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# **Citizens' Perceptions of Government Policy Success: A Cross-National Study**

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What explains citizens' perceptions of government policy success? To answer this question, we use multilevel modelling strategies to examine data gathered across 21 national samples from the 2006 International Social Survey Programme's (ISSP) *Role of Government IV* module. Our dependent variable is an index of perceived governmental policy success in six areas. Our analysis reveals that citizens' evaluations of the success of public policies vary within countries as well as between countries. Our multilevel models indicate that variation in perceptions within countries is largely a function of individual sociodemographic attributes and political attitudes. In contrast, across country variation in perceptions is mainly a function of the quality of public institutions within a country and, to a lesser extent, prevailing economic conditions. These results suggest that citizens' perceptions of government are not merely influenced by objective outcomes of public policy, they are also influenced by the degree of procedural fairness, professionalism, and integrity within public institutions.

**Keywords:** Government Performance, Citizen Perceptions of Government, Quality of Public Sector Institutions

In order for citizens to have faith in government it is often necessary for civil servants to implement public policies in an efficient and effective manner. According to Goodsell (2006), "...administration is more than an instrumental tool. It is a social asset at the core of democratic governance. It is responsible for ongoing missions that meet the long-standing and long-term needs of the society" (p. 633).

Despite the importance of having an understanding of citizens' perceptions of government performance, little is known about the process by which citizens come to synthesize their perceptions into an overall evaluation of effectiveness (Van Ryzin, 2007). To merely say that citizens are satisfied when government performs well and dissatisfied when government performs poorly is far too simplistic of an explanation. Rather, citizens' perceptions of government performance are likely a reflection of a number of factors beyond objective performance measures.

Thus, understanding how citizens perceive government performance is important for a number of reasons. For one, research suggests that positive perceptions of public sector performance can promote active citizenship (Vigoda, 2002; Vigoda-Gadot & Mizrahi, 2008). Indeed, public perceptions of competent government management have been viewed as one indicator of a strong and thriving democracy. Research has shown, for instance, that positive perceptions of government performance are associated with higher levels of citizen satisfaction with government services (Vigoda-Gadot, Shoham, & Vashti, 2010), an increased willingness to pay taxes (Glaser & Hildreth, 1999), and changes in ideologies (Kumlin, 2006).

A number of scholars have also pointed to a causal link between citizen perceptions of government performance and levels of public trust in public sector institutions (Marlowe, 2004; Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003; Van Ryzin, 2011; Vigoda-Gadot & Yuval, 2003). Ultimately, then, citizens' perceptions of government performance can be quite influential. As Vigoda (2002) observed, "...performance by the public sector contributes to a healthy development of attitudes and opinions that uphold democracy" (p. 266).

This study provides a global examination of citizens' perceptions of government performance in the context of public policy success. Through this examination we are able to address a number of questions. First, across countries, what attitudes do citizens hold about government performance? Second, what individual level attributes and attitudes correlate with citizens' perceptions of government performance? Finally, does national context account for variation in the level of government performance citizens perceive across countries?

Data from national samples across 21 North American and European countries were obtained from the 2006 International Social Survey Programme's (ISSP) *Role of Government IV* module. Multilevel regression models were estimated to investigate the relationship between citizens' perceptions of government and individual and country level attributes.

### **Perceptions of Performance and New Public Management**

Within the public sector, performance is often considered to be a reflection of the outputs and outcomes of public policy (Hatry, 2007; Van Dooren, De Caluwe, & Lonti, 2012). However, citizens often develop their perceptions of government performance by relying on a number of information sources. These sources include their own personal experiences, word-of-mouth, media, and formally published government materials such as performance assessments (James & Moseley, 2014).

There is an important distinction, though, between actual performance and citizens' *perceptions* of performance. According to Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2007), "Perceptions of administrative performance do not necessarily match actual performance. But perceptions matter as they steer citizens' actions" (p. 1135). This observation raises an important question: *When is government perceived as being truly effective?* That is, is government successful only when civil servants implement public policies that accomplish clearly defined results? Or, is government successful when citizens are pleased with the manner in which public services are provided regardless of whether objective measures of performance are high?

This is a question that strongly relates to ongoing efforts to reform the public sector. These efforts intend to make the public sector more efficient, effective, and highly regarded. Indeed, beginning in the 1980s governments around the world began implementing policy and bureaucratic reforms in order to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness, and performance of public services (Ariely, 2011;

Kettl, 2005). During this time, New Public Management (NPM) reforms redefined the relationship between government and society. These reforms focused on market mechanisms, decentralization, and government downsizing with the overall intent of making policy implementation more efficient and quality oriented. As a largely performance based movement, NPM emphasized outcomes and encouraged government agencies to focus on achieving demonstrable results (Bouckaert & Halligan, 2008; Van Ryzin, 2011).

Proponents of NPM have often equated it with “governance” (Kettl, 2005). However, as Peters and Pierre (1998) have argued, although NPM and governance overlap they are not the same concept. Governance is about process, whereas NPM is mainly concerned with outcomes or results. Reforms associated with NPM mostly focus on the “how much” rather than the “how” of public policy. In this study, we argue that in addition to the objective outcomes of public policy, citizen perceptions of government performance are conditioned by a number of factors such as individual sociodemographic characteristics, political attitudes, and the quality of public sector institutions.

### **An Integrated Model of Citizen Perceptions of Government Performance**

Although there are a number of explanations about how citizens form perceptions of government performance, the extant literature mainly focuses on citizen satisfaction with public service delivery. These studies have examined the determinants of satisfaction with public services at the local level (e.g., DeHoog, Lowery, & Lyons, 1990; James, 2009; Van Ryzin, 2004; Van Ryzin, Muzzio, Immerwahr, Gulick, & Martinez, 2004; Vigoda, 2002), the national level (e.g., Calzada & Pino, 2008), and within US federal agencies (Morgeson, 2013; Morgeson, VanAmburg, & Mithas, 2011). In order to organize this literature, it is useful to think of individual level explanations for citizens’ perceptions of government performance as falling into two separate categories: sociodemographic explanations and political attitudes toward government.

#### *Individual Level Correlates*

*Sociodemographic Explanations.* As one set of individual level correlates, sociodemographic explanations for citizens’ perceptions of government performance suggest that these perceptions are the product of socialization and social experiences. Although age, sex, and education have typically been treated as control variables for this type of analysis (e.g., Ariely, 2013; DeHoog et al., 1990; Morgeson & Petrescu, 2011; Morgeson et al., 2011; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007), DeHoog and colleagues (1990) have noted that there is little consensus as to the expected direction of these variables.

Interestingly, though, research on trust in government (which is a related concept) has often found that attitudes toward government are positively related with age. This is likely because as individuals age they tend to desire social connectedness; they also tend to be more collectively oriented and more inclined to have an attachment to institutions (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Christensen & Lægred, 2005; Houston, Aitalieva, Morelock, & Shults, 2016; Keele, 2005). Thus, in this study we hypothesize that older individuals will be more likely than younger individuals to hold positive perceptions of government performance.

Studies have also found that attitudes toward government are positively related to gender—specifically, being male (Brewer & Sigelman, 2002; Houston & Harding, 2013-14; Houston et al., 2016; Keele, 2005). Thus, we also hypothesize that men will be more likely than women to have positive perceptions of government performance.

In terms of education, research has shown that higher levels of education can contribute to a better understanding of the political system in a country (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2005; Lewis & Frank, 2002; Vandenabeele, 2008). We, therefore, hypothesize that individuals with higher levels of education will be more likely to hold positive perceptions of government performance.

Finally, regarding individual level characteristics, research has been shown that government employees are more likely to have positive attitudes toward government than private sector employees (Brewer & Sigelman, 2002). Thus, we hypothesize that government employees will be more likely than private sector employees to hold positive perceptions of government performance.

*Political Attitudes toward Government.* As another set of individual level correlates, studies have shown that individuals who affiliate with a left leaning political party tend to hold different perceptions of government than those who affiliate with a right leaning political party (Morgeson, 2013). Members of left leaning parties tend to be more supportive of government (Houston & Harding, 2013-14; Houston et al., 2016), whereas members of right leaning political parties tend to be more critical of government. We, therefore, hypothesize that individuals who belong to left leaning political parties will be more likely to hold positive perceptions of government performance than those affiliated with right leaning political parties.

We also expect that being a member of the current political party in power, as opposed to being affiliated with an out-of-power party, will be associated with more positive evaluations of government performance (Anderson & Tverdova, 2001; Blau, 2008). Indeed, this so-called “winner effect” has commonly been associated with higher levels of satisfaction with democracy and trust (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Anderson & LoTempio, 2002) as well as with positive feelings about government responsiveness and efficacy (Clarke & Acock, 1989). We, therefore, expect that individuals belonging to the political party in power, as opposed to those affiliated with an out-of-power political party, will be more likely to hold positive perceptions of government performance.

### *Country Level Correlates*

Beyond variation in citizens’ perceptions of government performance within countries there are likely differences across countries as well. Therefore, we also expect for citizens’ perceptions of government performance to be conditioned by national context. Only a handful of studies, though, have explored citizens’ perceptions of government performance from a cross-national perspective (e.g., Ariely, 2011, 2013; Van Ryzin, 2011; Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2010). These studies suggest a number of key variables that may have particular importance. In this study we consider two categories of country level variables: macroeconomic conditions and the quality of public sector institutions.

*Macroeconomic Conditions.* Citizens likely view the condition of a country’s economy as a reflection of public policy success or failure. Economic performance is objective. Thus, it can serve as an indicator of the results of public policy. For example, studies have shown that macroeconomic conditions are significantly associated with the level of political trust across countries (Alesina & Wacziarg, 2000; Anderson & Tverdova, 2001; Houston et al., 2016). We, therefore, expect economic performance to influence perceptions of government performance in a similar way.

Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, the unemployment rate, and inflation are all macroeconomic indicators commonly used in the literature to determine the economic

performance of a country and to make an international comparison (Houston et al., 2016). We hypothesize that individuals living in countries with higher levels of GDP per capita will perceive the performance of government more positively. Conversely, we hypothesize that individuals living in countries with higher levels of unemployment will be more likely to hold negative perceptions of government performance. We also hypothesize that the higher the inflation rate is in a country the more likely individuals in that country will hold negative perceptions of government performance.

*Quality of Public Sector Institutions.* Institutional quality is another measure that quantifies the processes of public administration—not merely the outcomes. Indeed, a well functioning government with high quality institutions is likely to influence citizens' perceptions of government performance. Just as trust in government is positively enhanced by procedural fairness, professionalism, and integrity (Houston et al., 2016; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005; Van Ryzin, 2011), citizens' perceptions of government performance may be as well. Thus, we expect that individuals who live in countries characterized as having better quality public sector institutions will be more likely to hold positive perceptions of government performance than those who live in countries characterized as having low quality public sector institutions. Specifically, we hypothesize that a government's procedural effectiveness rating will influence citizens' perceptions of government performance.

In summary, citizens' perceptions of government performance are commonly explained by individual level correlates that include sociodemographic variables and political attitudes toward government. In addition to these individual level correlates, country level variables may also be important. With only a few exceptions (e.g., Ariely, 2011, 2013; Van Ryzin, 2011), however, extant literature has failed to take into consideration the full range of explanations for citizens' perceptions of government performance. To fill this void in the literature our analysis tests individual and country level explanations for citizens' perceptions of government performance using data from 21 North American and European countries.

## **Research Design and Measurement**

This study examines citizens' perceptions of government policy success in a multilevel context. The analysis is presented in two stages. First, attitudes toward government policy success are examined. Second, multilevel analysis results are presented.

### *Data*

The data used in our analysis comes from the 2006 ISSP *Role of Government IV* module (ISSP Research Group, 2008). This module contains data from surveys administered worldwide. National samples were drawn from adult populations in each participating country using a multistage stratified sampling design. Data collection techniques differed depending on local conditions.

To ensure data quality, ISSP methodological groups have studied the sampling design as well as the administration of this annual survey. According to Smith (2009, p. 12), "The ISSP has assisted the expansion of social-scientific knowledge by gathering data on important social topics in comparative perspective" (p. 12). In our study, we examine data from the ISSP for 21 countries in North America and Europe.

### *Dependent Variable*

For our dependent variable, we used responses to the following survey questions: *How successful do you think the government in [country name] is nowadays in each of the following areas: 1) Providing health care for the sick? 2) Providing living standard for the old? 3) Dealing with threats to security? 4) Controlling crime? 5) Fighting unemployment? 6) Protecting the environment?*

All six questions were measured on a five-point Likert-type response scale ranging from “very unsuccessful” to “very successful.” For each question responses were coded so that the highest value indicates the most satisfactory response (i.e., 5=very successful).

To construct our dependent variable, we used these six survey questions to create factor scores with values ranging from -2.30 to 2.59. Table 1 displays the factor loadings of the individual survey items on the first unrotated factor. All six factor scores have substantial positive loadings. This indicates that the data support the notion of a unidimensional conception of citizens’ perceptions of government policy success.

Cronbach’s alpha for the six questions is 0.79. This value is above the commonly used minimum standard of 0.70 for inter-item reliability. Thus, this reliability score confirms the appropriateness of combining all six individual survey questions into a single scale (Bean & Papadakis, 1998). To ensure equal weighting of variables, all variables were standardized before summing them into factor scores.

### *Independent Variables*

For our individual level correlates, the following sociodemographic variables were included in the analysis as binary variables: male, low education (i.e., below the usual requirement for entrance into universities), high education (i.e., university degree or higher),<sup>1</sup> government employee, left leaning political party affiliation, right leaning political party affiliation, and affiliation with the current governing political party in power. This last variable identifies individuals who affiliate with the political party that holds a plurality of executive cabinet level posts in the national government (at the time). As an additional individual level sociodemographic variable we also included respondents’ age. This variable was measured as continuous.

Beyond these individual level attributes, we measured national context using four variables. Objective government performance was measured by three macroeconomic indicators: gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (in \$1,000) based on purchasing power parity (PPP) (constant 2006 international dollars), the unemployment rate (in percent), and the rate of inflation (also in percent). The data source for these variables was the 2006 World Development Indicators of the World Bank (World Bank, 2012).

The effectiveness and fairness of public sector institutions, which can be indicative of quality, represents another dimension of government performance. The quality of public sector institutions is measured using the World Bank’s Government Effectiveness Indicator (GEI) for 2006. The GEI measures the quality of public service provision, the quality of government bureaucracy, the competence of civil servants, the independence of the civil service from political pressures, and the credibility of government’s commitment to policies (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2011).

**Table 1.** Factor Analysis: Citizen Perceptions of Government Policy Success

Survey Item	Factor Loadings
How successful do you think the government in [country name] is nowadays in each of the following areas:	
Providing health care for the sick	0.67
Providing living standard for the old	0.71
Dealing with threats to security	0.58
Controlling crime	0.64
Fighting unemployment	0.59
Protecting the environment	0.56
Scale reliability score (Cronbach's alpha)	0.79
Scale mean	0.00
Standard deviation	0.89
Eigenvalue	2.88

### *Method*

Multilevel regression analysis was used to estimate the models in this analysis. Multilevel models, or hierarchical linear models, are appropriate for the present data given that these data are hierarchically structured with data on individuals collected through surveys (level-1) clustered, or nested, within countries (level-2) (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2012). The advantage of this estimation approach (over a simple pooled regression model) is that a hierarchical linear model does not assume that respondents are independent of one another since it is often more appropriate to assume that individuals within each cluster (i.e., country) have attitudes that are correlated as a function of the national context in which they reside. Multilevel estimators also more efficiently account for heterogeneity across clusters. For these reasons, multilevel models with random intercepts were estimated for the two-level hierarchical data structure used in this analysis.

The models were estimated using a restricted Penalized Quasi-Likelihood (PQL) method in HLM 7. Model diagnostics (see Snijders & Bosker, 2012) indicated that random effects should be included for the following individual level variables: left leaning political party affiliation, right leaning political party affiliation, and current governing political party in power. As is common in multilevel analyses, continuous predictors were grand mean centered.

### **Findings**

Our first research question asked: *Across countries, what attitudes do citizens hold about government performance?* Table 2 reports the average government policy success index score for each country in the sample along with its standard deviation. The index values range from a low of -2.30 to a high of 2.59, with an average standard deviation of 0.89. Country averages and standard deviations indicate that there is variation in citizens' attitudes toward government policy success within countries. These summary statistics also indicate variation in citizens' attitudes across countries.

Cross-national variation is illustrated in Figure 1. In this figure we display the average government policy success index score for each country ordered from highest to lowest. Citizens in Switzerland, Denmark, and Finland, we find, are on average the most positive about government policy success. On the other hand, citizens in Croatia, Portugal, and Russia are on average the least positive about government policy success. One interesting observation that emerges from the data is that Central and Eastern European countries that began transitioning to democratic



**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Government Policy Success Index

Country	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	<i>n</i>
Croatia	-0.63	0.84	-2.30	1.72	812
Portugal	-0.54	0.84	-2.30	2.59	1,491
Russia	-0.54	0.94	-2.30	2.59	1,895
Latvia	-0.37	0.79	-2.30	2.59	854
Poland	-0.19	0.84	-2.30	2.59	1,007
Hungary	-0.13	0.75	-2.30	2.59	849
Ireland	-0.09	0.88	-2.30	2.11	867
Sweden	-0.08	0.86	-2.30	2.59	884
United States	-0.05	0.91	-2.30	2.59	1,409
Czech Republic	-0.02	0.82	-2.30	2.59	1,106
Great Britain	0.05	0.90	-2.30	2.59	827
France	0.09	0.80	-2.30	2.59	1,608
Slovenia	0.11	0.66	-2.30	2.20	858
Netherland	0.11	0.69	-2.30	2.59	863
Norway	0.15	0.78	-2.30	2.59	1,101
Spain	0.23	0.81	-2.30	2.59	2,021
Germany	0.26	0.81	-2.30	2.59	942
Canada	0.28	0.71	-2.30	2.24	766
Finland	0.36	0.78	-2.30	2.41	963
Denmark	0.52	0.81	-2.30	2.59	1,150
Switzerland	0.86	0.66	-1.52	2.59	902
Total	0.00	0.89	-2.30	2.59	23,175

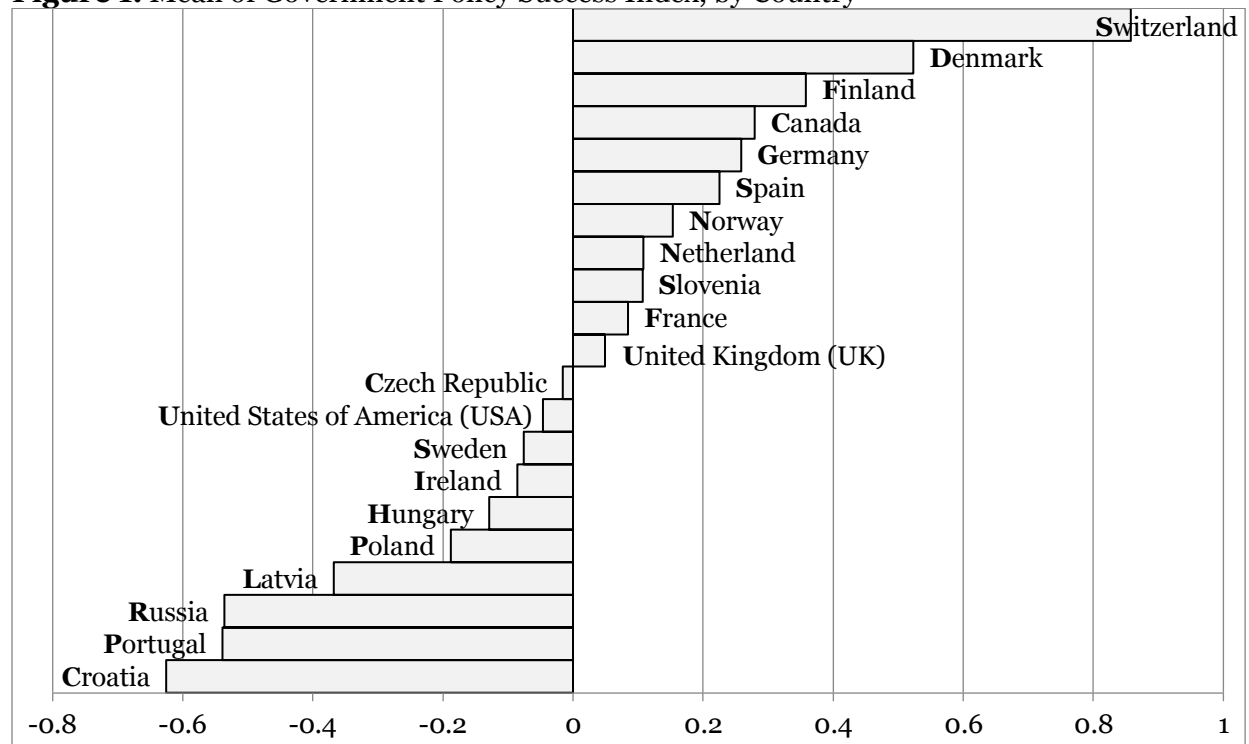
governments and capitalist economies (i.e., former Soviet Bloc countries) are over represented in the bottom half of Figure 1. The finding that these former Soviet Bloc countries appear at the bottom of this figure is consistent with studies showing that new democratic regimes in Central and Eastern Europe face challenges resulting from low government performance (Mishler & Rose, 1997). This suggests that the maturity or quality of public institutions may matter to citizens in their perceptions of government performance.

When conducting multilevel analysis it is necessary to consider whether there is sufficient variation between countries, as opposed to only variation within countries. Such an assessment allows us to justify the inclusion of country level effects when estimating models (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2012). To make this determination, a null model was estimated that excluded all individual level and country level variables. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) computed from the null model was equal to 0.20. This indicates that about 20% of the variation in the dependent variable is attributed to unobserved country characteristics. Therefore, the estimation of the null model provides evidence of a significant country level effect on citizens’ perceptions of government performance; and, thus, the need to employ multilevel analysis.

The multilevel regression models reported in Table 3 provide a test of the individual and country level hypotheses introduced earlier. It is important to note that the individual level variables perform similarly across each of the models indicating the robustness of our findings. Model 1 in Table 3 is a basic model consisting of individual level correlates measuring sociodemographic characteristics and political attitudes.

In terms of sociodemographic attributes, the male and the high education variables are positive and statistically significant. Consistent with previous research, our findings show that men and

**Figure 1.** Mean of Government Policy Success Index, by Country



those who are highly educated are among the most likely to express positive perceptions of government performance. Our findings also indicate, though, that there is not a statistically significant relationship between citizens' perceptions of government performance and age or being employed as a government employee.

The models in Table 3 provide partial support for our hypotheses relating political identity to citizens' perceptions of government performance. Contrary to previous literature, however, affiliation with a left leaning political party (although statistically significant) does not perform as expected. Indeed, those who identify with a left leaning political party are less likely than those who affiliate with a right leaning, moderate, or no political party to express positive perceptions of government performance.

As expected, though, the variable measuring whether citizens affiliate with the political party that holds a plurality of executive cabinet level posts in the national government is positive and statistically significant. This variable shows that those affiliated with the current party in power, more so than those unaffiliated with this party, are more likely to express positive attitudes toward government performance.

Beyond these individual level correlates, we also considered the importance of national context for conditioning citizens' perceptions of government policy success. Specifically, we examined two different explanations for variation in citizens' perceptions of government policy success between countries: economic conditions and the quality of public sector institutions. For the sake of parsimony, a final composite model is included. In this model we combined the statistically significant country level correlates from the preceding models.

**Table 3.** Multilevel Regression Models: Government Policy Success Index

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Base Model	Economic Performance	Quality of Public Sector Institutions	Composite Model
<b>Fixed Effects</b>				
<b>Individual Level Variables</b>				
Intercept	-0.08 (0.09)	-0.08 (0.07)	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.08 (0.06)
<b>Sociodemographic Variables</b>				
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Male	0.07*** (0.01)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.07*** (0.01)
Low education	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)
High education	0.11*** (0.02)	0.11*** (0.02)	0.11*** (0.02)	0.11*** (0.02)
Government employee	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
<b>Political Attitudes Variables</b>				
Left leaning political party	-0.07* (0.04)	-0.08** (0.03)	-0.08** (0.03)	-0.08** (0.03)
Right leaning political party	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)
Governing political party in power	0.25*** (0.03)	0.25*** (0.03)	0.25*** (0.03)	0.25*** (0.03)
<b>Country Level Variables</b>				
<b>Macroeconomic Conditions</b>				
GDP in thousands of dollars/capita	--	0.02** (0.01)	--	-0.00 (0.01)
Unemployment rate (%)	--	0.01 (0.03)	--	--
Inflation rate (%)	--	-0.03* (0.02)	--	-0.01 (0.02)
<b>Quality of Government Institutions</b>				
Government effectiveness indicator	--	--	0.37*** (0.05)	0.37** (0.15)
<b>Random Effects (Variance Components)</b>				
Intercept	0.161***	0.09***	0.06***	0.06***
Left leaning political party	0.018***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***
Right leaning political party	0.032***	0.03***	0.04***	0.04***
Governing political party in power	0.013***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***
Level-1 <i>n</i>	16,402	16,402	16,402	16,402
Level-2 <i>n</i>	21	21	21	21
-2 Log Likelihood	39,093.16	39,104.99	39,083.34	39,097.16

\* $p \leq 0.10$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq 0.01$

Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

Model 2 in Table 3 examines the impact of national macroeconomic conditions on our dependent variable. Of the three indicators of economic conditions in our study, we find that only national GDP per capita and the inflation rate are significantly correlated with citizens' perceptions of government performance. The third indicator, the unemployment rate, is not a statistically significant correlate.

As hypothesized, we also find that citizens of wealthier countries are more likely to perceive higher levels of government policy success. Likewise, the higher the level of inflation in a country, the lower citizens' perceptions are that government policies are successful. It should be noted, however, that the statistical significance for the inflation rate coefficient is achieved using a less demanding threshold ( $p \leq 0.10$ ).

Model 3 in Table 3 examines the effect of the quality of public sector institutions on citizens' perceptions of government policy success. We expected that citizens' perceptions of government policy success would positively reflect the quality of the public institutions charged with formulating and implementing public policies. As shown in Table 3, the World Bank's government effectiveness indicator is statistically significant at the 1% level. This suggests that individuals who live in countries that are characterized as possessing better quality public sector institutions are more likely to perceive public policies in their country to be successful.

Model 4 in Table 3 (which is a composite model) includes the significant country level correlates from models 2 and 3. This model allows us to test the utility of each country level explanation for citizens' perceptions, while controlling for other country level variables and still maintaining a parsimonious model. In this model, economic conditions are no longer statistically significant correlates of citizens' perceptions after controlling for government effectiveness. The quality of public institutions is a more pronounced country level correlate of our dependent variable. Countries with well developed public institutions are perceived by their citizens as having more successful government performance. This suggests that ultimately the process of providing public services may weigh more heavily on citizens' assessments of policy success than the actual economic results of public policy.

In sum, citizens' attitudes about the success of public policies vary within countries and between countries. The multilevel models in this study indicate that variation in citizens' perceptions within countries is a function of sociodemographic attributes and political attitudes. Across country variation is largely a function of the quality of public institutions in a country and, to a lesser extent, prevailing economic conditions. These latter results suggest that building quality public institutions is important for enhancing citizens' perceptions of government policy success—not merely focusing on policies that improve economic conditions.

## **Discussion**

Citizens' perceptions of government policy success are important to understand. According to Linde and Ekman (2003), "...democratic legitimacy derives to a great extent from the long-term performance of the democratic regime" (p. 406). Ultimately, though, the adequacy of this performance is judged through the eyes of citizens. Given the importance of this topic to democratic governance as well as the lack of scholarly attention on the topic, our study is an important addition to the literature on factors that influence citizens' perceptions of government. In the study, we relied on survey data from 21 national samples of citizens from North America and Europe to estimate a series of multilevel regression models. Using these models, we examined individual and country level determinants of citizens' perceptions of government performance.

Although previous studies have examined correlates of citizen satisfaction with government performance at the local level (e.g., DeHoog et al., 1990; James, 2009; Van Ryzin, 2004; Van Ryzin et al., 2004; Vigoda, 2002), the national level (e.g., Calzada & Pino, 2008), and the federal level (e.g., Morgeson, 2013; Morgeson et al., 2011), only a few studies have examined citizens' perceptions of government performance cross-nationally (see, Ariely, 2011, 2013; Van Ryzin, 2011; Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2010). Thus, this study was intended to add to the limited cross-national literature.

Our findings indicate that perceptions of government policy success vary among citizens both *within* countries as well as *between* countries. We, therefore, conclude that to better understand citizens' perceptions of government it is necessary to study their perceptions using both individual and country level data. Our multilevel analysis suggests that perceptions of government policy success correlate with individual level attributes. Specifically, we found that men were more likely than women to express positive perceptions of government. Given that men tend to be more prominent in key positions within government (Rosenbluth, Salmond, & Thies, 2006) and are also less likely to be exposed to experiences of inequality in social institutions (Houston & Harding, 2013-14), this finding is hardly surprising. It is possible such male dominance may lead women to believe that they will not be treated fairly when dealing with government institutions (Richardson, Houston, & Hadjiharalambous, 2001). Furthermore, women may feel diminished by the presence of a "glass ceiling" that can prevent them from advancing in their careers (Richardson et al., 2001).

It is interesting to note that being a government employee did not have a significant impact on citizens' perceptions of government performance. This is surprising given that at least one study (Marlowe, 2004) suggests government employees are more likely to be supportive of government policies since they are a part of the government machinery. Our findings, however, suggest that being a cog in the machinery of government does not condition citizens to be more positive about the success of public policies.

We also found that those who were highly educated were more likely to express positive perceptions of government. College educated respondents are likely to be members of professional organizations that require them to go through a licensing process. Therefore, those who are college educated may be more likely to trust the ability of public administrators to regulate their professional activity. They may also have more trusting attitudes toward these administrators (Marlowe, 2004). Individuals with higher levels of education may also have a more realistic view of the civil service and a greater understanding of the political administrative system (Marlowe, 2004; Richardson et al., 2001). Thus, they are often more tolerant of government's malfunctioning (Van de Walle, 2007).

In our study we also found that political attitudes matter. Those who affiliated with a left leaning political party were more critical of government performance than those who affiliated with a right leaning, moderate, or no political party. This finding suggests that political parties characterized by liberal ideologies that also embrace a positive role for government in addressing problems may express greater dissatisfaction with what public policy has accomplished. Perhaps the promise of a liberal political agenda is not being fulfilled in the minds of these citizens.

We also found that in addition to one's ideological leanings, affiliating with the governing political party in power enhanced citizens' perceptions of government policy success. This finding indicates that the outcomes of national elections may matter for influencing citizens' perceptions.

In terms of our country level correlates, we found that the presence of high quality administrative institutions was an important correlate of citizens' perceptions of government policy success. These results, combined with those of our individual level findings, reveal that perceptions of government performance are not merely influenced by the results of public policy alone. Other factors matter. In particular, the procedural aspects of public sector performance are factors that matter in influencing citizens' perceptions of government.

### *Limitations*

This study examined citizens' perceptions of government from a cross-national perspective. According to Bouckaert, Van de Walle, and Kampen (2005), public administration scholars have largely ignored citizen views. As they point out, "From the very beginning, the citizen has been neglected as an object of study in public administration, due to the discipline's early focus on organization studies and political-administrative relations" (p. 232). This study helps to lessen this scholarly deficit given the essential role that citizens play in a democratic system. To this end, comparative public opinion research is useful in that it allows the researcher to distinguish between patterns that are specific to one country as opposed to those that are more universal in nature (Smith, 2009).

One of the limitations of this analysis is that it is not possible to know exactly what respondents were thinking about when they indicated that they perceived government policy to be successful in a particular policy area. To address this limitation, we controlled for political attitudes and general perceptions of government, which likely condition responses on the items that serve as the basis for constructing our dependent variable. Another limitation of this study is that most of the countries included in the 2006 ISSP *Role of Government IV* module are established Western and European democracies. As such, the generalizability of our findings to nondemocratic and developing national contexts is limited.

Our analysis is further limited by the questions included in the module. In particular, respondents' experiences with government policies in the areas that comprise the dependent variable cannot be assessed; yet, these experiences likely influence their perceptions of government policy success (Pino, 2005). For example, James (2011) found that citizen satisfaction is often dependent on expectations that are set based on prior levels of performance. Likewise, Van Ryzin and Charbonneau (2010) found that citizens' perceptions of performance for certain public services are often a function of their usage of those services.

As an additional limitation we should note that the data collection for the majority of countries in the module was conducted in either 2006 or 2007 (with the exception of the data from Poland collected in February of 2008 and the data for Denmark collected from January 2008 to May 2008). Thus, this study is cross sectional in nature. Due to this, we are unable to make causal inferences between individual and country level variables and citizens' perceptions of government performance.

Finally, it is important to consider that the data in this study were collected during a relatively prosperous period before the Great Recession. However, countries like Spain, Ireland, Portugal, and France were especially impacted by the recession (Dotti, Sani, & Magistro, 2016; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Martini & Quaranta, 2018; Torcal, 2014; Van Erkel & Van Der Meer, 2016), which transformed economic conditions and political attitudes around the world for many years. It is important to note, then, that the Great Recession may have altered citizens' perceptions of government performance. Still, it is useful to analyze how citizens felt about government's performance before the recession. Thus, this limitation actually provides a possible avenue for

future research. Indeed, the recent release of the 2016 ISSP *Role of Government IV* module provides an opportunity to examine the influence of the Great Depression on citizens' perceptions by examining pre- and post-recession perceptions of government performance.

Despite these limitations, several implications can be drawn from our multilevel analysis. First, citizens' perceptions of government are conditioned by sociodemographic variables such as sex and education. Second, citizens' perceptions of government are politically conditioned by party affiliation and attitudes toward the political system. Third, as shown from the findings in the country level models, establishing high quality administrative institutions is important for enhancing citizens' perceptions of government performance. This finding should be of interest to public administrators seeking to improve citizens' perceptions. Indeed, by improving the professionalism, transparency, and procedural justice of administrative institutions, public administrators may be able to also improve citizens' perceptions of government. Fourth, the extent to which high quality administrative institutions are characterized by a public service ethic and procedural justice, not just enhanced competency, suggests that NPM bureaucratic reforms alone do not offer the full range of solutions necessary for enhancing citizen perceptions of government policy success.

## **Conclusions**

One of the aims of the NPM movement was to "...advance a public philosophy that reconfigures the relations between the citizens and the state" by improving efficiency, effectiveness, and performance (Durant, 2010, p. 7). Under NPM, it was expected that higher levels of performance would lead to increased citizen satisfaction, which in turn would promote positive evaluations of government (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). Higher performance, however, has not always led to more positive perceptions of government's performance.

The shortfall of relying on NPM reforms to restore public trust in government may lie in differences that exist between the private and public sectors. In the private sector, corporations must meet customers' expectations in order to survive. However, in the public sector there is no single measure of success (Cohn Berman, 2008). This often means that performance indicators in public organizations need to be more "citizen driven" and adapted to measure the things that citizens truly care about (Yang & Holzer, 2006). Indeed, public sector organizations need performance metrics that go beyond the simple "profit" and "loss" metrics of the private sector but that still promote accountability (Kelly, 2005; Kelly & Swindell, 2002). In order to consider both dimensions of performance (i.e., what is actually being done and what citizens perceive is being done), new means of evaluation need to be adopted; and, these evaluations should certainly include citizen attitudes alongside more objective metrics (Shingler, Van Loon, Alter, & Bridger, 2008).

Our study presents a comprehensive model of citizens' perceptions of government performance by examining survey data from 21 national samples. Using a multilevel modelling approach, we found that variation in citizens' perceptions of government performance within countries was largely a function of individual sociodemographic attributes and political attitudes. In contrast, variation in citizens' perceptions of government across counties, we found, was mainly a function of the quality of public institutions within a country and (to a lesser extent) prevailing economic conditions.

Ultimately, in this study we demonstrated that citizens' perceptions of government policy success are a reflection of many factors—not just economic indicators. Perhaps, most important among

these factors are procedural fairness, professionalism, and the integrity of public institutions. Thus, we echo the sentiments of Bouckaert and colleagues (2005) who suggested that, “Satisfaction with public services does not only result from the quality of services” (p. 237).

## Notes

1. The base category for the low education variable includes scholastic qualifications equivalent to high school diploma or higher; the base category for the high education variable includes scholastic qualifications below a full university degree.

## Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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