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# Trust in citizens and forms of political participation: The view of public managers

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**Abstract.** Like all forms of collaborative governance, new forms of citizen participation include risk-taking and therefore depend on mutual trust between the collaborating actors. While there is a huge body of research on citizens' trust in governments, public officials' trust in citizens has received very little scholarly attention. In order to address this gap, this paper draws on a recent survey of a representative sample of public managers in local Swedish government (N=1430). Do public managers think that citizens are trustworthy? Does trust in citizens impact which forms of citizen participation public managers prefer? Even though public officials are more trusting than the general populous, we show that not every public official do trust citizens. Furthermore, the results show public managers' trust in citizens influences their attitudes towards new forms of participation. Just as citizens' political trust has a positive impact on some forms of participation, but not on others, managers' trust in citizens matters more for some forms of participation than others.

**Keywords:** Citizen Participation, E-Participation, Public officials, Public managers, Trust.

## 1 Introduction

With the aim of increasing trust in government, new forms of citizen participation are coming into play in local politics. Democratic innovations [1], co-production of services [2], and participatory planning [3] are all common approaches for promoting direct citizen participation in policymaking. In recent years, e-participation tools have significantly improved the methodological quality of these initiatives, which has made their supporters believe that e-participation will renew democracy, offer a remedy for political populism, and enhance trust in government.

While some barriers to a more participatory democracy certainly have been removed through technical advancements, others are more lasting. One such enduring barrier is the attitude of public officials [4, 5]. Even if public officials tend to be in favor of the idea of e-participation, they do not always support e-participation in practice. The gap between policy talk and action is debated today [21] as much as it was in the 1960s [12]. Our understanding of the gap between theory and practice is nevertheless far from

complete. In this article we argue that new forms of participation, like all forms of collaborative governance, include risk-taking and therefore depend on the existence of mutual trust between the collaborating actors. Previous research has done a great job of investigating trust from the standpoint of citizens' trust in government. However, there is almost no research on what public officials think about their relationship with the public, the extent to which they trust citizens, or why they do or do not trust citizens [6, 7]. If it is true that "trust begets trust, while distrust begets distrust," this is a significant research gap.

When it comes to citizens, we know that political trust has a positive impact on some forms of participation, but not on others. Previous research has shown that distrusting citizens are more likely to engage in non-institutionalized forms of political participation, which are often goal-oriented, issue-specific and situated outside the institutions of the political system. On the other hand, citizens with high levels of political trust are more likely to engage in institutionalized forms of political participation. Public managers' trust in citizens impacts their willingness to invite citizens to participate in various forms of government/democratic processes has yet to be examined. In this context, the aim of this article is to expand our understanding of public managers' trust in citizens in relation to two research questions: (1) Do public managers think that citizens are trustworthy? (2) Does public managers' trust in citizens have an impact of which forms of participation public managers prefer?

We will use a survey that targeted a representative sample of public managers in local government in Sweden (N=1430). The first section presents the theoretical framework, which ends with some hypotheses related to public managers' trust in citizens. After having reviewed the literature and presented the data, this article proceeds with the empirical analysis of the hypotheses, followed by a concluding discussion of its findings and their implications.

## 2 Theory

One claim in the literature about citizens' participation is that participation requires political trust. Almond and Verba [8, p. 27] establish that in order to become a participant in politics, citizens require a positive opinion of the political system. Negative attitudes towards or negative judgements of the political system lead to alienation that erodes the effectiveness and legitimacy of the democratic system and will lead to democratic instability over time [8, p. 22 & 230]. Another claim has been that distrust can serve a motivating factor for political participation. When political decision makers or the political system as a whole are perceived to be untrustworthy, citizens feel compelled to intervene [9]. More recent research shows that political trust has a positive impact on conventional forms of participation, but not on unconventional [10]

When it comes to public officials, trust in citizens is required in order to make participation meaningful. As Reed [11] argues, trust and control are opposing options for handling risk and can be viewed as two sides of the same analytic coin. Accordingly, we would expect public managers with little trust in their citizens to take more control over decision-making processes in order to make themselves less vulnerable to citizens.

There are plenty of examples of this in the literature [22]. For instance, it is commonly believed that politically controversial topics should be avoided, while citizens are invited to participate in non-conflictual and non-political issues instead. Another familiar pattern is that citizen participation processes are disconnected from formal decision-making processes and that the lack of a facilitating institutional landscape impedes any policy impact. Interpreted under Arnstein's [12] prominent eight-rung ladder of participation, many of these initiatives are labeled as tokenistic.

While empirical research shows that public officials support the idea of citizen participation, it also indicates that their orientations regarding citizen participation in practice are less attuned to abstract normative goals than to concerns with concrete instrumental costs and benefits [4, 13, 5]. Potential benefits include making the work of government more acceptable to citizens and making decision-making more effective. Potential risks and uncertainties are associated with time, money, and other resources. Additionally, citizen participation may exacerbate conflicts or result in the undue influence of uninformed individuals and therefore become ineffective [14]. The implementation of participation implies that lower degrees of trust in citizens may lead to reduced risk-taking, less involvement and more control of citizens. In contrast, higher degrees of trust should be expected to increase risk-taking and motivate steps up 'the ladder of participation' [12].

In order to examine how trusting citizens relates to preferred forms of participation, we will include a stepwise approach including the advantages and disadvantages of participation.

### **3 Data and measurements**

#### **3.1 Data**

Public managers are largely responsible for designing, implementing, and making use of the results of participatory processes. Hence, they largely determine the outcome of government initiated participatory processes [4 & 5]. In Swedish local government, there are about 31,000 public managers. In order to examine their attitudes towards citizens, a random sample of 3,000 individuals—registered as managers and employed by a Swedish local government—was generated using the occupational register. Statistics Sweden curated the sample and facilitated the data collection by way of a broad survey in 2018. The survey included questions and statements related to twenty-five topics of which one measured public officials' perceived trust in citizens. The total number of responses to the survey reached 1,430, a 48% response rate.

Out of the 1,430 city managers in the data set, 32% are men and 68% are women, which illustrates the major changes that have taken place during recent decades when it comes to leadership and gender in Swedish local government. Not long ago, these numbers would have been reversed. About half of the respondents were 55 years of age or older, and the non-response analysis revealed an underrepresentation of managers under the age of 35 (response rate of 24%).

### 3.2 Measurements

Regardless of the underlying perspective (micro or macro), being confident that one's expectations of another will be fulfilled and a willingness to be vulnerable are critical components of most definitions of trust. In the definition given by Rousseau et al. [15, p. 395], "trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of another". As informed by Yang [6] and Vigoda-Gadot [16], we further understand trust to be reflected in three dimensions: the perception of competence, benevolence, and integrity. Competence refers to citizens' ability to act on their intentions. Benevolence and integrity address the intentions of the trustee, with benevolence being the intention to act 'in a kind way' toward the trustor and integrity being the underlying moral principles guiding behavior.

**Table 1.** Operationalizations and measurements.

| Concept                        | Operationalization  | Variable  | Scale                    |
|--------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------|
| Trust in citizens              | Assesses how the respondents perceive citizens' integrity, knowledge, and benevolence                   | Additive Index based on six items. Scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree) | 0–18<br>$\alpha$ : 0.748 |
| Referenda                      | Measures the extent to which respondents think that local government should extend the use of referenda | Single item. Scale ranging from 0 (do not agree) to 4 (strongly agree)                            | 0–4                      |
| Initiative                     | Measures the extent to which respondents think that local government should expand citizen initiatives  | Single item. Scale ranging from 0 (do not agree) to 4 (strongly agree)                            | 0–4                      |
| Citizen dialogues              | Measures the extent to which respondents think that local government should expand citizen dialogues    | Single item. Scale ranging from 0 (do not agree) to 4 (strongly agree)                            | 0–4                      |
| Advantages of participation    | Assesses the respondents' view of advantages of citizen participation                                   | Index variable based on four items. Scale ranging from 0 (do not agree) to 3 (strongly agree)     | 0–12<br>$\alpha$ : 0.842 |
| Disadvantages of participation | Assesses the respondents' view of disadvantages of citizen participation                                | Index variable based on three items. Scale ranging from 0 (do not agree) to 3 (strongly agree)    | 0–9<br>$\alpha$ : 0.602  |

The main independent variable was measured via six items, which were assessed with the following questions: “Citizens I interact with through my profession are generally... (1) reliable,” (2) “sincere and honest in their interactions with the local government,” (3) “well aware of local government affairs and current issues,” (4) “knowledgeable of how the local government organization works,” (5) “committed to changing and improving the municipality,” and (6) “more concerned about what benefits the municipality as a whole than what benefits them personally,” The Likert-type scale ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). The Cronbach’s alpha was 0.748, demonstrating good reliability of this measure as an independent variable.

Perceived advantages of participation were measured through four survey items each measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). Managers were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements: “Citizen participation in local politics will lead to” (1) “better policy decisions,” (2) “more political equality,” (3) “more satisfied citizens,” and (4) “more trust in the local government among citizens.” The four items were combined to an additive index measuring perceived advantages of citizen participation. Similarly, perceived disadvantages of citizen participation were measured with three items on an identical 0–3 scale. Managers were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements: “Citizen participation in local politics will lead to” (1) “worse policy decisions,” (2) “greater political inequality,” and (3) “more conflicts in the community.” These items were combined to an additive index measuring managers’ perceptions of disadvantages of citizen participation.

Finally, the main dependent variables were measured via three variables, measuring the managers’ attitudes towards an extended use of (1) citizen initiatives, (2) referenda, and (3) citizen dialogues. The Likert-type scale ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). All the measurements used are summarized in Table 1 above.

## **4 Empirical results**

### **4.1 Public managers trust in citizens**

Previous research has indicated that while most public officials support citizen participation in theory, they remain skeptical about the concrete instrumental costs and benefits of citizen participation [13 & 5]. Engaging citizens in political participation may have the potential benefits of increasing citizens’ acceptance of the government and generating more effective decision-making. However, there are also potential risks and uncertainties associated with citizen participation as it may increase the workload of public administration and place an added financial burden on public institutions. Implementing processes for citizen participation requires an allocation of public resources that could be used in other capacities. There is also a possibility that citizen participation could lead to more conflict or become ineffective as uninformed citizens gain influence on public policy.

This implies that a low degree of trust in citizens may lead public managers to avoid the risk-taking associated with citizen participation, fostering fewer advantages of citizen involvement and ultimately less public control over policy-making. In contrast, a high level of government trust in citizens can foster a greater willingness for public managers to accept the risk allowing citizen participation and motivate them to support such practices further up on ‘the ladder of participation’ [12].

To further understand the factors influencing public managers’ support for citizen participation we therefore find it vital to analyze public managers’ level of trust in citizens. Do managers trust citizens? And to what extent? In table 2 below, we present analyses of public managers’ trust in citizens when it comes to citizens’ integrity, ability, and benevolence. Public managers report positive evaluations of citizens’ integrity, perceiving citizens to be reliable, sincere, and honest in their interactions with local government. Around 80% of managers agree that citizens have integrity. Managers’ perceptions of citizens’ ability and benevolence were less positive. Only a minority agreed that citizens are aware of local government affairs and current issues, and fewer than 1 in 4 agreed that citizens are knowledgeable about how the local government organization works. Turning to benevolence, 45% of the managers agree that citizens are committed to change and improve the municipality, but only 16% percent believe that citizens are more concerned with what benefits the municipality as a whole than with what benefits them personally.

**Table 2.** Public managers’ trust in citizens  
(Given in percentage that agree with the survey items)

| <b>Citizens I interact with in my work are generally . . .</b>                                       |    |
|--|----|
| 1. Reliable  | 83 |
| 2. Sincere and honest in their interactions with local government                                    | 79 |
| 3. Aware of local government affairs and current issues  | 39 |
| 4. Knowledgeable about how the local government organization works                                   | 21 |
| 5. Committed to changing and improving the municipality  | 45 |
| 6. More concerned about what benefits the municipality as a whole than what benefits them personally | 16 |
| Trust in citizens index (high)   | 48 |

Comment: N=1359–1381; Scales range between 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree).

#### 4.2 Trust and the advantages and disadvantages of citizen participation

Does public managers’ trust in citizens influence their attitudes towards citizen participation in politics? Although previous research on this subject is scarce, a study among public administrators in the US suggests a connection between trust and a favorable opinion of citizen participation [14]. We investigated this relationship by way of biva-

riate correlation analyses between the index of public managers' trust in citizens (described above) and managers' perceptions of potential advantages and disadvantages of citizen participation in politics.

Starting with perceived advantages of citizen participation (see table 3 below), we find positive and statistically significant correlations across all items. Public managers with greater trust in citizens are more prone to believe that citizen participation leads to better policy decisions, greater political equality, more satisfied citizens and increased trust in the local government among citizens. Furthermore, we find a positive and statistically significant correlation between an additive index of all items measuring advantages of participation and managers' trust in citizens.

**Table 3.** Association between public managers' trust in citizens and perceived advantages of citizen participation

|                                       | <b>Pearson correlation</b> | <b>Sig.</b> | <b>N</b> |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|----------|
| Better decisions                      | 0.172                      | 0.000       | 1322     |
| Greater political equality            | 0.141                      | 0.000       | 1309     |
| More satisfied citizens               | 0.191                      | 0.000       | 1314     |
| Greater trust in the local government | 0.174                      | 0.000       | 1320     |
| Index                                 | 0.210                      | 0.000       | 1289     |

However, managers' trust in citizens does not positively correlate with perceived disadvantage of citizen participation. Public managers with weaker trust in citizens are not more disposed to believe that citizen participation risks impediments to the quality of decision making, the degree of political equality or decreased conflict in society. Hence, the perceived risks of citizen participation are not connected to the level of managers' trust in citizens. Potentially such perceptions of disadvantages might be connected to normative views of democracy. For instance, proponents of electoral democracy have often argued that extensive citizen participation outside of elections will lead to decreased political equality [19].

**Table 4.** Association between public managers' trust in citizens and perceived disadvantages of citizen participation

|                              | <b>Pearson correlation</b> | <b>Sig.</b> | <b>N</b> |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|----------|
| Worse decisions              | -0.038                     | 0.174       | 1314     |
| Greater political inequality | -0.043                     | 0.122       | 1314     |
| More conflicts in society    | -0.012                     | 0.657       | 1309     |
| Index                        | -0.042                     | 0.134       | 1299     |



### 4.3 Trust and attitudes towards different forms of participation

Thus far we have established that public managers' trust in citizens is associated with citizen participation as it influences managers' perceptions of the advantages of citizens' political participation. Public managers act as potential gatekeepers in relation to the processes of citizen participation with decisive influence over whether and how participatory processes are implemented. Therefore, it is important to learn more about how managers' trust in citizens directly shapes their attitudes towards different forms of citizen participation. Are managers who trust citizens more prone to support citizens' participation in politics? And does the influence of trust vary across different forms of participation, as it does among citizens [10]?

In table 5 (below), bivariate correlation analyses are presented, investigating the association among trust, perceived advantages and disadvantages of citizen participation and public managers' support for three forms of citizen participation. These forms of participation are citizen dialogues, citizens' right to advocate for issues with the local council, and local referenda. We find positive and statistically significant associations between trust in citizens and support for citizen dialogues as well as for referenda. However, we find no significant association between trust and initiatives.

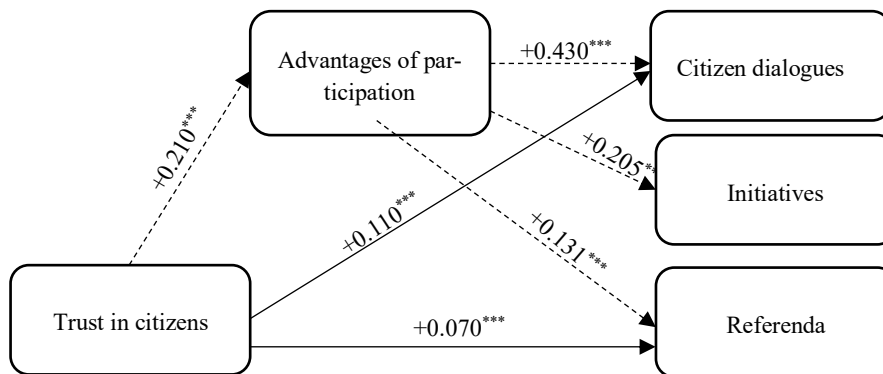
Perceived advantages of participation are strongly associated with support for citizen dialogues and positively correlated with support for initiatives and referenda. Perceived disadvantages of participation is negatively associated with support for all three forms of citizen participation. The strongest negative association is between perceived disadvantages and support for citizen dialogues. This result might be surprising since referenda form a much more influential and disruptive form of citizen participation. However, the strong associations between the perceived advantages and disadvantage of participation and support for citizen dialogues may well stem from the fact that Swedish public managers have a stronger gatekeeper function in relation to citizen dialogues as compared to the other two forms of participation investigated.

**Table 5.** Association between trust in citizens and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of citizens' participation and attitudes towards

|                                      | <b>Citizen dialogues</b> | <b>Initiatives</b> | <b>Referenda</b> |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Trust in citizens                    | 0.110***                 | 0.017              | 0.07*            |
| Advantages of participation—Index    | 0.430***                 | 0.205***           | 0.131***         |
| Disadvantages of participation—Index | -0.254***                | -0.084**           | -0.059*          |
| N                                    | 1330–1349                | 1330–1349          | 1325–1342        |

Taking the analysis one step further, we consider the potential indirect effect of public managers' trust in citizens on their support of citizen participation. As demonstrated above, trust influences managers' perceptions of the advantages of participation, which in turn influences their support for participation. Hence, in addition to the direct association between trust and the level of support for citizen dialogues and referenda discussed above, it is also clear that managers' trust influences support for participation

indirectly—by way of influencing managers’ perceptions of the advantages of participation. The direct and indirect associations between managers’ trust and their support for different forms of participation are summarized in Figure 1 below.



**Fig. 1.** Direct and indirect influence of public managers’ trust in citizens on their support for different forms of participation.

This mediation or path-analysis allows us to better grasp the full scope of the importance of managers’ trust in citizens regarding the process of citizen participation. The direct, indirect, and total effects of managers’ trust in citizens on their support for different forms of citizen participation are described in Table 6 below. The indirect effect is calculated as the product of the association between trust and the perceived advantages and the association between the perceived advantages and political managers’ support for the respective forms of participation. The total effect is calculated as the sum of the direct and indirect effects. Only statistically significant associations ( $p < 0.05$ ) are included in these calculations.

**Table 6.** Direct, indirect, and total effects of political managers’ trust in citizens on their support for political participation.

|                 | <b>Citizen dialogues</b>          | <b>Initiatives</b> | <b>Referenda</b>                  |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Direct effect   | 0.110                             | -                  | 0.070                             |
| Indirect effect | $(0.210 \times 0.430) =$<br>0.090 | -                  | $(0.210 \times 0.131) =$<br>0.028 |
| Total effect    | 0.200                             | -                  | 0.098                             |

The analyses presented in Table 6 show that trust in citizens is of non-trivial importance for understanding public managers’ attitudes towards citizen participation in politics. Managers who trust citizens more are disposed towards supporting citizen dialogues as well as referenda as compared to less trusting managers. Hence, building trust between citizens and public managers might be a pivotal step for supporting e-participation processes, as has been suggested in case studies [17].

## 5 Conclusions

As Newman et al. [18] reminds us, new forms of participation do not displace old forms of governance; rather, they interact with each other. This creates opposing imperatives for public managers. They should encourage participation from their citizens while ensuring their ability to fulfill their duties as imposed from above. They should engage in long-term trust building, while also competently completing tasks in the short term. Public managers' relationship with citizens exist in an institutional context where citizen participation has its specific costs, advantages, and risks. In this context, the degree of trust in citizens' integrity, knowledge, and benevolence matters.

While earlier studies have shown public officials to be more trusting than people in general, this study shows many public officials do not trust citizens. Furthermore, we have found that trust in citizens is related to the perceived advantages and risks of citizen participation. If the political managers trust their citizens, there is more confidence in potential benefits of participation. If there is distrust in the citizens, the value of participation is questioned. Thus, trusting citizens seems to be key for understanding whether or not public managers think that participation is worth the effort.

Furthermore, the results show that trusting citizens influences public managers' attitudes towards new forms of participation. Just like citizens' political trust has a positive impact on some forms of participation, but not on others, managers' trust in citizens matters more for some forms of participation than others. Somewhat surprisingly, citizen dialogues show the greatest impact from perceived advantages, risks and trust in citizens. At first glance at least, this seems contradictory to the idea that trust and control are opposing forces for handling risk. Regarding referenda, more control over decisions is given to citizens than in dialogues. However, the normative view of direct democracy versus representative democracy is more important in relation to referenda. One potential explanation for the pattern is that normative issues are less salient in relation to dialogues, which makes instrumental factors more important in shaping managers' attitudes towards participation.

The literature on new forms of participation predominately considers the drivers and barriers towards e-participation in normative terms while recognizing the role of public managers in facilitating change [4 & 5]. Our examination indicates that we should make more effort to understand how the perceptions of the instrumental costs, benefits and risks associated with citizens' political participation is affected by public officials' trust in citizens. Knowledge about public officials' trust in citizens could have important policy implications. If we know what institutional arrangements influence public officials' trust in citizens, it might be possible to address these factors through policy measures. New forms of participation provide a great opportunity for experimenting with trust-building arrangements; however, past research and development activities have typically had a one-sided focus, trying to find mechanisms that close the political distance between citizens and governments. This study reveals that we also need to aim for institutional arrangements that increase public managers' trust in citizens.

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