

Illogical Logic

An analysis of the arguments, assumptions, and logical fallacies that have shaped the E20 debate

For students preparing for government examinations in India, the syllabus has effectively been made easier by the government itself. A significant portion of the logical reasoning section is devoted to logical fallacies, for which until now, students had to spend exhausting hours poring over textbooks and study materials to master the subject. Today, they could simply read or listen to the government's communication on ethanol and rest assured that they have encountered examples covering almost the entire syllabus.

The government's one-way communication on the issue encompasses nearly every well-known logical fallacy. In this article, we examine what are argued to be the various communication blunders committed by the government in its defence of ethanol blending.

Shooting The Messenger:



The very first tactic employed by the government was one that had already become familiar across the country. From Union Minister Nitin Gadkari describing protesters as “anti-national” to government spokespersons invoking conspiracies involving the “Soros lobby” and other “vested interests,” the response followed a well-established pattern. The underlying suggestion was that protesting against government policy was somehow detrimental to the nation.

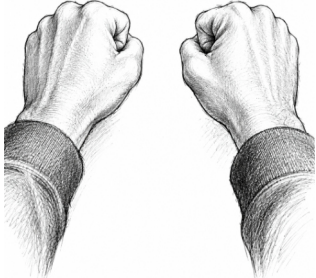
Ordinarily, this has been an effective tactic in the government's communication arsenal. This time, however, it failed to gain traction. The critics were not the Congress or another fringe political group, but millions of ordinary citizens. Convincing people that they themselves were participants in a conspiracy, when all they sought were answers to their concerns, was always going to be a difficult proposition.

Straw-Man:



At this point, the realisation appeared to set in. The government understood that it had to respond to the public's questions and could no longer dismiss the issue as merely a political debate. This marked the beginning of the second round of communication, straw man arguments. For most mileage-conscious Indian consumers, the concerns were remarkably straightforward. They revolved around just two questions: Would E20 deliver lower fuel economy per litre? And would it adversely affect vehicle engines or their components? On almost every other aspect, the public has been overwhelmed with information. From claims that ethanol is a cleaner fuel to references to what Henry Ford reportedly said about it a century ago, the government has offered extensive explanations. Yet, on these two critical and scientific questions, the very issues at the heart of public concern, its responses have been notably limited.

False Dilemma:

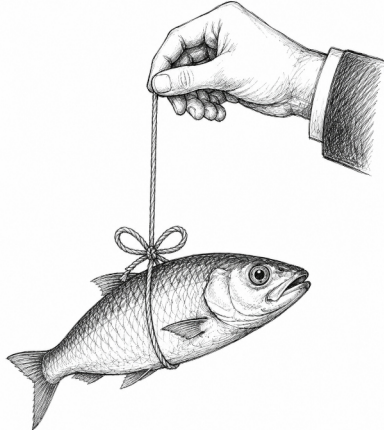


Here, the government's communication arguably goes beyond the classic false dilemma. A false dilemma presents only two choices when, in reality, several

alternatives exist. In this case, however, consumers are effectively presented with only one option: take it or leave it.

The government's position is that offering a choice is simply not feasible. Yet this claim sits uneasily with international practice. In many countries, motorists routinely choose from not just two, but sometimes four different fuel blends. Even within India, numerous fuel stations already offer multiple petrol variants, including premium fuels such as XP100. If consumers can be offered a choice between regular and premium petrol, the obvious question is: why would it be impractical for fuel stations to offer two ethanol blends, E10 and E20. At least at a substantial number of outlets?

Red Herring:



The government's communication on ethanol blending also exhibits what critics describe as a classic red herring. The public's primary concerns have remained remarkably consistent: Will E20 reduce fuel efficiency? And will it adversely affect vehicle engines or their components? The government's emphasis, however, has largely been elsewhere. Its messaging has focused on farmer welfare, import substitution, cleaner energy, lower crude oil imports, and the broader economic benefits of reducing pressure on the exchange rate. While these may well be legitimate policy objectives, they do not directly address the consumer's central questions.

More importantly, the government has presented the issue as though these objectives can be achieved only if consumers accept the associated costs. In effect, it has framed the debate as a zero-sum game: for the nation to benefit, the individual motorist must bear the economic burden through reduced fuel economy and high fuel costs.

Time and again, the burden of ‘*rashtra nirmaan*’ (nation-building) is placed on the shoulders of the ordinary citizen, while the specific concerns that prompted the debate remain unanswered..

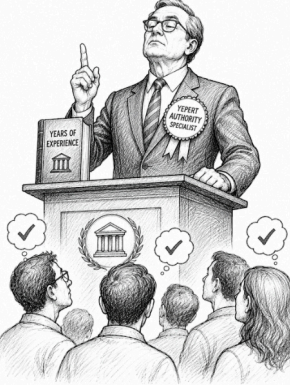
Cherry Picking:



Brazil has been the government's preferred point of inspiration and example throughout the ethanol debate. From the Petroleum Minister to the Minister for Road Transport and Highways, Brazil has repeatedly been cited as proof that high ethanol blends can be successfully adopted. What has largely been omitted, however, is not what Brazil achieved, but how it achieved it. Brazil's transition from conventional petrol to ethanol-rich blends unfolded over several decades, with vehicle technology, fuel infrastructure, and regulatory standards evolving in tandem. Vehicles were progressively made compatible with higher ethanol blends before those blends became the norm. India, by contrast, has sought to accomplish a similar transition within a much shorter timeframe.

Critics argue that by highlighting Brazil's end result while overlooking the conditions and sequence that made it possible, the government presents an incomplete comparison. The selective use of Brazil's experience, while omitting key contextual differences, is fallacious. No matter how often Brazil is invoked, the Indian ethanol transition has, in several important respects, followed a markedly different path from the one that made Brazil's transition successful.

Appeal to Authority:



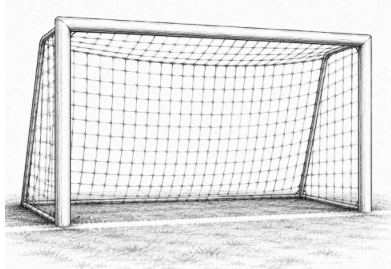
Another recurring feature of the government's communication has been its reliance on appeals to authority. The underlying assumption appears to be that the public lacks either the technical

understanding or the ability to independently assess the consequences of the policy.

This is reflected in statements by ministers suggesting that consumers should rely on official assurances rather than their own observations. Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, for instance, argued that an ordinary motorist cannot accurately measure a vehicle's fuel economy and must instead depend on specialised equipment available only at authorised service centres.

Such claims overlook the fact that most modern vehicles are equipped with built-in fuel economy displays, while consumers have long relied on simple methods such as measuring distance travelled against fuel consumed to estimate mileage. By asking citizens to accept official assertions over their own observations and experience, the government's communication repeatedly substitutes authority for evidence.

Changing the Goal Post:



As reiterated throughout this debate, the Indian consumer's overriding concern is simple: mileage, mileage, and mileage. Ethanol contains significantly less energy per litre than petrol, meaning that, under comparable conditions, a vehicle must consume more fuel to travel the same distance.

Yet, instead of directly addressing this concern, the Petroleum Minister highlighted ethanol's performance benefits, arguing that it can improve acceleration and has long been used as a racing fuel. While those characteristics may be relevant in motorsport or other specialised applications, they have little bearing on the priorities of the average Indian motorist.

For consumers navigating congested urban roads, where average travel speeds are often low, quicker acceleration is hardly a deciding factor. Their concern is not how rapidly a vehicle can gain speed, but how far it can travel on a litre of fuel. By emphasising a benefit that is largely irrelevant to the question being asked, the government's communication shifts attention away from the issue that consumers consider most important.

Still, a Government Win:

Despite the criticism, the government's

communication strategy has achieved two significant successes. The first has been to frame the debate almost exclusively around E20 compatibility. Public discourse has largely centred on whether vehicles manufactured before 2023 are compatible with E20 and whether their engines or components may be affected. In the process, a separate issue has received far less attention: fuel economy. A reduction in mileage, arising from ethanol's lower energy content compared with petrol, is not confined to older vehicles. It is an inherent characteristic of the fuel and affects all vehicles, irrespective of whether they are E20-compliant. Yet the discussion has increasingly been narrowed to compatibility alone. The second success has been in shaping the economic narrative. Over the past few years, India has benefited from access to discounted Russian crude oil and ethanol blending without these cost advantages being proportionately reflected in retail petrol prices. The original public justification for ethanol blending was that it would make petrol more affordable. Ironically, the debate has shifted so dramatically that even some of the programme's most vocal critics, including social activist *Tehseen Poonawala*, are now demanding access to unblended petrol even if it is priced higher than the standard E20 fuel. The discussion is no longer about obtaining cheaper petrol, but about preserving consumer choice.

Rather than making ethanol-blended petrol cheaper than conventional petrol, conventional petrol has effectively disappeared from most retail outlets, while E20 has become the standard fuel at the prevailing market price. Critics contend that what was introduced as a measure to lower fuel costs has instead resulted in the disappearance of the very product against which those savings could have been measured. The government's communication succeeded in shifting the public conversation away from these broader economic questions and towards the narrower issue of vehicle compatibility.

Way Forward:

The notion that citizens are subjects to be instructed rather than participants to be heard has no place in a democracy. A proper mechanism must be put in place to ensure that facts, reports, and data reach the public in full, and that feedback from the public reaches the government so that policies can be adjusted accordingly. The arrogance stems from the fact that the government has been using electoral success as a measure of policy infallibility. The belief that it can do no wrong, and that any opposition to its policies must be the result of vested interests or some “deep state” conspiracy, leads the government to treat citizens as though they are incapable of independent thought and have no inherent right to form their own opinions.