

Public Participation and Trust in Government: Results from a Vignette Experiment

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Abstract: Securing the trust of citizens can facilitate the delivery of high-quality public services and government has a normative expectation to act in a trustworthy manner. However, even if public service quality is high, if services are delivered without accountability and according only to the logic of efficiency, trust in government may be undermined. One strategy public managers can adopt to increase the legitimacy of decision-making about important policy or public service provision is the inclusion of citizens in the decision process itself. Theory suggests that public participation in the policymaking process can improve both policy and contribute to policy legitimacy. This study uses a 2-by-2 vignette-based experimental design to test the relationship between public participation in the policymaking process and trust in government under conditions of both good and poor policy performance. The results show that participatory policymaking increases citizen trust in government. However, they also show that performance appears to be the critical factor, and as such that participation alone cannot reverse the trust-damaging effect of poor performance. Although this research has limitations, it also has clear practical implications for public managers considering the involvement of the public in the decision-making process, particularly when the costs of doing so are non-trivial.

Keywords: trust in government; citizen participation; government performance; survey experiment