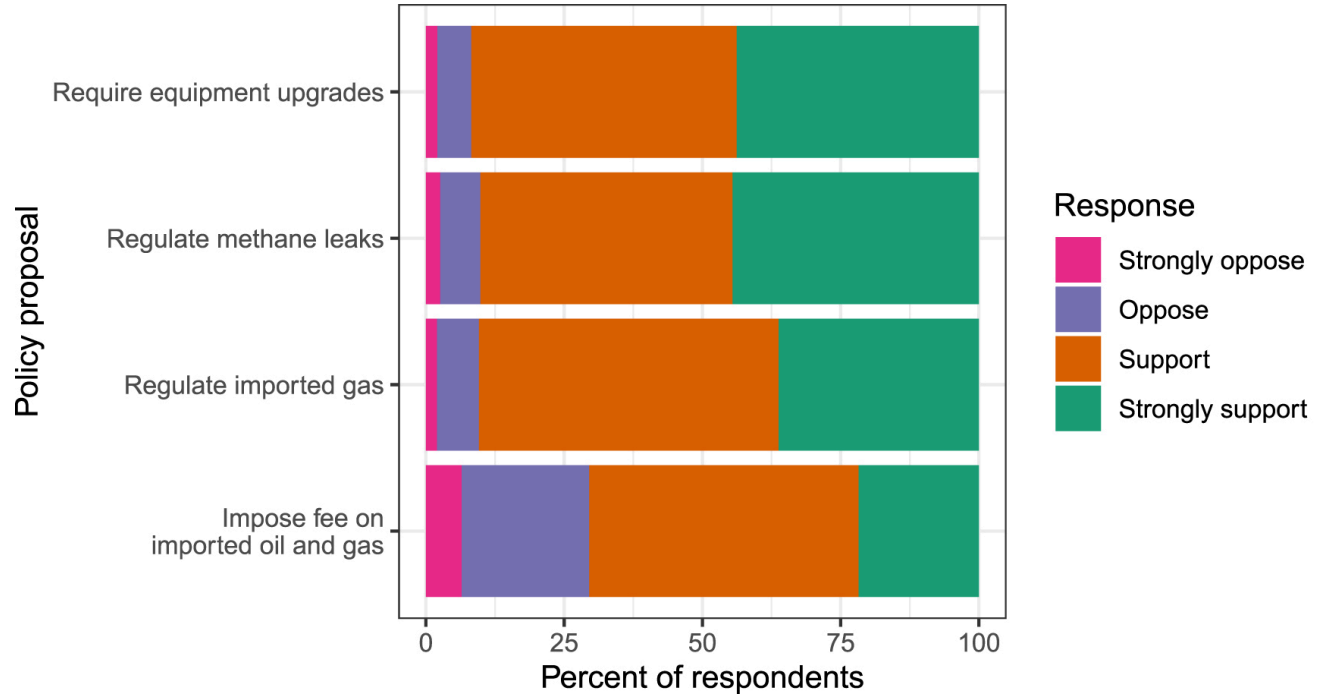


Figure 3. Support for regulations to reduce methane emissions: the figure shows public support for several policy alternatives that have been proposed in the EU. Here, support for a methane fee has been marginalized across responses to questions in which we randomly varied information about the consumer cost and use of revenues from such a fee. Responses did not vary substantially across these conditions.