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Citizen Participation: Linking Government Efforts, Actual Participation, and Trust in Local Politicians

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ABSTRACT

The present study analyzes several aspects of the relationship between citizen participation and trust employing data from Norwegian municipalities: first, the impact of local government efforts to increase participation on trust in local politicians, and second, the impact of these efforts on actual participation, which is a missing piece in the literature. The findings show that local government initiatives have a very limited effect on trust, and no effect on actual participation. A strong negative relationship between actual participation and trust suggests that participation is mainly protest-related, and not the result of local government initiatives to include citizens in decision making.

KEYWORDS

Citizen participation; trust; local government efforts

Introduction

A lack of political trust signals discontent with democracy. Thus, trust is one of the most important objectives and performance indicators of governments at any level. It is key to properly functioning, effective, and successful government and, without it, decisions and implementation become much more challenging. For example, trust in government affects support for governmental spending and activity, increases compliance with political authorities, and is even found to affect citizens' trust in each other (Chanley et al., 2000; Levi & Stoker, 2000). Several authors have noted a declining trust in government in recent decades (e.g., Chanley et al., 2000; Citrin, 1974; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). A clear trend in declining trust is most prominent in the United States, while internationally it can be described more as fluctuating, without a distinct trend (Norris, 2011). The COVID-19 crisis has illustrated how crucial trust in government is for successful crisis management. Norway is considered among the most successful countries in handling the pandemic, partly because of the high trust in government and most parts of society (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2020). Local democracy is central in Norway, and the central government has given local governments a great responsibility to implement local regulations. The focus on trust and the search for ways to increase trust in government, both central and local, thus seem as relevant as ever.

Citizen participation is defined as citizen involvement in government decision making and service delivery (Langton, 1978; Wang, 2001). Participation has been

argued as a way for the government to better understand the needs of the public and for the public to monitor governmental operations (Creighton, 1981). This involvement can take many different forms, such as public hearings, citizen focus groups, citizen surveys, and interaction on social media. Most scholars view citizen participation in government policy making and implementation as a key element of democracy, and the amount of attention paid to it in the public administration literature shows that its achievement is regarded as an important objective. The aim to increase trust has also been reported as the most important rationale behind public managers' attempts to initiate citizen participation (Yang & Callahan, 2005). The relationship between participation and trust is complex and remains unresolved. Several authors have argued that participation can positively affect trust (Creighton, 1981; Halvorsen, 2003; Kim, 2010; Wang & Wan Wart, 2007), while others report that attempts to increase participation have had no effect (Goldfinch et al., 2009; McComas, 2001; Wang, 2001).

So far, the lion's share of the literature on the effects of local government attempts to increase participation has been concerned with the perceptions of public managers. In these analyses we investigate the opinions of citizens themselves. The literature is scarce on the effects of participation initiatives on actual participation, which is another central contribution of the present study. Finally, to the best of our knowledge, variations in trust and participation at the local level have not yet been investigated. This provides the opportunity to

analyze the relationship within the same institutional framework and contexts, and thus to isolate more effectively the impact of different participation initiatives.

Political trust and citizen participation

Citizen participation is considered a central element of democracy. The idea of a political elite operating in isolation, with no citizen participation, is viewed with horror by some. Such a government would naturally have neither trust nor legitimacy. It is plausible to assume that a government which initiates citizen participation more actively would be perceived as open and responsive to citizens' views. We may also assume that such characteristics equate to higher levels of trust in politicians, because citizens would feel that their representatives are more prepared to listen to their opinions.

Across disciplines, trust may be defined as a psychological state where vulnerability is accepted based on positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another (Rousseau et al., 1998). More specifically, political trust may be defined as the trust citizens have in the political system, actors, values, and institutions of society (Listhaug & Jakobsen, 2017; Norris, 1999). The present study addresses the issue of trust in local politicians. The vulnerability described in the general definition thus entails acceptance of being vulnerable when power is transferred to those politicians based on positive expectations of their intentions or behavior. Political trust is described as the foundation of governmental legitimacy (Weber, 1972), and implies that institutions are functioning well, and the likelihood of increasing support for non-democratic governmental alternatives will be lower (Listhaug & Ringdal, 2008). If this is lost, citizens have less incentive to obey laws and regulations (Marien & Hooghe, 2011). A lack of trust, therefore, can create a vicious circle, where the government will have problems managing societal challenges, which will further reduce trust.

Norway is one of the countries with the highest levels of trust in government and other parts of society (OECD, 2021). Norway has a representative democracy and has long been ranked among the most democratic countries in the world (Marshall et al., 2014). As a geographically large and dispersed country with 356 municipalities, local democracy has a strong position. Local democracy is considered important for increasing political interest and participation, since citizens can debate issues that are close to them. Local democracy is also an important counterweight to the concentration of power in central government; it can function as a mechanism for controlling central government and as a special interest organization (Fiva et al., 2014).

A central tradition in Norwegian democracy is corporatism, with the principle that relevant actors are involved in governmental decisions (Sandberg, 2005). Special interest organizations, particularly trade unions and employers' organizations, play important roles with formalized and continuous contact with government decision makers.

The present study builds on an assumption that local government efforts to initiate participation have the potential to increase trust in two different ways. First, they can have a signaling effect (Bauer & Fatke, 2014; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002) and lead to greater trust by themselves. As has been noted, trust is based on positive expectations about intentions or behavior. With limited information about local politicians' actual intentions and behavior, these expectations may be based on cues signaling their intentions. By initiating citizen participation, a message is sent to the public that local government is open to citizens' views and that involvement is desired. A second premise is that citizen participation has the potential to generate benefits related to both process (education, skills development, possibility to enlighten government) and outcomes (making things happen, improving policy, gaining control over decisions; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). The realization of such benefits is expected to increase political trust.

Although there seems to be a consensus that citizen participation can be beneficial, increasing participation through local government initiatives is a challenge (Lowndes et al., 2001). If only a very small group participates, the positive effects will likely be limited (Michels, 2011). It is therefore important to consider the connection between participation initiatives and actual participation.

Previous results on the effects of participation on trust

A claim that citizen participation leads to trust presupposes that participation has other effects on the path to trust, and scholars have thus addressed a variety of different outcomes of citizen participation.

One outcome supported by several studies is the development of consensus (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Wang, 2001; Yang & Pandey, 2011). Participation enables the government to be better informed about the public's needs and expectations, which is helpful in developing more supported goals and missions and in making service priorities more in tune with the public. Citizen participation might improve decision making by introducing new ideas and making public services more innovative (Meričkova et al., 2016). Related to this

argument is the expected outcome of increased service quality, which is argued to have a positive effect on satisfaction and trust (Beeri et al., 2019; Christensen & Lægred, 2005; Vigoda-Gadot & Mizrahi, 2014). Participation might also yield more realistic expectations on the part of citizens who become better informed through participation (Langton, 1978; Lawton & Macaulay, 2014; McComas, 2001).

Empirical studies addressing political trust directly are not unanimous on the effects of citizen participation. Goldfinch et al. (2009) find no relationship between participation and trust. Wang (2001) concludes that participation does not increase trust, pointing out that many cities practise “superficial” participation lacking in depth and genuine involvement. McComas (2001) argues that participants are more sceptical towards the information provided than non-participants. However, several authors have found that participation is related to increased levels of trust, at least given certain prerequisites (Berman, 1997; Creighton, 1981; Halvorsen, 2003; Kim, 2010; Wang & Wan Wart, 2007), for example, that participation leads to high-quality services, enhanced ethical behavior (Wang & Wan Wart, 2007), improved performance and accountability (Berman, 1997), increased perceived responsiveness (Halvorsen, 2003), and that trust in public services can be increased through co-creation (Meričkova et al., 2015).

Hypotheses

Participation initiatives and trust

Local government initiatives for participation are expected to be positively related to trust in local politicians, either through a signaling effect (Bauer & Fatke, 2014; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002) or through the potential benefits of increased participation. That a breadth of participation mechanisms has a positive effect on participation outcomes is supported by previous research (Bassoli, 2010; Berman, 1997; Wang, 2001; Yang & Pandey, 2011). It is therefore hypothesized that an increasing number of participation initiatives positively affects trust. Two additional dimensions of local government participation efforts indicating the breadth and intensity are employed: the number of initiatives used more than three times a year and the number of services where participation is initiated. It is hypothesized that an increased breadth and intensity of participation efforts positively affects trust.

H_{1a}: *Local governments’ use of more participation initiatives is positively related to trust in local politicians.*

H_{1b}: *A higher frequency of participation initiatives is positively related to trust in local politicians.*

H_{1c}: *A higher number of services being subject to participation initiatives is positively related to trust in local politicians.*

Participation initiatives and actual participation

There is a lack of research directly on the relationship between the participation initiatives and actual participation. In principle, the participation efforts made by the local government should make the local government more accessible to citizens. As, for example, Fung (2015) describes, applying the “full menu of design choices for engaging citizens” is key to increase citizen participation. As already noted, several studies find positive outcomes related to increased breadth of participation mechanisms (Bassoli, 2010; Berman, 1997; Wang, 2001; Yang & Pandey, 2011). Actual participation is not measured in these studies; however, their conclusions indirectly assume that these efforts lead to participation. A positive relationship between the four participation dimensions and citizen participation (besides voting) is hypothesized. Since these participation efforts are not directed at the election process, it is not hypothesized that this effect applies to voting.

H₂: *A greater breadth and intensity of efforts to increase participation are positively related to citizen participation in the form of attempting to influence a decision in local government besides voting.*

Actual participation and trust

The assumed beneficial outcomes of participation require actual participation, and not just a signaling effect. Further, such positive outcomes presuppose that participation is the result of local government being genuinely open to the influence of citizens, and that a proactive interaction is taking place to find the best grounds for decision making. The measure of participation employed in the present analysis is a broad one; it does not distinguish between protest-related participation and other more neutral, proactive forms of influence. If local government efforts for participation positively affect actual participation, it is a clear sign that proactive interaction is taking place. In the present analysis, it is therefore of great interest whether participation related to local government initiatives is positively related to trust. The lack of prior studies on this

relationship makes the investigation exploratory without the formulation of a hypothesis. What prior studies do indicate, however, is that actual participation unrelated to participation initiatives made by local government is likely to be protest-related and related to distrust (Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Lee & Schachter, 2019). It is therefore hypothesized that if actual participation is unaffected by participation initiatives, this is protest-related and negatively related to trust.

H₃: *If local government efforts are unrelated to actual participation, participation in the form of attempting to influence a decision will be negatively related to trust in local politicians.*

Individual level factors: trust as moderator

In examining the relationship between actual participation and individual level predictors, the interplay between trust and political interest is analyzed. An individual's political interest is found to positively affect participation (Blais, 2010; Gallego & Oberski, 2012), and trust is found to be negatively related to protest-related participation (Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Lee & Schachter, 2019). It is thus assumed that political interest will have a stronger effect on actual participation for individuals with high levels of trust in local politicians than for individuals with low trust. This is because the low-trusting individuals will also be more inclined to protest-related participation regardless of political interest. It is hypothesized that trust *moderates* the relationship between political interest and participation:

H₄: *The relationship between political interest and actual participation is positive and moderated by trust.*

Data and methods

The analysis employs survey data from two large national surveys in 2016 and 2017. First is the survey on municipal organization,¹ which includes questions about a wide range of municipal organizational features. The survey is conducted by the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR). Second, the citizen survey conducted by the Agency for Public Management and eGovernment² includes questions about citizens' perceptions of their municipality, satisfaction with services, and trust in local politicians. The analysis thus combines data at the municipal level from 2016 with citizen-level data from 2017. Because of the hierarchical structure of the data, where the individual

citizens are clustered in their respective municipalities, a multilevel approach was chosen. Multilevel regression accounts for the dependency among citizens from the same municipality by estimating the error at both the individual and municipal levels simultaneously with the linear coefficients. Since it is assumed that local government efforts potentially increase trust in two different ways, via a direct signaling effect and/or by increasing actual participation, the analysis was carried out in three steps. Finally, an analysis of moderation effects is carried out on the relationship between political interest, trust, and actual participation. The moderated model employs Hayes (2021) PROCESS macro.

Measures

Descriptive statistics of all variables are found in Table 1. The first dependent variable is *Trust in local politicians*. This survey item asks the respondents to what degree they trust that the local government politicians are working for the citizens' best interests. The second (which is also independent in two of the models) is *Attempted to influence*. This variable is based on the survey item asking the respondent whether he or she has attempted to influence a decision in local government during the last twelve months.

In the first part of the analysis, the main explanatory variables are four indicators of local government efforts to initiate citizen participation. *Initiative* represents the number of different initiatives the municipality has employed.³ *High frequency* is a measure of how many initiatives are used more than three times a year, and is thus an indicator of more intensive use of participation initiatives. *Number of services* measures how many

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

| Dependent variables | Range | Mean | N |
|------------------------------|--------------|--------|-------|
| Trust in local politicians | 1–7 | 4.314 | 7,524 |
| Attempted to influence | 0–1 | 0.188 | 7,797 |
| Voted | 0–1 | 0.876 | 7,959 |
| Independent variables | | | |
| <i>Municipal level:</i> | | | |
| Initiative | 0–11 | 5.888 | 304 |
| High frequency | 0–9 | 1.454 | 304 |
| Number of services | 0–8 | 2.938 | 321 |
| Population† | 5.298–13.398 | 8.522 | 428 |
| Revenue per capita† | 4.162–5.641 | 4.538 | 428 |
| <i>Individual level:</i> | | | |
| Contact with politician | 0–1 | 0.223 | 7,933 |
| Woman | 0–1 | 0.514 | 8,361 |
| Age | 18–101 | 52.685 | 8,361 |
| Higher education | 0–1 | 0.485 | 8,080 |
| Household income | 1–8 | 5.534 | 7,109 |
| Political interest | 1–7 | 4.844 | 8,086 |
| Voted for mayor | 0–1 | 0.299 | 6,224 |

†Population and Revenue per capita are log transformed.

different service areas the participation efforts represent, and is thus an indicator of the initiative variation in terms of service areas.

In the second part of the analysis, the main explanatory variables are the participation measures: *Attempted to influence*, *Contact with politician*, and *Voted*. These dichotomous variables represent whether the respondent has done any of the activities in the last 12 months or the last local election. In the moderation analysis, the main explanatory variable is *Political interest* (treated as a control variable in the preceding steps), measuring how interested the respondent is in politics in general.

Control variables

Several studies have found gender, age, and social status to affect political trust and participation (Hooghe, 2018; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Lee & Schachter, 2019; Newton & Norris, 2000). The analysis therefore includes the control variables *Woman*, *Age*, *Higher education* and *Household income*.⁴ It is expected that people voting for the same party as the one the present mayor represents will report higher levels of trust in politicians, regardless of participation. *Voted for mayor* is therefore included as a control variable. *Political interest* is included as a control variable as it has been found to affect both participation (Blais, 2010) and trust (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006).

Smaller municipalities tend to benefit from a “proximity effect”, where citizens are found to be generally more satisfied (Christie, 1982; Monkerud & Sørensen, 2010). It is also expected that increasing

populations may negatively affect the perception of political efficacy; thus, *Population* is included to control for the potential effects size might have on both trust and participation. *Revenue per capita* is the municipalities’ gross income per capita, including tax and financial revenues, in addition to block grants.

Results

Local government initiatives, trust and actual participation

The results from the multilevel regression models are presented in Tables 2, 3, and 4.

We can see that *Initiative* has a positive effect on trust and is significant at the 10% level in model 1. None of the other participation indicators have any significant effect on trust in local politicians. It thus partially supports Hypothesis H_{1a}, while Hypotheses H_{1b} and c are rejected.

Being female, politically interested, having higher education, having voted for the same political party as the mayor’s, and increasing age positively affect trust in local politicians. Increasing income, on the other hand, has a negative effect on trust. At the municipal level, increasing population has a negative effect, while municipal revenues do not have significant effects on trust.

The next step was an analysis of whether the participation indices can be found to affect levels of actual participation reported by citizens.

As Table 3 shows, none of the participation indices have significant effects on reported participation given by the variable *Attempted to influence*.⁵

Table 2. Random intercept models with *Trust in local politicians* as dependent variable.

| | Model 1 Initiative | Model 2 High frequency | Model 3 Number of services |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Intercept | 4.214** (1.652) | 4.556** (1.720) | 4.067** (1.633) |
| Individual level | | | |
| Woman | 0.282*** (0.052) | 0.281*** (0.052) | 0.283*** (0.051) |
| Age | 0.011*** (0.002) | 0.011*** (0.002) | 0.011*** (0.002) |
| Higher education | 0.185*** (0.057) | 0.187*** (0.057) | 0.184*** (0.056) |
| Household income | -0.042*** (0.014) | -0.043*** (0.014) | -0.042*** (0.014) |
| Political interest | 0.117*** (0.019) | 0.118*** (0.019) | 0.115*** (0.019) |
| Voted for mayor | 0.561*** (0.054) | 0.560*** (0.054) | 0.549*** (0.053) |
| Municipal level | | | |
| Population† | -0.116** (0.045) | -0.108** (0.049) | -0.096** (0.044) |
| Revenue per cap.† | -0.052 (0.305) | -0.099 (0.313) | -0.026 (0.301) |
| Initiative | 0.037* (0.019) | | |
| High frequency | | 0.019 (0.021) | |
| Number of services | | | 0.027 (0.018) |
| Decisions | | | |
| Variance | | | |
| Level-1 variance | 2.632 (0.059) | 2.631 (0.059) | 2.640 (0.058) |
| Level-2 variance | 0.125 (0.031) | 0.131 (0.032) | 0.126 (0.031) |
| Level-1 N | 4,148 | 4,148 | 4,304 |
| Level-2 N | 279 | 279 | 295 |
| Log likelihood | -7,944.066 | -7,945.551 | -8,250.475 |

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. †Population and revenue per capita are log transformed.

Table 3. Logistic multilevel models with *Attempted to influence* as dependent variable.

| | Model 4 Initiative | Model 5 High frequency | Model 6 Number of services |
|-------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Intercept | -2.537 (1.931) | -1.568 (2.002) | -1.966 (1.976) |
| Individual level | | | |
| Woman | 0.151* (0.080) | 0.150* (0.080) | -0.123 (0.079) |
| Age | -0.009*** (0.002) | -0.009*** (0.002) | -0.008*** (0.002) |
| Higher education | 0.260*** (0.089) | 0.259*** (0.090) | 0.300*** (0.088) |
| Household income | 0.063*** (0.023) | 0.063*** (0.023) | 0.059*** (0.023) |
| Political interest | 0.365*** (0.034) | 0.367*** (0.034) | 0.364*** (0.033) |
| Voted for mayor | -0.253*** (0.085) | -0.254*** (0.085) | -0.257*** (0.084) |
| Municipal level | | | |
| Population† | -0.232*** (0.049) | -0.273*** (0.054) | -0.240*** (0.049) |
| Revenue per cap.† | 0.371 (0.367) | 0.233 (0.373) | 0.265 (0.373) |
| Initiative | 0.009 (0.023) | | |
| High frequency | | 0.038 (0.025) | |
| Number of services | | | 0.001 (0.022) |
| Decisions | | | |
| Variance | | | |
| Level-2 variance | 0.081 (0.046) | 0.074 (0.046) | 0.100 (0.049) |
| Level-1 <i>N</i> | 4,210 | 4,210 | 4,364 |
| Level-2 <i>N</i> | 278 | 278 | 294 |
| LL (pseudo) | -2,043.396 | -2,042.271 | -2,112.979 |

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. †Population and Revenue per capita are log transformed.

Table 4. Random intercept models with *Trust in local politicians* as dependent variable.

| | Model 7 Attempted to influence | Model 8 Contact with politician | Model 9 Voted |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Intercept | 3.564** (1.492) | 3.291** (1.470) | 3.317** (1.406) |
| Individual level | | | |
| Woman | 0.295*** (0.047) | 0.278*** (0.047) | 0.275*** (0.043) |
| Age | 0.009*** (0.001) | 0.010*** (0.001) | 0.009*** (0.001) |
| Higher education | 0.230*** (0.052) | 0.231*** (0.052) | 0.186*** (0.047) |
| Household income | -0.043*** (0.013) | -0.034*** (0.013) | -0.042*** (0.012) |
| Political interest | 0.133*** (0.018) | 0.135*** (0.018) | 0.105*** (0.016) |
| Voted for mayor | 0.510*** (0.052) | 0.534*** (0.052) | |
| Attempted to influence | -0.372*** (0.058) | | |
| Contact with politician | | -0.310*** (0.055) | |
| Voted | | | -0.110 (0.076) |
| Municipal level | | | |
| Population† | -0.097** (0.040) | -0.090** (0.040) | -0.056 (0.028) |
| Revenue per cap.† | 0.135 (0.273) | 0.155 (0.268) | 0.166 (0.256) |
| Variance | | | |
| Level-1 variance | 2.590 (0.054) | 2.623 (0.054) | 2.794 (0.051) |
| Level-2 variance | 0.132 (0.030) | 0.127 (0.030) | 0.124 (0.028) |
| Level-1 <i>N</i> | 4,923 | 4,999 | 6,176 |
| Level-2 <i>N</i> | 391 | 395 | 408 |
| Log likelihood | -9,397.029 | -9,570.538 | 12,010.460 |

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. †Population and revenue per capita are log transformed.

Hypothesis H₂ is therefore not supported. The results indicate that this participation is not initiated by local government. The effects are, in general, very limited, but on the individual level, higher education, income, and political interest positively affect participation. Participation decreases with age, and the likelihood of participation is lower for respondents who voted for the mayor's political party. The next and final step is to analyze the relationship between participation and trust.

Models 7 through 9 show that *Attempted to influence* and *Contact with politician* both have negative, significant effects on trust. Actual participation is unrelated to local government efforts, and thus hypothesis H₃ is strongly supported. *Voted for mayor* and *Political interest* are the most influential. *Attempted to influence* comes third in model 7 and *Contact with politician* is fourth most influential in model 8 (here *Age* is more influential). Participation other than voting therefore seems to have a relatively strong negative relationship with trust. Voting

Table 5. Moderation analysis (PROCESS Model #1) of *political interest* on *attempted to influence* by *trust in local politicians*.

| | Outcome variable: <i>Attempted to influence</i> |
|---|--|
| Intercept | 0.745 (0.479) |
| Political interest | 0.227*** (0.071) |
| Trust in local politicians | -0.390*** (0.094) |
| Political interest x Trust in local politicians | 0.047*** (0.017) |
| Covariates: | |
| Voted for mayor | -0.184** (0.081) |
| Woman | 0.095 (0.073) |
| Age | -0.010*** (0.002) |
| Higher education | 0.303*** (0.080) |
| Household income | 0.050** (0.014) |
| Population† | -0.239*** (0.022) |
| -2LL | 4,874.779 |
| N | 4,923 |

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. †Population is log transformed.

does not significantly affect trust. Otherwise, the individual- and municipal-level effects are very similar to those in Table 2.

Trust as moderator

Hypothesis 4 expected a moderating effect of trust on the relationship between political interest and actual participation. In Table 5 we see that *Political interest* has a positive effect on *Attempted to influence*, and the interaction between *Trust in local politicians* and *Political interest* is small, yet positive and significant.

Figure 1 illustrates the moderating effect of trust. In support of hypothesis H4, political interest has a slightly stronger effect on the likelihood of actual participation for individuals with high levels of trust than for individuals with low levels of trust.

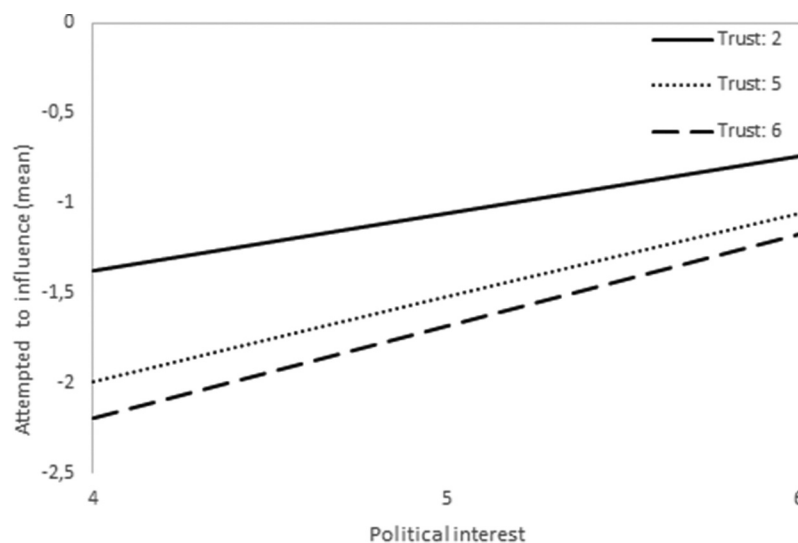


Figure 1. Moderation effect of political interest on participation (attempted to influence decision) by trust.

Discussion

Local government participation efforts and trust in local politicians

The first part of the analysis examined the overall relationship between local government efforts and trust, which can consist of two different parts: a signaling effect and effects resulting from actual participation. The analysis involved three different dimensions representing both breadth and intensity in participation efforts made by the local government, whereas all three can potentially have both signaling- and actual participation effects. The number of participation initiatives has a positive and slightly significant effect on trust in local politicians. This is in line with previous studies that found positive effects in employing multiple participation mechanisms (Bassoli, 2010; Berman, 1997; Wang, 2001; Yang & Pandey, 2011). Since actual participation is found to be unrelated to the initiatives in models 4–6, this positive effect can be isolated to a signaling effect providing cues about local politicians' intentions. The other dimensions are not significantly related to trust.

Thus, the findings indicate that the breadth of participation initiatives is the most effective in signaling to the public that local politicians have intentions to act in the citizens' best interests. A reason for the lack of relationship between local government efforts and trust could be that the participation mechanisms are not functioning as intended, and that the problem lies within the participation itself, in its design or execution. Alternatively, the problem arises in the process of activating or communicating to the public, and initiatives fail to generate citizen participation.

Local government participation efforts and actual participation

Breaking down the relationship and investigating the effects on actual participation makes it possible to identify that the problem arises before participation takes place; the participation initiatives failed to have any positive effects on actual participation.

Lowndes et al. (2001) provide suggestions as to the challenges in activating citizens through local government initiatives. Their findings point to a mix of a lack of awareness of participatory opportunities, negative perceptions and a lack of response from the local council, and feelings of social exclusion. Existing negative perceptions can undermine participation efforts, and instead they may be perceived as symbolic actions designed to give the illusion of a local government practising citizen participation. The finding that breadth of initiatives is positively related to trust in local politicians, however, points in another direction. Askim and Hanssen (2008) also discovered that citizen input is the most important influence on Norwegian local councillors in their agenda setting.

An alternative explanation may be that local governments are not putting sufficient effort into reaching citizens with their messages offering opportunities for participation. Lowndes et al. (2001) point to the potential positive effect of personal invitations and active mobilization through local leaders. Berntzen and Johannessen (2016) advise cities to use social media to recruit participants; they show that some selected Norwegian cities have varying success in creating a successful social media presence. Our data show that only 14% of municipalities engage in electronic dialogue (including all the ways that citizens can communicate with local politicians online), suggesting that this might be an area for improvement.

Looking at the assortment of involvement mechanisms (Appendix I), a challenge related to activating the public may be that the most frequently used initiatives are not the ones with the greatest potential for generating participation amongst the general population. A shift toward mechanisms directed more at collecting the opinions of regular people might be necessary. It has been claimed that bottom-up participation mechanisms are more suited to the fostering of a feeling of well-being through participation (Kagan, 2007), an effect likely to increase participation further. Politician days, electronic dialogues, and citizen panels, for example, might have great potential but are employed by only 25, 14, and 4.7% of the municipalities, respectively.

Actual participation and trust

Following the results from the analysis of participation efforts by local government and actual participation, it is already clear that participation is not the result of encouragement by local government. Participation as measured by *Attempted to influence* and *Contact with politician* is not very high – approximately 18% and 22%, respectively. Participation through voting is much higher, at 86%. Because participation other than voting is quite low and is not the result of participation efforts, it is plausible that it is mainly protest-related and sparked by a dissatisfaction with how local government handles the matters citizens care about. Therefore, the results from models 7 and 8 are not surprising, given the preceding findings. Participation has a clear, negative association with trust. Using voting as a participation measure, we see a different picture. Voting and the other measures of participation are clearly fundamentally different from each other. Unlike the other forms of participation, *Voted* is the second least influential variable in the model.

The individual-level variables are all measured at the same time, and the analysis does not make it possible to establish the exact direction of causality. An alternative explanation of the relationship might therefore be that trust decreases because of participation. Similar arguments have been made by, for example, McComas (2001). Seen in connection with the results from the previous models, however, the most plausible explanation is anticipated to be that participation is triggered by dissatisfaction and lack of trust. The negative effect of *Voted for mayor* also strengthens the argument that the limited participation taking place is triggered by a lack of trust.

Political interest has a positive and significant relationship with both participation and trust. It has been argued that people tend to have more positive feelings related to their fields of interest, and that politically interested individuals therefore like politics more. Liking politics is in turn related to partisanship and greater political trust (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006). Although there is little knowledge about how political interest develops, it is natural that these positive feelings coming from political interest also increase participation (Blais, 2010). Trust does, however, have a *moderating* effect on this relationship. High-trusting individuals require higher levels of political interest to participate, compared to low-trust individuals. A plausible explanation for this is that individuals with low trust have additional incentives to participate in protest-related activities to affect the areas resulting in their low levels of trust.

Limitations and future research

The present study uses Norwegian data. As a highly democratic society, Norway is suitable for the investigation of citizen participation. However, the possibilities for comparison with other countries are naturally limited. Longitudinal analyses would be valuable in establishing causality in the relationships that have been discussed herein. The dependent variable of political trust is operationalized by trust in local politicians, and future research could employ broader operationalizations, such as general trust in local government. The survey restricts respondents to the available choices. Thus, it does not consider other potential initiatives that could be discovered through, for example, interviews.

An interesting question that arises is: why do local government participation efforts fail completely to activate citizens? Future research that uses data on how local government communicates its participation initiatives to the public would help to expand our understanding of this problem.

Conclusions

If local government aims to increase citizen participation and, in turn, increase trust, it has been shown to be unsuccessful. However, its efforts may just be symbolic, and aimed at signaling intentions without involving actual participation. In that case, the initiatives might have some merit. An increasing breadth of participation initiatives has a positive signaling effect on trust in local politicians.

Breaking down the relationship between participation efforts and trust by examining their effects on actual participation leads to the conclusion that the challenges arise *before* the execution of the participation initiatives. So far, the focus has been directed at the design and execution of participation mechanisms to ensure the realization of the benefits of participation. This is clearly important, but before it becomes relevant, citizens must be galvanized into taking part in these participation initiatives. More attention must, therefore, be given to how these participation efforts are communicated. If government wishes for participation are genuine, it may be that the initiatives are not communicated effectively. Another potential problem might be related to the assortment of participation mechanisms most employed by the municipalities. To activate regular people, a shift towards mechanisms other than meetings with business representatives, local interest groups, and public hearings might be necessary. Broad, low-threshold initiatives that are effectively communicated, perhaps more actively on social media, could be fruitful.

If Norwegian local governments are to spend resources on activating citizens to participate in decision making, they need to take a close look at the choice of participation mechanisms and how they encourage the public to participate. The findings in the present study suggest that investigating the relationship between local government participation efforts and trust, without examining the effects on actual participation, can be misleading. However, if such efforts are merely symbolic, a focus on the breadth of initiatives seems to be the most promising strategy to increase trust in local politicians.

Notes

1. The survey was financed by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (KMD). Data in anonymized form was made available by the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) through the Norwegian Center for Research Data AS (NSD). Neither NIBR, KMD nor NSD are responsible for the analysis of the data or their interpretation herein.
2. The study can be accessed at <https://www.difi.no/rapporter-og-statistikk/undersokelser/innbyggerundersokelsen-2017>.
3. For frequency of use and all available initiatives, see Appendix 1.
4. Rated from 1–8 starting on approximately EUR16 080 (1) to more than EUR107,200 (8). (NOK150,000 and 1 million converted to EUR using average exchange rate the year data was collected (2017)).
5. Models employing *Contact with politician* and another measuring contact with administration as dependent variables were also conducted and yielded similar results.

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