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Abstract

Trust is an essential part of a legitimate political system. Based on data collected among Norwegian citizens, this article investigates the effects on trust in local politicians by influence on versus satisfaction with local services. The theoretical base for the article is the two differing theories which argue that citizen either regard themselves as *consumers* or *citizens* of (local) government. The article argues that people, when evaluating trust towards local politics, tend to apply customer-oriented factors to a greater extent than citizen-oriented factors. However, we do not find support for a claim that customer-oriented factors have *replaced* citizen-oriented factors as such. Thus we argue that the two considerations appear to be complimentary rather than mutually exclusive.

Introduction

There is widespread consensus that citizens' trust in politics and its actors is declining (see for example Listhaug and Wiberg 1995). While observers and academics alike apply various explanations for this decline, or question the extent to which this decline is actually taking place, a multitude of approaches to explain (lack of) trust have been applied (see for example Newton 2007; Norris 1999; Klingemann and Fuchs 1995).

Trust is an essential part of a legitimate political system. The lively scholarly debate on the possible decline of trust reflects how trust is considered as a characteristic of good governance, 'good' societies and their political systems. Even if trust does not necessarily overlap conceptually with legitimacy (Gilley 2006), some of the academic schools in this field tend to argue that factors such as social trust and social capital are the very foundation of legitimacy (Gilley 2009; Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000). Whether we study trust as a determinant of social actions or investigate which actions that influence trust, we are dealing with a phenomenon considered to be a foundation for any political system.

In this article, we contribute to the academic debate on which factors predict trust in local politics by applying the dichotomy of the 'citizen-voter' vs. the 'user-consumer' role to survey data from Norway. Referring to the logic of Barber (1984), arguing that the primary role of citizens is to participate in the democratic system as *citizens* or *voters*, and the works of, among others, Lawrence Rose (2011a; 2011b; 1999), suggesting that citizens' perceptions of their own role have changed into regarding themselves as *consumers* or *users* of local politics, we argue that this dichotomy can function as an interesting backdrop for an investigation of factors which predict trust in local politics.

Investigating the effects of variables which measure perceived citizen influence and variables measuring citizen satisfaction with a selection of local services, we ask what matters for modern citizens;

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to have input and exert influence into the political system via influencing its services, or whether people simply look to their level of satisfaction with services when determining whether they trust local politicians.

In the following sections, we will outline the theoretical framework for the article, explain how the variables are operationalised and measured, and provide an analysis with a following discussion of the findings. Our analysis shows that people, when evaluating trust towards local politics, tend to apply customer-oriented factors to a greater extent than citizen-oriented factors, however, we do not find adequate evidence for a claim that customer-oriented factors have *replaced* citizen-oriented factors as such. Thus we argue that the two considerations appear to be complimentary rather than mutually exclusive.

Theoretical framework

The factual relationship between participation and trust has been the topic of extensive academic discussion. Some follow in the footsteps of a long sociological tradition arguing that trust is a determinant for participation, making it relevant to question whether it makes sense to participate in a democratic system if one does not trust that system or its leaders (Hooghe and Marien 2013). Others argue that the causal direction between the variables works in the opposite direction, i.e. that participation can be regarded as a source of trust (March and Olsen 1989). Conventional liberal democratic theory tends to see citizen participation in politics not only as a virtue, but also as a prerequisite for the political system to function and as a source for trust (Putnam 2000; 1993). In this perspective, participation is regarded as an essential part of one's *citizenship*: a citizen is someone who is conscious of, and participates in, collective political processes. Van Steenberghe (1994: 2), for example, defines citizenship as the 'notion of participation in public life,' emphasising the role of people as active providers of input into the political system. Moreover, communitarian democratic theory not only emphasises participation in elections, but in all channels of participation that are available to the individual. Such participation is regarded both as a means to influence politics, and as a virtue; citizens who engage in politics contribute to serving common public interests, and hence act as good citizens (Etzioni 1995; Barber 1984).

Moreover, in communitarian democratic theory, virtuous citizens are knowledgeable about politics; are willing to take on public tasks, engage and deliberate politics also between elections; and serve common goals and interests through trying to influence politics (Rose and Pettersen 1995). In this perspective, citizens are regarded as subjects who *contribute* to the political system and who through their input help ensure that the system is sustained and remains legitimate. Moreover, participation is not only regarded as a virtue, but even as a *prerequisite* of citizenship—at least if this citizenship should be regarded as good—whereas passive observers who do not play their part cannot claim to be virtuous citizens. Finally, in addition to emphasising the importance of citizen participation to the vitality of democracy, deliberative democrats go one step

further suggesting that citizen participation even *increases* the quality of democracy and adds legitimacy to decisions (Michels and de Graaf 2010).

There is empirical support for the claim that involvement in political processes matters for individuals' trust in the system. Citizen participation is widely regarded as an integral part of public policy and public authorities seek to legitimise their actions by establishing direct involvement with the public (Barnes 1999). March and Olsen (1989: 44) put forward a well-known argument that people who are involved in politics also will be more trusting towards the political system than their more passive counterparts, claiming that '...individuals will—to the extent they are integrated into the political system—like what they see'.

Furthermore, Christensen and Lægreid (2002) argue that there is logic to the argument that active forms of participation will lead to higher trust in, for instance, governmental institutions, than more passive forms of participation. For example, membership in a political party will have a higher impact on trust than if one simply follows politics in the media and hold a general interest in political matters. Basing their study on survey data from Norway, they find that indicators which measure involvement in political processes have positive effects on trust in a variety of government institutions, including the local council. The study also finds that experiences with social, employment and health care services have positive effects on trust.

However, a more recent school of thought provides a different perception of the role of individuals in relationship to the political system. While conventional democratic theory emphasizes people's roles as active citizens who contribute to the system, Lawrence Rose, among others, argues that changed perceptions of especially local politics have led to a change in people's attitudes towards their own role, and that people increasingly regard themselves as passive recipients, or *users* or *consumers* of politics.¹ The backdrop for this changed role is, among other factors, the fact that citizen involvement in local politics has declined, which can be argued to be reflected in the decline in turnout at local elections, as well as a common perception that local politics has changed (Rose 2011a). While political parties previously held crucial roles in shaping and executing local politics, their influence has been weakened as a result of enhanced legislation on citizen rights as well as earmarking of public means.

This observation dovetails with a changed citizen perception of local government; while it previously was regarded as a provider of *local democracy*, it is increasingly being regarded as a provider of *services*. Therefore, the prime obligation of local government is to supply high-quality public services which responds to citizens' demands. The municipality in this perspective is morphing into a service-producing corporation with the mayor as the chairman of the executive board and the city manager as the CEO. This leads to the replacement of popular rule with clients' choice and goal-oriented governance (Rose 2011a).

Investigating citizens' attitudes towards the responsibilities of local government, Rose finds that they are inclined to regard services as more important than democracy and tax collection. Citizens hold a self-perception as consumers more

than voters or taxpayers in local government (Rose 1999). A more recent study (Baldersheim, Pettersen and Rose 2011; Rose 2011b) similarly concludes that a majority of citizens express a perception of one's role as more a consumer of local government than a voter and taxpayer. For instance, citizens state that it is more important that the municipality provides adequate services than that it spends taxes carefully, or whether citizens are able to influence local political decisions.

However, Rose does not disagree with scholars of democratic theory who argue that participation is a necessity for (local) democracy to be sustained – he writes that ‘the very legitimacy of local politics is under threat if nobody bothers to maintain it. But if the role of the municipality is only to be a provider of services, why should citizens bother?’ (Rose 2011a: 15). Following this argument, in the event of citizen roles changing from active participants in local democracy to passive recipients of services, the corresponding change in the role of local government contributes to sustaining the passive roles of citizens.

There is thus support for the argument that satisfaction with local services is a reliable predictor of trust and that satisfied users appear to be more trusting of the political system than are the dissatisfied users. Several scholars subscribe to the *performance approach*, which relates (dis)trust in government to the actual performance of government. Assuming a causal link between policy outputs and citizen trust, advocates of micro-performance theory, which focuses on service delivery (see Downe et al. 2013; Bouckaert and van der Walle 2003a, 2001; Swindell and Kelly 2002; 2000; Glaser and Hildreth 1999), assume that the causal link between service satisfaction and trust is related to the citizen experience of being a client of government services.

This view is supported by Uslaner (2003) who argues that state structures are unable to produce citizens' trust on a general level, but that state *policies*, particularly those that produce a more equal distribution of resources, are able to do so. A review of previous investigations into the matter yield varying results. Kumlin and Oskarson (1999) find that people who believe that public services have improved have higher trust in national politicians and the state of democracy compared to those who believe that services remain unchanged or have worsened. A pan-European study by Kumlin (2009) studying the effects of dissatisfaction with health and education services on EU trust finds a causal effect of trust in services on EU trust in several European countries. Finally, Rose and Pettersen (2000), find that satisfaction with local services is a reliable predictor of trust in selected aspects of local government in Norway. Hence, an argument that satisfied users of services may also be more trusting in (local) government that their dissatisfied counterparts appears to be well-founded.

We note that the concept of trust can be problematic to apply in studies, as the direction of causality is a matter which naturally arises. Do people trust a political system (or a politician or an institution) because they are satisfied with the output of the system, or because they are able to influence it, or do they report satisfaction with government output and/or ability to influence because they have an underlying trust in the system as a whole?

A number of scholars argue that the relationship between trust and evaluations of other aspects of government is complex and that there will be interaction between several factors when assessing how trust affects other measures. For example, Van de Walle (2002) argues that trust will be an interplay of several factors, and cautions researchers that there necessarily will be a link between performance of public services and trust in government, as public services may only be one of several components which influence citizens' trust. Kumlin (2007) suggests that the direction of causality should be subject for increased attention from scholars, given that the relationship between values, policy preferences and performance evaluations may be reciprocal. And Hetherington (1998) questions the degree to which trust has significant effects on other variables, arguing that it is less important to establish whether trust *explains* support than whether trust *affects* measures of support.²

The problems which arise when we study 'trust' may be even more prominent when we use data from a Norwegian sample. Norwegians are known to display comparatively high levels of political trust,³ even if a decline can be noted over time (Listhaug and Wiberg 1995). This makes it plausible to argue that trust is not necessarily based on other attitudes; trust may have come about as a result of other factors, such as economic and material security. An alternative theory is provided by Svallfors (2002) who finds no correlation between trust and attitudes towards state intervention in Scandinavia. This may be because the idea of universal citizenship is so woven into people's perceptions that trust will not affect attitudes to a notable extent. Before commencing the analysis, we underline that if our selected predictors of trust prove to be significant, we need to take these considerations into account.

Research question

With these theoretical frameworks in mind, we continue to elaborate on the research question and focus of this article. We emphasize that we do not investigate whether citizen- or consumer- orientations are more prominent among citizens. Instead, we explore the arguments further by studying the implications of subscribing to either of the two respective orientations and how this perception affects trust.⁴

Our first assumption is that if people regard themselves as citizens of a democratic system, whose duty is to participate in the political processes as active political subjects, their level of trust towards the (here: local) political system depends on whether they believe that they are able to influence it. On the other hand, if people regard themselves as consumers in relation to the local political system, they will be expected to put the emphasis on whether they believe that the political system provides the results they expect. Since their attention is not oriented towards their own input into the system but more regard themselves as passive recipients, their focus remains on what the system can do for them, not what they can do for the system. Hence, we test and compare the effects of being

able to *influence* services vs. one's *evaluation* of services on the level of trust in local government.

Furthermore, we investigate these issues on the local government level. We expect that the effect of participation is just as applicable on the local as on the national level—or possibly even more so—since local politics is by many regarded as a 'safe haven' for participatory democracy (Karlsson 2013). It can be argued that it is easier for citizens to get access to decision makers at the local level, as issues may be considered simpler and more directly related to the everyday lives of people, which may make participation seem more appealing to local residents than to engage in more complex national or international issues (John 2008; Denters et al. 2011).

Furthermore, since public service delivery is mainly a municipal task in Norway it appears plausible that citizens first and foremost will be likely to experience a certain vicinity to those services, and secondly, that they will be aware that municipal authorities are responsible for the delivery of the services. Hence, they are likely to hold the 'right' source accountable for the quality of services, and to believe that local authorities are, at least to a certain degree, possible to access, also since municipalities in Norway tend to be small (Denters et al. 2014). Whether these authorities are responsive and take citizen's opinions into account is, however, a different matter.

To reiterate a previous point, we create an expectation that respondents in our survey will, if Rose and Pettersen's claim that people's perceptions of their own roles in (local) society have changed from a citizen to a consumer role is to be followed, put more emphasis on satisfaction with services than whether they are able to influence it. Basing our argument on how changes in the organizational structure and modus operandi of the public sector—such as the New Public Management reform which Rose et al. also consider—challenge conventional representative democracy (see for example Brewer 2007), we expect citizens' perceptions of themselves as consumers to be more prominent than the conventional perception of oneself as a citizen.

Furthermore, citizens' influence on policies, which is measured in this article, can be argued to have been weakened by devolution, outsourcing of services and collaborative forms of governance (Ansell and Gash 2008; Donahue and Zeckhauser 2011). The introduction of such changes in the processes of shaping as well as executing local policies can be argued to have displaced political control and weakened the relationship between popular preferences and policy output (*Self-reference withheld*). Therefore, we do not expect people's perceptions of whether they are able to influence policies to matter as much for trust as whether they are satisfied with the quality of public services. Hence, we expect the level of satisfaction with services to be the most reliable predictor of trust within the context of the reformed Norwegian local sector. The following section will provide an overview over the data and the operationalisation of the variables.

Operationalisation, data and variables

Our data set was generated by a survey among Norwegian citizens which was conducted by *Resposanalyse* on behalf of the research team. The survey was part of a regular omnibus through which respondents are contacted by e-mail to answer sets of questions. In this case, respondents were contacted until a satisfactory number of responses were returned. The final sample contains 3014 responses from a representative sample in terms of age, gender distribution and geographical distribution of the general population in Norway. The questions included background variables such as age, gender, and education, and the main body of the survey included questions about perceived ability to influence elderly care, building and planning policies and primary school services, as well as satisfaction with these.

In order to measure political trust, we employ an index variable consisting of three scale items which measure citizens' attitudes towards local politicians. We believe that attitudes towards local politicians are parsimonious proxies for general trust in the local political system. To begin with, municipalities tend to be small in Norway,⁵ and it is a common belief that citizens in small municipalities have greater access to officeholders, and the system is more transparent and permeable than in the larger municipalities (Rose and Pettersen 2000). Local politicians will therefore often be visible in the local community and more approachable than in large municipalities. Hence, attitudes towards these officials should therefore be expected to be parsimonious proxies for attitudes towards the local political system. The items are phrased as follows: *local politicians are responsive to people's opinions*, *local politicians are honest people*, and *local politicians work to ensure that local policies benefit everybody*. Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with the statements on a scale of 1 to 10. As answers to these questions are internally consistent (Cronbach's alpha 0.91), it appears justifiable to create a scale variable out of these three items.

The services we investigate in the analysis are elderly care services, building and planning services and primary education, which all can be regarded as very essential components of the local political system in Norway. We assume that most citizens will have opinions about these services as they tend to spark relatively salient debates in local communities, on the national political levels as well as in local and national media. It is also very likely that citizens, either directly or through family members and friends, at some stage in their lives will have personal experiences with said services. Furthermore, we assume that citizens are aware that these services are delivered by the local government and that they hold local government and its officials accountable for the quality of services. Satisfaction with services are measured on a Likert scale of 1-5 with separate scales for the respective services (Cronbach's alpha 0.71), which were merged into one single variable which measures service satisfaction in general.

Given that our analysis assumes that survey respondents not only are aware that local governments provide the services in question, but also that they hold

them accountable for the quality of services, we wish to control for cognitive capacity. In order to do so, we include a variable which measures interest in local politics. We particularly expect interest to matter in the context of Norwegian local government. Oskarson (2007) argues that the relevance of political and social arrangements influences the level of political interest which is comparatively high in Scandinavia. Therefore, citizens who inform that they are interested in local politics and those who are not should not display corresponding levels of trust in local politicians. The variable which measures interest in local politics is measured on a 1-4 point Likert scale.

To measure perceived influence on services, we specified a number of items which ask citizens to rate on a scale of 1-5 whether they believe that they are able to influence the three specific services through a selection of means. Choosing two means which represent *voice* options based on Hirschman's popular typology ('influencing x service through voting in local elections' and 'contacting a local politician'), and one type of means which represent *exit* ('influencing service through choosing between services' for elderly care and primary school services, and 'influencing service by moving away from municipality as a protest response to a project' for building and planning), we merged the variables for the respective services to one per means of influence (alpha 0.85 for influencing service through voting in local elections, 0.84 for contacting a local politician and 0.50 for influencing service through choosing between services/moving away from municipality).

Furthermore, in order to allow for greater explained variance in the dependent variables, we also control for the effects of gender, age, education, municipal size, and a dichotomous variable which distinguishes between public sector employees and others. Age and education are particularly expected to contribute to greater variance, as Dalton (2004) and others have found a decrease in trust among the younger and higher educated. Due to the vicinity between citizens and decision-makers in small municipalities, we expect citizens in smaller municipalities to display higher levels of trust than people in larger municipalities, so we therefor also include a measure of municipal size. Finally, the inclusion of a public-sector/not public sector-employee relies on an expectation that people who work in the public sector have a vested interest, and will be likely to regard actors and institutions within the public sector more positively than others. Alternatively, they may display more negative views than others, given that their proximity to the system may render them to possess greater insight into the system (Rose and Pettersen 2000).

Analysis

In order to test the effects of the selected variables, we specify two models. The first model estimates the effects of the three selected forms of influence, service satisfaction and political interest. The second model also includes the demographic control variables.

Table 1. Unstandardized regression coefficients, dependent variable 'trust in local politicians.' Ordinary least squares regression.

	Model I	Model II
Intercept	-3.39***	-6.43
Satisfaction with services	.90***	.91***
Interest in politics	1.46***	1.22***
Influence via elections	.30***	.33*
Influence through contacting a politician	.42***	.39***
Influence through choosing service / moving away from municipality	-.28***	-.26***
Gender (Woman=1)		.40
Age		.00
Education		1.08***
City (25 000- 100 000 inh.) ⁶		.95*
Small city (15 000-25 000 inh.)		.30
Town (<15 000 inh.)		.19
Public sector employee		.14
R ²	0.34	0.37
N	1337	1337

***Significant at the 0.000 level

**Significant at the 0.01 level

*Significant at the 0.05 level

Our models show that service satisfaction has a significant and relatively strong effect on trust and that this effect is much stronger than the effects whether citizens believe that they are able to influence services. When service satisfaction increases with one unit, trust in local politicians increases with roughly 0.9, in both estimated models. To compare the variables which assess whether citizens believe that they are able to influence services, contacting a politician has the strongest effect of these. Believing that one is able to influence through voting in elections has a weaker, but positive, effect, while choosing service or moving away from the municipality has a negative effect on trust. The latter can possibly be ascribed to the protest nature of the exit measure; it may appear plausible that when opting to leave the municipality one does so as a result of dissatisfaction and lack of trust. It appears that this is being translated into a view that protesting against the system through exit is the preferred (or the only?) measure for those who do not trust the system (*self-reference withheld*).

The variable which has the highest impact on trust in our analysis is interest in local politics; one unit increase in interest causes trust to increase with almost one unit and a half in the first model. The effect of interest is slightly lower when we control for demographics. The overall effects of the variables are only being slightly modified when we add the demographic variables. This addition does

not alter the explanatory effect of the model notably; the R^2 only increases with .03 when adding demographics. Note that the only demographic variables which are significant are education and living in a city with 25,000-100,000 inhabitants (compared to the reference category 'large city'), both with positive effects on trust, while the expected effect of age does not occur at all.

Our results show that there is a strong effect between service satisfaction and trust in local politicians, and that this connection is stronger than that of whether people perceive that they are able to access decision-making actors and procedures which shape local services. Returning to the underlying expectations outlined in the previous section, it appears that the assumptions are largely being met by our data. Hence, it appears reasonable to conclude that people apply consumer-oriented factors to a greater extent when evaluating trust towards local politics, than citizen-oriented factors. This finding may be interpreted as a consequence of changed perceptions of citizen roles which occur simultaneously as the public sector has undergone, and still is experiencing, extensive reforms on all levels.

However, we need to clarify an important issue. The underlying expectation which the analysis is based on relies on an assumption that these citizen roles are dichotomous and hence mutually excluding. Our data do not provide support for a claim that customer-oriented considerations have replaced citizen-oriented orientations, but rather that the former are more prominent than the latter, without arguing that citizen-oriented considerations are non-existent. On the contrary; people do, at least to a certain extent, find it important that they are able to influence services in order to be satisfied with local politics.⁷ This could possibly be the starting point of a discussion of whether citizen roles are regarded as complementary, and the extent to which the modern citizen perceive him/herself as a consumer of local politics *as well as* part of a demos who has the right to participate in political processes.

Summary and conclusion

This article investigates the effects of influence on versus satisfaction with local services on trust in local politicians, with a theoretical base in the two differing theories which argue that citizen either regard themselves as *consumers* or *citizens* of (local) government. Expecting that citizens would focus to a greater extent on system output, i.e. what the system can do for them, than emphasizing their own input, i.e. what they can do for the system, we found that the data supported such a claim; the effects of service satisfaction greatly superseded the effects of influence. However, given that the latter variable also has significant effects on trust, we did not find that the data provided sufficient reason to dismiss that conventional citizen orientations are present as well. We rather argue that changes in the public sector may have brought about *complementary* citizen orientations when people take on multiple roles in society. However, the data suggests that some considerations may be more prominent than others; we find

reasons to conclude that people apply customer-oriented factors to a greater extent when evaluating trust towards local politics, than citizen-oriented factors.

We repeat the possible caveats of applying the concept of 'trust' in a scholarly analysis, as problems related to the direction of causality naturally arise. Still, our analysis provides a complimentary input to the academic scholarship on citizen roles as well as the implications of changing roles. The results point in the direction that modern-day citizens refer to their satisfaction with system output to a larger extent than their ability to actually influence the process when they evaluate whether they trust the local political system, which suggests that consumerist orientations constitute meaningful predictors for political attitudes. This calls for further analysis into the matter of changed citizen attitudes in the era of NPM and network governance.

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Notes

¹ For the sake of simplicity, we will use the term *consumer* in this paper.

² When experimenting with trust as an independent variable and satisfaction and means of influence as dependent variables on our data, certain results are being produced, however, the effects of the coefficients are strongest when trust is the dependent variable.

³ However, the mean value of our sample is 13.36, just below the median value of 15 (st.dev. 6.51), which signifies that respondents in our sample are not overwhelmingly positive towards local politicians.

⁴ It must be noted that Petterson and Rose (2000) test the effects of three citizen role orientations: consumer, voter and taxpayer, in a regression analysis which investigates the effects on confidence in, and perceptions of, the degree of responsiveness of the municipal council. The only statistically significant coefficients are those for taxpayers and voters on responsiveness. However, we will not further elaborate this issue.

⁵ More than half of Norwegian municipalities have less than 5000 inhabitants. See Statistics Norway <http://www.ssb.no/>.

⁶ The variable which measures municipal size is treated as a categorical variable in order to account for a non-linear effect of municipal size, with 'large city' (>100 000 inh.) as the reference category.

⁷ When correlating satisfaction with the selected means of influence, the correlations (Pearson's r) are as follows: voting in elections 0.41, contacting a politician 0.46 and choice/moving 0.11, all significant at the 0.000 level. Hence, a certain correlation, though not a very strong one, is to be found between satisfaction and being able to influence, except for the exit option.