Syllabus: Citizens’ perceptions of public services

Class information:
Level: Master
Period: Summer 2013
Class Day/Time:
   Monday: 10.15 AM-1.00 PM. Location: 1327-026
   Wednesday: 10.15 AM-2.00 PM. Location: 1327-026
   Friday: 10.15 AM-1.00 PM. Location: 1327-026
Examination Day/Time/Location: Yet to be announced.
Language of teaching: English

Teacher:
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Office hours: After Class by appointment (email me!)

Course contents
The course will introduce students to various theoretical perspectives focusing on citizens’ perceptions of public services. Among the theoretical perspectives that we will touch upon are voter and performance information, fiscal illusions, and various accounts on citizen satisfaction (for instance the expectancy-disconfirmation model).

Citizens’ perception of the performance of their government and the quality of the services provided by the public sector is obviously a core question in established democracies. It has therefore also been studied extensively within various disciplines such as comparative politics, public policy, and framing studies. This course focuses on citizens’ perceptions in a public administration perspective entailing that we are interested in to what extent knowledge about citizen perceptions can and should be used to benchmark public organizations and to guide future policy-making. The point of departure is the claim in the literature on voter information that most voters do not have the information necessary to fully judge the performance of incumbent governments or to assess alternative administrations when they seek to exercise democratic control.

The course falls into three main parts. In the first part of the course handles citizens’ perceptions as an independent variable and we will hence look at how citizen’ perceptions of costs and quality shape their behavior. The main question is how citizens react in case of dissatisfaction and why they do so. The theoretical point of departure in this part of the course will be the Tiebout-model which states that citizens select local governments by moving and the EVLN-model exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect proposed by Lyons et al.

The second part deals with the basis of citizens’ perceptions of public services. One question is how citizens’ perceptions are shaped. We will look at whether citizens’ assessments are based on valid knowledge and to what extent their perceptions can be influenced if they are presented to new and valid information. We will also touch upon the literature on fiscal illusions which suggests that citizens systematically underestimate the costs of public services and therefore demand more public
spending than they would if they had been fully informed. Among the questions that we will discuss in this respect is the empirical evidence of such illusions and why such systematic misperceptions may arise.

The third part deals with the widespread use of citizen satisfaction surveys as a means to assess quality and performance in the public sector. The main question is under what conditions such surveys constitute a valid tool by which quality can be assessed. Moreover, we will discuss the drivers of citizen satisfaction with a special emphasis on the relation between service expectations and satisfaction; a relationship which has gained increasing attention in public administration research in recent years.

The course mainly has a theoretical focus. However, we will also spend some time discussing methodological issues; for instance, the validity of conclusions in empirical papers and how we could design studies in order to examine the questions raised during the course.

**Participation and Attendance Policy:**

Your participation is a vital component of the class and will be assessed in terms of active and meaningful involvement in class discussions and group activities. Note that participation is not merely class attendance, although you must be in class in order to participate! Although I will not be formally recording your attendance, I do take notice of participation in our class discussions. I also recognize that emergencies, illness etc. may cause you to miss the occasional class. If you are unable to attend a class, it is your responsibility to communicate this to me by email and to obtain any notes from fellow course participants.

**Comments on teaching**

The course will consist of introductory lectures, discussions, student presentations, and casework in smaller groups of students. There will also be presentations by the lecturer, but students are required to become familiar with the literature before class and students are strongly encouraged to discuss central themes prior to each lesson in groups created by the lecturer. In order to help you with your preparation I have prepared a number of questions for each lesson. These questions can be found in the time schedule further below. Answers to the questions may not always be found in the assigned reading and you will therefore in some cases need to think beyond the reading. The purpose is to train your ability to critically reflect about the themes covered in the course. We will not always discuss answers to the questions in detail in the lectures. They are mainly created for preparational purposes.

Notice also that the course has its own webpage in the system Aula: Go to [www.aula.au.dk](http://www.aula.au.dk) and register as a participant of the course called ‘Citizens’ perceptions of public services’.

**Participant learning outcomes:**

The course offers an extensive and thorough analysis of citizens’ perceptions of public services from a public administration perspective. To this end, the course provides an overview and a critical discussion of the literature and the issues relevant for the topic of the course. After the course the participants will be able to:

- Describe and compare theories about citizens’ perceptions of public services.
- Discuss the advantages and drawbacks of using different research designs and methods to study citizens’ perceptions of public services.
Critically evaluate and discuss theoretical and methodological strengths and weaknesses of existing studies of citizens’ perceptions of public services.

Analyze and discuss to what extent citizens’ perceptions of public services are based on misperceptions.

Analyze and discuss to what extent citizens’ perceptions can be shaped by new information.

Analyze and discuss drivers of citizens’ satisfaction with public services.

Analyze and discuss how citizens react when dissatisfied with public services and why they do so.

Present their analysis in a clearly written language.

The final exam:
The final exam covers some selected topics from the course. It is a written exam under supervision in which you are allowed to use a PC, personal notes, and literature from the course. You are not allowed to communicate with others during the exam. The exam lasts for six hours and is graded using external co-examination. Grades are given on the Danish 7-point grading scale.

The final exam consists of a series of questions that test your understanding of the literature covered in the course and your ability to critically discuss the topics covered in the course. The exam does not aim to test your language abilities and therefore lingual and grammatical mistakes will as a common rule not affect your grade. Confusing sentences and sentences that do not make sense may, however, affect the general impression of your exam paper and I therefore encourage you to communicate your exam paper in a language as precise and clear as possible.

Time schedule:

Please notice that this is an intensive course in which there will be a lot to read from the very beginning. I therefore strongly urge you to begin reading beforehand. Most of the readings may be downloaded through the National Danish Library webpage (www.statsbiblioteket.dk) and it is your job to do this yourself. If nothing else is stated this will be the case. In those few instances where it is not the case, it will be mentioned explicitly in the schedule below. Please also notice that you will have to buy a book for lecture 2. You can choose to order this book yourself but the book should also be available at the bookshop ‘Politologisk bogformidling’ (see http://www.pol-bog.dk/?page=110) on campus before the course begins.

Lecture 1 (Monday, August 5: 10.15 AM – 1.00 PM): Introduction and the Tiebout-model

Description:
There is a threefold aim of this lecture. First the course participants will be introduced to the teacher and vice versa. Second, a general overview of the course will be provided and the participants will be introduced to the aim of the course and they will be evaluated come Examination Day. Finally, we will spend some time discussing the first topic of the course: Citizens reactions in case of dissatisfaction with public services. Our point of departure will be the Tiebout and Hirshman – framework along with some critiques and extensions hereof.
Assigned readings:


Questions:

- Discuss the assumptions underlining the Tiebout model.
- Compare the Tiebout and the EVLN-model. What are the main differences/similarities?
- The Tiebout, Hirschman and EVLN-models have mainly been developed in order to explain citizens’ response to dissatisfaction in the US. What kind of responses do you think are most likely in your country? Why?

Lecture 2 (Wednesday, August 7: 10.15 AM – 2.00 PM): Citizen response to dissatisfaction

Description:
We will continue our discussion from the first lecture. Our discussion will be based on a thorough examination of the Hirschman framework on British data. The authors of the book argue that the original Hirschman framework is too simple and they therefore expand the concepts of voice and exit in order to differentiate between numerous different situations that citizens and other decision-makers commonly face. In particular they show that collective voice processes are rather different from individual ones and should interact with exit processes rather differently. We will discuss the main innovations and compare the model to previous ones examined in lecture 1.

Assigned readings:

- Dowding, Keith and Peter John (2012). *Exits, Voices and Social Investments; Citizens Reaction to Public Services*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Please notice that the whole book should be read!

Questions:

- How does the theoretical model suggested by Dowding and John (2012) differ from the models covered in the first lecture?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of this model compared to the Hirschman-model?
What are the main findings? Discuss the validity of the empirical evidence presented in the book.

Lecture 3 (Friday, August 9: 10.15 AM – 1.00 PM): Antecedents of citizen service perceptions

Description:
The topic of this lecture and the two to follow is how citizens’ perceptions of public services are shaped. We will distinguish between two kinds of perceptions: Satisfaction and fiscal preferences. We will discuss and compare various theoretical explanations of the two kinds of preferences. Moreover, an important topic will be the relationship between satisfaction and fiscal preferences. The theoretical literature has little to say about this topic and we will therefore spend some time developing hypotheses about how they relate to one another.

Assigned readings:


Questions:

- What are the main explanations of variation in citizen satisfaction?
- Do you think that the same explanations are also important explanations of citizen fiscal preferences? Why/Why not?
- How do you think citizen fiscal preferences are related to their satisfaction with public services? Provide a theoretical argument. In order to help you a little:
  - Imagine, for instance, that citizens are dissatisfied with public school services? How do you think that would affect their preferences for public school spending?
  - On the contrary, imagine that citizens are satisfied with public school services. How do you think that would affect their preferences for public school spending?
  - Would you expect the same relationship between fiscal preferences and public spending for other public services?
Lecture 4 (Monday, August 12: 10.15 AM – 1.00 PM): Fiscal and asymmetrical illusions

**Description:**
This lecture introduces the concept of fiscal illusion. The literature on fiscal illusions suggests that citizens systematically underestimate the costs of public services and therefore demand more public spending than they would if they had been fully informed. Based on the concept of fiscal illusions a large literature has developed in which fiscal illusions is mainly dealt with as an important assumption. The last text introduces the concept of asymmetrical preferences: That users and political activists are generally more willing to spend than others. We will discuss how this concept relates to fiscal illusions.

**Assigned readings:**

**Questions:**
- Provide definitions of the concept fiscal illusions and asymmetrical illusions.
- According to Dollery and Worthington (1996) the empirical evidence analysis of fiscal illusion yields somewhat mixed results. Discuss why this is the case.
- Provided that fiscal illusions are important to citizens’ fiscal preferences: Is it something that public authorities should care about? Is it a democratic problem? If yes to either of the previous questions: What could be done to overcome fiscal illusions?

Lecture 5 (Wednesday, August 14: 10.15 AM – 2.00 PM): Information effects on citizen service perceptions

**Description:**
In this lecture we will continue the discussion from the previous lecture. We will look at a number of experimental studies in which some randomly selected citizens have received either fiscal information or performance information and we will dig into when and how such information shapes their decisions.
Assigned readings:


Questions:

- Does information have a differential impact on citizen perceptions for different citizens?
- Provide a critical discussion of the survey and the operationalizations used by James (2011). For instance: How does he measure information and citizen satisfaction? Are there any problems associated with measuring the key variables the way he does?
- The empirical evidence in the readings today is mostly based on experimental designs. What are the advantages/disadvantages of this design compared to, for instance, a cross sectional survey design?
- Suggest an alternative non-experimental design in which you want to study the impact of information on citizen satisfaction. Which respondents are you going to use? How will you measure your key variables (information and satisfaction)? Discuss to what extent your design is able to account for potential endogeneity and alternative explanations.

Lecture 6 (Friday, August 16: 10.15 AM – 1.00 PM): The Citizen Satisfaction Concept

Description:

Citizen satisfaction surveys are commonly used to assess performance in the public sector. The theme of this lecture is to discuss the citizen satisfaction concept. Among the topics in this lecture is how citizen satisfaction may be defined and how the concept relates to objective performance measures. An important question in this respect is to what extent citizen satisfaction surveys produce valid information about public performance.

Assigned reading:

- The City of Clayton 2012 Citizen Satisfaction Survey, Please observe: Read only pages 1-64 and 230-238 in the pdf-file. Intensive reading is not needed. The document is included in the
reading as an example of a real citizen satisfaction survey. We will use this example in
lecture 6 and 7.


Questions:
- Discuss how citizen satisfaction can be defined.
- Discuss advantages and disadvantages of different operationalizations of the ‘citizen satisfaction’ concept.
- Review the arguments for and against using citizen satisfaction as a measure of performance.

Lecture 7 (Monday, August 19: 10.15 AM – 1.00 PM): Methodological challenges associated with citizen satisfaction surveys

Description:
While lecture 6 is concerned with a theoretical discussion of the citizen satisfaction concept and the relation to performance measures, lecture 7 focuses on the methodological challenges associated with citizen satisfaction surveys. Data from such surveys are often used to make statements about the general satisfaction in the public at large and causal claims are often made based on analyses of data which solely stems from such surveys. However, data from citizen satisfaction surveys may in many instances be heavily biased. We will discuss some of the potential methodological pitfalls associated with citizen satisfaction surveys and how to deal with them in practice.

Assigned readings:


Questions:

- To what extent are the methodological challenges outlined in today’s readings relevant to the research in James (2011) which was covered in lecture 5 and to the City of Clayton satisfaction survey covered in lecture 6?

**Lecture 8 (Wednesday, August 21: 10.15 AM – 2.00 PM): Expectations, perceived performance, and citizen satisfaction**

**Description:**

This lecture explores the relationship between three constructs: Expectations, perceived performance, and satisfaction. The main question of this lecture is whether satisfaction with public services is affected not only by how citizens perceive the quality of the services but also by the quality citizens expect services to have. We will various approaches to this question. According to the expectancy-disconfirmation model, citizens will be dissatisfied in case their prior expectations are disconfirmed by the perceived performance of the product or service. The approach suggests that it is important to take both expectations and perceived performance into account when explaining satisfaction. This approach is outlined in the third and fourth text. A competing approach, the assimilation approach is outlined in the first two texts. The last two texts introduce experience as another important explanatory variable.

**Assigned Readings:**

Questions:
- Compare the assumptions and expectations of the expectancy-disconfirmation model and the assimilation approach.
- Recall lecture 5. How do you think new information will affect the relationship between expectations, perceived performance, and citizen satisfaction suggested by the expectancy-disconfirmation model?
- How does experience with service use affect citizen satisfaction? What are the theoretical implications of these findings for the expectancy-disconfirmation model and the assimilation model?

Lecture 9 (Friday, August 23: 10.15 AM – 1.00 PM): Shaping Citizen Expectations

Description:

There are two objectives of this final lecture. First, we will discuss our final topic: How citizen expectations are shaped by information and various other factors. This is essentially an expansion of the models previously covered in lecture 8. Second, we will prepare for the final exam. We will do so in two ways: First, we will briefly touch upon topics previously covered in the course in order to provide an overview. Second, course participants will have the opportunity to ask questions about the themes covered in the course.

Assigned Readings:

Questions:
- Are citizens’ service expectations manageable? And should they be managed? (this is a normative question, I know, but try to provide pros and cons based on democratic theory).
- Draw a model in which you include the relations suggested by expectancy-disconfirmation theory in lecture 8 and 9.
**Literature**


***: The City of Clayton 2012 Citizen Satisfaction Survey, pages 1-64 and 230-238.


If nothing else is mentioned, readings may be downloaded through the National Danish Library webpage (www.statsbiblioteket.dk).

*: You will have to buy this book. It is not available at the Aarhus University libraries.


***: Available on the Aula-page of the course under documents.