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Assessing public services from the citizen perspective: what can we learn from surveys?

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ABSTRACT
Surveys have become an established means by which scholars can evaluate and assess the quality of public services provided by governments. Though surveys must be interpreted with caution, as explained here, they also have the advantage of providing useful insights about public services that cannot easily be gauged from other assessment techniques. After briefly expounding on the use of surveys, we go on to present the papers included in this special issue and the main insights they bring onto questions of assessing public services from the citizen perspective.

KEYWORDS
Public services; citizens; consumers; surveys

Policy Highlights

- Surveys have become an established method of assessing the quality of public services from a citizen perspective.
- The advantages and limitations of surveys are highlighted when assessing public service quality.
- Papers on using surveys to assess public services in this special issue are presented.

Assessing the quality of government in terms of the quality of public services governments design and deliver to citizens has been a long-term and significant concern of scholars of political economy and many other social scientists. In the current times, this concern with assessing the quality of public services has taken on even more importance as a large part of the world's citizens require timely, effective and high-quality public services in order to find our way back to something resembling global health. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the critical importance of good quality, affordable and accessible public services for all – in the first place, health, but also, education, infrastructure, policing, social care, public communication and transportation.

The human tragedy of overloaded hospitals in both the developing and developed world – often provided by government – has underscored this point. Though there are a range of factors that have affected the scale of the crisis in each country – including population density, the behaviour and choices of individual citizens, as well as socio-

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economic and population health factors – the pandemic has helped sharpen the distinction between governments that are perceived to be managing the crisis in a timely, efficient and responsible manner, by demonstrating "preparedness" and agility in public service management, as against those governments that appear to be reacting late, and dependent upon over-stretched, under-funded or insufficiently well-managed public services (Capano et al. 2020). The Cost-benefit pandemic has made it is all too clear that poorly delivered public services cost lives and can reduce life quality permanently.

How can we properly assess the quality of the public services citizens receive? Given the centrality of these tasks, a large literature exists that tackles this question from different disciplines, using distinct methodological approaches. One of the classic approaches, of course, is cost-benefit analysis; here, the net outcome of a given government policy to provide a public service can be determined by working out the price individuals would be willing to pay to obtain its benefits, or, to avoid the costs of a specific policy (Johansson and Bengt 2020). The cost-benefit analysis takes an individual approach to public service delivery, in that it sums individual citizens' willingness to pay.

An alternative technique which has also been in place for many decades is policy and programme evaluation: here, the approach determines what a collective seeks to obtain, and then the extent to which this aim has been reached by a given policy. Once established, however, there are gaps in knowledge about how public services are actually performing which makes such evaluations problematic. Dehn, Reinikka, and Svensson (2003), for example, have argued that measuring budget allocations on the part of government are a poor predictor of public service performance for several reasons. Public services may be delivered to the wrong people or include the wrong goods or services; funding may not reach the critical or "frontline" services; the incentives to provide good quality services may be lacking; and, even if good quality services were made available to citizens, citizens may not make the best use of them or use them at all.

Hence, in particular from the 1980s onwards, to supplement, or even replace, these previous assessment methods, scholars have also increasingly sought to bring into the assessment mix citizens' opinions and perceptions about public services. One of the major ways in which this has been done is through the increasing use of surveys as a tool to assess the quality and impact of public services.

This increased use of surveys fitted very well with the parallel development during the same time period of the so-called New Public Management (NPM) paradigm (Hood 1991). NPM and its related policies adopted a "customer-oriented" approach to the reform of government and public services. Adherents of NPM promoted policies such as liberalization, deregulation, competition and, in some cases, privatization, all in the name of making greater "choice" available to members of the public, with government envisaged as being at the service of "customers", rather than "citizens" (Clifton, Comín and Diaz-Fuentes, 2006). It therefore followed that "customer satisfaction" could be a new and important means of evaluating public services (Clarke et al. 2007). Following this lead, during the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, a considerable literature emerged that deployed surveys to gain new insight into public service performance (for example, Clifton, Comín, and Díaz-Fuentes 2005; Fiorio and Florio 2011; Fiorio, Florio, and Perucca 2013; Van de Walle 2018; Clifton, Díaz-Fuentes, and Fernández-Gutiérrez 2019). The use and interpretation of surveys to assess public services, however, must be conducted with great care (Ferrari and Manzi 2014).

The first major challenge is that expressions of satisfaction are, by definition, highly subjective, and therefore may need careful contextualisation. Many variables may contribute to why a citizen rates a public service in a certain way. For example, Van Ryzin (2004) shows that respondents' prior expectations concerning a specific service play an important role in their stated level of satisfaction with this service. Clifton and Díaz-Fuentes (2010) found respondents from Italy held systematically more negative perceptions about public services in general than most other European Union countries, suggesting a country or cultural bias. Another example is socio-demographic characteristics of respondents. Wunder et al. (2013), for example, find the elderly are more likely to report lower satisfaction in life generally and this attitude flows over and colours their generally more critical stance on public services than their younger fellow citizens.

One useful way to overcome, or at least ameliorate, the purely subjective nature of such "stated" levels of satisfaction is to contrast them with a more objective indicator. Respondents' subjective expressions of satisfaction are considered to be their "stated preferences", which can then be contrasted with their "revealed preferences" – that is, preference levels extracted from individuals' observable choices, usually obtained from sources such as household surveys. Following Whitehead et al. (2008), Clifton, Díaz-Fuentes, and Fernández-Gutiérrez (2014, 2016) conduct a joint analysis of respondents' stated and revealed preferences help to gain insights into public service performance from the citizen perspective. So, for example, these authors found that a good part of the tendency that the elderly exhibited lower satisfaction for mobile telephony services (stated preferences) was due to this sub-set of the population paying over-average rates for this service (revealed preference). This, in turn, was due to difficulties the elderly encountered navigating the new, fast-changing world of telecommunications.

A second challenge is that the treatment of survey respondents as "customers" who are expected to be either more or less satisfied with a public service may well misinterpret the findings. For example, respondents are likely to evaluate services in different ways depending on whether they are using them by choice or by obligation. While some respondents may have an array of services from which to choose, others may not have a choice, or are "coerced" into using a given service, such as in the interactions they have with the police (Brown 2007). Solely on the basis of the type of interaction between the respondent and the public service, "customers" are more likely to be satisfied than "captives".

Interpretation of survey results concerning satisfaction with public services is complex. But, nevertheless, if done properly and interpreted carefully, surveys can provide useful and novel insights into the performance of public services and new information for how future policy might improve such services.

In this light, this special issue brings together papers that use surveys in different, and novel, ways to assess public services. The first paper, by Van de Walle and Migchelbrink (2020) deals with the critical question of citizen trust in government itself. Citizen trust in government is likely to be crucial to facilitate good governance. When citizens do not trust their own government – or only trust it weakly – it can be expected citizens are less likely to pay heed to governmental instructions, laws, policies, advice and messages, or to view them with some suspicion. The recent and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic illustrates this issue vividly as research emerges showing important differences in the degree of success as regards the management of the pandemic across countries world-wide

(Capano et al. 2020). One core, and related, question for future research on the pandemic, for example, is to what extent trust in government influenced citizens' following (or not) official advice regarding the stringent demands placed upon them during months of lockdown – including "social" distancing, the wearing of masks, etc., in order to avoid the spread of COVID-19 (Pierre 2020).

Probing this relationship between government performance and citizen trust, Van de Walle and Migchelbrink (2020) analyze the extent to which citizen trust in government can be traced to the performance and the processes of government across 173 regions in Europe. The authors collected data on citizen trust in government and individual information on respondents from five waves of the Standard *Eurobarometer* survey, a survey conducted by the European Commission. Additionally, they collected data from the *European Quality of Government Index Survey* (carried out by the Quality of Government Institute) on citizens' views on the quality of delivery of a range of public services, as well as on citizens' perceptions of processes around public service delivery; impartiality and the absence of corruption. The authors find that citizen trust in government was augmented when both public service outcomes and processes are perceived as more positive. In particular, both the perceived quality and the perceived absence of corruption in public service delivery were found to be strong institutional determinants of citizen trust.

Citizens' perceptions about public services, of course, may shift unevenly over time, as citizens are exposed to a multitude of events and changing politics, locally, nationally and globally. In addition, the legacy of the past (political events) may colour individuals' perceptions about public services. This scenario is explored by Yang and Wu (2020), whose paper is set in the context of a Hong Kong which is undergoing "de-globalization", the increasingly visible presence of China, growing stresses associated with immigration from Mainland China, concerns about the maintenance of "local identity" and long-lasting inequalities. Though some of these issues are specific to Hong Kong, equivalent pressures are being felt by citizens in other countries around the world, where there is an apparent shrinking of solidarity and a rise of hostile attitudes towards immigration. The fractious Brexit vote in the UK in 2016, the election of Donald Trump in the US later in the same year and the coming to power of Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018 are just three cases in point.

Yang and Wu (2020) inquire why, whilst Hong Kong citizens support most welfare programmes, they exhibit much less support for a specific one: the social assistance programme, addressed at facing severe poverty. In particular, the authors inquire how, and to what extent, citizens' attitudes towards immigration colour their support – or their lack of support – for this programme. Using a tailor-designed random sampling telephone survey among Hong Kong residents, conducted in 2017, the authors demonstrate that citizens' views in favour of restricting immigration in Hong Kong are clearly associated with a reduced support for this social assistance programme. Respondents are influenced by their perceptions about which constituents benefit from a particular policy or programme; in this case, they explain that perceiving social assistance programme to largely benefit immigrants, public support for this policy was more muted among respondents.

Apparently, well-designed public services also can have unanticipated consequences – including negative perceptions and behaviour on the part of citizens –

when governments fail to understand the needs of citizens receiving services. Braithwaite, Ahmed, and Cleland (2020) consider the case of the Australian government's income-contingent loan programme for tertiary students, which was introduced at the end of the 1980s, and has been continued, with reform, to this day. This scheme allowed university students to defer university tuition payment until their income reached a set threshold – a policy subsequently adopted in many other countries, including the UK and New Zealand.

The puzzle the authors seek to resolve is how and why a scheme that was designed to increase equity ended up creating an unresolved conflict around perceptions of fairness which have persisted until the present day. The authors use both quantitative and qualitative evidence from a survey carried out through a random sample of graduates from two Australian universities, to assess attitudes on the way in which tertiary education was financed. Braithwaite, Ahmed, and Cleland (2020) find that the gap between the government's and citizens' perception about the fairness of this way of providing a public service was a major reason behind dissension as regards the policy. While the government upheld a notion of objective fairness to all, individual respondents perceive fairness as relative to their peers and stuck to the notion that education should be free for all. The way in which tertiary education was provided failed to create a consensus on how "fair" this really was – leading to a feeling of weak moral obligation to repay the loan or so-called doubtful debt.

The final paper in this collection, by Bucciol, Manfrè, and Gimenez (2020), also uses a survey to solve another puzzle. Among Latin American countries, Chile was a laboratory in the early introduction of "customer-oriented" reforms of public services in the context of the developing world (Marcinkiewicz and Chybalski 2019). This was the case of the 1980s reform of the Chilean pension system, which led to a system based on individual pension accounts managed by private providers. In the early twenty-first century, many Latin American countries experienced a kind of counter-reform – in the shape of uneven mobilizations against privatization (Warner and Clifton 2014) or indeed more progressive policies by the government (Clifton, Diaz-Fuentes, and Revuelta 2020). In this context, the public sector regained a more central role in the provision of public services which considered more carefully the need of its citizens. As part of this wave, the 2008 pension system reform enacted by the Chilean government was designed to deal with the large structural inequality in the country and to benefit the poorest and most vulnerable segment of the elderly population left behind by the 1980s reform. The 2008 reform aimed to fortify the social safety net, foster solidarity and, also, to improve gender equality.

Bucciol, Manfrè, and Gimenez (2020) analyse the somewhat paradoxical consequences of the 2008 reform on an issue which has not received sufficient scholarly attention, but which has gained salience in the aftermath of the global economic and financial crisis: the financial situation of the most vulnerable segment of the population. The authors use the largest representative Chilean survey, the *Encuesta de Protección Social*, a unique survey in Latin America in terms of the amount of information on households' wealth and financial instruments it provides. Their results show that the reform had collateral effects on the financial decisions of those vulnerable segments of the population – the very segment it had intended to benefit. In particular, the beneficiaries of the new basic pension increased their financial debt more than their assets, raising concerns of over-indebtedness. Though the reform was also supposed to improve gender equality, in reality, women increased their debt ratio significantly more than men. The use of this survey can thus expose the unintended and (negative and positive) consequences of government policy.

Overall, the papers contained in this issue shed light on both the methods used to conduct evaluative surveys and how they may be interpreted. They demonstrate the importance of incorporating the attitudes and perceptions of citizens when seeking to evaluate and analyse public policies and public service provision, helping to shine a spotlight into unexpected consequences of policies and their reform. The papers deal with a wide variety of public service contexts and countries – the European Union, Hong Kong, Australia and Chile – and, as set of papers, shed much-needed light on this increasingly important means of penetrating deeper into the evaluation of government policy and public services.

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