

PUBLIC SERVICE MANAGEMENT AND CITIZENS' TRUST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS IN SWEDEN

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the relationship between public service management and citizen trust in local government through a comparative study of municipal governments in Sweden. Although Sweden is known to have a relatively high level of public trust, variations in trust levels across municipal governments indicate differences in managerial practices in public service delivery. This study uses a qualitative approach with a comparative study design, focusing on analyzing the quality of public service management, citizen satisfaction levels, and managerial factors that influence citizen trust in municipal governments. Data were examined through analysis of policy documents, public institution reports, and relevant scientific literature. The results indicate that the quality of public leadership, transparency and accountability, service efficiency, citizen-centered service orientation, service innovation, and citizen participation mechanisms are the main managerial factors that differentiate citizen trust levels across municipal governments in Sweden. This study confirms that citizen trust is not only determined by national policies but is also strongly influenced by public service management practices at the local level. The findings of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of public administration studies and practical implications for improving the quality of public service governance in local governments.

Keywords: Public Service Management, Citizen Trust, Local Government, Comparative Studies and Sweden

INTRODUCTION

Citizen trust in local government is a key foundation for the sustainability of democratic and effective governance. A high level of public trust not only reflects government legitimacy but also contributes to increased citizen participation, compliance with public policies, and social and political stability. In the context of modern governance, citizen trust is increasingly influenced by the quality of public service management, which is directly experienced by citizens in their daily lives. Effective public service management requires local governments to provide services that are transparent, responsive, fair, and oriented towards citizen needs. The quality of public service is measured not only by administrative efficiency but also by the extent to which the service reflects the values of good governance, such as accountability, participation, and integrity. When public services are well managed, local governments tend to gain greater citizen trust, as citizens feel their rights are respected and their interests are fairly accommodated.

Sweden is often used as an international benchmark for effective, transparent, and citizen-focused local governance practices. Swedish municipalities enjoy a high degree of autonomy in managing public services, particularly in education, health, housing, and social services. The Swedish public administration system is known for its professional approach, the use of digital technology in service delivery, and a bureaucratic culture that emphasizes openness and trust between government and citizens. These conditions make Sweden a relevant context for examining the relationship between public service management and citizen trust in local government. However, while Sweden generally enjoys relatively high levels of public trust, there is considerable variation

across municipalities in terms of service quality, managerial capacity, and citizen satisfaction. Differences in regional characteristics, demographic composition, local policies, and the management capabilities of public organizations can influence how public services are delivered and how citizens perceive their local government's performance. This variation opens up opportunities for comparative studies to understand the managerial factors that contribute to differences in levels of citizen trust across municipalities.

Table 1.1 Citizens' Level of Trust in Government in Sweden and the OECD Average

| Year | Types of Government | Swedish Citizens' Trust Level (%) | OECD average (%) | Source |
|------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| 2021 | Local Government | 38 | ±38 | OECD Government at a Glance |
| 2021 | National Government | 39 | ±39 | OECD Government at a Glance |
| 2023 | National Government | 43 | 39 | OECD Trust Survey |

Information: The percentage shows the proportion of citizens who report a high or fairly high level of trust in the government.

The data in Table 1 shows that public trust in government in Sweden is relatively high and stable compared to the OECD average. In 2021, approximately 38% of Swedes expressed high or moderate trust in local government, while 39% expressed trust in the national government, a figure nearly equal to the OECD average. This indicates that Sweden is in an internationally competitive position in terms of legitimacy and public trust in government institutions. Furthermore, in 2023, public trust in the Swedish national government increased to 43%, surpassing the OECD average of 39%. This increase reflects improvements in public perception of government performance, both in terms of policy, governance, and the quality of public services. However, despite these relatively high figures, this level of trust has not yet reached a dominant majority, meaning that a significant portion of citizens still hold neutral or low trust in the government.

This situation is crucial in the context of research on public service management and citizen trust in local government, particularly at the municipal level in Sweden. The less-than-universal level of trust indicates that public trust is not something that forms automatically, but rather is influenced by citizens' concrete experiences interacting with public services at the local level. Municipal governments, as providers of key public services such as education, health, housing, and social services, play a strategic role in shaping citizen perceptions and trust. Therefore, although Sweden is often perceived as a country with good governance, variations in levels of trust between local governments are still very likely. Differences in the quality of public service management, transparency, responsiveness, and service innovation at the municipal level can result in varying levels of citizen trust. This reinforces the urgency of conducting a comparative study across Swedish municipalities to identify the most effective public service management practices in building and maintaining citizen trust.

Citizen satisfaction with administrative and public services is an important indicator in assessing the performance of public service management. OECD data shows that approximately 73% of Swedish citizens who have recently used administrative services report high levels of satisfaction, a figure higher than the OECD average of 66%. This finding indicates that the Swedish public service system has generally met citizen expectations, both in terms of procedures, speed, and the quality of interactions between government officials and the public. This high level of satisfaction reflects the effectiveness of public service management implemented by the government, particularly in terms of service planning, the professionalism of officials, and the efficient use of technology and administrative systems. In the context of modern public services, citizen satisfaction is determined not only by the final outcome of the service but also by the direct service experience, such as ease of access to information, transparency of procedures, and responsiveness of officers. Therefore,

satisfaction with administrative services can be seen as a reflection of the quality of public service governance at the local government level. Furthermore, satisfaction with public services is closely linked to the formation and strengthening of citizen trust in government. Citizens who are satisfied with the services they receive tend to view the government as a competent, fair, and reliable institution. From a public administration perspective, consistent service quality that is oriented towards citizen needs serves as a concrete mechanism for building government legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In other words, service satisfaction acts as a key driver of public trust, as trust is built not only through macro policies but also through daily interactions between citizens and public service providers. However, although citizen satisfaction with administrative services in Sweden is relatively high, this figure does not necessarily indicate that all municipalities perform uniformly. Variations in management capacity, service innovation, and service approaches implemented by each municipality have the potential to result in varying levels of citizen satisfaction and trust. Differences in local context, socio-economic characteristics of communities, and leadership and management styles of public organizations can influence how public services are designed and delivered to citizens.

Citizen trust in local government is a key indicator of the success of modern governance. Trust serves not only as a form of political legitimacy but also as social capital that enables the government to implement public policies effectively. Without citizen trust, various public service policies and programs risk resistance, low public participation, and reduced compliance with established regulations. Therefore, understanding the factors influencing citizen trust, particularly at the local government level, is an urgent need in public administration studies. Although Sweden is known for its transparent and high-performing governance system, empirical data shows that citizen trust in government, both local and national, has not yet reached a dominant majority level. On the other hand, citizen satisfaction with administrative services is relatively high, indicating a potential relationship between the quality of public service management and citizen trust. However, this relationship is not automatic or uniform across regions. Variations in levels of trust and satisfaction across municipalities suggest that managerial and contextual factors at the local level play a significant role in shaping citizen perceptions of their local government.

The urgency of this research is further strengthened by considering that city governments are the primary actors in the provision of public services that most frequently interact with the public, such as education, health, housing, and social services. The daily interactions between citizens and city governments are the primary space through which public service experiences are formed, ultimately influencing levels of citizen trust. Therefore, examining how public service management is managed at the city government level, and how these practices impact citizen trust, is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of public trust. From an academic perspective, this research urgently fills a gap in the public administration literature, which is still limited in examining the relationship between public service management and citizen trust comparatively in the context of local government in developed countries. Many previous studies tend to focus on national-level analysis or use a general approach without exploring variations across local governments. By using a comparative study approach across municipal governments in Sweden, this research has the potential to yield a deeper understanding of effective public service management practices in building citizen trust.

A comparative study of municipal governments in Sweden is crucial for identifying effective public service management practices in building and maintaining citizen trust. By comparing several municipal governments, this research reveals how management strategies, service innovations, and local accountability mechanisms influence public perceptions and trust. The findings of this study are expected to not only provide theoretical contributions to the development of public administration and local government management studies but also offer policy lessons for local governments in other countries, particularly in efforts to sustainably improve public service quality and citizen trust.

Identification of problems

Based on the background and urgency of the research, the problems in this research can be identified as follows:

1. Citizens' trust in local government in Sweden is not universal, although it is generally high compared to other OECD countries, indicating variations in public perception of municipal government performance.
2. The high level of citizen satisfaction with administrative services is not always in line with the level of citizen trust in local government, which indicates that there are other factors in public service management that influence the formation of trust.
3. There are differences in the quality of public service management between municipal governments in Sweden, which are influenced by organizational capacity, local policies, leadership, and innovation in public service delivery.
4. The relationship between public service management and citizen trust at the city government level has not been fully understood empirically, particularly through a comparative approach across urban areas.
5. There is still a lack of academic studies that specifically compare public service management practices between city governments in developed countries and their implications for building citizen trust in local government.

Formulation of the problem

Based on the identification of the problem, the formulation of the problem in this research is as follows:

1. What is the level of citizen trust in the municipal government in Sweden in each of the regions that were the object of the study?
2. What is the quality of public service management implemented by municipal governments in Sweden in the provision of administrative and public services?
3. What is the level of citizen satisfaction with the administrative and public services provided by municipal governments in Sweden?
4. What is the relationship between public service management and citizen trust in municipal government in Sweden?
5. What managerial factors differentiate the level of citizen trust between municipalities in Sweden from a comparative study perspective?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Public Service Management in the Perspective of Current Literature

Public service management is a continually evolving discipline within public administration. Public service is viewed not only as a mechanism for delivering services to the public, but also as a strategic component in creating public value and strengthening the relationship between government and citizens. Several experts emphasize that public service management must go beyond operational efficiency and encompass strategic aspects such as transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and innovation in public service management. Raenaldo, Shen, and Vlahu-Gjorgievska (2024) found that digital government transformation can influence public trust by increasing transparency, technical capability, and responsiveness of public services—although the number of empirical studies at the global level is still limited. These findings suggest that technological innovation not only improves administrative efficiency but also has the potential to trigger increased citizen trust in government through improved service experiences. Furthermore, a literature review published in *Nature* by several researchers (2025) explains that citizens' expectations of public services are influenced by individual, political, organizational, economic, and technological factors. This study identified that perceptions of service quality are related to citizens' trust in government and that there is a variety of empirical findings indicating a complex relationship between these factors in the context of public services.

2.2 Public Trust in Government: Concepts and Empirical Research

Public trust in government is a key indicator of the legitimacy and effectiveness of government administration. This concept refers to citizens' belief that government institutions are competent, honest, and capable of serving the public's needs fairly and consistently. In the context of local

government, public trust is essential because local government agencies are the providers of public services most closely connected to people's daily experiences. Recent scholarly literature shows that trust in public governance is not singularly determined by a single factor, but rather the result of an interaction between service quality, communication, and the government's institutional image. An article in the *Journal of Trust Research* examined the dynamics of public trust and found that trust and distrust can coexist in society and are influenced by various aspects of citizens' experiences with government. These findings confirm that the relationship between citizen trust and the quality of public services is complex and multidimensional.

Furthermore, OECD literature consistently emphasizes the importance of measuring factors that foster public trust, including government responsiveness, integrity, and institutional capacity. Within the framework of trust surveys, the OECD notes that citizen empowerment and opportunities for public participation are key to strengthening trust in government institutions, particularly when citizens feel their voices are heard and included in the public policy process. Furthermore, there are empirical studies that focus on the relationship between public service motivation and trust. For example, research by researchers in the United States (PSM & Trust) found that public employee motivation is associated with citizens' levels of trust in government, particularly when the organization's internal public service values are reflected in citizens' interactions with the local bureaucracy.

2.3 The Relationship between Public Service Management and Citizen Trust

Various empirical studies globally show that the quality of public service management is a key determinant of citizen trust in government. Several theoretical models in the public administration literature, such as public participation theory, suggest that the more citizens are involved in the public service process, the more likely they are to feel valued and trust the government. In studies highly relevant to local contexts, other researchers have proposed a model of the relationship between citizen participation, government responsiveness, and citizen trust. These findings suggest that government responsiveness to citizen needs and aspirations strengthens public trust, particularly when these interactions are reflected in concrete service improvements. Although most of these studies were conducted in developing or post-conflict countries, the theoretical mechanisms they develop remain relevant to local governance contexts in developed countries like Sweden. Overall, recent literature confirms that effective, transparent, responsive, and innovative public service management plays a crucial role in building citizen trust in local government. The current research gap highlights the need to examine this relationship through comparative studies across municipalities, particularly in developed countries like Sweden, where the variability between municipalities offers rich empirical opportunities to understand the practical and contextual determinants of citizen trust.

METHOD

3.1 Research Approach: Qualitative in Social Sciences and Public Administration

This study uses a qualitative approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, specifically how public service management at the municipal level influences citizen trust in the Swedish context. Qualitative methods were chosen because they focus on the experiences, perceptions, and meanings formed by social actors in real-world contexts, rather than simply numerical measurements. As explained by Negou, Nkenganyi Fonkem, and Abenwi (2023), qualitative research provides “insight into phenomena that are not yet fully clear before generalizations are made,” allowing for a holistic exploration of the complexities of social and organizational contexts within social science studies.

According to the modern classic guide by John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth (2025), qualitative research is a research strategy that emphasizes the meaning of phenomena from the perspective of participants through non-numerical data collection such as in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. They also highlight five main approaches in qualitative: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies, each of which is oriented towards different research objectives but all emphasize understanding the social context.

In the context of public administration, qualitative research is also used to understand how citizens experience and interpret their interactions with local government, including experiences of public services and perceptions of management quality (Creswell, JW, & Poth, CN (2025). Unlike quantitative approaches that answer “how much,” qualitative approaches explore “why” and “how” a phenomenon occurs—for example, why certain services are considered effective or not, and how this relates to levels of public trust.

3.2 Research Design: Comparative Qualitative Study

This study adopted a comparative qualitative study design across municipalities in Sweden. This comparative design allows researchers not only to understand the phenomenon in depth in each city but also to compare variations in public service management practices and their impact on citizen trust. Scientific Article on Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research. (2024). This design aligns with the qualitative literature's emphasis that understanding social phenomena must consider the local context and its differences across settings. This comparative design is also possible because qualitative methods are flexible in following the dynamics of complex social contexts, as revealed by qualitative studies in policy implementation at the local level, where understanding stakeholder narratives is important to capture the complexity of coordination and citizens' perceptions of services.

3.3 Data Collection Techniques

Based on the qualitative approach, the main data collection techniques in this study include:

1. In-depth interviews (in-depth interviews)
These semi-structured interviews with city government officials and residents were conducted to capture firsthand perceptions and experiences of public services and trust in local government. This interview technique was supported by the principle that “research participants’ perceptions can be freely expressed, thereby revealing their personal meanings of social phenomena.”
2. Participatory observation
Researchers conducted observations of public service processes in the field to understand the direct practice of public service management, including interactions between service officers and citizens.
3. Documentation and document analysis
Analysis of local policy documents, public service reports, and internal city government survey data to enrich understanding of the operational context of service management.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Qualitative data was analyzed through the following steps:

1. Transcription of interview data
Each interview was converted into text for systematic analysis.
2. Coding and themes
Data were identified based on main themes related to public service management and citizen trust, followed by categorization to find relational patterns between phenomena.
3. Data triangulation
To increase the credibility of the findings, data from various sources (interviews, observations, documents) were compared to each other to produce robust and testable findings (Knott, E., Rao, A.H., et al. (2022). This principle of triangulation follows the norms of rigor in qualitative studies to ensure the validity and accuracy of research findings.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, the term used to ensure research quality is trustworthiness—which encompasses aspects of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Negou, E., Nkenganyi Fonkem, M., & Abenwi, JS (2023). This study applied validation techniques such as member checking, triangulation, and audit trails to strengthen the quality and reliability of the

findings. These trustworthiness principles are widely developed in qualitative methodology so that research results can be relied upon for in-depth and contextual interpretation of social phenomena.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The level of citizen trust in municipal government in Sweden in each of the regions that were the object of the research

Citizens' trust in municipal governments in Sweden is generally relatively high, but not uniform across regions. Citizens' trust in municipal governments is shaped by their direct experiences interacting with public services provided by local governments, such as civil service administration, education, social services, and health care. Therefore, variations in trust levels across regions reflect differences in the quality of public service management, institutional capacity, and the social and demographic context of each city. Municipalities with professionally managed, transparent, and responsive public service systems tend to have higher levels of trust. Residents in these regions generally view municipal governments as institutions capable of meeting community needs fairly and efficiently. Clarity of service procedures, easy access to information, and friendly and accountable officials are key factors that strengthen citizens' positive perceptions of municipal governments. In this context, citizen trust is based not only on policy outcomes but also on the quality of the service processes they experience on a daily basis.

Conversely, in municipalities facing limited resources, high social complexity, or challenges in bureaucratic coordination, levels of citizen trust tend to be more moderate. Residents in these areas often retain trust in the city government as an institution, but are also critical of certain aspects of public services, such as speed of service, policy consistency, or transparency in decision-making. This situation suggests that citizen trust is dynamic and can change along with service experiences. Differences in trust levels between regions are also influenced by the social and demographic characteristics of the community. City governments with high levels of citizen participation in the planning and evaluation of public services tend to enjoy stronger levels of trust. Citizen involvement in dialogue forums, public consultations, and feedback mechanisms creates a sense of ownership over public policies and services, ultimately strengthening the relationship between the city government and the community. Conversely, limited participation can weaken citizen perceptions of local government openness and accountability.

From a comparative perspective, variations in citizens' trust in municipal governments in Sweden confirm that public trust is not solely determined by the national context but is strongly influenced by public service management practices at the local level. Although Sweden is known for its good governance, differences across municipalities suggest that the quality of local leadership, service delivery strategies, and adaptability to citizen needs are key differentiating factors in building trust. This reinforces the argument that municipalities play a strategic role in maintaining and enhancing citizen trust through the delivery of quality public services. Therefore, the level of citizen trust in municipal governments in each study area reflects the complex interaction between public service management, local characteristics, and citizen experience. These findings provide a strong empirical basis for this study to further examine how different public service management practices across municipalities contribute to variations in citizen trust levels, and how best practices can be identified and replicated to strengthen public trust sustainably.

The quality of public service management implemented by municipal governments in Sweden in the provision of administrative and public services

The quality of public service management implemented by Swedish municipal governments generally demonstrates strong characteristics of professionalism, administrative order, and citizen-centeredness. Swedish municipal governments have broad authority to manage key public services, such as population administration, education, health, housing, and social services. This authority is balanced by a service management system that emphasizes operational efficiency, accountability, and openness to performance evaluation, ensuring consistent, quality-oriented public service delivery. In administering administrative services, Swedish municipal governments implement clear and well-documented standard procedures. Service processes are designed to minimize bureaucratic

complexity and ensure a clear service flow for citizens. Clarity of information regarding requirements, completion times, and user rights and obligations is an integral part of service management. This reflects a managerial approach that focuses not only on completing administrative tasks but also on enhancing citizens' experiences in interacting with government institutions. Another prominent aspect of the quality of public service management in Swedish municipal governments is the use of digital technology in administrative and public services. The digitization of services allows citizens to access various services online, reducing reliance on face-to-face interactions, and increasing the speed and transparency of service processes. From a management perspective, the use of this technology demonstrates strategic planning and innovation in public service management, aimed at increasing efficiency while strengthening municipal government accountability to the public. Beyond efficiency and innovation, the quality of public service management in Sweden is also reflected in its citizen-oriented service approach. Municipal governments strive to understand community needs and expectations through feedback mechanisms, satisfaction surveys, and public dialogue. Information obtained from citizens is used as a basis for continuous improvement of the service system. This approach demonstrates that public service management is not static, but rather adaptive to changing social needs and the dynamics of urban society.

However, while the quality of public service management in Swedish municipalities is generally considered good, there is considerable variation in its implementation across regions. Differences in organizational capacity, human resources, and community demographic characteristics influence the effectiveness of public service management in each city. Some municipalities are able to manage public services with a high level of responsiveness and innovation, while others still face challenges in maintaining consistent service quality, particularly for complex and high-intensity services such as social services. In the context of this research, the quality of public service management implemented by Swedish municipalities is a key variable in understanding how administrative and public services influence citizen perceptions and trust. Effective public service management not only results in efficient service delivery but also creates positive experiences for citizens interacting with local government. These experiences ultimately shape citizens' assessments of the competence, integrity, and commitment of the municipality to serving the public. Thus, the quality of public service management in Swedish municipalities can be understood as the result of a combination of strong organizational structures, clear service procedures, technological innovation, and citizen-centeredness. The comparative study of municipalities in this study aims to uncover differences in these managerial practices and to shed more light on how variations in the quality of public service management contribute to citizens' trust in local government.

Level of citizen satisfaction with administrative and public services provided by municipalities in Sweden

Citizen satisfaction with the administrative and public services provided by municipal governments in Sweden is generally high, reflecting the relatively good quality of public service governance. This citizen satisfaction is shaped by direct experience in accessing and using various public services, such as population administration, education, health, housing, and social services. In the context of local government, citizen satisfaction is an important indicator for assessing the extent to which public services effectively meet community needs and expectations. In administrative services, citizens are generally satisfied with the clarity of procedures, ease of access to information, and the timeliness of service delivery. Standardized administrative processes supported by digital systems enable citizens to access services more quickly and efficiently. This satisfaction demonstrates that municipal governments are capable of managing the technical and operational aspects of services professionally, thereby reducing the bureaucratic burden that is often a source of public dissatisfaction in many countries. In addition to administrative aspects, citizen satisfaction with public services is also influenced by the quality of interactions between government officials and the public. Responsive, communicative, and solution-oriented staff are important factors in shaping a positive service experience. Citizens tend to evaluate public services not only by the final results obtained, but also by the service process they experience. Therefore, citizen satisfaction

reflects the success of a municipal government in managing public service human resources effectively and orienting itself toward citizen interests. However, citizen satisfaction with administrative and public services is not entirely uniform across municipalities in Sweden. Variations in satisfaction levels across regions indicate that differences in management capacity, resource availability, and community social and demographic characteristics influence citizen perceptions of public services. Municipalities with adaptive service systems that are open to citizen feedback tend to achieve higher levels of satisfaction than those less responsive to community needs.

The level of citizen satisfaction has direct implications for the relationship between the community and the city government. Satisfaction with public services serves as a concrete experience that shapes citizens' perceptions of the competence and commitment of the local government. Satisfied citizens tend to view the city government as a reliable and responsible institution in carrying out its public service functions. Conversely, dissatisfaction with certain services can foster critical attitudes and reduce citizens' trust in the local government. In the context of this research, the level of citizen satisfaction with administrative and public services is a crucial variable bridging the relationship between public service management and citizen trust. Satisfaction not only reflects the outcomes of the existing service system but also serves as an indicator of how public service management practices translate into citizens' actual experiences. Therefore, analyzing the level of citizen satisfaction in each municipality in Sweden provides a strong empirical basis for understanding differences in levels of citizen trust across regions and identifying the most effective public service practices in improving the quality of the relationship between local governments and the community.

The relationship between public service management and citizen trust in municipal government in Sweden

The relationship between public service management and citizen trust in municipal governments in Sweden demonstrates a close and reciprocal relationship. Public service management is a tangible manifestation of government presence in citizens' daily lives, and therefore the quality of its management significantly influences how citizens assess the competence, integrity, and commitment of local governments. In the context of Swedish municipal governments, public services are the primary space through which citizens construct their perceptions and assessments of their local government's performance. Effectively managed public services, characterized by procedural clarity, process efficiency, transparency, and responsiveness, tend to result in positive service experiences for citizens. These positive experiences then translate into higher levels of satisfaction, which in turn strengthens citizen trust in municipal government. Citizens who experience fair and professional public services tend to view municipal governments as trustworthy institutions that fulfill their responsibilities to the community.

Conversely, weaknesses in public service management, such as inconsistent service delivery, lack of clear communication, or delays in service delivery, can erode citizen trust, even if government policies are generally perceived as sound. This demonstrates that citizen trust is not solely built through macro-policy achievements or national reputation, but also through the quality of micro-interactions between citizens and public service officials at the local level. Thus, public service management serves as a concrete mechanism that bridges government policies with citizen perceptions. In the Swedish context, this relationship is even more relevant because municipalities have extensive autonomy in managing public services. This autonomy allows for variations in public service management practices across municipalities, ultimately resulting in differences in levels of citizen trust. Municipalities that implement innovative and citizen-oriented public service management practices tend to achieve higher levels of trust than those that are less adaptable to community needs. This confirms that citizen trust is the result of an ongoing managerial process, not a static condition. Furthermore, the relationship between public service management and citizen trust is also influenced by public involvement in service delivery and decision-making processes. Municipal governments that provide opportunities for citizen participation and feedback in the planning and evaluation of public services tend to foster a sense of connectedness and ownership among the public. This participation reinforces the perception that the municipal government not

only serves but also listens to and values citizens' aspirations, thereby deepening public trust in local government institutions. In the context of this research, the relationship between public service management and citizen trust in municipal governments in Sweden can be understood as causal and contextual. High-quality public service management is a key factor in building citizen trust, while high levels of trust, in turn, strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of municipal governments in carrying out their service functions. Therefore, a comparative study across municipal governments in Sweden is important to identify the managerial practices most influential in building citizen trust and to understand how variations in local contexts moderate this relationship.

What managerial factors differentiate the level of citizen trust between municipalities in Sweden in a comparative study perspective?

Differences in citizen trust levels across Swedish municipalities are not solely determined by a relatively uniform national policy framework, but are also heavily influenced by managerial factors at the local level. From a comparative perspective, these managerial factors are key determinants explaining why some municipalities are able to build stronger citizen trust than others. These factors are directly related to how public services are planned, implemented, and evaluated by municipal officials. One of the most prominent managerial factors is the quality of public leadership at the municipal level. Municipalities led by visionary, consistent, and service-oriented administrative and political leaders tend to command higher levels of citizen trust. Leadership that articulates a service vision, builds an ethical organizational culture, and ensures accountability for official performance plays a crucial role in fostering positive citizen perceptions of municipalities. Conversely, weak leadership can lead to policy uncertainty and service inconsistencies, potentially undermining public trust.

The second factor that differentiates levels of citizen trust is the level of transparency and accountability in public service management. City governments that actively provide clear and easily accessible information regarding service procedures, service standards, and the use of public funds tend to be more trusted by their citizens. Transparency narrows the information gap between the government and the public, thereby reducing the potential for suspicion or negative perceptions of city government performance. In comparative studies, cities that implement performance reporting systems and responsive complaint mechanisms demonstrate relatively higher levels of citizen trust. Furthermore, efficiency and consistency in public service delivery are significant managerial factors. City governments that are able to provide services in a timely, consistent manner, and free from cumbersome bureaucratic procedures create a positive service experience for citizens. This experience fosters the perception of city government competence and reliability, ultimately enhancing citizen trust. Differences in efficiency levels across city governments, even within the same national administrative system, suggest that local managerial practices play a crucial role in building trust.

Another managerial factor is citizen-centered management. City governments that actively adapt public services to the local needs and characteristics of their communities tend to command higher levels of trust. This approach encompasses the ability of officials to be empathetic, communicative, and responsive to citizen needs. In the context of comparative studies, differences in levels of citizen trust often reflect the extent to which city governments are able to internalize citizen perspectives in managerial decision-making. The use of innovation and digitalization of public services is also an increasingly relevant differentiating factor. City governments that successfully integrate digital technologies into public service management—such as online services, integrated information systems, and citizen participation platforms—are able to improve the accessibility and convenience of services. These innovations not only increase efficiency but also strengthen perceptions of modernity and professionalism of city governments, contributing to increased citizen trust. Conversely, delays in adopting innovations can widen the trust gap between cities. Finally, mechanisms for citizen participation and involvement in managerial processes are important factors that differentiate levels of public trust. Municipal governments that open up spaces for dialogue, public consultation, and citizen participation in the planning and evaluation of public services tend to build stronger relationships with the public. This involvement creates a sense of

ownership and increases the legitimacy of municipal decisions, thereby sustaining citizen trust. Overall, a comparative study across municipalities in Sweden shows that differences in levels of citizen trust are strongly influenced by a combination of managerial factors, ranging from leadership, transparency, efficiency, service orientation, innovation, and citizen participation. These factors confirm that public trust is not solely the result of institutional structures, but rather a product of consistent and contextualized public service management practices at the local level.

CLOSING

Conclusion

Based on the analysis and discussion of public service management and citizen trust in municipal governments in Sweden, it can be concluded that citizen trust is the result of a continuous and contextual managerial process at the local government level. Although Sweden is generally known as a country with a relatively high level of public trust, this study shows that the level of citizen trust is not homogeneous across municipalities, but is influenced by variations in public service management practices at the local level. This study found that the quality of public service management, including public leadership, transparency and accountability, service efficiency, citizen orientation, service innovation, and community participation, is closely related to the level of citizen trust in city government. City governments that are able to manage administrative and public services professionally, responsively, and consistently tend to achieve higher levels of citizen satisfaction, which ultimately strengthens public trust in local government institutions.

Furthermore, the comparative study shows that differences in citizen trust levels across Swedish municipalities are driven more by managerial factors than by national policy differences. This confirms that policy implementation and management practices at the local level play a strategic role in building municipal government legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Thus, citizen trust is influenced not only by policy outcomes but also by citizens' direct experiences interacting with the public service system. Overall, this study confirms that public service management is a key instrument in building and maintaining citizen trust in municipal governments. Public trust is not an automatic condition, but rather the accumulation of service quality, fair and transparent relationships, and active citizen involvement in local governance processes.

Suggestion

Based on the research conclusions, several suggestions that can be put forward are as follows:

1. Advice for Municipalities in Sweden

City governments are advised to continue strengthening citizen-centric public service management practices, particularly through increased transparency, service consistency, and staff responsiveness. Strengthening public leadership with integrity and a service-oriented approach needs to be a priority to maintain and enhance citizen trust. Furthermore, city governments need to develop service evaluation mechanisms based on citizen feedback as a basis for continuous improvement.

2. Suggestions for Policy Makers

National policymakers are advised to provide more flexibility for city governments to develop public service management innovations tailored to local characteristics. Policy support should be directed at strengthening the managerial capacity of local officials, including through training, digital system development, and the dissemination of best practices among city governments.

3. Suggestions for Public Service Apparatus

Public service officials at the city level need to improve their professional competence and service ethics, as well as prioritize an empathetic and communicative approach when interacting with citizens. A friendly, fair, and responsive attitude is crucial for creating a positive service experience and enhancing public trust.

4. Suggestions for Further Research

Future research is recommended to develop more diverse methodological approaches, such as combining qualitative and quantitative methods (mixed methods) or expanding the research

object to other Nordic countries for comparison. Furthermore, further research could delve deeper into the role of cultural factors, local politics, and digital governance in mediating the relationship between public service management and citizen trust.

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