

# Perception Politics

*Thinking and working politically on perceptions of risks and collective responses that impact people's daily lives and human well-being*



## Policy lab

As a political scientist I am interested both in the political nature of the formation of risk perceptions, in terms of their power dynamics, processes where social, political, cultural and psychological factors interact, and in their political relevance, that is, their influence on collective responses (behaviors, decision making, collective actions, policy process) and their consequences for people's daily lives, functioning and well-being of their societies.

- Policy action lab, which seeks to promote a practical approach for thinking and working politically on perceptions of risks and the policy change process.
- This requires creative political methods for doing applied political analysis and for designing strategies for their management or change.

# Welcome to fvazquezLab

*Preventing harm, Improving lives, Promoting collective well-being*

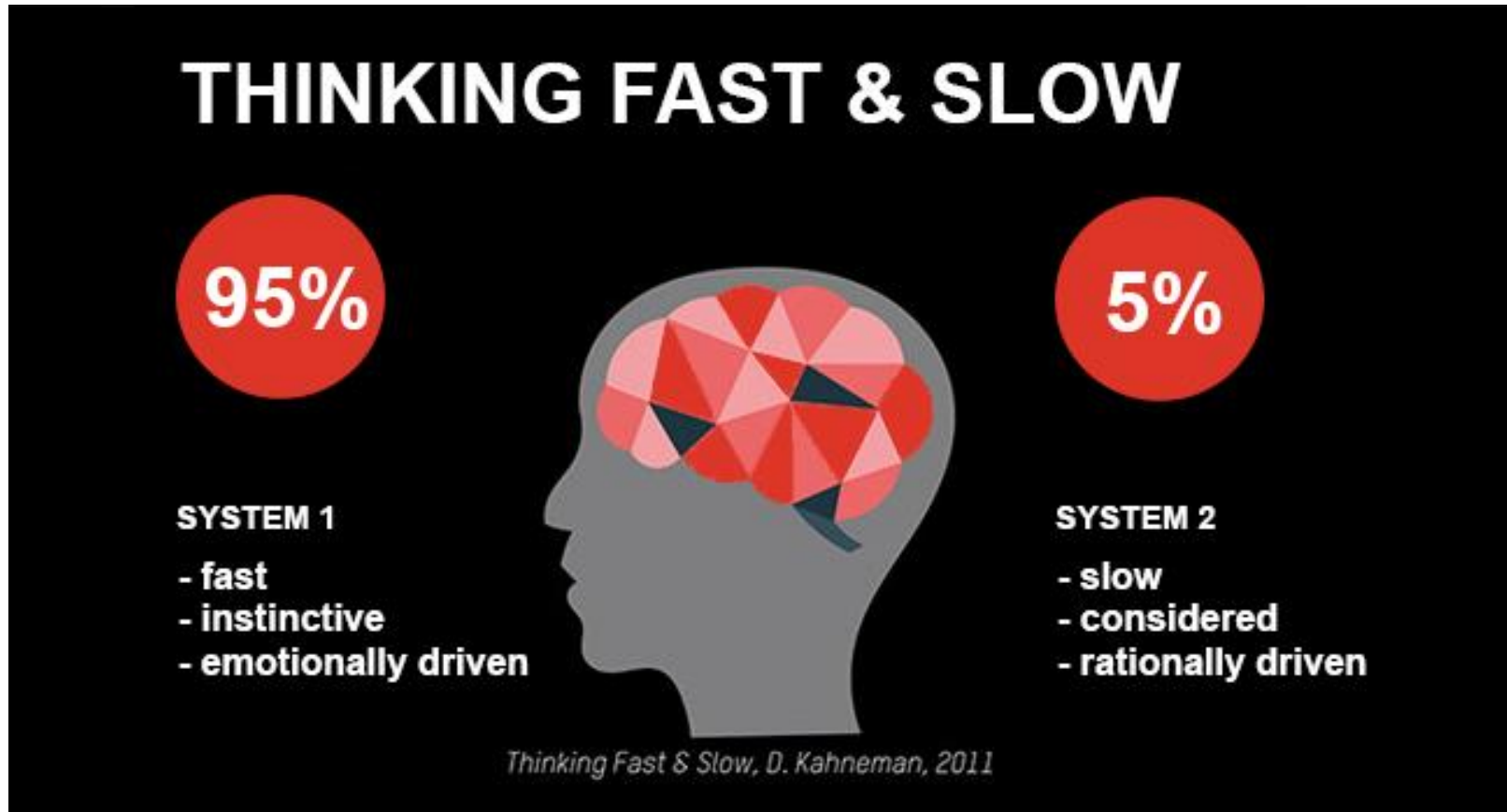
*A lively, hands-on, policy-oriented lab for thinking and working politically on perceptions of risks that influence collective responses impacting people's lives and societal well-being*

- Incorporating an “applied political method” to understand and manage perceptions into a problem-solving, collective decision-making and policy change processes can make the difference between success or failure.



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What is not perceived does not exist?

To every perception corresponds a reaction?

Risk perception as a contested terrain

# The power of perceptions

*“It is not a matter of what is true that counts, but a matter of what is perceived to be true.” – Henry Kissinger*

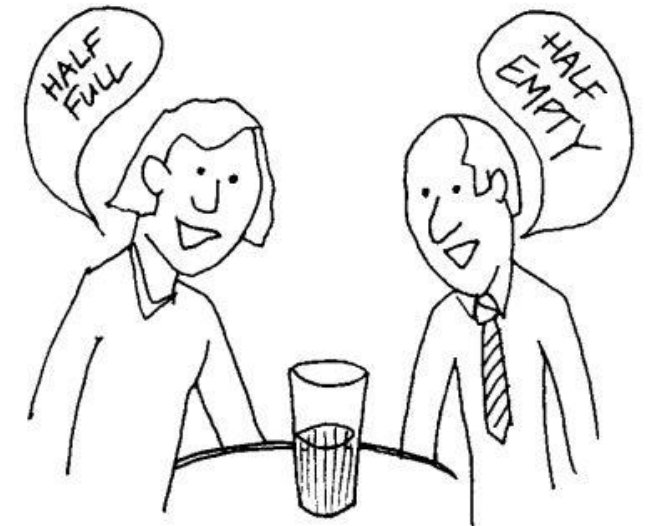
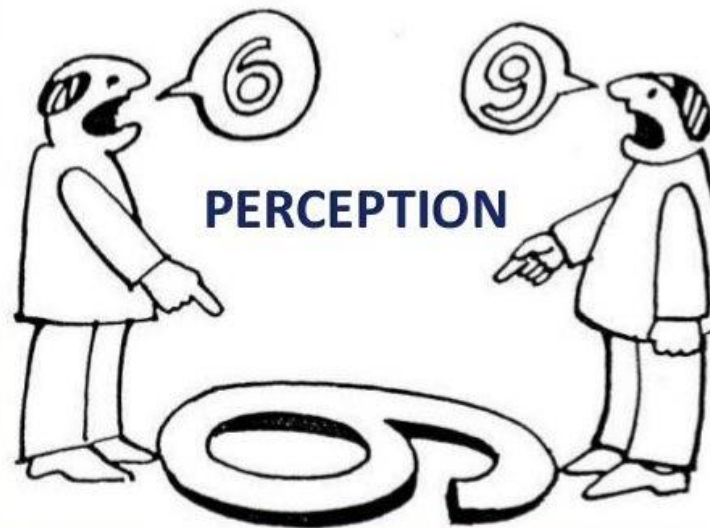
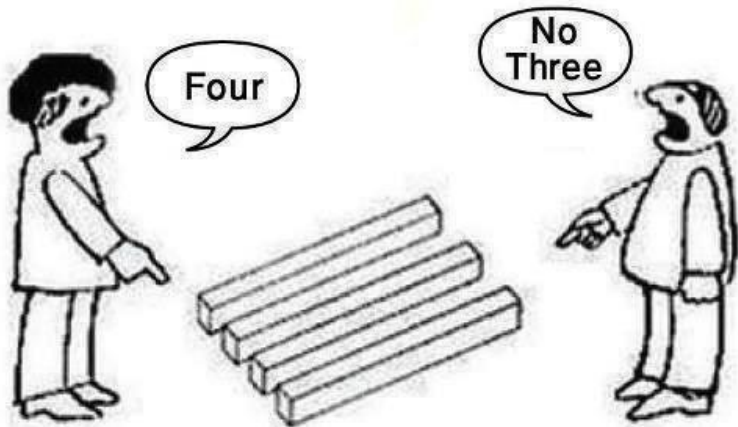
*“All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.” – Friedrich Nietzsche*

*“All our knowledge has its origin in our perceptions.” – Leonardo da Vinci, 1452 – 1519*

*“There are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception.” – Aldous Huxley*

*“Perception is strong and sight weak. In strategy, it is important to see distant things as if they were close and to take a distanced view of close things.” – Miyamoto Musashi, 1584 – 1645*

It is really confusing!!!



**“If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”**. In other words, the interpretation of a situation causes the action. Thomas Theorem

## *A life passion the power of perceptions*

- *In my life experience, I have seen the importance of politics for development and policy outcomes, and in this process, the relevance of perceptions in the decisions we make.*
- *As a political scientist working in international development and governance issues for nearly 20 years, I have spent part of my career trying to get policy-oriented scholars, professionals, officers, practitioners and policymakers to think and work politically.*
- *For that, I have been trying to promote creative ways of doing political analysis and developing strategies for understanding and managing perceptions; perceptions of risks, situations, problems, policies, social norms.*
- *Managing public perceptions for social, political or policy change requires doing “soft power politics” and if you want to think and work politically you need political smart methods, skills and practical tools.*
- *For example, if you want to manage the perception of risk during a public health emergency, as Covid-19 pandemic, you need effective strategies for policy communication as part of your global political strategy, especially if you want to change the mindset, the language and the image of some issue or problem to make progress.*
- *This perspective can play a critical role for many situations and public concerns. Having the skills for changing or managing perceptions, can be a crucial toll for facing multiple challenges that require better decisions and effective policy responses.*

**IF A PERSON PERCEIVES  
A SITUATION AS REAL,  
IT IS REAL  
IN ITS CONSEQUENCES.  
-THOMAS THEOREM**

## THINKING FAST & SLOW

95%

SYSTEM 1

- fast
- instinctive
- emotionally driven

5%

SYSTEM 2

- slow
- considered
- rationally driven

*Thinking Fast & Slow, D. Kahneman, 2011*

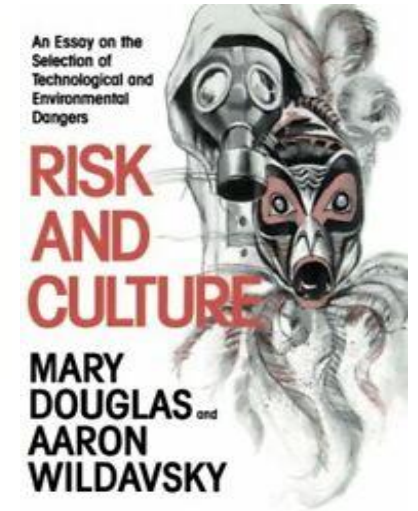
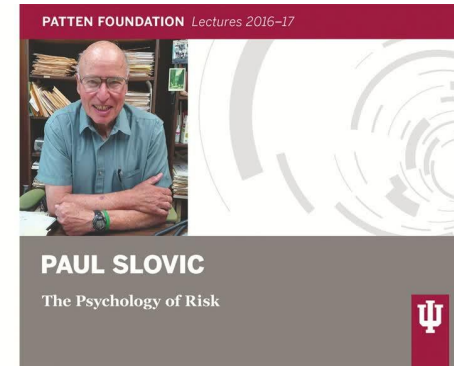
# Risk Perception Politics

## - Statement Lab -

Global inspiring idea - The perception formation process is political.

“risk perceptions are inherently political” (Baruch Fischhoff)

- "The world is witnessing, and will increasingly witness, real political battles over perceptions of public risks and the collective responses that societies make to their challenges and adversities, is increasingly about intense contests to influence the shaping of a variety of risk perceptions and the orientation of responses, whether they are behavioral, political or policy responses in different domains, from environmental and climate challenges, emergencies and disaster intensification, disputes over public health, the use of technologies, emerging risks to governance such as democratic erosion and different expressions of violence, to the changing and uncertain landscape of armed conflicts and global security. On many occasions, tourist destinations have even become part of these disputes. And of course, the classic battles for markets, particularly those related to the extraction and use of natural resources."
- And it is not just about public perceptions, but about the perceptions of various actors who participate in and influence the politics of decision making and their consequences for sustainability, human well-being and peaceful and democratic coexistence.

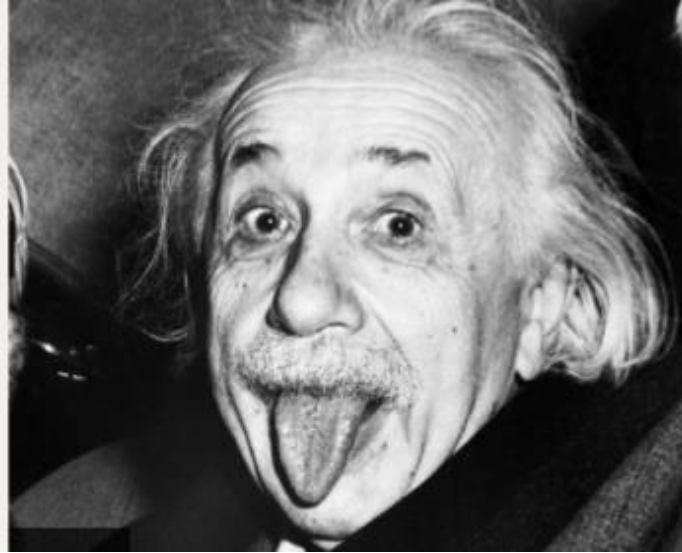


**PerceptionMaker:** is a policy advocacy tool, a method for doing applied political analysis, to design strategies for managing the political dynamics of “perceptions of risks” and their role in decision-making and policy process.



La imaginación es más importante que el conocimiento".

**Albert Einstein**  
Físico



The Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, “People are disturbed, not by things, but by their view of them

Saint Thomas Aquinas observed that “Most men seem to live according to sense rather than reason.”

” Understanding the roots of what shapes those views and senses allows the true dialogue of modern risk communication to take place (*David Ropeik*)

## Political management of risk perceptions

- ***Building capability for understanding and managing the political aspects of risk perceptions and associated responses is a critical skill to navigate adversity and a strategic tool to address some of the world’s most challenging problems we face in our time.***

# Thinking and working politically (TWP)

- perception formation processes as political -

*political science – psychology*

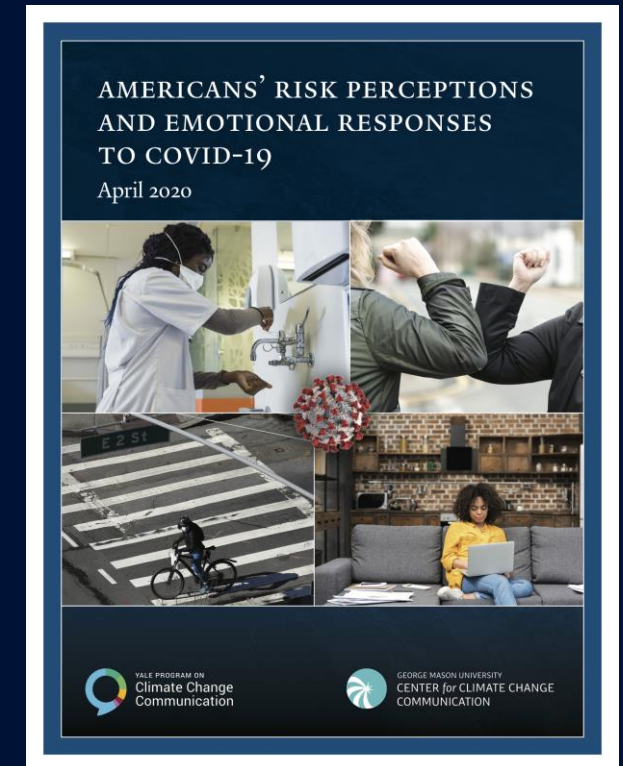
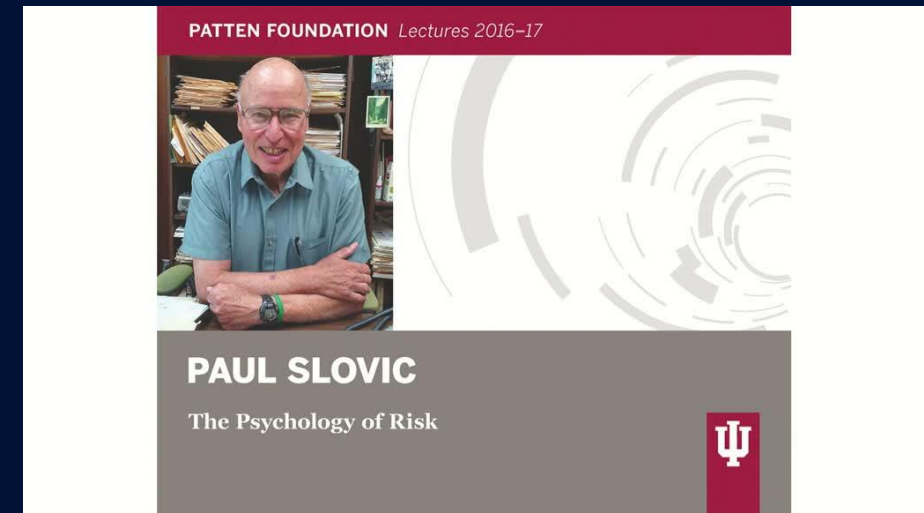
- Risk perception as politics: values, cultural cognitions, emotions, process issues- who decides, power, trust, responses, conflict/controversy (P. Slovic, B. Fischhoff).

## Thinking Politically:

- Relevance of (soft) power in the formation of perceptions – who has the power to decide how society should be organized and function, and to allocate resources (H. Lasswell, J. Nye)
- Role of cultural cognitions, world-views, values
- Social amplification/attenuation of risk (cultural and communication politics)
- Competing and conflicting conceptions of risk perceptions and cost-benefit narratives /discourses– risk perception as a cultural and political dispute

## Working Politically:

- Managing/changing perceptions as a soft power tool, perceptions of the public, experts, politicians, decision and policy makers (perception-shaping capabilities)
- Role of perceptions in societal responses and in political & policy decision making (political tool to reduce power gaps – promoting more equitable distribution of benefits and resources)
- Risk perception as a preventive tool, as a social skill (empowerment) to respond to threats, emergencies, navigate adversities and emerging challenges.





# Creative ways of doing applied political analysis and designing strategies for managing perceptions

## Perceptions of risks – collective responses

Risk perception can prevent harm and save lives by improving decision-making and changing behaviors/social norms

## Perceptions – politics of the policy process

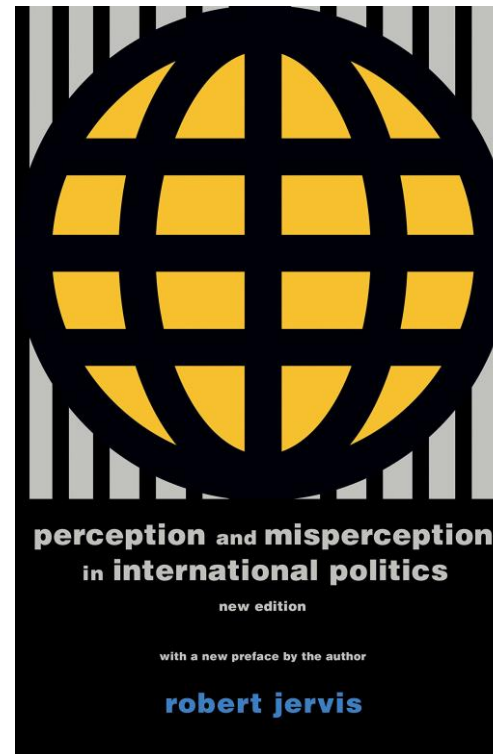
How to impact collective responses and policy process, through understanding perceptions, respecting the wisdom and values they may reflect and managing the factors/dynamics that shape them?



For example, the science of risk perception and the approach such as the one we seek to develop, can contribute to a creative analysis for the understanding of emergencies and violent conflicts...from the protests in Cuba, the insurrection on Capitol Hill in the USA, the epidemic of violence in Mexico, to the military conflict between Russia-Ukraine.



[What Risk Perception Research Can Teach Us About the US Capitol Attack – The Wire Science](#)



# The politics of risk perception and decision-making

- *Theories of risk perception are inherently political because they carry within them implicit understandings about how to organize and implement policies for managing risk. (Sheila Jasanoff, Harvard)*
- *The problem of risk conflict and controversy goes beyond science. It deeply rooted in the social and political fabric of our society.*
- “To summarize the earlier discussions, danger is real, but risk is socially constructed, (...), Whoever controls the definition of risk controls the rational solution to the problem at hand (...) Defining risk is thus an exercise in power”.

(Paul Slovic, *Trust, Emotion, Sex, Politics, and Science: Surveying the Risk-Assessment Battlefield*)

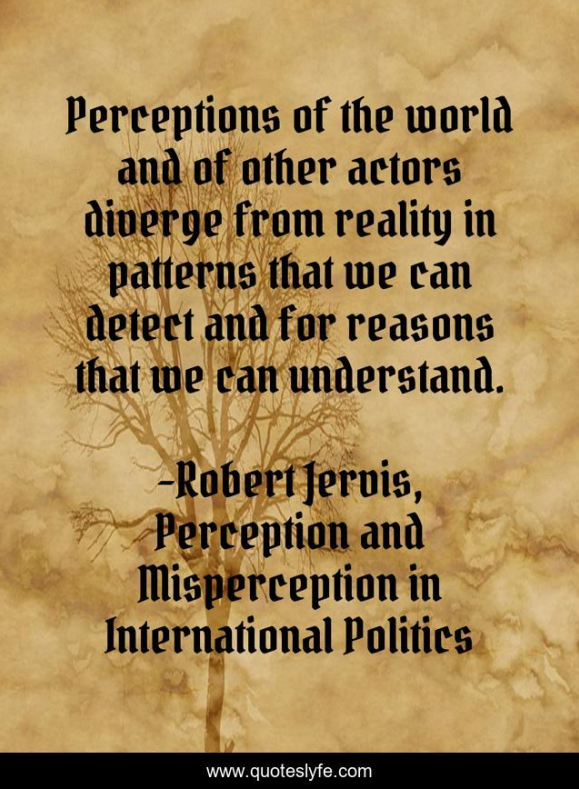


# Thinking and working politically (TWP)

- In 1987, Plough and Krimsky wrote in *Science, Technology and Human Values* (a publication of Harvard and MIT) that risk communication was, “an organizing theme for a set of diverse but conceptually related problems concerning the political management of public risk perceptions.”
- TWP is above all, a matter of recognizing the properly political nature of the perception formation process, that is, our perceptions of risks and of other public concerns, is not neutral or simply spontaneous, nor is the notion of risk.
- To paraphrase Newton's third law, one could metaphorically say that "to every perception there is a reaction", and in this equation politics and power play a determining role, both in its formation and in its management.



# Thinking and working politically on perceptions



Perceptions of the world  
and of other actors  
diverge from reality in  
patterns that we can  
detect and for reasons  
that we can understand.

-Robert Jervis,  
Perception and  
Misperception in  
International Politics

[www.quoteslyfe.com](http://www.quoteslyfe.com)

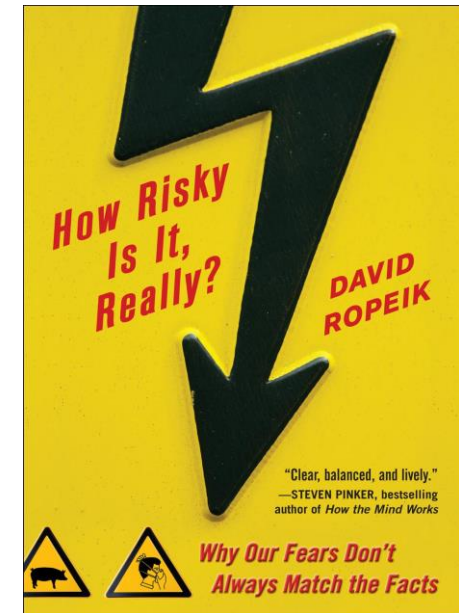
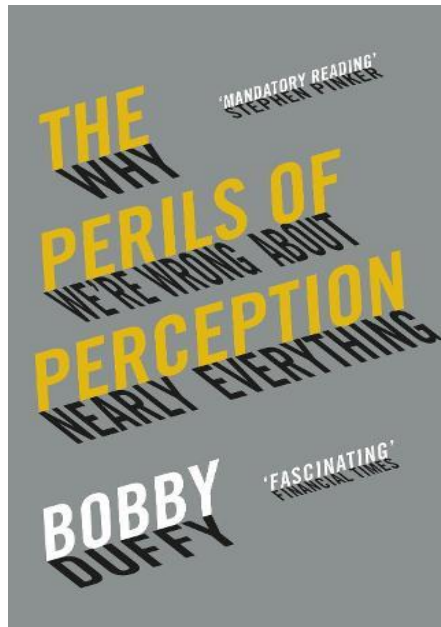
The approach promoted – TWP-P - has two assumptions that, in dialogue or integrated, seek to promote a practical and innovative perspective of analysis and management of perceptions,

- ❑ On the one hand, while it is recognized that perceptions of risks influence responses, whether in behaviors, decisions, collective actions or policies,
- ❑ It is also necessary to understand (the link between such perceptions and) perceptions of responses to problems involving risk, as part of a political process that influences not only the formation of risk perceptions themselves, decision or policy making, but also the implementation of responses.

*This opens up a more innovative and comprehensive perspective for thinking and acting politically both in understanding the shape of risk perceptions, their influence on a variety of responses and decision-making processes, but also the role that perceptions of responses play in the politics of policy change and implementation.*

# “Cultural Politics” of (mis) Perception Gaps

- Dilemmas and tensions between closing the gaps (experts dream - expertocracy, evidence and “rational” decision-making) or understanding their nature (listen to what people care or are concerned about. ) -
- Does the perception gap express conflicting values, beliefs, ideologies, identities and political orientations?
- Do misperceptions generate new risks or have socio-political consequences that may impact societal well-being?
- Do perception gaps deepen social divide and political polarization? Become a risk?
- Does social divide and political polarization reinforce or reproduce perception gaps?





# Some dimensions for doing applied analysis and designing strategies



- **Intentions & Motivations** (contextual game): *resources* (power, material, influence), cultural world-views (cultural values, ideology, religious, identities), *inclusion and dignity* (rights, equity, freedom, recognition), *sovereignities* (territorial, collective memory battles, historical claims)
- **Power resources**: availability and access to resources, capacity to increase them, to mobilize attention and opinion, generating alliances, mobilizing stakeholders
- **Player Positions & intensity** (contextual game): attitudes, beliefs, preferences, behavioral orientation (dialogical, conflict, use of violence), role in decision-making (opposition/supporters, deciden, elites, influencers)
- **Languages**: images and symbols (visual politics), discourses, reality-projection narratives, interpretative disputes, institutional language (authoritative).
- **Institutional legitimacy** (embeddedness): trust/confidence, expectations, social norms, societal polarization-cohesion
- **Risk awareness**: outrage, risk attitude, attributes (qualitative characteristics), psychological, social and cultural factors, cultural world-views (orienting dispositions), amplification-attenuation, sources, semantic images, perceptual gaps



# Role of perceptions in collective responses

- the science and the art of understanding and managing perceptions -

## Behaviors – social norms



## Choices -decisions



## Collective actions



## Politics of policy change



# How it arises?

## *Context and beyond*



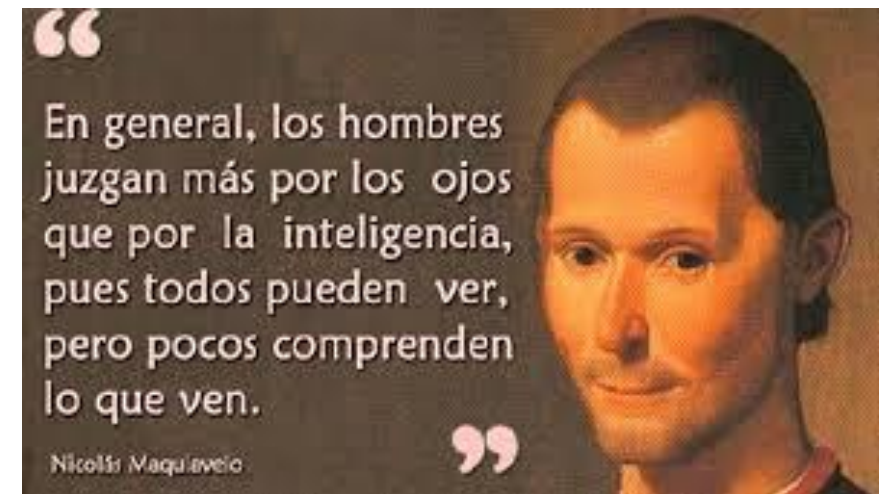
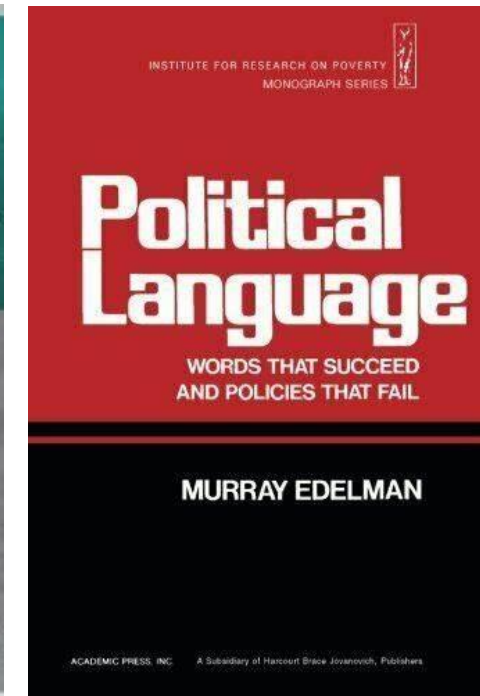
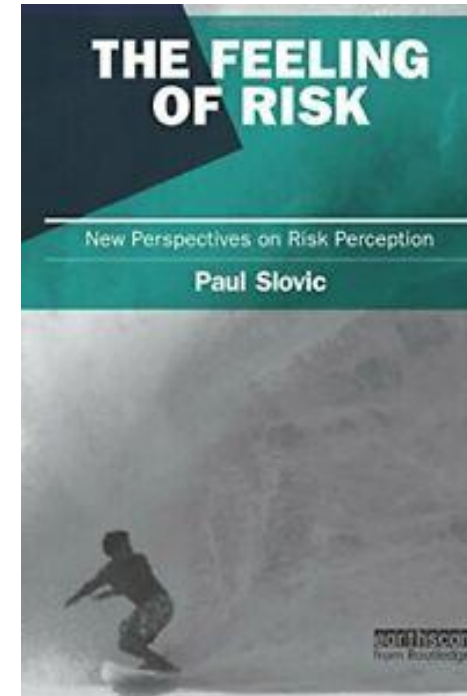
- The project is the product of a process of reflection-action and the experience lived during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Although it arises during the pandemic, its contribution is not limited to public health and seeks to be useful for a variety of public concerns and in different policy areas.
- The pandemic has reminded us of the central relevance of considering the political dimension of perceptions of risk and its role in responses and decisions.
- The gap between risk perception studies and the development of skills and tools for policy action.
- Therefore, the need to develop analysis and strategy design skills, to have practical tools that can be applicable to real problems and situations, sensitive to diverse and usually complex contexts.

# Inspirations

**Analytical perspective:** "risk perceptions as politics" (Paul Slovic - Baruch Fischhoff, Aaron Wildavsky, Mary Douglas, Ortwin Renn, Dan Kahan, Brooke Rogers, Murray Edelman, George Lakoff, Daniel Treisman, Elisa Reis, Bobby Duffy), – values, cultural cognitions, process issues-who decides, power, trust, conflict/controversy. Applications in various contexts and real situations (both in times of normality and crisis), to influence flow of behaviors and decision-making processes.

**Practical method:** *PolicyMaker* (<http://www.polimap.com>) applied political analysis and strategy design - being one of the few applicable tools that considers the variable of "perceptions" as one of the central components of the political process of policy and political decision-making. This tool has been widely used for the analysis and the design of strategies that seek to broaden the political feasibility of health policy reform processes (Michael Reich, Harvard)

Managing perceptions of risks: George Lakoff, Sheldon Krinsky, David Ropeik, Ortwin Renn, Peter Sandman, Vincent Covello, Brook Rogers, Ragnar Löfstedt)





“With all the challenges we face, from COVID-19 to environmental disaster or violent conflicts and crime, understanding public perceptions of risk is central to successful public policy since those perceptions will determine what specific policies they will support”.

*Dr. Philip Oxhorn*

*...But also to learn from them. We shouldn't understand perceptions just to see what the public will support but rather to learn from them. Maybe they don't support officials' policies because they have different values from the officials and experts and they distrust them.*

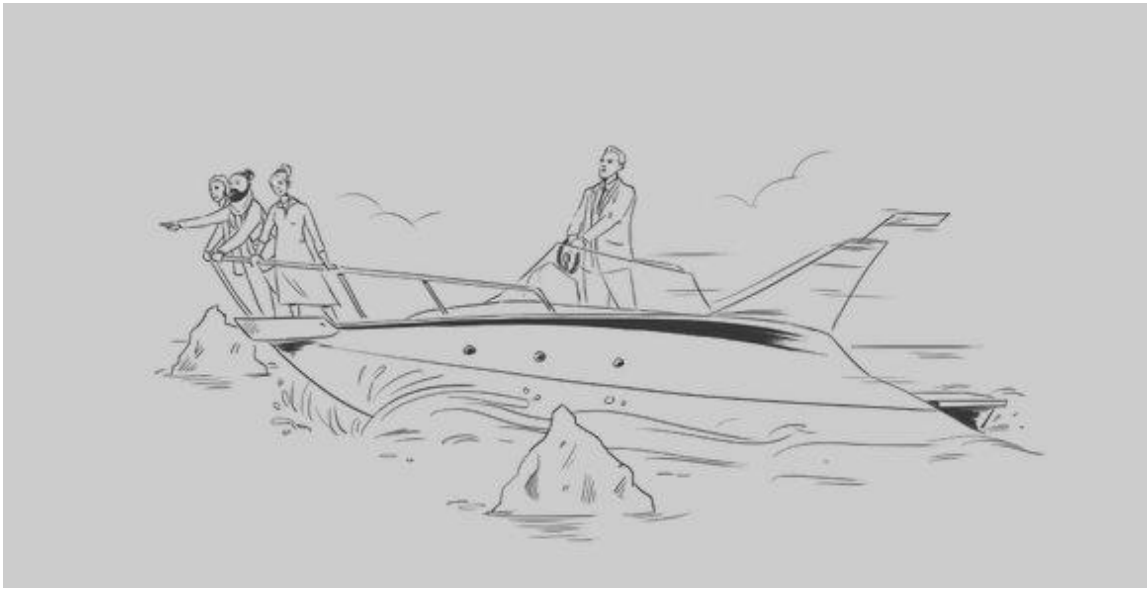
*Dr. Paul Slovic*

## ***Some purposes...***

- Close the gap between scientific research and practical application.
- Develop skills and practical tools for understanding and managing perceptions of risks.
- To make practical experiences visible (mapping of strategies, tactics, innovation in different settings and countries).
- Global collaborative dialogues and linkages (perception diplomacy)
- Promote the relevance of the role of risk perception in international development.

Applications to real situations and problems  
some examples of a variety of topics...

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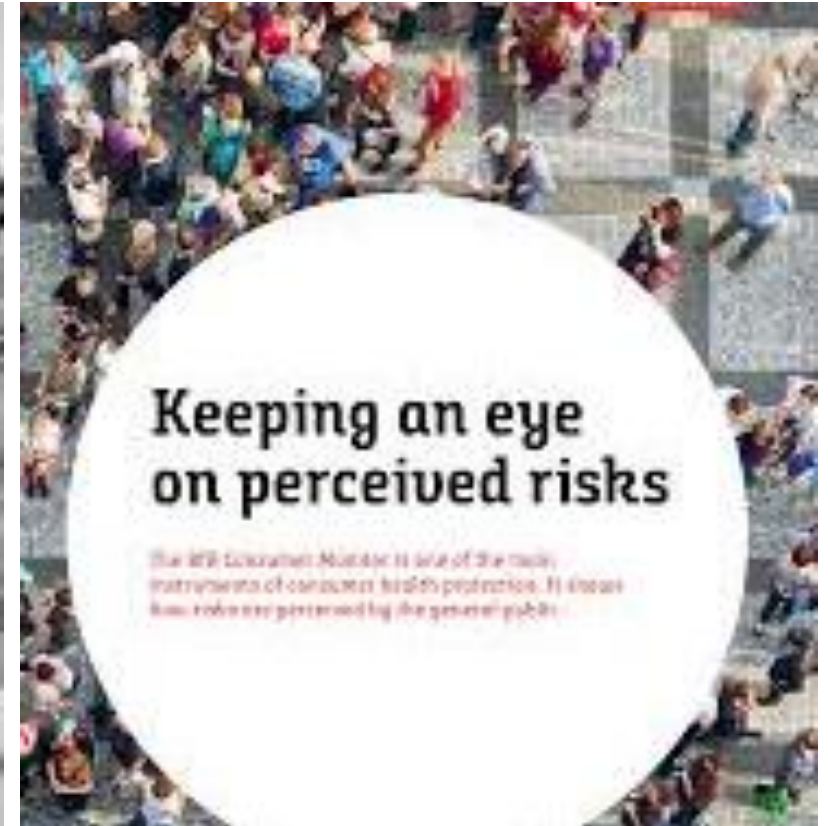
Managing Risk  
Perceptions

# Practical applications

Although it is about developing a creative approach that follows the perspective of "risk as politics", in some of its variants it has been applied in various contexts and real situations to impact the "environment of public perceptions", in order to influence the flow of behaviors and decision-making processes, as in the case of environmental risks or risks to human health. The method itself and the tools that can bring it to life, seek to contribute to give continuity and advance the practice of political management of risk perceptions. (Alonzo Plough and Sheldon Krinsky, *The Emergence of Risk Communication Studies: Social and Political Context*).



Its most recent application has been during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has served to influence human behavior and guide decision-making by high-level actors, for example in the design of risk communication strategies and the management of perceptions about vaccines and vaccination.



# Perception Monitor

It's an example of what could be a tool to monitor perceptions, anticipate possible responses and strengthen decision making in the face of threat risks that may involve catastrophes and human suffering, such as a public health emergency, a climate disaster, a violent conflict, a humanitarian crisis or a technological accident. *(enhancing risk perception-managing capabilities)*

**PREVENTION SAVES LIVES!**

COVID-19 RESPONSE

UN Office for Disasters

**'Natural' disasters do not exist**

#PreventionSavesLives



Managing perceptions can save lives: role of risk perceptions and communication in emergency preparedness and disaster risk reduction

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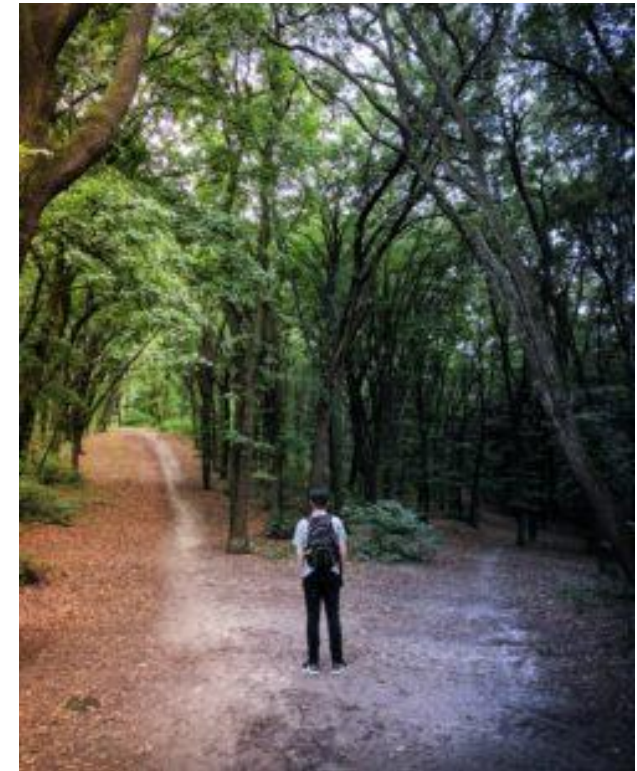
# The Funhouse Mirror of (“Risk”) Perceptions

Tiny risks can scare us while bigger ones fly under the radar. Our brain is always at risk of bad risk perception



(Jonathan Jarry M.sc. McGill)

...but public perceptions are not always bad, and experts and officials also make mistakes” (Paul Slovic)



# The role of risk perception in public health & emergency preparedness

*- thinking and working politically on perceptions of risks to promote/protect public health -*

- The main lessons of Covid-19 have to do mostly with poor communication from experts and terrible decisions by public officials (Paul Slovic).
- Trust is critical, and you won't earn it if you don't respect public concerns (Paul Slovic).
- The vital role of political aspects for promoting and protecting public health in emergencies and disasters.
- Understanding public risk perception and respecting the public will be vital for policy-making to protect citizens and for the capability of societies to navigate in contexts of adversity and uncertainty.





PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF  
THE HEALTH CONSEQUENCES  
OF GLOBAL WARMING

OCTOBER 2014

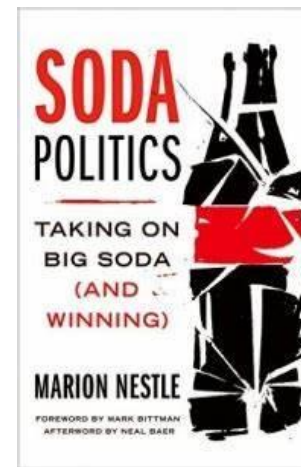
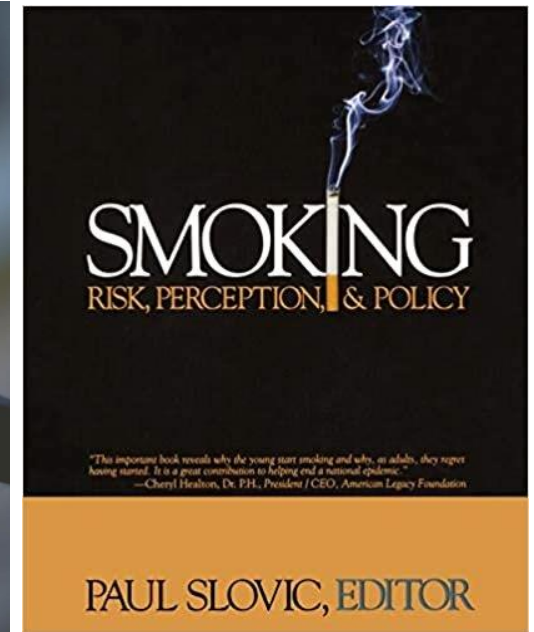
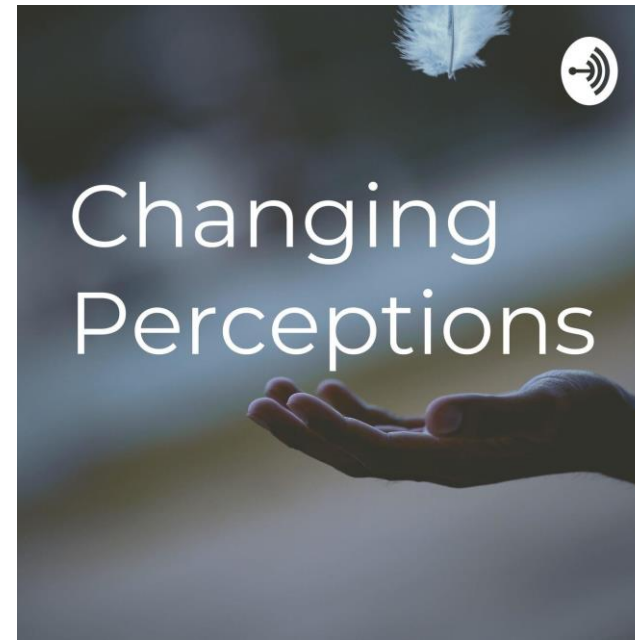


George Mason University  
Center for Climate Change Communication

Perceptions of climate change impacts on public health  
"Our leaders perceptions, values, and decisions are at fault.", Paul Slovic



Political disputes  
over risk  
perceptions and  
their role in  
public health  
responses



Between the past and the present, there is an increase in the battles over perceptions of risks and their role in the politics of responses - decision-making, policy process, collective actions



WHEN IT COMES TO CORONAVIRUS...



55% FEEL EXHAUSTED BY ALL THE MESSAGES.



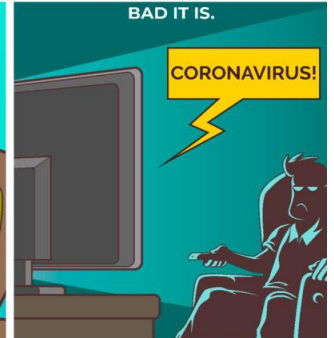
54% FEEL OVERLOADED BY THE AMOUNT OF INFORMATION.



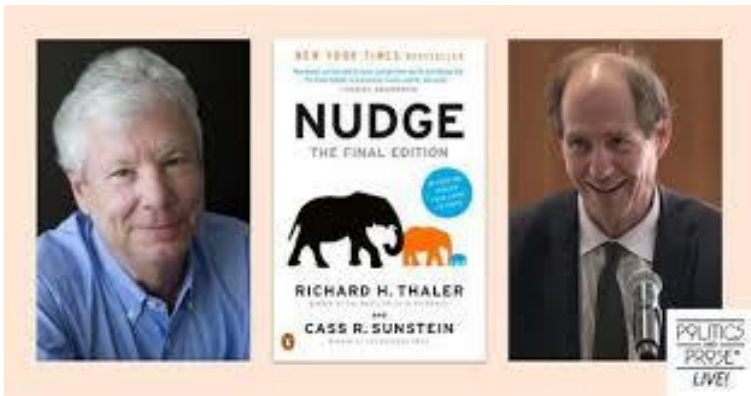
51% FEEL THAT THE MESSAGES ARE REPETITIVE.



47% FEEL LIKE MESSAGES EXAGGERATE HOW BAD IT IS.



BASED ON A SURVEY OF 400 U.S. ADULTS CONDUCTED MARCH 20-24TH, 2020



Perceptions of social norms  
*behavior change*

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Role of perceptions in the politics of the policy process

## *Perception politics*

- *“the dispute and the art of conquering minds, hearts, and views”*

# Perceptions of political risk: applying the perspective to political emergencies and governance conflicts

## What Risk Perception Research Can Teach Us About the US Capitol Attack

[What Risk Perception Research Can Teach Us About the US Capitol Attack – The Wire Science](#)

*Opinion:* The Science That Explains Trump's Grip on White Males

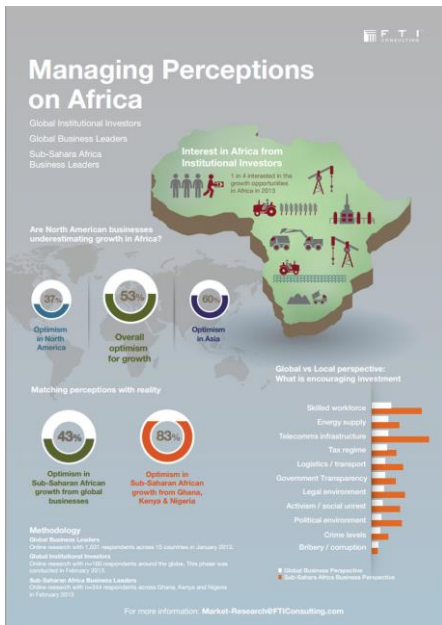
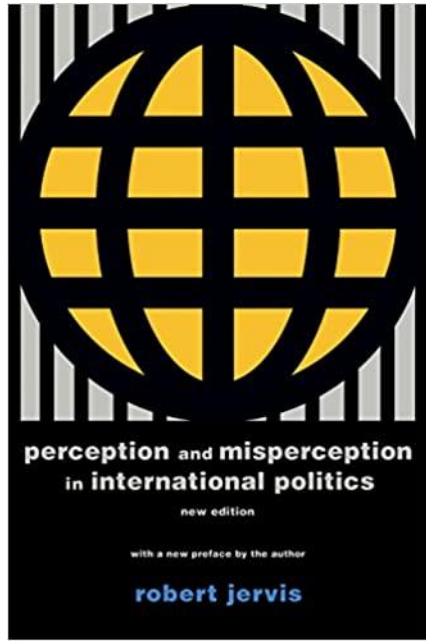
*Decades of research on risk perception can help us understand the Trump supporters who stormed the Capitol.*



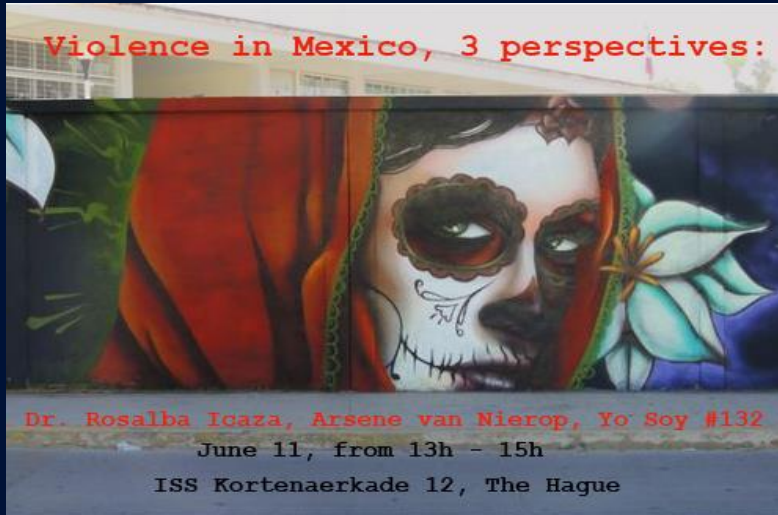


# Perceptions and misperceptions of risks in international relations

*soft power & public diplomacy*



# Risk perception of citizen's insecurity and criminal violence



VS



Mexico 2021, Sensación de seguridad, en su mejor nivel en 8 años: Inegi

- Creative strategies to change risk perceptions as a central component to improve citizen security and reduce violent crime: perception of the role of policing, perception of violence as a public health issue...
- Citizens' perception of security and violence must be a factor that is continuously monitored so that public policies against insecurity and violence address each and every one of their concerns.



# Strategies for changing perceptions of “complicated places” as a way to improve people’s lives and promote collective well-being



Favela Painting: Community Art for Social Change



*Bronx de Colombia*



Caracas, Venezuela



Villa Porteña, Buenos Aires



Tijuana – San Diego

SERIOUS  
SCIENCE



Daniel Treisman

**Why isn't economic inequality a factor that leads to revolutions?**

## *Perceptions of inequality*

risk perception of economic insecurity and lack of social protection

- Socio-political effects of perceived inequality

- Revolutions, social protest, democratization, demands for redistribution, violence, inaction -

## ELITE PERCEPTIONS of POVERTY & INEQUALITY

EDITED BY  
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