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PUBLIC SERVICE PERFORMANCE AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT: THE  
PROBLEM OF CAUSALITY

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## PUBLIC SERVICE PERFORMANCE AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT: THE PROBLEM OF CAUSALITY

Concerns for restoring citizens' trust in government are at the core of public sector modernization. Public distrust is often blamed on the bad functioning of public services, and in political discourse well-functioning public services are said to create trust in government. This is a very rational and mechanistic reasoning, only part of which corresponds to reality. The link between performance and trust can only be made when very specific conditions are present. The core of the discussion deals with causality: it is obvious that performance of the public administration has a certain impact on trust in government, but existing levels of trust in government may also have an impact on perceptions of government performance. In this article, we outline a framework for research on this performance-trust relation.

## INTRODUCTION

Concern with low levels of trust in government and the negative image of government and the public administration has stimulated Western governments to engage in a modernisation strategy for their public service [1]. The implicit hypothesis on which this strategy is built is that *better performing public services will lead to increased satisfaction among their users, and this, in turn, will lead to more trust in government*. The hypothesis, in other words, is that people do not trust government because administrations do not work properly. This hypothesis contains a number of flaws and is only valid within a certain context. In this article, we want to offer a framework within which the relation between public sector performance and citizens' attitudes towards government (call these trust, support, perceptions, or whatever you like) can be investigated. The most important aspect dealt with in this article will be the causal relation in this reasoning: do citizens have a negative perception of government because its services do not work properly, or do citizens evaluate government administrations and their performance in a negative way, because their image of government in general is a negative one?

In customer satisfaction surveying, which is steadily gaining ground in government, it is often forgotten that other factors than service *quality* also determine user satisfaction. Performance of public administrations and satisfaction of its users are thus not necessarily related, because of the subtle interplay of reality, perception and expectations. This leads us to believe that another implicit causal relation in modernisation and reinvention rhetoric, the relation between satisfaction with service delivery and trust in government, is even more dubious, especially when we stick to approaching government as a mere summation of agencies. We thus have to answer a number of questions: do perceptions of government agencies –agencies delivering services more specifically- influence perceptions of government, and if they do, is the

impact of every single agency comparable, or are certain agencies more dominant? Are these agencies the only influences on government perception? Is the causal relation a correct one, or does it work in the opposite way? Or is there no relation at all?

Before starting, we would like to mention that we will approach performance in a very general way, as to avoid terminological discussions. Due to the nature of government performance, output and process are often intertwined. Services are produced and consumed at the same time, making a distinction between output and process aspects in practice impossible. Therefore, we will use the term performance as encompassing both process and output/outcome. Trust is an often-used term in political discourse, which has led to an inflation of its use. Terms such as trust, confidence, perception and image of government are often used interchangeably as catchall terms. What we are interested in is not trust in the restricted meaning it has in philosophical works, but general attitudes towards government, perceptions of government and the like. When we use trust, it are these attitudes we refer to, since trust has through intensive use in political discourse obtained this meaning.

## CAUSALITY

Research on trust in government often tries to find statistical relations between a series of socio-demographic and sociological variables and trust in government, but little is known about the processes of causation behind these relations. With regard to the topic of this article, the question whether it is low public service quality that leads to a unfavourable evaluations of government in general, or whether it is the negative attitude towards government in general that leads people to evaluate the quality of its public services in a negative way becomes more relevant. Can causality

actually work in both directions, or does it then concern two entirely different causal relations (at other levels)? It may be clear that in our field of research there are only few situations where we can find a counterfactual conditional relation: if X then Y. Instead we find situations where 'if X, then Y' is valid as well as 'if not X, then also Y' or 'if X, then not necessarily Y', and where this information does not allow us to conclude that a relation is absent. A good starting point could be to refer to the INUS conditions: is a condition necessary and sufficient? This INUS approach relies on contingent conditions which have to be present for X to have an impact on Y [2]. There has to be an Insufficient but Necessary part in a condition, which is in itself Unnecessary, but Sufficient. Together these form a full cause for something [3]. In the framework of this article, this means that it is not easy to have people trust government when public services do not function properly, while good functioning public services do not necessarily lead to trust in government. We want to know when this causality is functioning, and why this is or is not the case. Large-scale empirical research is necessary to determine whether there actually is a causal relation between public service performance and trust in government, or whether the causal relations are just based on beliefs.

#### MICRO-PERFORMANCE THEORY

Bad performance of government agencies is said to create negative attitudes towards government in general. Similarly, well-functioning public services are said to induce citizens to trust government [4;5]. This micro-performance theory, as we call this relation, relates variations in trust to changes in (the quality of, or the perception of) government service delivery [6-10].

This so-called micro-performance hypothesis contains the following reasoning:

<figure 1 here>

Better quality performance is supposed to lead to satisfied citizens, and this in turn to more trust or a similar positive attitude towards government. At the same time better agency performance will be summed up and lead to better government performance. Government would then only exist as a summation of its constituting elements and has no separate identity: Government = police + courts + schools + parliament + ministries +....

#### THE RELATION BETWEEN PUBLIC SERVICE PERFORMANCE AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT: 5 ALTERNATIVE MODELS

The micro-performance approach contains a large number of shortcomings and offers at best only a partial explanation of the relation between the quality of public service delivery and trust in government. We therefore have to clarify both the biases and the gaps in this approach. We will therefore develop a number of alternative models to explain this relation. It seems there are a number of strict preconditions for the micro-performance hypothesis to be valid. The first deal with objects of evaluation, the second with the evaluation criteria, and the third with the causality in the evaluation.

- OBJECT: First there should be certainty and clarity on the objects of evaluation. Is the status of an organisation or agency clearly and undisputedly governmental, *and perceived as such?* If a public organisation is not perceived as being public, quality and performance improvement efforts will do little to improve trust in

government. We will discuss this aspect more in detail when dealing with model 1. An alternative to this remark is what we call 'dominant impact': government should not be regarded as just a summation of all its constituting parts (agencies, institutions), but instead one or more core institutions determine citizens' image of government. The basic hypothesis, the micro-performance theory, considers public services as such 'core institutions'. Model 2 describes the impact of these core institutions more in detail.

- **CRITERIA:** Second, the relation between agency performance and perceptions of government should be direct and linear. This means no other factors should be involved. Evaluations of performance are mediated by expectations about this performance. Furthermore, trust in government is not only a factor of its performance, but depends on the degree of identification with the government as well, and a series of sociological factors. The main question therefore is what impact the performance of public services has on the evaluation of government in general as compared to other factors. Do evaluations of public services have an important impact on citizen's image of government or are they only marginal? Model 3 gives indications on the type of criteria that are used for evaluating government
- **CAUSALITY:** Third, subjective performance perceptions should somehow correspond to (objective) reality. When introducing subjective measures, such as satisfaction or opinion surveys, there are always critics who are afraid that these subjective evaluations will not correspond to objective quality. Research shows that there is no ground for these worries [11-13]. Other research however is not so sure about this [14;15]. Here the main problem with the 'micro-performance approach' is situated. It takes a causality leading from performance to satisfaction to trust for granted, while it may well be that evaluations of the performance of public services are not based on the actual performance, but on a stereotypical view on how government is said to function. Causality is thus reversed: here

perceptions of government in general influence perceptions of its constituting public services, and not the other way round. This is what is described in model 4. Model 5 then shows that the direction of this causality is context-specific, and that in fact we will often have to speak of multi-causality.

Each of the models consists of a number of units: at the left side, there are a number of public agencies, and at the right side government in general. We consider three aspects in an agency: performance, user satisfaction and trust. These three aspects are also to be found in government as a whole: government performance, satisfaction with government performance and trust in government. Performance, satisfaction and trust are supposed to be related within a certain unit, but in some models the relations are non-existent or unclear, and relations within a unit may also be influenced by other units. The 'P' stands for perception. Presence of a 'P' indicates the existence of an independent perception, an influence external to performance of either the agencies or government in general.

<figure 2 here>

#### MODEL 1: DISCONNECTION

Model 1 suggests that the perception of government agencies does not influence the perception of government as a whole and vice versa. Here we can distinguish two possibilities. One is that there is no influence of service satisfaction on trust in government because citizens make independent judgements of both government as a whole and of its individual agencies. It however seems improbable that the performance of these agencies has no influence at all on evaluations of government.



The other possibility is that some agencies are just not perceived as being part of government, or as being influenced by government. When we want to compare or evaluate data on perceptions of government, 'government' should have a well-defined and stable meaning. It is not always clear what people see as 'government' or as public services. Are schools part of government? Or the post-office? The railways? A survey in the UK asked citizens which organisations they thought of as public services. 55 % mentioned Councils, 51% public transport, 29 % police, while only 13% spontaneously mentioned central government [16]. This could mean central government is conceptualised in political terms and not so much in administrative ones. Research by the European Commission in its Continuous Tracking Survey showed a number of important differences between European countries [17]. Differences in the judgement of telecommunications, radio and television, public transport etc. as being public or private can be explained by a different history of privatisation, political influence and the structure of the market. What is surprising however is that there are -be it small- cross-country differences between judgements of police, justice etc. as public services. 94 % of the Dutch consider the judicial system as a public service as compared to 85% of the French. The figure below gives some data on Belgian service providers:

<figure 3 here>

Such a question on what citizens see as government is important to discover what kind of agencies are considered as part of government, and can thus be supposed to have an influence on the perceptions of government. The public has increasing problems to distinguish public and private sector [18], and a lot of 'errors of attribution' therefore occur [8;19].

If a large part of a population does not consider e.g. the post office as a public service one could conclude that the evaluation of the functioning of and the general

attitude towards this post-office does not have an influence on the perception of government in general, though very often one would find a relation. In the USA, a listing of high impact agencies was developed, containing those government agencies that are supposed to have most impact (both by frequency of contact and visibility) on citizens. If this impact were decisive for the formation of the general perception of government, it would be possible to calculate for each institution separately what influence it has on the perception, but such an approach is probably too simple and negates many factors (see also model 2).

Perceiving a certain government agency as part of government is one thing, attributing its bad performance to government another, even though both are often indistinguishable. An example where this is not always the case could for instance be the Central Bank: if economic prospects are bad, is this then due to the performance of the Central Bank or to external factors? Uslaner for instance finds a relation between the state of the economy and trust in government, but only when respondents thought government could actually exert influence on the state of the economy [20]. If citizens do not hold government or a public service responsible for something, it is unlikely this will influence evaluations. This 'holding responsible' should be distinguished from the question whether citizens think it is a government task to perform certain tasks. The macro-performance theory explains variations in trust across countries and over time as due to variations in unemployment rates, economic growth, inflation, the stability of governments etc. [21-26]. According to Huseby, this hypothesis is only valid when applied to issues on which there is a consensus that government should perform them, and people should see them as an important and not just as a secondary task of government [23]. Therefore, we could conclude that if there is no relation between satisfaction with the performance of public agencies and trust in government, this can be caused by the following factors.

- The agency is not perceived as part of government

- The bad performance is thought of as not caused or influenced by the agency
- There is total and unconditional consensus on the fact that government should perform the task, and bad performance is then regarded as an unavoidable consequence of this decision (e.g. government is restricted by a large number of preconditions in performing a certain task, which makes it cannot perform as effectively as in a situation where these preconditions would not be present) for which government should not be blamed (↔ citizens who think a task should not be done by government shall take a negative attitude whatever the performance)

#### MODEL 2: DOMINANT IMPACT

The micro-performance theory takes a rather mechanistic and rational approach to the process of how public service performance can lead to a more positive attitude towards government. All agencies should be summated, with a correction for the relative weight of the agency in society, for the importance citizens attach to the agency, and for the fact whether the agency is entirely seen as a *public* service or not. In model 2 we suggest that certain agencies can have a dominant impact on perceptions of government that is larger than could be justified by their role (size, budget, impact on people's lives...). This process can be compared to the process of generalisation that we will describe when dealing with model 4. Until now, most research has focused on the impact of certain *political bodies* on the attitude towards government, so most examples will be taken from that body of research. We do not see many reasons why certain government administrations and agencies could not play a similar role, except perhaps the mythical and ideological aura that is surrounding certain political bodies that we do hardly find with regard to administrations.

A dominant impact of a single institutions or agency or of a small group of institutions/agencies on trust in government is not necessarily permanent. A number of factors determine which dominant institution can exist. There are cultural and symbolic factors such as the role of parliament in transition countries, which symbolises democracy, and we could refer to the role of strong leaders symbolising the nation, to the role of the army in periods of war, etc. Changes over time can occur due to certain events. In Belgium, a number of scandals suddenly made the court system and the food safety agencies dominant bodies in the perception of government, whereas this impact (certainly in the case of the food safety agencies) was much lower in the past. In the US, citizens' attitudes towards public administration became much more positive because of the events on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September. It can be expected that in a period of scandals, the moral integrity of politicians becomes important as a factor for constituting one's attitude towards government.

Which factors, agencies or even policies become dominant is often a matter of (conscious or unconscious) choice. Beck gives the example of the commotion on (small-risk) nuclear plants, while traffic accidents have a bigger impact on society. The latter problem however has not been accepted as a major problem and has been defined away [27]. A malfunctioning environmental protection agency will probably not take an important place in the assessment of government when the police and justice system are unfair. Similarly, participation in decision-making only becomes important once there is security and material safety.

Keywords in this model are visibility, events and scandals. Relying upon this model could make research difficult, since it could happen that the object of study (i.e. what do citizens see as government) is changing during the research. This model allows for bringing in a wide range of existing research on the impact of scandals on political trust. We should rely here on communication science. The main question is why certain events become widely publicised, and are thus supposed to have an

influence. This is not just a passive approach. It also has importance for government communication initiatives: what issues does crisis management have to focus on and how can it be arranged so that certain government activities, e.g. major reforms or quality initiatives are actually promoted to 'dominant impacts'?

As the above has tried to show, we can hardly consider these dominant influences as stable and permanent. In fact, the degree of political sophistication has something to do with it. Easton and Dennis wrote a book in 1969 on how (American) children see the political system [28]. Small children do not perceive government as one homogeneous institute, instead they already distinguish a number of bodies, and they are able to see differences between formal and would-be political authorities. They consider the president as very important, but older children regard authority institutions such as government or the Supreme Court as more important. The older they become, the more importance there is given to structures and impersonal institutions, and less to persons. They also found that even the young children did not refer to the president as the person, but as the institutionalised role. In this case, the president is a strong personalisation of power, which is not the case for e.g. a Representative, who is less able to personalise the legislative power of Congress.

As for the United States, the President is sometimes seen as government in person, and this will have an influence on the image of government in general. President Reagan for instance managed to increase trust in government by emphasising ceremonial aspects of the presidency, such as symbols, the 'grandeur', the image of the president who stands above politics, ... [29]. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse on the other hand, in their book *Congress as Public Enemy*, state that it is Congress which determines the (negative) attitude towards government in the USA because of its visibility: all debates, compromises and opposition are too visible. A conceptualisation of the commonly made general semantic connections in the public mind between the various parts of the national government showed members of

Congress as part of the (pejorative) 'Washington system', while the president, and certainly the members of the Supreme Court, were leaning towards the 'constitutional system' [30]. A similar point is made in research on the Canadian situation: feelings about parliament and assessments of MP's have significant effect on levels of support for the national political community and regime, because parliament is the most salient and dramatic symbol of the representative character of politics [31]. Certain parts of government seem to take a more prominent place in people's mind, but as the American examples show, it seems difficult to attribute the whole attitude/image to the effect of one institution.

There is no reason why these images should not differ between countries and over time. Another question could be whether it are the institutions as such which have an impact, or that these just symbolise criteria used for judging government. In certain periods or areas, more or less importance is given to efficiency, legitimacy, participation etc. When the pendulum swings to participation, perhaps parliament weighs stronger, while the administration or strong leaders weigh stronger when importance is given to efficiency. The same could hold for process or output orientations in performance evaluations.

### MODEL 3: MULTIPLE INFLUENCES

Performance of the constituting agencies of government is not the only factor influencing evaluations of government. Even when government does not perform independent from its agencies, there is no reason why citizens would not have an opinion on government itself. This independent perception of government becomes even more apparent when we not only consider performance-related evaluation criteria, but also identity-related ones. This brings us to a broadening of the factors influencing perception: not only administrative ones, but also political ones. Adding

these extra criteria does not necessarily contradict the micro-performance hypothesis; it only means that the micro-performance hypothesis is only able to explain part of the attitude towards government. It might well turn out that the impact of agencies' performance evaluations is surprisingly small.

The implicit causal link between user satisfaction and trust in government seems to be based on a merger of client and citizen roles. It is supposed that citizens will transfer their satisfaction in a *by definition* limited client-role to trust in government, which is a broader attitude engaging the citizen in all his/her roles (client, voter, taxpayer, participant, stakeholder...). This corresponds to a move from the use of performance-related indicators to a mixed use of both performance- and identity-related indicators. However, the reduction of government to an amalgamation of services in NPM approaches might suggest that there is no merger at all of roles. Instead, there are numerous criticisms on the reduction of citizens to clients as a result of modernisation exercises [32].

#### MODEL 4: REVERSED CAUSALITY

We do not only want to know (micro-performance hypothesis) whether satisfaction with agencies' performance leads to a more positive attitude towards government. We should also wonder why it would not be a general positive attitude towards government that leads to a more favourable evaluation of its agencies' performance. This would for instance be the case in a state where a strong national identity is fostered (often created by dissociating oneself from an out-group), and where as a result none of the state-related agencies can do wrong in the citizen's eyes. More realistic perhaps would be the existence of a generalised negative attitude towards

government –a culture of distrust [33]- that makes that all actions of government are evaluated in a negative way, just because it are government actions.

The question of causality is thus the main one. When doing research, one should thus clearly state whether trust will be dealt with as a dependent or independent variable, since trust can be both cause and effect [34]. Huseby states that

“the survey data on the relationship between evaluations of government performance and political support is incapable of establishing the direction of causality. It is uncertain whether citizens give negative responses to questions on government performance because they do not trust the government, or if they loose faith in government because they evaluate the economic performance as poor” [23].

#### Generalisation

To describe this model, we should answer two questions: is the attitude towards government a generalised one or can it be differentiated, and if it is generalised, why and how then does it influence perceptions of the agencies.

To establish the impact of perceptions of government in general on perceptions of government agencies, it is important to know to what extent there is generalisation. This question is related to the processes described in model 1 and 2. If citizens do not make the distinction between the different institutions, it becomes difficult to determine the independent influence of government services. The process of generalisation, or better the opposite of it, differentiation, is part of socialisation, and requires a leaning process [35]. Generalisation can therefore point at a lower level of political sophistication, or at a (deviant) form of socialisation, where people learn to see government as a monolithic bloc without any differentiation, making it thus easier to attribute it extremely good or bad characteristics.



A number of authors have noticed a process of *generalisation*. There seems to be a common factor behind the evaluations of all institutions that are related to 'government' [6;15;20;22;36-38]. By generalisation, we mean that the attitude towards government refers to one amorphous unity. In most surveys, respondents are shown a list of institutions and they are asked how much trust they have in each institution separately (scale from 1-4, or 1-5). It turns out that not all of these trust opinions correlate perfectly, and that a number of clusters can be found in the list. Even though there are differences, trust in one institution often means trust in all institutions [39]. Some institutions however may have a determining impact on trust in government in general, such as parliament, the president etc. (see model 2). This would mean that there is just *one* perception of government, because people do not make conceptual distinctions. Even between some private and public services, very little difference can be found [40]. This observation could lead to the conclusion that government is approached as if it was one amorphous concept. There is however no agreement among researchers on this issue. The extreme viewpoint is Klingemann who states there is no generalisation, and that all depends on actual performance. If there are similarities, this is due to similar performance [41]. The performance hypothesis also takes this as an implicit assumption. If on the other hand people see government as one amorphous unity, it seems improbable that specific experiences with specific services will have a strong impact on the perception of 'government'. Another remark is that the evaluation of government in general differs from the summation of evaluations of all agencies (not institutions) separately [42]. How government is differentiated or generalised is part of political culture: in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the state as such does not exist as a legal entity, but rather as 'government' and 'government departments'. Continental European traditions on the other hand do not consider the authority of the state a divisible or bargainable [43].

Concerning satisfaction with urban services, Stipak states that there is generalisation, i.e. that specific attitudes are based on general evaluations, for instance because of lack of information and knowledge and because political objects are in many cases rather impalpable [44]. The Canadian Center for Management Development finds that indeed general attitudes towards government affect perceptions of service quality [45]. Therefore, belief system differentiation (meaning that less general evaluations are used) should occur more when respondents are better educated and politically more informed. Most examples on the process of generalisation come from research on political institutions and we will turn to this literature for further examples. Steen did research in the Baltic States and found there was more trust in newer institutions (because these were not burdened with a communist legacy, and because the population itself has recently asked itself for their founding). Institutions producing a symbolic and/or diffuse output (church, army, press...) enjoyed more trust as compared to those with a very specific output. This is probably because it is easier for people to have clear criteria to judge specific outputs and because the actual outputs have deteriorated (cf. bad economic situation). Finally, he found more trust in the leaders of institutions than in the institutions [46]. Hetherington finds that it is the level of political trust in general that influences trust in the president, and not so much trust in the president that influences political trust in general, while the opposite is true for the relation between trust in Congress and political trust in general. Research on stereotypes has found that feelings about the sum affect feelings about parts more than feelings about the parts affect the sum [47].

Comparable to differentiation between institutions is differentiation between different levels of government. Local or decentralised government is said to enjoy a more favourable image than central government, because the distance between citizen and government is smaller, and the frequency of contact higher. This implies that citizens would differentiate between local and central government. Uslaner however

finds that the degree of approval for president and Congress in the USA influences trust in both federal and state level, thereby refuting the claim that people trust those levels closest to them more. He concludes there is no differentiation between different levels of government, but just a general attitude of trust in government. Therefore, the problem of trust in government will not be solved by empowering other levels of government [20]. Glaser and Denhardt find that *government is government regardless of level*. Performance ratings of (US) *federal* and *state* government have a very strong influence on perceptions and evaluations of *local* government [48].

#### Culture of Distrust

Distrust does not necessarily have an influence on the stability of the political system or the behaviour of the citizens. One possible explanation could therefore be that the attitudes of the citizens do not result from a personal negative attitude vis-à-vis government, but because expressing a negative attitude towards government is a fashion, prejudice or cultural element. Citrin states that the current *Zeitgeist* (in 1974) promotes anti-political rhetoric. He considers denigrating speech on politicians and institutions as ritualistic negativism, and does therefore not see any reason to be worried. He compared political distrust with the rhetoric used in a baseball game: everyone yells at the referee and accuses him of mistakes, while this rhetoric never threatens the game [49]. Distrust, and not trust, then becomes the basic attitude towards government, and there is certain social pressure to comply with this attitude. Sztompka speaks about a 'culture of (dis)trust':

“When a culture of trust- or culture of distrust- appears, the people are constrained to exhibit trust or distrust in all their dealings, independent of individual convictions, and departures from such a cultural demand meet with a variety of sanctions” [50].

This culture of distrust phenomenon thus makes that people are negative towards government agencies, not because of the performance of these agencies, but because they are government agencies. For Fox,

“Damn-gummint [*damn government*] is a conflated aggregation, the illogical and shifting mingling of perceptions, symbols, examples, and nonsequitur inferences. Consider that every customer has had a bad experience with some private enterprise. But ‘damn-bidness’ [*business*] is not a conflated aggregation in high circulation” [51].

Explanations for existing negative perceptions of government and the public administration are therefore no longer to be found in public administration or political science theories, but rather in very basic sociological theories, though these do not explain anything on the origins of these images.

The *spiral of silence* hypothesis states that the perception of the distribution of public opinion influences the willingness to express one’s own opinion, because one does not want to isolate oneself by having a different opinion [52]. As long as the people think most people have a negative perception of government, they will *express* a negative perception themselves, even if this perception does not correspond to reality. Minority opinions thus become very difficult to express and are met with sanctions. If negative attitudes towards government would be a social mood or even a social norm, it becomes very difficult to restore trust in government. Expressing a negative attitude becomes compulsory. Communication theory and diffusion studies could perhaps explain the diffusion dynamics of distrust and negative experiences with government and suggest possible strategies for reverting this trend. Diffusion of (dis)trusting opinions could therefore be a key factor. Research on service delivery revealed that dissatisfied customers tell on average seven people about their

experience, while satisfied customers do not. This implies that a negative opinion is dispersed faster. Stories and myths about the administration should also not be underestimated: certain stories, call them 'urban legends' can have an important impact on opinions.

These examples show that performance does not always matter when such a 'culture of distrust' comes into being. At that moment perceptions of government become theory- rather than data-driven [53]. Negative attitudes towards government seem to support themselves. Examples of good performance are just not noticed anymore, as is illustrated by this extract from an interview with a prominent Belgian politician, where he tells about a conversation he had with a citizen:

“An old man from Antwerp addressed me about the square we were both looking at. The square had been renovated entirely, and had probably never looked better. The social housing bordering the square was finally renovated. I admit, the man's neighbourhood had been forced to wait for a long time, but finally the entire neighbourhood was upgraded. The result could clearly be seen. Still, the entire argument of the man was one long lamentation, which he then finally summarised as 'for us, they [=government] never do anything'" (own translation) [54].

This immediately illustrates why recent attention for government communication, public services marketing and for external accreditations and evaluations (as a source of opinion on the quality of the evaluated agency above suspicion) will not necessarily contribute to a more 'objective' observation of government performance.

## MODEL 5: MODERATED REVERSED CAUSALITY

The previous model is of course an extreme case (in order not to rebuff those committed to improving public sector performance we won't use the term 'ideal-type'). Relying on the reversed causality model would deny citizens the possibility to evaluate agency-performance in an independent way. In most cases, a realistic, i.e. fact-driven, perception of the separate agencies remains possible. Customer surveys indeed show that citizens are able to assess the performance of public services in an objective way, without constantly referring to stereotypes. The impact of the government stereotype (e.g. culture of distrust) on service evaluations depends on the context in which this evaluation is made.

The observation that people are very critical of government and its service delivery in everyday speech (e.g. gossip, discussions in pubs etc.), while this is not always reflected in trust- or customer satisfaction surveys, gives additional evidence for the presence of a social norm (we do not give any indication here of how this came into existence). Allports' research on stereotypes states that people always choose groups and not persons as out-groups. The abstractness of groups allows for changing one's attitude towards certain persons in that group. When one is faced with a fact that is not reconcilable with the stereotype, it is not necessary to alter the stereotype, but one can just attribute it to a difference of the *specific* person/fact [55]. Goodsell found that citizens take a negative stand towards government as a whole, but when 'government' becomes more concrete in surveys, this negative attitude largely disappears [56].

Another example could be the often-held conviction by politicians who complain that citizens want more and better performance, but are not willing to pay for it. It is true that a voice calling for more taxation is unheard of, but still more than half of the

respondents of a British survey state they would be willing to pay more taxes for better public services [16]. In fact, this symptom can be found practically everywhere: parents evaluate their children's school as good, but are sceptical about the educational system. People evaluate their own family and (working)community as good, but they still think these societal institutes are disappearing [37]. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse speak about Fenno's paradox: in surveys, people are positive about specific members of Congress (i.c. their own member), but take a negative attitude towards Congress as an institute. One of the reasons they give for this is that people use other assessment standards [30].

The abstract nature of government partly explains the abundance of public administration-related stereotypes. Katz et. al. mentioned that when people are asked what kind of agency they prefer to tackle certain problems, a public or a private, that they can choose between two modes of answering: the pragmatic and the ideological one [57]. Ideological answers would return the private agency as the preferred one, while chances for a public agency increase when giving a pragmatic answer is promoted or stimulated in a context that hinders stereotyping. Rumours only appear when the real facts are ambiguous or vague [58]. Instead of rumours, we could also speak about (administrative and government-related) 'stories' or urban legends. Beck Jørgensen analysed novels in which the main subject was the relation between citizens and administration (e.g. Kafka's novel 'The Castle') [59]. The advantage of such an approach is that it also allows catching informal aspects of the relation, that it mainly deals with perceptions, and that it allows tracing evolutions because of the availability of older material. His analysis showed that these novels, when dealing with the alienation in the relation between government/administration and citizen, *never refer to concrete activities*, but to (perceived) objectives, consequences and context.

These observations have important consequences for the measurement of performance evaluations. It seems that very broad and general surveys will return answers reflecting the existing stereotypes. Only specific questions will return the desired result, but this then creates a danger for researchers' biases in the answering patterns. Whereas the need for benchmarks mainly stressed the comparability of wording and scale-construction, this evidence suggests the focus should be on context as well.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article has shown that the hopes for creating a more favourable image of government by stimulating public sector modernisation, as exemplified in better performance and more quality, are built on assumptions that are at least incomplete. When we want to know more on the relation between the evaluation of the quality of public service performance and evaluations of government in general, we have to focus on the object(s) of evaluation, the evaluation criteria, and on the causal processes in the evaluations. We have used these three foci to deconstruct the relation between public service performance and trust in government, and to develop a number of alternative models which show where the main issues of future research on this relation should be. The alternative models that have been presented show that:

1. Citizens do not consider all public agencies as being public, and influence of these agencies' performance on evaluations of government can therefore not be taken for granted.'
2. Some agencies or bodies may feature stronger in citizens' image of government, which makes that government is not just a summation of agencies.
3. Performance is not the only criterion citizens use to evaluate government.



4. Point 1-3 show that it is difficult to establish the precise impact of evaluations of specific agencies on citizens' trust in government. This relation changes constantly and is subject to contextual elements.

5. The direction of the causality is disputed. Why would it not be the general attitude towards government that influences the perception of agency performance?

The models we have presented should thus be considered as a deconstruction of the performance-trust relation for methodological purposes, since to know more on this relation, it is not sufficient just to measure citizens' evaluations of government performance and compare these to citizens' trust in government.

Increasing government legitimacy by modernising public services is therefore just a partial strategy, since actual performance is not equal to perceived performance, and because differences might exist in citizens' minds on the definition and necessity of public service performance. A unilateral focus on performance will not be sufficient, since perceptions and definitions of performance are not only created in government-citizen interactions, but also in everyday citizen-citizen relations. Restoring trust in government cannot just be based on a managerial action-plan but requires social engineering as well. The core question should therefore be how government can alter these perceptions and evaluation criteria in a way that is acceptable in a democratic society.

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Figure 1

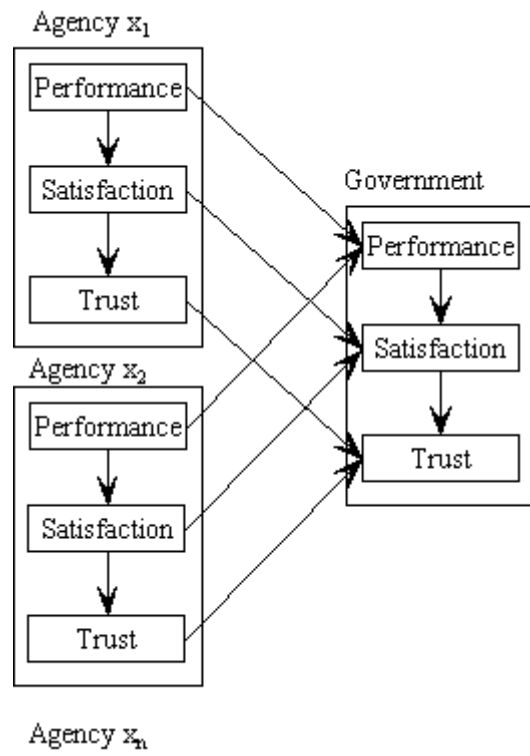
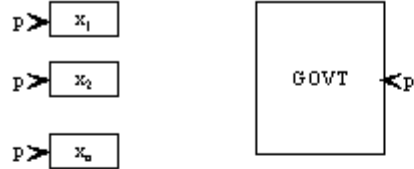
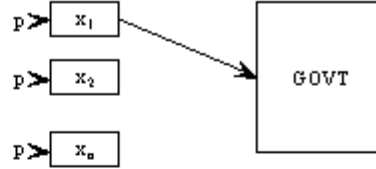
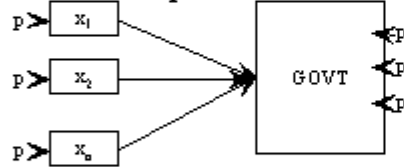


figure 2

## OBJECT

**Model 1: disconnection****Model 2: dominant impact**

## CRITERIA

**Model 3: multiple influences**

## CAUSALITY

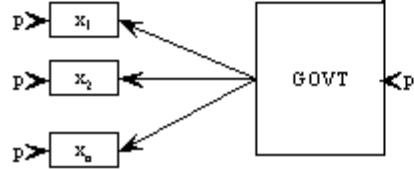
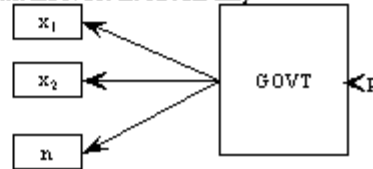
**Model 4: moderated reverse d causality****Model 5: reversed causality**

Figure 3

Do you consider ... as public services? (Belgium, % yes)

