
CITIZEN SURVEYS IMPACT ON DECISIONS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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The new 'customer oriented' approach in local government significantly relies on the use of citizens surveys. Anyway, it is not clear how satisfaction ratings should be incorporated into the decision-making activity. This is mainly due to the fact that citizens' views on services are not statistically associated with service levels as indicated by objective measures. Moreover public administrators' decisions are characterised by a high degree of complexity since they have to combine 'service' and 'political' components. This paper aims at filling that theoretical and practical gap, by studying if and how surveys outputs actually influence decision maker's choices. A conceptual model is suggested and an explorative empirical research involving a sample of majors is described. Results show that the perceived reliability of the needs expressed through surveys has a second order effect on the final decision to intervene or not to improve the service quality. Results are then discussed and conclusions are drawn.

INTRODUCTION

A major shift from a pure 'efficiency orientation' to a more comprehensive 'customer orientation' has been characterising the public sector in the last two decades (Kouzmin et al. 1999). The very use of the term 'customer' by local authority staff and politicians is a mark of the deep-seated change taking place (Skelcher, 1992). In this context, a large number of studies has been addressing the application of (Total Quality Management) TQM to local government and public administrations (e.g. Navaratnam and Harris, 1995; Redman et al., 1995). For example, recent researches demonstrate that in UK the public and the private sectors are at a roughly similar state of development in quality management, with about 50% of the organisations having a formal TQM programme (Redman et al., 1995).

In particular, citizen surveys seem to play a central role in order to implement a customer-driven continuous improvement, but they have still not reached their full potential as valuable instruments for urban decision makers and managers (Watson et al., 1991). Despite some recent studies about budgeting processes (Franklin and Carberry-George, 1999; Ebdon and Franklin 2004), it is not clear how satisfaction ratings should be incorporated into the decision-making activity. The result is that professional organisations endorse measuring outcomes as citizens perceive them, but they are largely silent on what to do in response (Kelly, 2005).

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These difficulties are to be connected to a 25-year-long discussion about discrepancies among objective and subjective performance indicators (Kelly, 2005), from which robust critics against citizen surveys have arisen (Stipak, 1980). This seems to exactly reflect the mentioned debate between efficiency and customer orientations, emphasised by the particular complexity of political choices (Brudney and England, 1982). Up to now no shared agreement has been reached about how the decision process should treat these different indicators.

This article, adopting the decision maker perspective, try to fill that knowledge gap by suggesting a model building on some of the antecedents included in the well-known Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) in order to explain how both subjective and objective indicators can serve as inputs in the complex political decision process. A quasi-experiment is also performed to test the suggested hypotheses.

The paper is articulated as follows: the first section includes a review of the available literature about the shift from 'efficiency' to 'satisfaction' together with a discussion of the role of citizen surveys in the public sector. After that the current use or non-use of survey results as inputs for the decision process is analysed. The proposed model, set of hypotheses and methodology are then explained, followed by a description of the results. Finally findings, implications and limitations of the present study are discussed.

PUBLIC MARKETING AND CITIZEN SURVEYS

The valuable contribution for non-profit organisations deriving from a careful application of marketing has been widely discussed and assessed since the classical article by Kotler and Levy (1969) was published. After that, many authors argued the need to introduce a total marketing orientation in the public sector and specifically in local government (e.g. Ritchie and Labréque, 1975; Yorke, 1984). Anyway such a debate was not immediately followed by a practical application of those marketing principles. Indeed the 1980s were characterised by a strong focus on public administrations' economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Brown and Pyers, 1988). Finally during the 1990s attention shifted to quality and consumer satisfaction (Kouzmin et al. 1999), with the objective of implementing total quality in the public sector (Navaratnam and Harris, 1995; Redman et al., 1995). Among the others, Swiss (1992) contended that if introduced without overselling and with sensitivity to government's unique circumstances, reformed TQM could make a useful contribution to contemporary public management. Moreover Kouzmin et al. (1999) indicated citizens' charters, quality awards (ISO 9000-9004) and award competitions as potential instruments in order

to measure quality management and to introduce benchmarking in the public sector. Anyway, despite this strong focus on quality (and on the related organisational routines), the design of performance indicators has revealed to be very difficult due to the various meanings, the different audiences and the different contexts connect to the concept of performance (Kouzmin et al, 1999; Carter, 1991), and the criteria for measuring 'delivery effectiveness' are still not very obvious (Das et al, 1996). We can anyway distinguish a clear shift from 'efficiency orientation' toward 'customer orientation', driven by the general aim of achieving corporate objectives by giving customer satisfaction.

A similar path was followed by citizen surveys, whose usage is generally traced to the pioneering work of several medium to large U.S. cities in the early 1970s (Watson et al., 1991). Anyway early surveys were mainly characterised as a measure of local government effectiveness and productivity (Miller and Miller, 1991). In that phase, the measurement has been dominated by indicators which had little to do with the direct experience of customers (Pollitt, 1988). This attitude has significantly changed with the recent focus on TCM, according to which the customer is the ultimate determiner of quality (Swiss, 1992). Today citizen surveys are recognised for their usefulness in obtaining feedback in order to improve service delivery. However, citizen surveys have not reached their full potential as valuable instruments for urban decision makers and managers (Watson et al., 1991).

In this effort by city officials to 'stay in touch' with the views of the members of the community (Watson et al., 1991; Das et al., 1996), citizen surveys compete with a number of alternative instruments, such as output as indicators (e.g. the number of complaints), consultation exercises, user panels, opinion cards at service outlets and focus groups (Skelcher, 1992). Nowadays citizen surveys are the most applied tool, even if they present some limitations in that they do not involve a two-way communication such as focus groups (Ebdon and Franklin, 2004). Among the many types of locally sponsored surveys (concerning citizens' needs, behaviours, characteristics, policy preferences, service evaluations and hopes and dreams) the most useful tool for local government administrators is the survey that elicits citizens' assessments of city services - the evaluative survey (Miller and Miller, 1991).

The literature on citizen surveys covers more than survey uses and importance. It tells how to do surveys, how to interpret them, how many are done and how flawed and even dangerous they are (Miller and Miller, 1991). In particular, academics and practitioners have widely debated on what measurements to take in order to support strategic decisions. SERVQUAL, the instrument developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988; 1991; 1994), has found a wide diffusion

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among public sector studies (Donnelly et al., 1995; Wisniewski, 2001), despite a number of criticisms (Carman, 1990; Finn and Lamb, 1991; Teas, 1993; Brown et al., 1993; Cronin and Taylor, 1992, 1994). In particular Orwig et al. (1997) find that the dimensionality of SERVQUAL is problematic in the public sector and that its application should be preceded by appropriate testing of its psychometric properties. Anyway this instruments is valuable in that it allows to compare actual service evaluations and customer expectations.

Wiesniewski (2001) explains specific uses of SERVQUAL to support councils' decisions through gap analyses (Parasuraman et al., 1985); it can help in understanding current service quality, comparing different customers' groups and different (parts of the) services, providing insights into the internal customer and evaluating performance over time.

SURVEYS RESULTS AS INPUT FOR DECISIONS

Data collected to assess quality should be managerially useful (Williams et al., 1999): 'interesting' is code for 'useless' information, if it cannot help in making decisions, setting priorities, launching programmes or cancelling projects (Lunde, 1993). Anyway in the public sector it is still not clear how to use citizen surveys to act (Kouzmin et al., 1999). If on the other side we consider the private sector, the guiding rule is that delivering quality service helps a company at the bottom line, while customer dissatisfaction implies lost revenues. Therefore firms try to improve their offering according to the indication given by customer surveys in order to maximise profits (Berry and Parasuraman, 1997). Choice for the company is simpler, because at its core is the need to generate profit in order to survive. The calculus of decision is therefore quantifiable and hence clearer (Skelcher, 1992). Decision-making in the public sector is much more complicated, since administrators have to combine a 'service' component centring on economic issues and a 'political' component concerned with problems of distribution (Brudney and England, 1982). Hence consumers' satisfaction cannot be the only dimension in performance measurements and has to be handled with considerable caution (Swiss, 1992).

Given these peculiar constraints, there are many studies about different potential insights which can be derived from citizen survey. Such instruments are useful tools for evaluating public sector services (Miller and Miller, 1991; Watson et al., 1991) and citizen ratings of public service quality can be compared to the results of similar researches in the private sector (Poister and Henry, 1994) or to other municipalities to provide important benchmarks (Miller and Miller,

1991). The combination of citizen surveys and administrators' predictions of citizen views is another way to gain interesting insights (Melkers and Thomas, 1998).

Anyway, in spite of a number of attempts to analyze the validity and utility of citizen surveys, the results to date have been ambiguous and unconvincing (Watson et al., 1991) and different critics have emerged. One of the reasons is that citizens' views on services are not statistically associated with the levels of service outputs as indicated by objective measures (Stipak, 1980; Swiss, 1992). Brudney and England (1982) respond that citizen assessments in many cases actually correspond to objective measurements of service delivery and they argue that in a society committed to democratic norms, the views of the citizenry (no matter how (ill)-conceived) are significant in themselves. Parks (1984) also suggests to link survey data with more objective indicators. On the other hand, Watson et al. (1991) write that the finding of a wide disparity in the subjective perceptions of citizens and the objective assessments of service quality can be a most useful one.

The validity of subjective measures as indicators for policy performance has also been questioned because citizens are thought to have relatively little knowledge about local government and public affairs upon which base their evaluations of municipal services (Stipak, 1980).

Anyway the underlined difference between objective and subjective indicators is not surprising if we consider that customer satisfaction indexes are influenced by citizens' experience with the service and by the degree of homogeneity of the needs addressed (Roth and Bozinoff, 1989; Das et al., 1996).

Therefore, given the role of individual factors, it is likely that subjective evaluations will differ from objective indicators. Moreover those two kinds of measurement are not necessarily supposed to coincide: the same mismatching can also happen in the private sector when a firm focuses on value drivers which are not considered as determined by the customers and client surveys are used to correct this 'myopia'.

The real problem is then to understand objective and subjective measurements' roles and interactions in the decision making process. In this sense, only some early and general studies are available. Watson et al. (1991) discuss, through the use of a case study, how citizen surveys can be integrated into the policy, programme and budget processes of local government. Budget processes themselves are being widely re-examined including more objective performance-related data, as well

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as the subjective perceptions of non-traditionally dominant participant groups (Franklin and Brandi, 1999). In the same way Ebdon and Franklin (2004) contend that surveys can be used to identify citizens' priorities to guide budget allocations and to identify trends over time. At the same time, officials need to be careful in how they handle the input they receive: if citizens do not feel that their opinions are valued, the results may be worse than if the public had not been contacted in the first place (Ebdon and Franklin, 2004).

Therefore knowledge about the integration of objective and subjective measures into the decision-making process is still limited and empirical evidence is absolutely scarce. In order to fill this gap an explorative model is now introduced and its validity is investigated through a quasi-experiment.

HYPOTHESES

A model divided into two submodels is now proposed in order to identify the antecedents of the decision to intervene to improve the quality of a specific public service (figure 1).

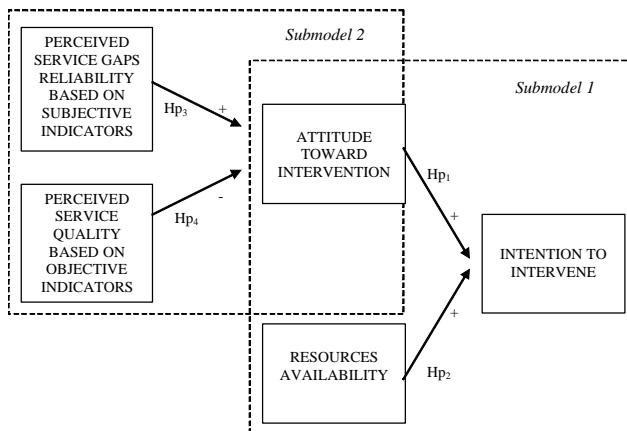


Figure 1: The research model and the two submodels

Submodel 1

This part of the model directly builds on the well-known Theory of Planned Behaviour -TPB- (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein and Ajzen 1975), which states that the individual intention to perform a specified behaviour is the result of three distinct components:

- Attitude toward behaviour: 'an individual's positive or negative

- feelings (evaluative affect) about performing the target behaviour' (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975, p.216);
- Subjective norms: 'the person's perception that most people who are important to him think he should or should not perform the behaviour in question' (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975, p.302);
 - Perceived behavioural control: 'the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour' (Ajzen, 1991, p.188).

If we adopt the political decision-marker's perspective, we contend that some of the antecedents suggested by TPB could explain a significant variance in the choice to intervene. In particular, two main factors are considered:

- attitude toward the intervention, which indicates decision maker's perspective about the usefulness and long-term benefits (Kouzmin et al., 1999) of the planned intervention. In particular, as the intervention is perceived to bring higher advantages, the intention to perform the behaviour increases;
- resource availability (derived from perceived behavioural control), which registers the availability of the needed financial resources, whose scarcity makes the choice among a wide array of potential interventions particularly difficult. The problem of scarce resources also implies for the public sector that a certain degree of insensitivity to consumer demands is positively desirable in order to protect the interests of vulnerable customers (Kouzmin et al., 1999). In other terms, public organisations are expected to operate in the 'public interest' where 'public' is a synonym for 'the community' and given the problem of limited resources, such a policy becomes manifestly difficult, although the more efficient use of these resources should still remain a priority (Yorke, 1984). Since budget constraints may often decide service availability rather than consumer needs (Das et al., 1996), this construct could explain a significant part of the variance in the intention to intervene.

Therefore, the model considers the overall complexity of the political decision process, making it clear that the relation between attitude and intervention needs to be observed together with at least another variable, the availability of resources.

Subjective norms are not directly considered in the study since our explorative model and the empirical experiment only consider citizens

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as source of influence. In this perspective perceived citizens' pressures on the decision maker are already taken into account by the construct 'perceived service gaps reliability based on subjective indicators', whose impact on the attitude toward the intervention is included in the second submodel. In other terms, we hypothesise that citizens' pressures contribute to shape the decision maker's attitude toward intervention and they do not exert a direct effect on the opportunity to intervene. Anyway the possible direct link between perceived service gaps reliability and intention to intervene will be tested, as well. Given these premises, we suggest that:

Hp₁: decision maker's attitude toward the intervention is positively related to the intention to intervene.

Hp₂: resources availability is positively related to the intention to intervene.

Submodel 2

The second parts of the model investigates if and how both objective and subjective indicators about service quality contribute to the formation of the decision makers' overall attitude toward the opportunity to intervene. In particular, two new constructs are included in the model:

- 'Perceived service gaps reliability based on subjective indicators' (SI) measures the decision maker's opinion about the relative importance and trustfulness of the results given by subjective indicators (i.e. service performance gaps), which can be derived from citizen surveys, focus groups, user panels and so on. As a matter of fact, we argue that those indicators have no direct effect on intention in themselves, but only through the cognitive internalisation and processes of the decision maker.
- 'Perceived service quality based on objective indicators' (OI) refers to decision maker's actual evaluation of the service under analysis, based on the results of objective indicators (e.g. time required to deliver a specific service). In particular, the perception of a good service quality level registered by objective indicators should lower the intention to intervene. Moreover we hypothesise that objective indicators can lead to the intervention only through their impact on decision maker's attitude. Given these premises we set the following hypotheses:

Hp₃: decision maker's perception about service gaps reliability based on subjective indicators has a positive effect on the decision marker's overall attitude toward the intervention.

Hp₃: decision maker's perception about service quality based on objective indicators has a negative effect on the decision marker's overall attitude toward the intervention.

METHODOLOGY

Overview

To evaluate the research model a survey was administered to a sample of majors of Italian towns. Subjects were asked to interact with a quasi-experiment about the decision to intervene to improve a particular service in their towns. Regression analyses were used to test the hypotheses related to the research model.

Measures

A questionnaire was first developed through a focus group involving three majors. The instrument was divided into two parts. In the first section respondents were asked some questions about services quality and citizen surveys in their towns: in particular majors were supposed to give a judgement based on available objective indicators about the quality of the register office in their towns. In the second part a quasi-experimental setting was applied. Respondents were given a stimulus text, reporting that a citizen survey conducted in their towns had underlined a 20% gap between desired and perceived service levels (respectively 6 and 4,8 on a seven-point scale). After that, majors had to answer a set of questions.

Overall, five constructs were measured: attitude toward intervention, resources availability, perceived service gaps reliability based on subjective indicators, perceived service quality based on objective indicators, and intention to intervene. All items were measured on seven point Likert-type scales and were referred to the register office. The constructs were analysed using a confirmatory factor analysis (principal component with varimax rotation) and Cronbach's statistic alpha (Cronbach, 1970) was computed to evaluate the reliability of the scales (except for intention

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to intervene, which was measured through one item only). SPSS 13.0 was used for this computation. All scales show reliability values over 0.70 (Table 1).

Table 1: Factor loadings and Cronbach's Alpha

	Perceived service level based on objective indicators (OI)	Perceived service gaps reliability based on subjective indicators (SI)	Attitude toward intervention	Resource availability
Available obj indicators show an overall good service level Based on obj indicators I am satisfied about the service level No critical points are underlined by obj indicators	.875 .923 .743			
Citizens' service evaluation is reliable The difference between service level expectations and perceptions is significant Citizens have a good knowledge about service efficiency The gap between citizens' expectations and perceptions indicates an actual need		.859 .692 .686 .474		
An intervention could improve service quality To intervene is a priority for me I like the idea of intervening To intervene is a good idea			.875 .900 .886 .902	
There will be enough financial resources to intervene The intervention is compatible with budget priorities The expenses for the intervention will not damage other services quality				.860 .870 .548
Intention to intervene: I intend to intervene in the next two years				
Cronbach's Alpha	.83	.74	.93	.75

SAMPLE

The questionnaire was mailed to the majors of 225 towns selected from a population of 8101 Italian towns, based on geographical and dimensional stratified sampling. Majors were chosen as key informants, since they actually make the decision to intervene to improve their towns' services quality. 52 questionnaires were returned, but four of them were deleted due to incomplete answers, giving a final response rate of 21.3%. Average population of respondents' towns was 4,509 people. Some of the non-respondents were also randomly contacted by phone in order to understand why they did not take part in the survey. Lack of time was the most common answer.

RESULTS

Multiple regression analyses were used for hypotheses testing. Analysis of Submodel 1 shows an adjusted R^2 of 0.683, indicating that the independent variables account for 68.3% of the variation in the intention to intervene. The hypothesis number, standardised beta coefficients, t-test statistic and significance of each independent variable in the final equation are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Submodel 1 Estimations.

Variable	Standardised Beta	t	Sig.
Attitude toward intervention (Hp.1)	.539	5.971	.000
Resources availability (Hp.2)	.444	4.918	.000

Results show that the intention to intervene to improve the service quality is positively and strongly related both to attitude toward intervention and to resource availability. Therefore hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported, in accordance to TPB.

A further multiple regression was performed in order to exclude decision maker's perceptions based on objective and subjective indicators that could exert a direct effect on the decision to intervene. A model including all the four variables as first order antecedents of intention was therefore tested. The values derived for subjective (SI) and objective (OI) indicators perceptions were not significant, demonstrating the absence of a direct effect on intention.

Submodel 2, regression analysis gives an adjusted R^2 of 0.283. Table 2 summarises hypothesis number, standardised beta coefficients, t-test statistic and significance of each independent variable in the final equation.

Table 3: Submodel 2 Estimations

Variable	Standardised Beta	t	Sig.
Subjective indicators (SI) (Hp.3)	.476	3.859	.000
Objective indicators (OI) (Hp.4)	-.234	-1.892	.065

Results show that the service quality level perceived from objective indicators is negatively related to the intention to intervene: this means that if quality is already acceptable majors do not feel the need to improve it. Therefore Hp_3 is supported. On the other hand the perception of the reliability of the service gaps derived from subjective indicators (citizen surveys) has a positive and significant impact on the intention to intervene. Hence Hp_4 is confirmed, as well.

DISCUSSION

Survey results demonstrate that citizen surveys have an impact on the decision maker's choice to intervene to improve the quality of a specific

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service provided by local government. Anyway their impact is not direct, but they can contribute to shape decision maker's attitude which, in turn, significantly influences the final behaviour. At the level of attitude (Submodel 2), indicators of citizens' opinions about service gaps are also mixed with perceptions based on objective indicators: therefore their effect can be 'diluted'. At a further point (Submodel 1) the attitude toward the intervention is compared to the available resources in order to assess budget priorities. Hence results from citizen surveys have a second order effect on the final decision, but they have to pass through two filters: consonance / dissonance with perception of service quality from objective indicators and resources availability.

The results of this study underline the complexity of local government decisions as compared to the private sector ones. In the first case, citizens' opinions are taken into account but the satisfaction of the emerging needs is not straightforward since the choice is more complex and it involves wider budget considerations. On the other hand, in the private sector companies are 'forced' to improve their offering to the clients' demand if they want to stay competitive.

A second interesting point with respect to the decision maker is that since the final choice depends on his attitude, a citizen orientated attitude is required in order to listen to pressures and needs expressed by people. Therefore, a survey's efficacy strongly relies on decision marker's efficiency orientation (objective indicators) and customer orientation (subjective indicators). Official's 'customer based education' is then a pre-requisite to let citizen surveys express their potentials.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has suggested and tested an explorative model in order to assess whether or not citizen surveys have an impact on local government decision to intervene to improve the quality of a specific service. Results have demonstrated that citizens' needs expressed through surveys or other indicators exert only an indirect impact on the final choice, by acting on decision maker's attitude about the opportunity to act to improve the service. This second order effect emphasises the role of people within local government, since the effectiveness of citizen surveys strongly depends on decision maker's perception that the expressed opinions are reliable and indicate a true need.

Some limitations of this study have to be underlined. First of all, the explorative model presented in this paper includes only pressures put by one of many potential different local government stakeholders: citizens. If other actors are considered, the impact of subjective norms should also be tested.

Secondly, a larger sample could have given a stronger support to the suggested model. Moreover a sort of self-segmentation of the sample could have happened. In that perspective majors who decided to take part in the survey could be more oriented to customers and surveys than their colleagues.

Further researches should then enlarge the analysed sample to increase the reliability of the model. Constructs such as the mentioned subjective norms should also be gradually added to cover the whole complexity of the analysed decision.

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