Public service satisfaction, citizen trust and participation

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While extensive research has been carried out to explain the phenomenon of institutional isomorphism, less is known about the emergence of institutions across different structural fields such as the private versus the public sector. There is also limited research into examining desired outcomes of implementing certain practices within organizations, which is particularly pertinent as outcomes differ largely contingent upon the field. Our study contributes to the ongoing debate around institutional isomorphism by investigating how private sector practices can be adopted by the public sector. To be more precise, we investigate how effective Customer Relationship Management (CRM) practices from the private sector can be adopted by public sector bodies – in order to manage relationships with citizens – and how such an adoption is related to important outcomes such as citizen trust and identification, and, arguably most importantly, participation.

1.240 citizens from a medium sized city were surveyed about their overall satisfaction, their trust and their identification with the city. We chose measures that had already been tested empirically. The main constructs included in the survey were overall citizen satisfaction with the council, satisfaction with council services, and council CRM initiatives, citizen trust, citizen identification, political participatory norms, interest in politics and perceptions of political efficacy.

As expected, the results show that overall satisfaction with the council and its services predict citizens' trust in local government. Trust itself is related to citizen identification with the city, which in turn leads to political participation. Moreover, the link between citizen identification and participation is moderated by the level of interest in politics. However, the impact of CRM practices, in this case technology enabled feedback and communication channels, on citizens' trust in the council and identification with the city are rather inconsistent. This suggests that the implementation of such channels itself does not reinforce political participation. In the face of public and political pressure to adopt management practices from the private sector, local public sector organizations need to consider that the key to citizens' political engagement may lie first and foremost in the creation of citizen trust and identification. This is achieved through the consistent delivery of reliable and positive public service experiences. The use of CRM practices may enhance such experiences, but is not in itself an end, but a means to an end. At the forefront of public service enhancement strategies needs to be the consideration of how to improve citizen satisfaction with the council through the content of the services provided. The question of how to deliver these services, in this case through technologically enabled channels, only comes secondary.