

POTENTIAL FOR COMPARATIVE PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION*

LYGINAMOJO VIEŠOSIOS NUOMONĖS TYRIMO GALIMYBĖS VIEŠAJAME ADMINISTRAVIME

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Abstract

Public administration and public services have always taken a marginal place in political scientists' behavioural research. Public administration students, in contrast, tend to focus on political and administrative elites and institutions and have largely ignored citizens in comparative research. In this article, we make a plea for international comparative research on citizens' attitudes towards public administration from an interdisciplinary perspective. Available international survey material is discussed and main trends in empirical practice and theoretical approaches are outlined, especially those with a potential impact on public sector reform.

Introduction

Trust in the civil service is extremely low in Greece and Italy, while the Austrians and Luxemburgers have the highest level of trust (Eurobarometer, Spring 2002). Public administrations often suffer from a very negative image among the population, which is, according to political discourse at least, a major contributing factor to citizens' distrust in government (Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2003). The consequences of this distrust with regard to the functioning of states and administrations are said to be manifold: failing public sector recruitment, tax evasion and a decline in law-abiding behaviour, shifts in the political party landscape or even political earthquakes affecting the entire political constellation, increased need for public administration to invest in enforcement and control mechanisms, difficulties in reaching less well-off groups with government programmes, etc. Despite the intensity by which these 3 usual relations are proclaimed and repeated, empirical proof is often hard to find.

This distrust be it real or not, seems to be a factor that is present in most to measure, map and *explain their citizens' attitude towards public administration*. Distrust in government has been the topic of much research by political scientists and sociologists but there is little international comparative research focusing on the image of public administration.

With specific services has been studied quite intensively but citizens' general attitudes towards the public administration at large do not seem to be popular among researchers. Some research maps these general attitudes but study of the values and beliefs underlying these attitudes is weak to absent. This article provides an inventory of available data for studying public opinion on public administration. Our focus will be on European countries as it is for these countries that the bulk of empirical cross-national data are available. Most suggestions are valid, however, for other countries and regions as well.

A disregard for citizens in administrative culture research

Research on administrative cultures has thus far primarily focused on institutions and actors within the system (top civil servants, politicians). Differences in citizens' attitudes are seldom taken into account. A Dane's relation to, and appreciation of, his/her administration is not the same as that of a Portuguese. Different concepts of administration exist, certain guiding principles are considered less or more important and some national administrations are trusted more than others. All this indicates a need for systematic international comparative research into administrative culture from a citizen's perspective. Research on administrative cultures should be built on at least three blocks:

- ◆ institutions,
- ◆ political and administrative elites and
- ◆ citizens.

While most of the research has focused on institutions and political-administrative elites, in this article we will focus on the third building block: citizens. In a number of cases, citizens have been the object of study, be it that research was often limited to certain aspects of public administration, such as local government (Rose, 1999; Rose and Pettersen, 2000).

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The need for thorough research on citizens' opinion on public administration has been identified on several occasions but this has not given rise to a real research tradition. Rainey (1996) even designed an ideal framework for survey research on public opinion towards the civil service and Sods (2001) explicitly included citizens' political culture into his research design on indicators of local democratic governance. Derlien, in his review article on the state of comparative administration research until 1992, did not even mention a single study that had citizens' relationship to their administration as a topic. This should not come as a surprise, as he noted that comparative analysis in all fields of public administration was still the exception rather than the rule [Derlien] 992:297V

Most research on administrative and political cultures with regard to public administrations has focused on political and administrative elites (Aberbach et al, 1981; Rouban, 1995) by interviewing civil servants (Bekke et al, 1996; Page and Wright, 1999), municipal CEOs (Klausen and Magnier, 1998), civil servants in European administrations (Hooghe, 2002) and mayors (Soos et al, 2002), etc. Still other studies tried to compare political-administrative institutions (Peters, 1989). These studies reveal that considerable differences between countries exist and, therefore, the place of public administration within the state differs depending on the political, constitutional and cultural situation (Coombes, 1998; Stillman, 1999). There is no such thing as a universal concept of *the administrative state*. Even more, the conception of the state itself differs widely. Little effort is made to distinguish between state and public administration. Therefore, the exact relation between *state* and *public administration* remains fuzzy. In the US approach, public administration makes the state, as the state is seen as a problem-solver, while in Europe it is the state that shapes public administration, in a more legalistic tradition (Kickert and Stillman II, 1996). There is no reason why these differences cannot be observed in citizens' minds as well or why they would not be reflected in citizens' preferences and in their conceptualization of public administration *within the state*.

When doing empirical research on citizens' attitudes towards public administration and on their conceptualization of the administrative state, researchers' attention is, all too often, focused on organizing new opinion surveys and there is little enthusiasm for secondary analysis of existing data. The reasons behind this are easy to identify.

- ◆ Research on public administration was not the aim of most surveys when they were organized (the European Values Study is a sociological survey, Eurobarometer has a policy support function), which means these sources are often unknown to public administration researchers.
- ◆ Because of the (political) sociological nature of these surveys, most contain a limited number of items on public administration and public services.

- ◆ In many cases, accessibility problems hinder researchers. Even though numerous data files exist, it is often very difficult to trace them and to combine or merge them. Even more problems exist in evaluating the quality of existing data files.
- ◆ Historic data or data on general evolutions or values that may help to explain public administration phenomena are often of interest for '*pur sang*' public administration researchers only. The work of most researchers is closely related to the requirements of the sponsoring organization or government, who are often mainly interested in new and recent material that has immediate relevance for policy or management.

Despite all these drawbacks, there already is a huge potential for research on citizens' attitudes towards public administration. The remainder of this article consists of three parts. First, we identify existing research on citizens' attitude towards public administration: What image do citizens have of public administration, what about levels of trust in the civil service? Second, we list and describe a number of valuable surveys that offer promising prospects for comparative research but which have remained under-explored by public administration researchers. Finally, we map a number of trends in the empirical approach to citizens' attitude towards the administration, theoretical explanations for these attitudes and the impact of these 'new' issues on the public sector reform agenda.

Citizens' image of public administration

From the very beginning, the citizen has been neglected as an object of study in public administration, due to the discipline's early focus on organization studies and political-administrative relations. Things have changed since then but examination of subjective data such as opinion data has always been, and still is, limited in comparison to the widespread use of performance indicators in public administration research. Still, a number of studies with a theoretical approach to public opinion towards public administration have been written (Ott and Shafritz, 1995; Rainey, 1996). Recently, we have observed an increased use of opinion data in public administration. In most cases, however, this use is limited to the national context: repeated citizen assessments of the Israeli public sector (Vigoda and Yuval, 2001), analysis of Spanish public opinion data on the public sector (del Pino, 2002), Finnish citizens' trust in their ministries (Harisalo and Stenvall, 2002), Norwegians' trust in government (Christensen and Laegreid, 2005) and citizen-local government relations in several Central European countries (Swianiewicz, 2001).

Many governments are escalating their efforts to monitor citizens' attitudes towards government and public administration: trust and satisfaction indicators have permeated the Finnish public sector (Alam, 2002; Holkeri and Nurmi, 2002). The Danish Ministry of Finance organized a survey on citizens and the public sector in 1998 (Danish Ministry of

Finance, 1998). The Belgian federal government had an instrument for measuring satisfaction with and trust in federal public services (Legrand and Staes, 1998). At the Flemish level, the Administration for Planning and Statistics has, since 1996, organized an annual survey covering not only policy issues but also attitudes towards government (www.vlaanderen.be/aps) and we recently did a large-scale survey on citizen attitudes towards the public administration (www.kuleuven.acbe/io/trust). In The Netherlands, a 'Belevingsmonitor'⁷ was launched in 2003 as a monthly survey on trust in government. Recently, however, the political desirability of the project has been a matter of dispute, especially after a number of results that were not exactly flattering for government were published (Anon., 2003).

In the UK, the People's Panel has been a valuable source of information and the Cabinet Office prepared several documents and organized seminars on satisfaction with public services at all levels of government (Moore et al, 1998; Donovan et al., 2001). At the local level, the Audit Commission has launched a broad project on trust and corporate governance in public institutions, including an opinion survey (Audit Commission, 2003; Audit Commission and MORI Social Research Institute, 2003). As part of the Review of Public Administration by the Northern Ireland Executive (www.rpani.gov.uk), a number of omnibus surveys have been organized to find out the public's views and experiences of public services in Northern Ireland (Knox and Carmichael, 2003).

The practice seems to be best established in Canada (Sims, 2001). All kinds of surveys (citizens, customers, employees) are theoretically related into a single *service value chain*. In just a few years, a government tradition of regular large-scale surveys has emerged. The biannual Citizens First survey deals with what citizens think about the services they receive, while the Listening to Canadians surveys deal with government communication and measures Canadians' views on public policy priorities. It also outlines how the Government of Canada serves Canadians in response to those priorities (www.communication.gc.ca).

Several non-profit initiatives have measured citizens' attitudes towards public serviced) at large in the USA, such as PEW (The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1998) and the Council for Excellence in Government's and Ford Foundation's Partnership for Trust in Government (Council for Excellence in Government, 1999). In 1999, the Panel on Civic Trust and Citizen Responsibility, with Paul Volcker as chairman, issued its report 'A Government to Trust and Respect: Rebuilding Citizen-Government Relations for the 21st Century'.

The lack of data makes it difficult to map trends in Australia but concerns about trust certainly exist, as is shown by discussions at the Office of the Auditor General of Western Australia on public confidence in the public sector (Ryan, 2000). In New Zealand, Barnes and Gill in 2000 wrote a Working Paper for the State Services Commission, entitled 'Declining Government Performance? Why Citizens Don't Trust Government?'

Scattered initiatives exist on the African continent (African Training and Research Centre in Administration for Development, 1998; Public Service Commission, 2003) and in Latin America (Payne et al., 2002).

These government initiatives are real goldmines for data but often remain unknown to researchers. Unfortunately, international comparison remains very difficult with these national-level initiatives, due to the large variety in survey methods and survey content.

Available data for international comparison

There has always been more interest in collecting *new* data rather than in consolidating and analysing existing data. This means that many survey data have not (yet) been 'discovered' by public administration researchers and that items on public administration, public services and civil servants remain, thus far, largely unexplored. Many of these surveys have been designed for other purposes, often in the field of (political) sociology, which explains their limited use by public administration scholars.

Table 1 provides an inventory of surveys that are available to public administration scholars who want to do research on citizen attitudes towards the public administration. The criterion for inclusion in the list is that the survey covers at least three European countries and that it contains a fair number of items dealing with public administration. The list is not meant to be comprehensive. It mainly focuses on European and North American countries, as it is this region for which most material is available.¹ Apart from this series of surveys among the general population, numerous surveys exist among selected groups, often business people, civil servants, politicians or experts. The World Bank has compiled a good overview of these studies and surveys (Kaufmann et al., 2002), which is also available on its website.

The road ahead: challenges for international comparative research on citizens' attitudes towards public administration and for policy

We have pleaded for more attention to be paid to citizens' attitudes towards public administration, as this is an often-neglected factor in public sector reform and in public administration research. By taking citizens' attitudes into account, public sector reform may avoid backlash and, ultimately, failure. In the research on citizens' attitudes towards public administration and trust in government, there are a number of trends, both in empirical practice and in theoretical approaches to the issue.

Trends in empirical practice

From an elite model to a user-based model. Researchers on administrative culture and public administration researchers have mainly focused on institutions and on political and administrative elites. Organizing broad citizen surveys was left to sociologists and behavioural political scientists. Recently, the interest in *citizen* surveys is on the rise.

Tab. 1 Overview of data sources on public opinion towards the public administration

Source	Period	Coverage (respondents, countries)	Useful items	URL
Eurobarometer (European Commission)	Since 1973, 2x/year. Some of the indicators starting in 1973, 1994, 1997, 1999	Approx. 1000 in all EU countries	Trust in institution; satisfaction with democracy. Special reference to services of general interest in EB 53 AND 58. In-depth survey of public services in EB 47.	http://europaeu.int/comm/public_opinion/
Candidate Countries Eurobarometer (previously Central and Eastern Eurobarometer - EC)	Since autumn 1990, yearly	Approx 1000 in each EU Candidate Country	Trust in institutions; satisfactions democracy	http://euiopaeu.int/comm/public_opinion/
Special Eurobarometers (European, Commission)	2000 & 2002	Approx 1000 in each EU country	Services d'interet general (2000 & 2002)	http://europaeu.int/comm/public_opinion/
Europinion, Continuous Tracking Survey (European Commission)	October 1996	Approx 800 in each EU country	Special Europinion: European public opinion towards public services	http://euiopaeu.int/comm/public_opinion/
European Values Study	1981, 1990, 1999/2000	32 countries in last wave, Approx 900-3600 per country	Confidence in institutions, satisfaction democracy technocracy & democracy, leadership, civic duties & values, evaluation 'system of governing'	www.europeanvalues.nl
European Values Survey	1981, 90-91,95-98, 99-01	Up to 80 societies, min. n=1000	Confidence in institutions, satisfaction democracy technocracy & democracy, leadership, evaluation system of governing & leaders	www.worldvaluessurvey.org
European Social Survey	Two-yearly, first in 2002	Min. 1500 per country, 24 European countries	Trust in institutions, satisfaction way government works, satisfaction democracy, functioning education & health care, civic duties	www.europeansocialsurvey.org/
ISSP: International Social Survey Programme	Role of Government Module (included in national surveys) 1985, 1990, ±1995, 2006	23 countries in latest Role of Government Module, of which 16 European, n=approx 1000/country	Government regulation, government spending priorities, obeying laws, trust civil servants, satisfaction democracy, taxes, privatization	www.issp.org
Voice of the People (World Economic Forum)	2002 – 2004	N = 36000,47 countries	Trust in the institutions	www.voice-of-the-people.net/
Readers' Digest Trusted Brands Survey	2001, 2002, 2003, 2004	18 European countries, n=27,692, mail survey	Confidence in policies, professions and institutions	www.rdtrustedbrands.com/
Readers' Digest Eurodata	1969, 1990	Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Germany, England, Italy N=4919 in 1969, 17 European countries N=22,339 in 1990	Confidence in Institutions, civic duties	
International Crime Victim Surveys (ICVS)	1989, 1992, 96/97, 00/01	14 countries in 1989, 1000-2000 households, CATI or face-to face. Now 56 countries	Police helpfulness, are police doing a good job in controlling crime, satisfaction police response, experience of corruption by government or public official	www.unicri.it/icvs
New Democracies Barometer (NDB)	Five rounds: 1991, 1992-93, 1993-94, 1995, 1998	Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, Serbia+Montenegro, partly also in Austria, Germany, Moldova, total n=8-12,000 for each round and Austria	Evaluation of how government works+comparison with previous regime, trust in institutions	www.cspp.strath.ac.uk/
New Baltic Barometer (NBB)	1993, 1995, 1996, 2000	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania		www.cspp.strath.ac.uk/
New Europe Barometer Omnibus Surveys (NEB)	2001, previously NBB & NDB	Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia , total n=11,012	Satisfaction democracy, evaluation of how government works+comparison with previous regime, trust in institutions, corruption	www.cspp.strath.ac.uk/
Opinion polls	Continuous	Wide range of public opinion surveys, some have been conducted in several countries e.g. Gallup Brain: database of public opinion surveys by Gallup since 1935; CBOS (Poland) on trust in institution in Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary		
European Election Study (EES)	1979, 1984, 1989, 1994, 1999 (on the occasion of elections for the European Parliament), Before 1999 integrated in EuropeBarometer	EU countries, n=500 or 1000 (300 in Lux). CATI	Policy in integration, immigration, economy, and environment: what level of government should do it, should government should it? Satisfaction with this policy. Satisfaction with democracy, evaluation of government's record	http://europeanelectionstudies.net
Election studies	Continuous Long tradition in some countries, rather recent in others	Organized in many countries, but no harmonized instrument	For an overview of studies in some EU countries, see (Mochmann et al., 1998)	

From disconnected surveying to an integrated approach.

Surveying is becoming more common in public administrations and in the public administration research community but all too often questionnaires are designed on an ad hoc basis. This is due to the absence of internationally recognized and tested scales, as they exist in psychology, sociology and political science, and to the nature of most of these surveys, which are often commissioned by governmental bodies with a very specific aim in mind.

Increased use of opinion data in administration and in public administration research. Not only *measurement* of citizens' opinion is increasing but also the *use* of these in administration. Data collection is gradually moving beyond the classic customer surveying. Whereas these indicators were used anecdotally and symbolically in the past, they are now gradually being integrated into the policy process. Still, problems persist in harmonizing the administration's demand for fast, policy-relevant analysis and researchers' preference for in-depth nuanced scrutiny.

In research, thorough *exploitation* of these data still has to take off. Administrations tend to provide funding for the collection of new data but they hardly ever commission research that analyses existing data. This underanalysis is especially striking when we compare it to surveys in political science or sociology, where the same data are being analysed by large groups of researchers. In public administration, methods of analysis remain rather basic and there is a need to go beyond the mere frequencies and cross-tabulations; and a critical approach to data quality is urgently needed.

Relating performance data to perceptions. Over the past few decades, various research has been done comparing objective quality indicators and subjective perceptions. Also, it was often thought that perception data (e.g. satisfaction with local services) could be used *in lieu* of performance indicators. The availability of perception data at the more general public administration level will, in the future, allow objective quality and process indicators to levels of satisfaction with the public administration and trust in government to be compared.

Trends in theoretical approaches

The need for theoretical innovation. There is considerable empirical fragmentation in research on trust. A convergence of the means and methods of data collection should eventually lead to innovative theoretical approaches. Thus far, we have seen that there has been little innovation in explanatory models for citizens' attitudes towards public administration. Few have moved beyond the explanations, or rather observations, that have been put forward by Katz et al. in 1977 or Goodsell in 1983. Predominant values that lie at the core of attitudes have remained a blind spot in research. Research should go beyond merely *mapping* trends and evolutions in citizens' or users' opinions on the administration and should try to look for *explanations*.

Crossing boundaries: increasing interdisciplinarity. Approaching citizens' attitudes towards public administration from a multitude of perspectives includes

questioning the rational paradigm. Satisfaction with public services does not only result from the quality of services. An exclusively public administration research approach is insufficient, since it tends not to look for explanations for these attitudes beyond the administration or the administration-citizen encounter itself.

Different conceptions of the state. Cross-national or cross-cultural comparisons of citizens' attitudes towards public administration often disregard the fact that the mental concept of 'government', the 'state' or 'public administration' does not necessarily refer to the same objective basis. To know how citizens *evaluate* public administration, we first need to know *what citizens see as public administration* and how public administration is seen in relation to the *state (l'etat)*. The place of public administration in the concept of government or the state remains one of the most important issues for public administration students (Rockman, 1992; Coombes, 1998: 32).

Trends in public management reform

From public management reform to governance reform.

Evolution and trends reach beyond research and academic '*besognes*'. They even reach beyond government itself. A citizen-centred or rather society-centred logic replaces a government-centred one and government reform is just one aspect of *governance reform*. We find similar concerns for confidence building in the upsurge of corporate governance. Citizens' attitudes towards government and public administration may, therefore, be related more to trends in society rather than to trends in government.

From rational public sector reform to creativity.

An improvement in public services will not necessarily lead citizens to adopt a more favourable attitude towards public administration. Good governance, congruence between citizens' wishes and government policy and a well-functioning administration could but do not necessarily have to result in satisfied citizens. Conflicting priorities and demands are just one element in explaining this phenomenon. Rational decision-making and policy may have its limits. Creativity is needed with communication about reforms as a key element. Governing is not only about answering demands but also about shaping these demands. A great deal of social engineering is required.

Conclusion

Public administration and public services have always taken a marginal place in political scientists' behavioural research. Public administration students, in contrast, tended to focus on elites and institutions and largely ignored citizens in comparative research. Policy-makers often consider themselves close enough to citizens to know their complaints, aspirations and thoughts. Not only an interest in citizens' opinion towards public administration but also international comparative research on this issue will have to move to the core of future research efforts. There are, however, a number of requirements for this research strategy to work. Interdisciplinarity and cooperation are key elements for this

success. Studying citizens' attitudes requires teams of sociologists, political scientists and psychologists, often even supplemented by anthropologists and historians. Methodological investments in this type of research are substantial but considerable experience exists in other disciplines. Progress can only be made by standardizing research and survey instruments.

Note

¹ For other countries, some different data sources exist: Global Barometer (www.globalbarometer.org), Afrobarometer (www.afrobarometer.org), East Asia Barometer (<http://eacsurvey.law.ntu.edu.tw>), Latinobarometro (www.latinobarometro.org), etc. Particularly in Latin America, a number of in-depth studies have already been completed (Adsera et al., 2000; Payne et al., 2002).

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Summary

Public administration and public services have always taken a marginal place in political scientists' behavioural research. Public administration students, in contrast, tend to focus on political and administrative elites and institutions and have largely ignored citizens in comparative research. In this article, we make a plea for international comparative research on citizens' attitudes towards public administration from an interdisciplinary perspective. Available international survey material is discussed and main trends in empirical practice and theoretical approaches are outlined, especially those with a potential impact on public sector reform.

LYGINAMOJO VIEŠOSIOS NUOMONĖS TYRIMO GALIMYBĖS VIEŠAJAME ADMINISTRAVIME*

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Santrauka

Viešasis administravimas ir viešosios paslaugos visada užėmė sąlyginai nežymią vietą politikos mokslininkų tyrimuose. Viešojo administravimo specialybės studentai, priešingai, savo lyginamuosiuose tyrimuose yra linkę sutelkti dėmesį į politinį ir administravimo elitą bei institucijas, visiškai ignoruodami piliečius. Šiame straipsnyje autoriai pateikia tarptautinio lyginamojo viešosios nuomonės apie viešąjį administravimą tyrimo iš tarpdisciplininės perspektyvos galimybes. Straipsnyje aptariama dabartinių tarptautinių tyrimų medžiaga, nurodomos pagrindinės empirinės praktikos ir teorinių požiūrių vystymosi kryptys, ypač tos, kurios susijusios su viešojo sektoriaus reforma.

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