Social Equity and Trust in Government

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ABSTRACT

Despite the wealth of studies on trust in government, important questions still remain to be asked and answered with respect to the impact of social equity on trust in government. To fill this void, the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of social equity on trust in government. This study used a multilevel analysis to take into account macro-country level influences. The findings from analyzing the World Values Survey and the Rule of Law Index revealed that social equity in administrative process is positively associated with trust in government.

Key Words: Social equity, Trust in government, Multilevel regression analysis
INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, there has been a marked tendency for the decline of trust in government (e.g., Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Kong, 2013; Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005). Diminished public trust can deteriorate the government’s capability to assume its role (Clark & Lee, 2001), citizens willingness to pay taxes (Scholz & Lubell, 1998), and investments in the work of government (Yang & Holzer, 2006). More importantly, it can harm legitimacy of government and eventually have deleterious effects on a democratic system (Easton, 1965). Because of far reaching effects, many scholars attempt to find a way to rekindle trust in government and pinpoint that government performance is a strong candidate to reinvigorate the trust in government (e.g., Hetherington, 1998; Wang & Van Wart, 2007).

Although the positive impact of performance on trust in government seems apparent, it is unclear for several reasons (Yang & Holzer, 2006). Social equity can be one of the missing links between government performance and trust in government. The relationship between social equity and trust in government can be explained by the performance theory. The performance theory maintains that actual performance of government is the key to understanding citizens’ confidence in government (Newton & Norris, 2000). Frederickson (1971) argues that social equity is as important as efficiency and effectiveness and places social equity as the “third pillar” of public administration. If citizens perceive social equity as crucial government performance, high levels of social equity increase trust in government. However, the previous literature shows disproportionately little interest in the impact of social equity on trust in government.

In addition, some studies emphasize procedural aspects of government activities in affecting public trust (e.g., Herian et al. 2012; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Van Ryzin, 2011). They have relied on individual level measurements. Without examining the fact that citizen
attitudes may vary because of national conditions, however, there is risk of estimating the model incorrectly (Battaglio & Legge, 2008). With respect to the impact of social equity on trust in government, very few studies have connected macro-level equity indicator to micro-level trust in government.

In this sense, the purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of social equity on trust in government by assessing the World Values Survey and the Rule of Law Index. In doing so, a comprehensive understanding of social equity and trust in government can be acquired. The next section presents literature review and hypotheses. In a subsequent section, methodology is explained. The results from multilevel regression analysis are identified. The article concludes with suggesting theoretical contributions and practical implications.
LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Trust in Government

Trust in government can be referred as “citizens’ confidence in the public institution and in public officials’ ethics and competence, and the belief that they will perform in the best interests of society and in accordance with the normative expectations of society in the absence of constant security” (Yao, 2014: 13). Trust is one of the most important ingredients upon which the legitimacy and sustainability of political systems are built and maintained (Blind, 2010). A democratic government will not survive long if it does not build and sustain trust of its citizens (Popovski, 2010). Therefore, it is no surprise that government functioning relies on public trust because democracies are representative in nature (Hetherington, 2005).

High levels of trust in government can increase efficiency and effectiveness of government operations (OECD, 2013). Wolak and Kelleher Palus (2010) argue that government can involve in greater innovation and risk-taking when public trust in government is high. When the level of trust is low, on the contrary, governments tend to be passive, avoiding innovation and failing to make necessary commitments because citizens are not likely to give governments the benefit of doubt (Citrin & Luks, 2001). Performance often requires government’s innovation and proactive activities. Low levels of trust in government do not allow governments to be active enough to perform better for citizens. In turn, it decreases efficiency and effectiveness.
Social Equity

Understanding New Public Administration movement in public administration field is essential to explain social equity. The participants in the Minnowbrook Conference 1968 called for social equity in the public administration field (Gooden, 2010). In particular, Frederickson (1971) stresses that public administration should consider social equity as the main pillar of the field. To be specific, he argues that social equity is as important as other criteria such as efficiency (maximizing the outcomes under given resources), effectiveness (whether organization achieves the goal) and economy (providing agree upon outcome by minimizing costs). New Public Administration significantly contributes to the public administration field by adding social equity aspect which had not been considered properly.

Equality and equity are often used interchangeably. Although two terms share some similarities, equality can be converted into “a mathematical measure in which equal parts are identical in size and number” whereas equity is “a more flexible measure allowing for equivalency while not demanding exact sameness (Guy & McCandless, 2012).” In line with this view, Gooden (2015) sees equality as the principle that the same rights apply to all whereas social equity as the notion of justice and fair treatment of all. In this article, the term “equity” is used because it reflects the social circumstance more comprehensively.

Social equity is rooted in the idea that each person is equal and has inalienable rights (Guy & McCandless, 2012). Social equity is about “whether citizens of different social groups are treated equitably or fairly and whether they receive the same treatment and experience similar outcomes (Charbonneau & Ricucci, 2008: p. 605-606).” Ricucci (2009) considers justice, fairness, and equality as components of social equity. Svara and Brunet (2005) include
procedural fairness, distribution and access (equality in availability of services/benefits), and equality in the process of providing services and benefits.

Much of the social equity research has been focused on race, gender and class (Wooldridge & Gooden, 2011). In recent years, rising economic inequalities are accompanied by other forms of democratic privation (Frederickson, 2005). Also, sexual orientation, religion, region, disability status, immigration status, veteran’s status, and language of origin can be considered (Wooldridge & Gooden, 2011). In addition to aforementioned facets, Guy and McCandless (2012) discuss that social equity lens can shed light on social economic class, public transportation, health care, environment threats, intergenerational issue, and human trafficking.
Social equity and trust in government

The relationship between social equity and trust in government can be explained by the performance hypothesis. The performance hypothesis maintains that actual performance of government is the key to understanding citizens’ confidence in government (Newton & Norris, 2000). Government performance can be understood by organizational performance of government agencies. Brewer and Selden (2000) develop theoretical dimensions of organizational performance. They combine three types of administrative values (efficiency, effectiveness, fairness) and organization focus (internal and external). In doing so, they generate six dimensions of organizational performance: internal efficiency, external efficiency, internal effectiveness, external effectiveness, internal fairness, and external fairness. Among six dimensions, external fairness is closely associated with social equity. In line with Brewer and Selden, Walker, Damanpour, and Devece (2011) includes equity (in their paper, equal access to public housing) when they measure organizational performance of government. As Frederickson argues, social equity is the third pillar of public administration and is an important component of government performance. In this sense, if government enhances social equity, citizens think government is accountable and trustworthy. All other things equal, it seems clear that higher levels of social equity leads to higher levels of trust in government. Following this reasoning, this study examines the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis: Social equity positively affects trust in government.

Hypothesis 1: Social equity positively affects trust in the executive government.

Hypothesis 2: Social equity positively affects trust in the legislative government.

Hypothesis 3: Social equity positively affects trust in the judicial government.
METHODOLOGY

Data

In order to answer the research question, two different sets of data are used. Trust in government is drawn from the World Values Survey. Social equity indicators are drawn from the Rule of Law Index conducted by World Justice Project. The World Values Survey and the Rule of Law Index are pooled by the country information. The WVS data is matched to specific year of the Rule of Law Index depending on the data when WVS was conducted.

The World Values Survey contains a series of questions on citizen perceptions on society including confidence in public institutions (Van de Walle, Van Roosbroek, & Bouckaert, 2008). It was built on the European Values Survey and has been conducted since 1981 and considered as high-quality cross-national survey (Jilke, Meuleman, & Van de Walle, 2015). For this reason, many scholars used the World Values Survey (e.g. Ariely & Davidov, 2011; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008; Suh, Chang, & Lim, 2012).

The Rule of Law Index is an assessment tool designed to offer a detailed and comprehensive picture of the extent to which countries adhere to the rule of law in practice. The Econometrics and Applied Statistics Unit at the European Commission Joint Research center has undertaken for auditing data. Moreover, the World Bank publishes the Worldwide Governance Indicators every year based on a wide range of valid indicators. It includes this Rule of Law index when creating Governance Indicators. These rigorous procedure and the usage prove its quality.
Measures

Level-1 Measures (Individual Level: World Values Survey)

Trust in government

Trust in government is measured by following items: I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them; is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all? The government (in you nation’s capital) / Parliament / The courts

Respondents answered a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (A great deal of confidence) to 4 (None at all) to rate each item on trust in government. For easier interpretation, these are reversely coded. The Cronbach Alpha of trust in government is .801.

Citizens have different reasons to trust different institutions and trust has various meaning in different situations (van der Meer, 2010; Yang & Holzer, 2006). Therefore, scholars need to measure trust in sub-governmental institutions separately for comprehending trust correctly. For this reason, Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) and Kim (2010) separate government into Federal, State, Local government and Central, Local government, respectively. Basically, trust in government index is computed by averaging three items. After that, how trust in government is differentiated by different sets of government institutions is assessed.

Demographic features

Given potentials to inflate or suppress relations between other relevant variables, some variables need to be controlled. Gender, age, and education are commonly considered as control variables. Also, political ideology is an important factor in explaining trust (Bouckaert, Van de Walle,
Maddens, & Kampen, 2002). Besides, household income can affect trust in government (Rahn & Rudolph, 2002; Wroe, 2014). Table 1 contains details of wording of control variables.

<Insert Table 1 Around Here>

Level-2 Measure (Country-level: the Rule of Law Index)

Social Equity

Social equity is an inclusive concept (Box, 2015) and thus can be perceived in various ways. For instance, Riccucci (2009) investigated the racial proportion of high ranking officers in the federal government in order to conceive social equity. Among a variety of dimension, this study focuses on social equity in administrative process for the purposes of this study. The National Academy of Public Administration defines social equity in public administration as “the fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contact, and the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services, and implementation of public policy.” Besides, Van Ryzin (2015) considers “being responsive to residents”, “treating residents with respect”, and “treating all residents fairly” to measure administrative process. Following NAPA’s definition and Van Ryzin’s measurement, this study constructs the index by following five variables: “Equal treatment and absence of discrimination”, “Due process of law”, “Due process in administrative proceedings”, “People have access to affordable civil justice”, “Civil justice is free of discrimination”. These variables range from 0 to 1.
Analytical Strategy

In social science, nested research designs are commonly found (Raudenbush, 1993). Integrating micro and macro information into a single model poses a challenge to researchers (de Leeuw & Meijer, 2007). Multilevel modeling is an increasingly popular technique and play an important role in analyzing hierarchical data (Afshartous & de Leeuw, 2005; Curran & Bauer, 2007) because it tests variables at different levels without necessary recourse to aggregation or disaggregation and it focuses on differences between groups in relation to differences within groups (Garson, 2013). In this article, multilevel modeling method is conducted to connect trust in government (an individual level) and social equity (country level). For this study, the following model is estimated:

Level 1: \( Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} \text{ (Gender)} + \beta_{2j} \text{ (Age)} + \beta_{3j} \text{ (Education)} + \beta_{4j} \text{ (Political ideology)} + \beta_{5j} \text{ (Household income)} + r_{0j} \)

Level 2: \( \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{0j} + \gamma_{01} \text{ (Social equity)} + u_{0j} \)
\( \beta_{1j} = \gamma_{1j} + \gamma_{01} \text{ (Social equity)} + u_{1j} \)
\( \beta_{2j} = \gamma_{2j} + \gamma_{01} \text{ (Social equity)} + u_{2j} \)
\( \beta_{3j} = \gamma_{3j} + \gamma_{01} \text{ (Social equity)} + u_{3j} \)
\( \beta_{4j} = \gamma_{4j} + \gamma_{01} \text{ (Social equity)} + u_{4j} \)
\( \beta_{5j} = \gamma_{5j} + \gamma_{01} \text{ (Social equity)} + u_{5j} \)

The level-one model specifies how individual-level predictors are associated with the citizen-level outcome. At level two, each of the regression coefficients entered in the level-one model may be predicted by country-level predictors. The intercept and slope parameters obtained from
the level-1 analysis served as the dependent variables in equations used for a between unit
(Mossholder, Bennett, & Martin, 1998).

A generalized hierarchical linear model (GHLM) allows to deal with non-continuous or
non-normal dependent variable by including a necessary transformation and an appropriate error
distribution for the dependent variable into the statistical model (Luke, 2004). In this paper,
GHLM is used because the dependent variable is ordinal.
RESULTS

Descriptive Information and Correlation

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlation between the variables. The respondents’ mean age was 41.98 year (S.D.=16.64) and 47 percent were women. The mean of trust in government index is 2.44 with the standard deviation of .80. Social equity was positively and significantly related to trust in government ($r=.014, p<.01$). Political ideology correlated positively with social equity ($r=.010, p<.01$).

<Insert Table 2 Around Here>

Multilevel regression results

In the model 1, the dependent variable is trust in the combined of three branches of government. Social equity positively affects trust in the combined government. Thus, the main hypothesis is supported. Men are less likely to trust in the combined government. Higher levels of education negatively affect trust in the combined government. Higher household income positively affects trust in the combined government. Being conservative positively affects trust in the combined government.

In the model 2, the dependent variable is trust in central government. Social equity positively affects trust in central government. Men are less likely to trust in the combined government. Higher levels of education negatively affect trust in central government. Higher household income positively affects trust in central government. Being conservative positively affects trust in central government.
In the model 3, the dependent variable is trust in Congress. Social equity positively affects trust in Congress. Older citizens are less likely to trust in Congress. Higher levels of education negatively affect trust in Congress. Higher household income positively affects trust in Congress. Being conservative positively affects trust in Congress.

In the model 4, the dependent variable is trust in courts. Social equity positively affects trust in courts. Higher levels of education negatively affect trust in courts. Higher household income positively affects trust in courts. Being conservative positively affects trust in courts. All of positive impact of social equity is found, to varying degrees, in affecting trust. Table 3 presents the results of multilevel regression analysis.

<Insert Table 3 Around Here>
DISCUSSION

The impact of social equity on trust in government has received relatively little attention in the public sector. Especially, insufficient attention has been given to connect the linkage between a country level social equity and an individual level trust in government. Therefore, I attempt to answer research questions: “How does social equity affect trust in government?” In congruence with previous research that emphasized administrative process, social equity has positive impact on trust in government. The research contributes to the literature in several ways.

First, this article attempts to reaffirm that social equity is worthy of being treated as an important criteria of government performance. New Public Management underplays the role of democratic-constitutional values such as due process and transparency (Piotrowski & Rosenbloom, 2002) because it concentrates on public management that increases efficiency (Peters & Pierre, 1998). Including social equity properly as government performance makes possible a deeper understanding of the performance theory.

The second contribution lies in an analytic strategy. Human behavior and views are deeply ingrained in political environments (Fukuyama, 2011) and social context contains situational dynamics that cannot understood with interpreting individuals separately (Mossholder et al., 1998). In particular, comprehending trust in government should be placed within contexts (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003). In this regard, the perspective taken in this study is that the effect of social equity on trust in government depends upon the country-context in which it is embedded. A multilevel analysis helps gain a fuller picture of the mechanism of trust in government.

The third contribution is to acquire higher levels of external validity. Using cross-national survey requires comparable measurement (Jilke et al., 2015) and cross-sectional comparative
research is often curtailed by the absence of empirical evidence of comparable measurements (Miller & Listhaug, 1999). For instance, analyzing the German citizen sample, Baird (2001) found that procedural justice leads to judicial legitimacy. However, his study has trouble with external validity because the population is only Germany. The World Value Survey and the Rule of Index help compare countries comprehensively because a single survey questionnaire has been used across a large number of countries (Jen et al., 2009). In this study, greater external validity is acquired by legitimate cross-national data.

In addition to several theoretical contributions, this study offers practical implications for public management practice. Many government performance indices are focused on quantifiable efficiency or effectiveness. Governments are often considered as being responsible for reducing social vulnerability by promoting social equity (Susan Gooden, Jones, Martin, & Boyd, 2009). Although social equity is considered an important public value, it has been eclipsed by other government values such as efficiency and effectiveness (Charbonneau, Riccucci, Van Ryzin, & Holzer, 2009). If government performance includes social equity properly, the span and understanding of performance would be enlarged.

Despite theoretical contributions and practical implication, there is a limitation. One of the most critical limitations of the present study is its exclusive reliance on cross-sectional data because cross sectional data do not allow researchers to infer a strong causality. Causal evidence on trust in government is hard to be established by cross-sectional data because unmeasured macro factors influence trust. There can be macro-level dynamic such as political scandal, economic crisis and war. These unmeasured events threaten the validity of the conclusions. Researchers can come to more fully appreciate the impact on trust in government when they use longitudinal data.
This study offers direction for the future studies. In managing government performance, government may confront trade-off between efficiency and equity (Hou, Lunsford, Sides, & Jones, 2011). In this respect, Behn (2001) notices the accountability dilemma that the trade-off between accountability for rules and for performance can hinder responsiveness. Citizens may prioritize process over outcome. For instance, Hetherington and Rudolph (2008) predict political trust is a function of not only performance but also process. It is worth examining whether pursuing social equity lowers an efficiency aspect of government performance.
APPENDIX

Table 1. Demographic variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coding Scheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1= Male 2= Female recode to 0=Female 1=Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Can you tell me your year of birth, please? 19__ (write in last two digits). This means you are __ years old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>What is the highest educational level that you have attained? 1=No formal education ~ 9=University-level education with degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political ideology</td>
<td>In political matters, people talk of “the left” and “the right” How would you place your view on this scale, generally speaking, 1=Left ~ 9=right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Income</td>
<td>On this card is an income scale on which 1 indicates the lowest income group and 10 the highest income group in your country. We would like to know in what group your household is. Please specify the appropriate number, counting all wages, salaries, pensions, and other incomes that come in.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.Sex</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.Age</td>
<td>41.98</td>
<td>16.64</td>
<td>-0.02**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.Education</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>0.03**</td>
<td>-0.17**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.Income</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>0.03**</td>
<td>-0.12**</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.Political Ideology</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>-0.04**</td>
<td>0.08**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.Social Equity</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>0.05**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.11**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.Trust</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>-0.01*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
<td>0.10**</td>
<td>0.10**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01
Significance tests for the correlations are two-tailed.
Table 3. Results of Multilevel Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model1 Combined Government</th>
<th>Model2 Central Government</th>
<th>Model3 Congress</th>
<th>Model4 Courts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-0.03** (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.04*** (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.009 (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.0002 (0.0003)</td>
<td>0.0004 (0.0003)</td>
<td>-0.0008** (0.0003)</td>
<td>-0.0003 (0.0003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.02*** (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.02*** (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.02*** (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.01*** (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.05*** (0.02)</td>
<td>0.04*** (0.002)</td>
<td>0.05*** (0.003)</td>
<td>0.04*** (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Ideology</td>
<td>0.05*** (0.02)</td>
<td>0.04*** (0.002)</td>
<td>0.04*** (0.002)</td>
<td>0.03*** (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Equity</td>
<td>0.88*** (0.04)</td>
<td>0.31*** (0.04)</td>
<td>0.63*** (0.04)</td>
<td>1.24*** (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log-likelihood</td>
<td>-101473.35</td>
<td>-58769.977</td>
<td>-56499.29</td>
<td>-59092.714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No of individual-level</td>
<td>46,385</td>
<td>45,974</td>
<td>45,712</td>
<td>45,881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No of country-level</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001
REFERENCES


