Review

Why do people oppose new rules? Policy change, norm change, and public outrage

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Social norms are guiding principles of society, affecting collective and individual conduct by defining the line between acceptable and deviant behavior. Top-down regulations often aim to redefine what is considered appropriate in groups by imposing new rules that either restrict or mandate certain behaviors. These regulations may transform into socially shared and peer-enforced norms. However, resistance from individuals and groups can impede such changes, leading to opposition and social conflicts. By distinguishing between individual-level (i.e., preferences, reactance, and habits) and group-level factors (e.g., second-order beliefs), we review psychological processes to identify who is prone to resist top-down rule changes and why. Thereby, we develop a heuristic model summarizing when new rules can evolve into social norms, facilitating genuine normative change.

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Background

Wearing seatbelts in cars is mandatory in most countries around the world. Most people perform this behavior automatically when entering a car. In short, following the rule has become a habit. However, this was not always the case. In the first half of the 20th century, seatbelts were optional. In 1956, only 2 % of Ford buyers opted for the $27 seatbelt option [1]. By 1983, seatbelts had become mandatory for car manufacturers, although they were still voluntary for car drivers. Around that

time, less than 15 % of Americans reported using seatbelts in their cars [2]. When policies mandating the wearing of seatbelts were introduced in the 1980s across the US, vocal opposition emerged, claiming that seatbelts are "ineffective, inconvenient, and uncomfortable," also infringing on fundamental liberties. Today, such opposition is rare; wearing seatbelts has become the norm.

A similar dynamic occurred with smoking bans in public places in European countries. In 2007, the laws prohibiting smoking in cafés and restaurants faced a public outcry. Opponents argued that these bans would bankrupt businesses and that the government should not dictate where to smoke. Despite the initial opposition, public approval for smoking bans increased from 53 % in 2005 to 81 % in 2014 [3]. Approval rose by additional 8 % after the bans were introduced, a pattern seen in the US, Italy, and Switzerland for similar policies [4—6].

Both examples illustrate that perceptions of what is considered 'normal' or 'deviant' can substantially change after policy changes. Social norms—rules that people follow because they believe most others do so and because they think that others expect them to [7]—adapt continuously, either gradually over generations or abruptly through tipping points [8—11]. Policy changes attempt to induce abrupt behavioral changes but can lead to public debate and opposition. Sometimes, this opposition is strong enough to reverse policy changes (for example, the repeal of the *Sedition Act* of 1918 that criminalized 'disloyal' speech about the United States in 1921 [12]), whereas in other cases, new rules turn into social norms. In the latter case, people not only follow the new rule out of fear of punishment by authorities but, instead, believe that others follow it (descriptive expectation), think others expect them to follow it (normative expectation), start to personally value it, and even actively enforce it through peer punishment [13—15].

This poses a puzzle for policymakers and social scientists: Why do people oppose regulations and attempts to change what is deemed appropriate or accepted, and how can we explain that this opposition sometimes fades, leading to newly shared norms? In this selective review, we discuss core psychological processes that can

illuminate what makes opposition to or acceptance of top-down rule changes more likely, and propose a heuristic model on when and why such changes may lead to preference reversals and genuine normative change, 'phantom rules' that are simply not followed, or vocal opposition and 'public outcry' (Fig. 1).

Who opposes or supports change?

To structure our considerations of who opposes (or supports) change and why, we first discuss individual-level processes (i.e., preferences, reactance, self-control, projective paternalism, habits) and then turn to group-level aspects (i.e., second-order beliefs, pluralistic ignorance, social identity).

### Individual level

Revealed preferences
New regulations or rules often restrict decision options, such as smoking, or mandate specific actions, such as using a seatbelt or wearing masks during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fig. 1). According to revealed preference theory, choices reveal the underlying, latent preferences of decision makers. A straightforward and rather trivial prediction following this assumption is that a person will oppose new regulations that restrict access to option A or mandate taking option B, when this person would choose option A over option B without choice restriction (as we would assume that this reveals a preference for A over B, for example, because A caters more to the self-interest of the chooser). From this perspective, opposition to new regulations would be a sign of contrary personal preferences. However, revealed preference theory does not offer a straightforward explanation why (and when) personal preferences would change and reverse after top-down rule changes, like in the case of seatbelt laws or smoking bans.

Reactance
Reactance theory [16] goes beyond a simple choicepreference association by proposing that restrictions can also change preferences. In a nutshell, when faced with a choice between options A and B, reactance theory posits that the attractiveness of choosing A increases when access to it is restricted. One reason why people may seek to obtain A is that people (to different degrees) value their behavioral freedom and react with emotions, such as anger, if restricted [17]. Choosing A, albeit forbidden, signals (to oneself or others) that the freedom of choice is preserved. However, the rationalization of a new law is more likely than reactance when people's attention is not focused on how the law restricts their freedom (e.g., through strategic

Figure 1
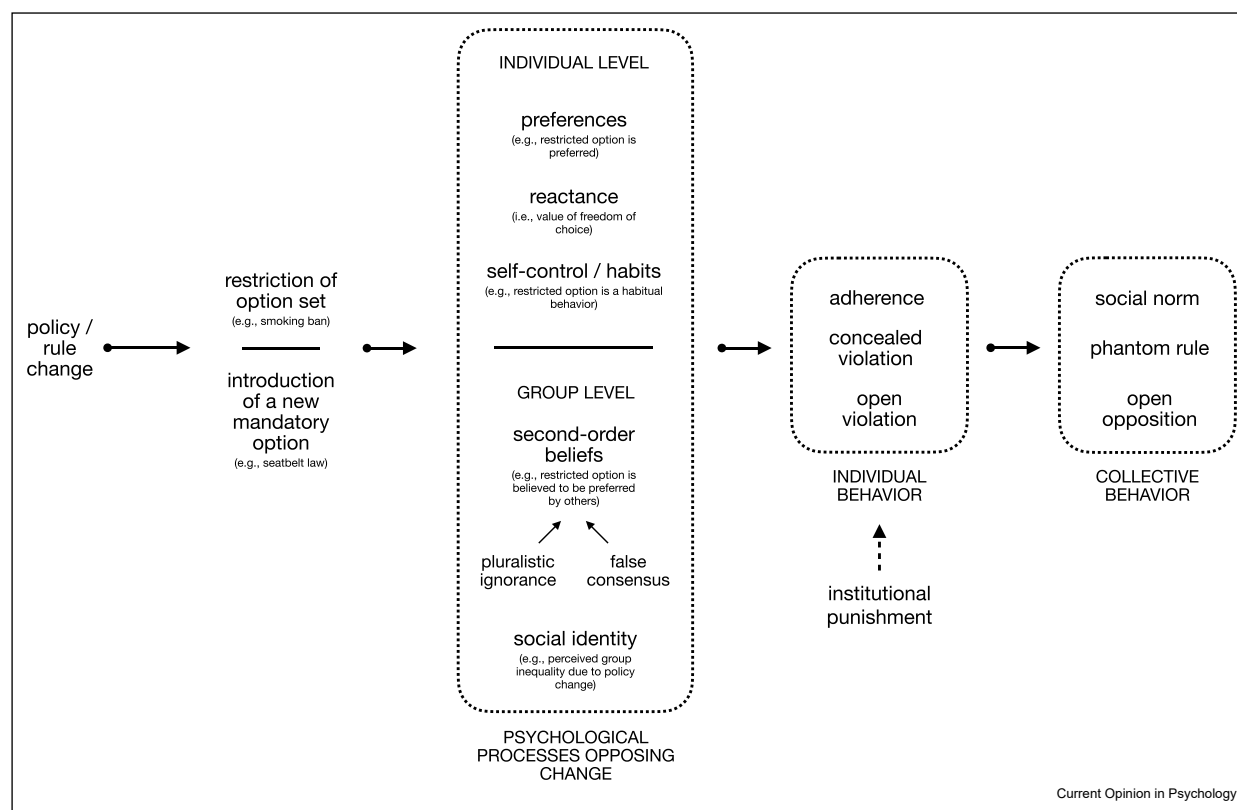
Psychological processes opposing and possible outcomes of top-down rule changes.

wording or as a result of distraction) or when they perceive the new law to be not just imminent but to take effect with certainty [18].

Lack of self-control

Crucially, choices may sometimes reveal self-control problems rather than preferences [19–21]. People who prefer to limit their behavior (e.g., smoking or smartphone use) but fail to do so may actually be in favor of top-down choice restrictions or mandates that go against their actual choices, since such rules can serve as an external 'commitment device' [21,22]. Research has shown that people who are dissatisfied with their success in self-regulating their choices report being more supportive of regulations mandating certain actions or prohibiting others [21], see also [23].

Ideals-projective paternalism

A complementary prediction of who opposes (or supports) choice restriction can be derived from experimental work which showed that a majority of people act as 'ideals-projective paternalists,' restricting choice options for others that they themselves would not take [24]. For example, more patient choosers imposed greater patience on others. Empirical evidence further suggests that people prefer restrictions on choices that they themselves adhere to in the first place (e.g., non-smokers were more likely to express support for tobacco taxes than smokers [25]).

Habits and habit change

When new rules demand a change in habits (e.g., no longer smoking in a restaurant) or the development of new habits (e.g., wearing a seatbelt), opposition to such rules is more likely to emerge, the stronger the existing habit is. Habits are routinely and regularly performed behaviors that are often executed automatically in response to environmental cues [25,26]. Numerous studies have demonstrated that unlearning habits, or acquiring new ones, requires effort and self-control and can result in repeated failure and frustration. The stronger a habit, the more challenging it can be to adapt and change [27–29]. Hence, habits can be potent drivers of resistance to top-down attempts to alter behavior [30–32]. Simultaneously, once a new habit is widely adopted, it becomes a convention that can attain normative status [33–36]. For new policies targeting habitual behavior, it is crucial to attend to contextual cues [22], because habitual behavior is automatically executed in the presence of relevant cues; simply restricting a behavior or demanding a new behavior may encounter protest if the contextual cues, triggering learned habits, are neglected. For example, until the behavior of others stops cueing undesired behaviors or starts cueing desired behaviors, cue design can help disrupt old habits and establish new ones (e.g., prominent placement of healthy food options at the cafeteria checkout or public signs reminding people to wear face masks during a pandemic).

Group level

Second-order beliefs

When a new policy is introduced in the hopes of creating new social norms, it is important to consider how second-order beliefs may facilitate or impede desired behavior changes [7,37–39]. Since norms typically entail some form of costly behavior (e.g., refraining from lying, assisting others, adopting environmentally conscious practices [39]), it is not sufficient for people to merely believe they share a certain norm. They also need to believe that others adhere to the norm, expect others to follow it, and may even enforce it [40,41]. For instance, believing that others believe that saving energy helps the environment (i.e., second-order beliefs) was more important for predicting individual behavior than one's own attitude towards saving energy (i.e., first-order beliefs [42]). Social influence seems particularly strong when close others (e.g., friends, family) signal acceptance (or reactance [43,44]).

Thus, for new rules to be adopted by large groups, it is crucial to consider not only what individuals think about the new rule but also what they believe others think about it. If people witness significant resistance or rule-breaking (or simply believe it is occurring), this can become socially contagious [45–47], potentially leading to organized protests and opposition.

Outrage, echo chambers, and pluralistic ignorance

Inferring what others think or feel is crucial for establishing norms but may not be representative or accurate. People often seek information that aligns with their views, for example, forming echo chambers on social media by selectively consuming information from like-minded individuals, thus biasing beliefs about what 'everyone' thinks [48–50]. This tendency can result in a false consensus effect, whereby individuals believe that others share their own perspectives [43,51,52]. Particularly in the context of rules aiming to change norms, opposition can manifest as vocal 'moral outrage.' Combined with the belief that the majority share this outrage, it can lead to powerful social dynamics that facilitate coordinated protests and opposition to new regulations. Biased media attention may reinforce this false consensus [53–55].

Inferences from others' behavior (e.g., inaction) can also lead people to wrong conclusions about consensus. In this case, people contemplating a behavior assume that the majority, who do not enact the behavior, have opposing preferences. This pluralistic ignorance has been observed in climate-change-mitigation policies. It has been shown that people systematically underestimate support for policies aimed at mitigating climate

change in the population [51,56]. Like the false consensus, pluralistic ignorance operates on (misrepresented) beliefs, making it challenging to impose new rules or develop new norms. Even if personal attitudes (i.e., first-order) are open to changing the status quo, biased second-order beliefs can suggest that the majority oppose any change. In this case, however, new laws can also signal a change in societal norms, potentially correcting pluralistic ignorance [57].

Social identity and political attitudes
Whether individual opposition to new regulations translates into collective action also depends on the salience of social identities [58–60]. According to social identity theory [61], a disadvantaged group will attempt to challenge group inequality to the extent that its members cannot improve their situation individually, inequality is perceived as illegitimate, and there is a prospect for change. New regulations may not target a specific group, but new identities may form as a result of new regulations (e.g., categorization as victims of a new law, as during the yellow vest movement in France [62]). Furthermore, political affiliations and orientations can influence openness to policy change [63].

Conclusions - from regulation to norms
In complex modern societies, top-down regulatory changes serve as crucial policy tools for steering collective behavior. To some extent, adherence to rules can be promoted through formal punishment, as exemplified by the introduction of fines for not wearing car seatbelts [64], see also [65,66]. However, institutional approaches to rule enforcement have limitations, particularly when behavior is easily concealed (e.g., refusing to separate trash) or requires extensive and costly monitoring. When people resist new rules, it can initiate a cat-and-mouse game in which the rules are imperfectly enforced and frequently violated. In this case, the social norm remains contrary to the rule, making it a 'phantom rule' [67]. For example, rules prohibiting jaywalking are frequently broken without significant consequences. In more extreme cases, new regulations can lead to a public outcry and organized opposition aimed at reverting policies to the old status quo. To endure change, rules must evolve into shared norms actively enforced by peers. Based on our selective review, we identified four elements that increase the likelihood of opposing changes at the individual level: (contrary) personal preferences, reactance, habits, and limited self-control. At the group level, social beliefs play a crucial role, and believing (wrongly or correctly) that others oppose change can lead to strong social dynamics of organized opposition, mediated or enforced by social identities and moral narratives [68–70]. Though not exhaustive, the identified elements can serve as a heuristic model for the success or failure of top-down attempts to change social norms

(Fig. 1). It is important to note that individual and group-level factors can also influence each other and interact. For example, habit-based inaction of others may pave the way for pluralistic ignorance.

For new rules to (eventually) turn into socially accepted norms, policymakers are advised to go beyond simply imposing rules and sanctions, but also consider habits and self-control issues that make it difficult for people to abruptly change their behavior (by considering habit cues and how they can be mitigated, for example, restricting smoking advertisements). Furthermore, information about what others think and do (i.e., the perceived norm) can be incorrect but strongly influence individual behavior, calling for norm nudging interventions that need to be carefully designed to avoid backfire [71,72]. Predicting the extent of opposition to new rules or regulations is difficult and highly topic-dependent yet crucial for democracies that rely on citizens' trust in their institutions. Behavioral scientists can play an important role in this regard by providing a careful analysis of the underlying, domain-specific psychology of behavior and beliefs to anticipate and understand the motivations and reasons to oppose change before regulations are implemented.

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Further reading

15. In this research, people indicated their personal hygiene norms
* and how intensely they would punish someone violating their personal norms. Covering a greater range of personal norms, the experiments support Strimling et al.'s [14] hypothesis that asymmetric punishment drives norm change.

21. Evidence that self-reported support for policies that make personal
* choices more costly (e.g., higher prices for meat consumption) tends to be higher among individuals who express greater

dissatisfaction with their ability to control themselves (i.e., failure to voluntarily reduce meat consumption).

24. This study shows that people are more likely to restrict choice
** options for others (i.e., 'paternalism') when they would not choose such options for themselves in the first place.

32. This study shows that strong habits (i.e., automatic repetition of habits)
* can weaken social influence, conformity, and behavioral change.

42. Second-order beliefs (i.e., what one believes others consider
** important) are shown to be better predictors of energy conservation choices than first-order beliefs (i.e., what one personally considers important).

46. In this behavioral experiment, individual differences in the pro-
* pensity to follow arbitrary rules were found to predict shifts in social dynamics toward honest behavior. This suggests that individual tendencies to follow rules can influence and predict group dynamics.

51. Using a representative sample from the U.S., the study documents
** that most Americans would personally support climate change mitigation policies, but underestimate the support of such policies in the general public, indicating pluralistic ignorance.

67. This research on 'phantom rules'—codified rules that are rarely
* followed by most—illustrates how these rules emerge and how their selective enforcement is particularly susceptible to third-party motives.