



PUBLIC SERVICE QUALITY AS AN INFORMAL INSTRUMENT OF POLITICAL EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

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Abstract

Political education in Indonesia is often reduced to electoral participation, ignoring the crucial role of citizens' daily interactions with the bureaucracy. This study aims to analyze how the quality of administrative services transforms into an informal political education tool that affects the level of institutional trust at the local level. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach through a case study in Cimaja Village, Sukabumi Regency, data were collected using a rapid assessment technique consisting of observations and in-depth interviews with residents and village apparatus. The results show that responsive, equal, and transparent public services by street-level bureaucracy empirically function as a democratic "classroom". Fair administrative interactions can reduce administrative burdens, build awareness of citizenship rights, and reduce political cynicism among the public. Furthermore, the quality of basic services is proven to reduce this cynicism and build autonomous institutional trust that encourages citizens' active participation in village development. This study concludes that public administration and political science cannot be rigidly separated at the level of local governance, where public service performance is an effective political education instrument. As a practical implication, it is recommended that local democracy evaluations integrate basic public service satisfaction.

Keywords: Institutional Trusts; Political Education; Public Service Quality; Street-Level Bureaucracy.

INTRODUCTION

Political education in Indonesia has long been trapped in a paradigm that is overly elitist, ceremonial, and focused exclusively on electoral moments such as general elections (Pemilu) and regional head elections (Pilkada). Discourse on political education is often reduced to voter participation campaigns or outreach from formal state institutions, distanced from the daily realities of society. In this context, the state often overlooks a fundamental phenomenon: citizens' daily interactions with the bureaucracy are the most tangible means of political education. Citizens actively evaluate government performance and will provide positive assessments when they are guaranteed equal treatment and procedural fairness within the administrative process (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Van Ryzin, 2015). The state's capacity to enforce the law, provide reliable services, and manage public resources with integrity is directly correlated with citizen compliance (Kreps & Darden, 2020). Interactions at the public service desk are not merely empty administrative transactions, but rather moments where citizens directly experience and assess the state's presence. The public trust that arises from these interactions is fundamentally crucial for a healthy and well-functioning democracy (Mishler & Rose, 2005). Both theoretically and empirically, political trust is recognized as essential not only for stability but also for the smooth functioning of democratic governance (Hetherington, 1998; Dalton, 2004; Letki, 2006; Newton, 2009; Marien & Hooghe, 2011).

This trust can significantly encourage citizen compliance with public policies, stimulate participation, and contribute to the building of perceptions of government legitimacy (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Conversely, the absence of public trust can have destructive impacts, such as citizens' reluctance to pay taxes or comply with the law, which ultimately forces the state to multiply its oversight and law enforcement systems (Tyler, 2004). Therefore, when citizens encounter state officials at the grassroots level, they directly learn and absorb values about how the state views, positions, and fulfills the rights of its citizens. Given the significance of this impact, efforts to restore and maintain public trust through quality service must be placed as a critical policy priority (Tyler, 1998).

1.2. Research Gap

Previous studies have generally strictly and rigidly separated these two domains of discourse. Studies on "Public Service Quality" have almost always been situated within the realm of administrative management, where Public Service Quality (*PSQ*) is generally conceptually defined as citizens' subjective evaluations of the excellence, superiority, or level of fulfillment of expectations regarding services provided by a government agency (Hardiyansyah, 2022). These studies also highlight that this issue is crucial in the public sector, particularly because citizens often have very limited choice regarding service providers (Wakhid, 2017). On the other hand, studies on "Political Education" have consistently been confined to the realm of pure political science, focusing specifically on party institutions, elections, and voter behavior.

This separation ultimately creates a research *gap* that ignores the essential intersection between administrative performance and the construction of citizens' political awareness at the local level. However, the literature on bureaucratic reform and governance shows that the paradoxical starting point for political trust has gradually shifted from issues of economic growth to the provision of public goods and services (Meng & Yang, 2014). Therefore, to a greater extent, government performance ultimately determines the level of political trust among its citizens (Meng & Yang, 2014). Building on this gap in the literature, this article offers novelty *by* combining these two realms of discourse. This research views and positions public services at the village level or grassroots bureaucracy not merely as transactional instruments for fulfilling basic needs, but as instruments of informal political education that actively construct citizens' understanding and bonds with their state entities.

1.3. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

To dissect this phenomenon, this research is based on three main theoretical pillars that intersect each other. First, Michael Lipsky's *Street-Level Bureaucracy theory* is used to explain the strategic position of village or sub-district officials. From this theory's perspective, officials who interact directly with the public serve as the true representation or "face of the state." The state's reputation in the eyes of citizens is largely determined by the behavior and professionalism of these frontline bureaucrats. Public Service Quality (PSQ) is essentially the primary mechanism by which citizens assess a state's competence and integrity. Failure by the bureaucracy to uphold the principles of good governance will lead to administrative decay, diminished state capacity, and rampant corruption. Therefore, the performance of frontline officials is a key determinant in shaping public perception of state institutions.

Second, the *New Public Service perspective* of Janet V. Denhardt and Robert B. Denhardt is applied to emphasize the shift in the service paradigm. Citizens who come to the public service desk should no longer be reduced to the status of mere "customers," *but* rather should be positioned as *citizens* with democratic rights. The service process is a moment where citizens learn and practice their rights and obligations directly. This is in line with the shift in focus in current public sector management, which is no longer merely measuring organizational output technically, but shifts to assessing the final results (*outcomes*) and their impact on citizens and social welfare. In this process, the government must also minimize the administrative burden , namely the costs, obstacles, or difficulties experienced by individuals when interacting with the state and its bureaucracy.

Third, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's concept of *Political Culture serves as an analytical bridge to connect these service experiences with the formation of Institutional Trust* . Public trust is not automatically granted by citizens; it must be earned by the state through consistently competent performance. The reflection of citizens' attitudes toward their political system is highly dependent on this empirical experience. Citizens rationally and continuously form positive or negative evaluations of the political system's performance, which then forms the basis for their attitudes (trust or cynicism) toward the political system itself. This trust serves a crucial function as a mechanism to reduce complexity in social interactions; in the administrative realm, citizens rely heavily on this trust to avoid the need to constantly suspect or monitor every government action. Ultimately, the overall performance of the government determines the level of political trust, as a government with poor performance is proven to be unable to win the trust of its citizens.

1.4. Research Objectives

Based on the theoretical arguments and empirical phenomena that have been described, this study aims to analyze how the quality of administrative services is transformed into informal political education that influences the level of institutional trust of the community at the local level.

More specifically, the description of the main objectives of this research is directed at achieving the following analysis targets:

- **Examining the mechanism of performance evaluation formation:** Tracing how citizens' empirical experiences when interacting with the bureaucracy, especially related to service efficiency, shape their

subjective evaluation of government performance which in turn acts as a major predictor for the formation of political trust.

- **Evaluating the impact of reforms at the front line:** Analyzing the mechanisms by which reforms or structural improvements to the bureaucracy will only be effective in generating public trust if the positive impacts of the reforms are truly felt directly by citizens at the front line of public service delivery.
- **Assessing the reduction of administrative burden:** Identifying the extent to which procedural fairness and clarity of rules in services are able to reduce the administrative burden *experienced* by citizens, so that the experience of interaction does not become an obstacle, but rather educates citizens informally about their democratic rights.
- **Analyzing multi-level trust disparities:** Testing and comparing the dynamics of public trust levels in government at the local level versus the central level, based on the premise that citizens tend to have a much higher intensity of interaction with local authorities in daily service matters.

By achieving these objectives, this research is expected to not only provide theoretical contributions to bridge the gap between public administration and political science literature, but also offer concrete managerial implications for policymakers. Specifically, it aims to encourage bureaucracies to prioritize service output quality indicators *directly* perceived by the public, rather than simply focusing on adherence to structural procedures.

2. Research Method (Method)

2.1. Research Design

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a phenomenological or case study design. This design was chosen to deeply explore the empirical experiences and subjective meanings of interactions between citizens and state officials at the grassroots level. Measuring the quality of public services fundamentally requires instruments capable of capturing user perceptions, given that citizen satisfaction and evaluation are very difficult to comprehensively measure without using a perceptual approach that explores their direct experiences. Therefore, this qualitative approach is deemed most relevant for capturing how the reality of daily services is transformed into a means of political education.

2.2. Research Locus and Subjects

This research took place at the Cimaja Village Office in Cikakak District, Sukabumi Regency. This coastal village was chosen as a highly representative qualitative research laboratory due to the high level of administrative interaction between residents and the local village office authorities. Furthermore, coastal areas exhibit unique sociocultural dynamics, where the public service desk at the village hall often serves as the primary—and sometimes the only—point of contact between the community and government representatives.

2.3. Data Collection Techniques

To obtain in-depth data (*thick description*) in a measurable time, data collection in the field relies on the *Rapid Assessment technique* which combines two main instruments:

1. **Direct Observation:** Researchers conducted participatory observation in the administrative service room of the Cimaja Village Office to capture the reality of interactions, transparency of procedures, and friendliness of the apparatus when serving residents.
2. **In -depth Interview :** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups of key informants:
 - **Citizen Service Users:** Citizen informants were approached and interviewed immediately after completing their service transactions at the village office. This strategy was specifically chosen to maximize respondents' ability to recall and evaluate their service experiences immediately, thereby effectively minimizing memory *recall bias* . Exploring these citizens' subjective perceptions is crucial because these perceptual measures essentially reflect the reality of the institution's performance in the eyes of the public.
 - **Village Apparatus:** Interviews were also conducted with village officials who work on the front lines (for example, the Head of Service Affairs or the Village Secretary) to explore the perspectives of service providers regarding their awareness of the role of services as an instrument of political education and representation of the state.

2.4. Data Analysis Techniques

Qualitative data in the form of interview transcripts and field notes (observations) were analyzed using the interactive data analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). This analysis process proceeded in a circular fashion through three main stages:

1. **Data Condensation :** The process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data obtained from citizen and official interviews. Data that is repetitive or irrelevant to service quality indicators and institutional trust is removed.
2. **Data Display :** **Compiling** and organizing condensed data into narrative and thematic matrix forms, so that the interaction patterns between service quality (such as speed and transparency) and citizens' political perceptions can be clearly seen.
3. **Conclusion Drawing/Verification :** Interpreting the emerging patterns using the analytical tools of *Street-Level Bureaucracy* and *Political Culture theories* , to then draw a conceptual red thread regarding the implications of basic services on the political trust of residents in Cimaja Village.

3. Results and Discussion

Daily interactions between residents and village officials serve as a front-line showcase for the state. Observations at the Cimaja Village Office in Cikakak District, Sukabumi Regency, demonstrated adequate institutional preparedness. The physical service desk appeared clean and tidy, equipped with chairs for residents being served, and an adequate waiting room (capacity for 20 people). These tangibles *psychologically* send an initial message that the state is present and ready to serve its citizens adequately. Beyond mere physical and administrative matters, the dynamics of interactions occurring in this service space encompass dimensions of political education and the construction of public trust, which can be analyzed through the following three analytical themes.

3.1. Village Service Desk as a "Classroom" of Democracy

Street-Level Bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 2010), frontline officials have strong discretion in translating state policies into concrete actions on the ground. Their performance is a direct manifestation of the state's presence. Data collection results indicate that Cimaja Village officials consistently apply flexibility and discretion oriented towards resolving residents' problems. The Village Secretary (Sekdes) emphasized his institution's commitment by stating that services are provided without rigid time limits; residents are even served outside office hours in urgent situations. Furthermore, this bureaucratic discretion is balanced with the principle of equity . Public service *front office staff* emphasize that Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) remain the reference point, but improvisation is necessary to ensure services don't appear rigid. The impartiality of the apparatus is evident in the commitment not to discriminate against residents based on personal proximity or distance from residence. All residents are treated equally.

Interestingly, there is a latent reality where bureaucratic officials are not fully aware of their strategic role as political educators for citizens. The village secretary explicitly stated his lack of understanding regarding the connection between administrative service duties and political education. Yet, when officials ask citizens to complete administrative requirements according to the system, or assist in formulating a Business Domicile Certificate, they are *de facto* educating citizens about state administrative procedures and the supremacy of the rules (Lipsky, 2010). This theoretical unawareness of the officials does not diminish the essence of their service desks functioning as "classrooms" where citizens learn directly about the rationality and procedures of state bureaucracy.

3.2. Transforming Administrative Experience into Citizen Political Awareness

New Public Service paradigm emphasizes that people who access public services must be treated as citizens *with rights*, not just customers (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). The empirical experience of Cimaja Village residents confirms that fair and transparent treatment at the service desk can reduce administrative burdens *and* transform confusion into awareness of their rights. This is illustrated by the experience of a villager (a young head of household) who was applying for the Indonesian Health Card (KIS) for his wife, who was about to give birth. The villager acknowledged a delay in the application process. However, rather than making things difficult, village officials responded by providing clear explanations and alternative solutions (registering for the independent KIS first while waiting for the government-assisted KIS to be disbursed). This equitable and supportive service made the villager feel that their rights were being protected by the system.

Furthermore, informal political education at the village level is greatly aided by the role of the neighborhood association (RT) head as an intermediary agent (*broker*). The RT head often has to intervene to assist residents who feel inferior or who underestimate administrative requirements. It is in this process that policy literacy occurs. For example, regarding the turmoil surrounding the termination or updating of social assistance recipient data (such as the Family Hope Program), the RT head noted that residents are slowly beginning to understand the state's mechanisms. Transparency through the poverty data checking system (the "Desil" system on the Cekbansos platform) has enabled residents to learn to accept data-driven policy changes. This process of residents understanding the quota system and updating data is a pure form of informal political education, through which residents learn about accountability and the state's justice distribution mechanisms.

3.3. Implications for Institutional Trust

The empirical political education experienced by citizens at the service desk ultimately leads to the formation of a political culture *and* a level of institutional trust (Almond & Verba, 1989). This institutional trust manifests itself in citizen participation and concern for village development agendas. The reality in Cimaja Village demonstrates a complex participation landscape heavily influenced by the distribution of social assistance. Both *front office staff* and the village secretary noted cynicism among some residents; those who do not receive government assistance (such as the Family Hope Program (PKH), the Community Empowerment Program (KIP), and the Community Empowerment Program (KIS)) tend to be reluctant to participate in communal activities like mutual cooperation (gotong royong). This confirms that satisfaction with material welfare *outcomes* remains a determining factor in the patronage culture of politics at the grassroots level.

However, humane and responsive service interactions have proven effective in reducing this cynicism and building autonomous *institutional trust*. A young resident applying for the KIS (Informant III) expressed his readiness to continue participating in community service and supporting the village government, even though his social assistance has not yet been disbursed, simply because he felt well-served and quickly served when he needed administrative documents. The most solid institutional trust is seen among community leaders who maintain high levels of communication with the village bureaucracy. Flexible services—such as document processing via *WhatsApp*—*generate a strong* reciprocal relationship. Community leaders feel their time is valued by village officials, which in turn encourages them to actively dedicate themselves to mobilizing residents in various strategic government programs, such as Musrenbang (Regional Development Planning Forum), Village-Owned Enterprises (Bumdes), environmental security, and village forest management. This synergy confirms that equitable, transparent, and responsive public services directly foster institutional trust that underpins citizen participation in governance (Marien & Hooghe, 2011).

4. Conclusion

4.1. Synthesis of Findings

This study concludes that daily interactions between citizens and the village bureaucracy have *de facto* transformed into a highly effective means of informal political education. Through empirical experiences at the public service desk, citizens directly learn about the supremacy of the rule of law, the rights and obligations of citizenship, and procedural justice. The reality on the ground shows that responsive, equal, and non-discriminatory services are far more effective in instilling civic awareness and building institutional trust than formal political outreach or socialization, which are often elitist and ceremonial. When village officials serve citizens well, they are essentially educating the public that the state is present, functioning, and reliable, which in turn can reduce citizen political cynicism and encourage active participation in development at the grassroots level.

4.2. Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this research offers novelty *by* proving that the dichotomy between public administration and political science becomes irrelevant when analyzed at the *street-level bureaucracy*. The study of public service quality can no longer be viewed exclusively as the domain of administrative management, focused solely on customer satisfaction. Instead, administrative performance directly intersects with the domain of political science because it acts as an instrument of political socialization that actively constructs political culture and *institutional trust* within society. Therefore, these two disciplines cannot be rigidly separated in analyzing local governance.

4.3. Practical Recommendations

Based on these findings, this study provides practical recommendations to policymakers, particularly the National Unity and Politics Agency (Bakesbangpol) and local governments. Evaluation of the quality of democratic life, or the Local Democracy Index, should no longer be measured narrowly through electoral indicators, such as voter participation in general elections or regional elections. These measurements should be integrated with the Public Satisfaction Index for basic public services at the village or sub-district level. Given that citizens' trust and political participation are built daily at the service desks of village halls, improving the quality of basic services must be positioned as a primary strategy and a concrete foundation for civic political education in Indonesia.

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