Citizen satisfaction with arm's length bodies in local government: expert insights on policy and practice

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to investigate the application of citizen satisfaction (CS) as a tool for measuring performance by arm's length bodies (ALBs) in local governments across eleven countries, addressing central questions about its functionality and influencing factors.

Design/methodology/approach – We employ a hybrid inductive-deductive explorative study design, characterized by an iterative interpretative approach guided by sensitizing concepts. Expert interviews are analyzed through template analysis and cover eleven countries where ALBs are present due to decentralization and outsourcing.

Findings – Our study uncovers limited real-world applications of CS in evaluating public service delivery by ALBs. Expert interviews reveal insights into factors potentially influencing CS use, such as the level of autonomy of local governments, state traditions and austerity measures. A research agenda is formulated for further investigation.

Originality/value – Contributing to the CS debate, our study focuses on its application in evaluating public service delivery by ALBs. The explorative design, expert opinions and theoretical foundations enhance understanding, offering insights into factors potentially shaping CS use in this context. The study proposes a research agenda, propelling further investigations into this underexplored, yet emerging, area.

Keywords Arm's length bodies, Citizen satisfaction, Semi-autonomous agencies, Public service delivery

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Citizen satisfaction (hereafter referred to as CS) is a topic of ongoing debate when assessing the performance of public administration, particularly in the context of public service delivery. It serves as a gauge of perception, and as such, it is influenced by subjectivity and susceptible to cognitive biases (Andersen and Hjortskov, 2016). Consequently, many tend to favor quantitative metrics to gain insights into the performance of public service delivery agencies. On the other hand, the integration of citizen sourcing initiatives into decision-making processes by governments worldwide reflects a shift towards more participative decision-making (Schmidthuber *et al.*, 2019), assuming benefits for public service quality and interactive value creation.

Despite the reservations about the subjectivity of CS there is a case for considering it in the evaluation of public service delivery. This is because citizens' evaluations are grounded in their real-life experiences (Blaug *et al.*, 2006; Zwick *et al.*, 1995), making it a somewhat unreliable measure. Nevertheless, governments could use CS as a metric to achieve a broader understanding of CS with services, to find a way to manage expectations and to improve public service delivery and information flow among stakeholders and enhance transparency. However, its real-world use remains limited (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). Our study relies on expert

opinions (Bogner *et al.*, 2009; Döringer, 2021), from eleven countries to explore CS' role in measuring public service delivery at the local level by arm's length bodies (ALBs), which are increasingly common in local government due to decentralization and outsourcing (John, 2022; Van Genugten *et al.*, 2020; Kuhlmann and Bouckaert, 2016).

Through this approach, we answer the central research questions:

RQ1. If and how does CS serve as a tool for performance measurement of ALBs in charge of public service delivery at the local level?

RQ1 is answered through a comprehensive literature review and integrated by expert interviews;

RQ2. And how can its use (or lack thereof) be explained?

RQ2 is answered through the analysis of expert interviews and development of causal correlations between the potentially influencing factors.

We start by explaining the hybrid inductive-deductive methodology, followed by a brief literature review and theoretical exploration in the second section, where we identify the sensitizing concepts that have guided our analysis and provide a theoretical foundation for using CS evaluation by ALBs in local government. The third section will discuss data collection and the process of analysis. We then present and discuss the results and formulate a research agenda and a set of propositions for further research.

Theoretical exploration and sensitizing concepts

Gutiérrez Rodríguez *et al.* (2009, p. 2, citing Oliver [1980]) define customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction as "results from experiencing a service quality encounter and comparing that encounter with what was expected". Satisfaction results from experience, as opposed to perceived quality, which depends on "the customer's judgment about the superiority or excellence of a product" (Zeithaml, 1988 in Gutiérrez Rodríguez *et al.*, 2009, p. 2). CS, in the public sector, is a less popular evaluation method for performance compared to the private sector (Minelli and Ruffini, 2018), although it serves as a proxy for policy efficiency (Gutiérrez Rodríguez *et al.*, 2009). It emerged from the marketization of public administration (deLeon and Denhardt, 2000) and is associated with public trust (Welch *et al.*, 2004) and linked to information asymmetry between government and individuals (De Matteis *et al.*, 2023; Schmidthuber *et al.*, 2019; Yamamura, 2012). CS is also a predictor of perceived quality of life for the citizens (Bucaite Vilke and Vilkas, 2018) and is linked to the well-being of public personnel (De Matteis *et al.*, 2023).

CS is thus a tool for policymakers to bridge the gap with the public, enhance trust and promote citizen participation. In the next sections, we introduce the sensitizing concepts guiding this study.

ALBs

Our first sensitizing concept is: *CS evaluation with services delivered by bodies arm's length, at local government level*. ALBs are "*organisations which spend public money and fulfil a public function but exist with some degree of independence from politicians*" (Van Genugten *et al.*, 2020, p. 139). They range from semi-autonomous entities like the UK development companies to French "Metropolitan agencies" to private-law-based corporations and foundations. Their aim is to efficiently deliver public services by decentralizing management and granting high autonomy to specialized units. Varying degrees of fragmentation and autonomy, influenced by legal contexts and state traditions, lead to complex interactions among stakeholders. This can result in unclear accountability and increased information asymmetry, affecting citizens' trust in their government (Yamamura, 2012).

ALBs and decentralization can be motivated by various factors, such as shrinking public budgets (Van Genugten *et al.*, 2020). New public management reforms emphasize market-based principles, leading to privatization and the creation of arm's length public corporations. ALBs have contributed to improving responsiveness in public service delivery and shifting public administration towards a customer-centric approach. Semi-autonomous agencies offer flexibility in meeting citizen needs, enhancing satisfaction with the government (van Thiel, 2017). They also allow governments to delegate service delivery, reducing their responsibility and potentially shifting blame to external bodies (Busuioc, 2013; Hammond *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, ALBs can result from political patronage (Golden, 2003).

Many governments have hived off service units to create ALBs (Verhoest *et al.*, 2016). ALBs can vary in their degree of autonomy from local government and can be categorized into three types: from autonomized units in local governments to limited companies and foundations established by, or on behalf of, local governments (Van Genugten *et al.*, 2020). ALBs take different forms and names across countries (Van Genugten *et al.*, 2020) and can be public-law or private-law entities responsible for delivering public services. They may be public companies created by the government or detached departments of the administration. They are often involved in delivering services like solid waste management, water provision and public transport.

Although ALBs differ across countries, they share a managerial approach (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994). Their purpose is to deliver public services rather than to create profit. However, they operate with the flexibility to adapt to citizens' needs, positively impacting CS. Conversely, they often operate beyond the control of government agents (Armstrong and Jackson-Smith, 2019; Van Genugten *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, measuring CS with services delivered by ALBs could be useful for governments to assess performance, steer action and guarantee citizen representation in service delivery even when services are outsourced.

CS and ALBs: data availability and frequency of use
The second sensitizing concept regards *the actual use of CS in the evaluation of ALBs*. We conducted a Scopus search using the terms "citizen satisfaction local government" limited to social sciences, business management, accounting and econometrics to gather results related to local service delivery. Our literature review served as main indicator on the scope and scale of the use of CS in the literature, and its findings found confirmation in the analysis of the interviews. The initial search yielded 20 results, of which only two were relevant (one uses the Hosier survey and one the European Social Survey); a manual search by referencing the bibliographies of these studies, identified 18 additional articles. The literature review informed our understanding of how CS is studied in municipal services, changes in CS trends in public service evaluation and the mapping of data sources uncovered during the study.

Based on our literature review, we made an inventory of available data sources for measuring CS with local services in the studied countries. It is worth noting that while data are often available, they are infrequently analyzed and seldom used for decision-making. As indicated in most interviews, there is a shortage of researchers focusing on ALBs, leading to limited research on the subject. For example, German informants argued:

> Few researchers in general study service delivery agencies in Germany because of their hybrid public-private nature.

Hence, we compiled a list, drawing from the literature, interviews and desk research, offering researchers and practitioners a reference point for locating CS data related to local services. The literature review reveals fragmentation in CS usage as a performance measure. From journal articles, we identified 13 references during desk research and backward tracing, resulting in 16 databases, see Table 2.

The literature review showed that only a limited number of studies were conducted, with a few cases using primary data not publicly available. Some used open-source data or data available upon request, although this is infrequent. A primary data source for CS is the European Social Survey (ESS, Diaz-Serrano and Rodríguez-Pose, 2015; Overman, 2017), listed on the Registry of Research Data Repositories (re3data.org). ESS is accessible through a data portal and was used in the mentioned studies to explore citizen perceptions regarding decentralization and autonomous agencies in the European Union.

On a smaller scale, the Hosier survey was utilized in two studies to assess citizen perception of local services in Indiana, USA. Several local surveys are conducted in New Zealand (Productivity Commission), Australia (Citizens Experience Survey, Council Community Satisfaction Survey), the Netherlands (Municipal Social Domain Monitor and LISS), Norway (Norwegian Citizen Panel, Survey on Municipal Organization and Municipal Reporting Register, Statistics Norway), Canada (Halifax Citizens Survey) and the Belgian region of Flanders (Gemeente Monitor). Additionally, two works relied on primary data: Andrews and Van de Walle (2013) conducted the Place Survey in 2008, which measured citizen perceptions of local councils, but was not repeated. Similarly, in Germany, Zenker *et al.* (2013) developed the Citizen Satisfaction Index (CSI) through two online surveys comparing CS in four German cities, which was also not repeated. Another German initiative, the COST-action, aimed to address information fragmentation by establishing comparative knowledge on the public sector (Kuhlmann and Bouckaert, 2016), although it was also discontinued. Notably, these surveys date back some time.

Standard tools of assessment of CS of public services
The third concept that guided our analysis regards the *typology of tools used* to measure CS with local services delivered by ALBs.

Several tools are used to evaluate public services. In this study, we focus on the use of surveys, which is the most common strategy. SERVQUAL is a five-dimensional construct created to measure perceived service quality (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1986, 1988). It is one of the first tools for assessing service quality regardless of the application sector. SERVQUAL is a 22-item questionnaire based on a five-dimensions model of service quality, administered for the first time in 1985. Although criticized, for example because of its high level of generalization (it applies to a wide range of services indistinctly), SERVQUAL is the primary method for quality assessment and measures satisfaction by demanding that customers recall and include their expectations in the evaluation. Cronin and Taylor (1992) developed the SERVPERF performance-based questionnaire to overcome the criticism on SERVQUAL by evaluating the expectations and perception of citizens about the quality of services or products without considering their expectations.

Using surveys to measure CS is criticized for various reasons (Bouckaert and van de Walle, 2003; Cassia and Magno, 2015; Swindell and Kelly, 2000). First, even if expectations are included in the measurement (Van Ryzin, 2004; Van Ryzin and Immerwahr, 2007), it can be questioned to which extent citizens are knowledgeable about public services and have had real-life experiences on which their expectations are based. Second, by measuring only the satisfaction of citizens who used the service, experiences regarding the inaccessibility of public services or information about those services are left out and hence not included in decisions based on the information collected from the survey.

Main frameworks about the use of CS: expectancy disconfirmation model (EDM) and experience anchoring
One reason CS is often dismissed as a performance measurement tool is the subjective nature of evaluation, which may bias priorities and expectations.

To assess public service importance, two measurements are considered: stated importance and derived importance (Chu, 2002; De Oña and De Oña, 2015). For example, surveys (Van Ryzin and Immerwahr, 2007), may suggest that people prioritize healthcare over roads cleanliness based on their response *when asked* (stated importance). Managers may act on these opinions or favor traditional performance evaluation (Kelly and Swindell, 2002). However, residents' perceptions can change under the influence not only of service quality but also its perceived importance (derived importance), affected by personal experience. This highlights the role of citizens' experience in their evaluation of services.

Citizens' ideas change frequently, influenced by culture, needs and available information. Governments should analyze citizens' opinions in-depth to provide long-term satisfaction data (Roch and Poister, 2006). Therefore, surveys measuring perceived importance, satisfaction and perceived service quality should complement other methods to assess citizens' perceptions. Despite increased focus on citizens' needs and service corporatization, citizen-centric research remains limited. A systematic review (Jakobsen *et al.*, 2019) found that only 10% of public administration research centers on citizens as the unit of analysis, in contrast to the consumer-oriented model of new public management (Andrews *et al.*, 2011).

Within this premise, the fourth guiding concept for our study is *the theory of CS evaluation* and precisely the impact of previous argumentations (and others which should eventually arise through the data) on the decision of local governments and their ALBs to implement evaluations of CS with local services.

Methodology
We interviewed national academic experts on local government and ALBs and employed template analysis for the interview data. Template analysis allows content analysis of a portion of the data, resulting in a coding template (King and Brooks, 2017), which is then applied to the remaining data. Template analysis provided a flexible yet structured approach to uncover patterns in attitudes toward CS in local services.

Data collection: interviews
National academic experts with active research careers from 11 countries were interviewed: Australia, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom (Table 1).

Expert interviews are a valuable method for theory generation in exploratory studies, surpassing in efficiency surveys, focus groups and literature reviews (Döringer, 2021; Bogner *et al.*, 2009). Specifically, they allow to dive into complex topics and accessing specialized knowledge. Secondly, these interviews allowed to gather diverse insights from experts in multiple countries, enriching our dataset and transcending the language barrier created by a locally sourced analysis. Alternative approaches involving direct research on the field, such as interviewing the employees of the ALBs, public servants or process managers would have presented challenges, including limited case diversity, potential language barriers and narrower interview scopes primarily reflecting individual experiences. Furthermore, in depth interviews allowed to address the issue also in light of the complexity highlighted by the third and fourth sensitizing concepts of this research: the typology of tools used in CS evaluation (why some, such as surveys, are more common than others; what are the pros and cons of each tool) and the reasons behind the lack of use of CS (whether expectancy disconfirmation really is an issue, and if so, why).

On the other hand, expert interviews can introduce biases linked to the selection process. Individuals from a network might share similar perspectives or backgrounds, potentially resulting in a lack of diversity in their viewpoints. Moreover, experts may carry inherent

	Name	Country	Affiliation
1	Dr Voorn B	Netherlands	Radboud University
2	Prof. Dr Van Genugten M	Netherlands	Radboud University
3	Prof. Dr Bel G	Spain	Universitat de Barcelona
4	Prof. Dr Tavares A	Portugal	United Nations University
5	Prof. Dr Andrews R	The United Kingdom	Cardiff University
6	Prof. Emer. Bovaird T	The United Kingdom	Birmingham University
7	Prof. Dr Kuhlmann S	Germany	Universität Potsdam
8	Prof. Dr Papenfuss U	Germany	Zeppelin University
9	Prof. Dr Torsteinsen H	Norway	UiT Norges Arktiske Universitet
10	Prof. Dr Verhoest K	Belgium	Universiteit Antwerpen
11	Prof. Dr Van de Walle S	Belgium	Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven
12	Prof. Dr Cepiku D	Italy	University of Rome Tor Vergata
13	Dr Asquith A	New Zealand	Curtin University
14	Prof. Dr McNeill J	New Zealand	Massey University
15	*	Hungary	
16	Prof. Dr Kádár K	Hungary	Corvinus University
17	*	Australia	

Note(s): * Informants n°15 and 17 preferred to stay anonymous
Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 1.
National experts on
local government
service delivery by
ALBs and their
affiliation at the time of
the study

biases stemming from their experience and expertise. We employed stringent selection criteria and a semi-structured interview protocol to mitigate the influence of pre-existing biases and guarantee a balanced representation of perspectives. Lastly, only a limited number of experts could be interviewed for each country. The diversity of their expertise though allowed to obtain saturation thanks to their expert knowledge and intensive interviews, which provided particularly rich data.

The national experts (Table 1) representing different countries were purposefully sampled (Rivera, 2019) based on their qualifications and availability. In some cases, country experts were contacted through snowballing. Purposive sampling was necessary to obtain a non-random sample with academically acknowledged expertise on the field of ALBs and local governments. Twenty were initially contacted, with 19 agreeing to interviews. Seventeen contributions were received and three experts (from Hungary and Spain) provided additional original documents. The interviews took place online (except for one conducted via email exchange) between December 2021 and April 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and concluded upon reaching thematic saturation. Data, including researchers' notes, expert documents and verbatim transcriptions, were coded using NVivo software in an iterative process.

The interview guideline was broad and open-ended, focusing on five key areas:

(1) General information about the interviewee's country, local service delivery and the presence of ALBs.

(2) CS evaluation within their country, especially concerning local services provided by ALBs.

(3) Availability and accessibility of CS data in their country.

(4) Indicators, protocols and regulations for CS evaluation of local services delivered by ALBs.

(5) Cases and best practices, i.e. municipalities implementing CS evaluation projects.

Analysis of the interviews
We used template analysis by analyzing a portion of the data to create a template that we applied to the remaining data. The analysis was guided by the sensitizing concepts identified in the literature review. The content was then coded in strings of significance by keeping the semantics strictly connected to the surrounding context (King and Brooks, 2017). The hybrid inductive-deductive approach enabled patterns to emerge across the countries, minimizing the influence of prior research and helping triangulating commonalities and differences between the countries.

The first phase of the analysis resulted in the creation of 245 codes through line-by-line coding. The codes were organized around recurring themes as depicted in Figure 1, which formed the template for the analysis and will be elaborated upon in the results section.

Results
The core of the research consisted of conducting interviews and analyzing them to construct a conceptual framework (template) through which we attempt an explanation to the use (or lack thereof) of CS (RQ2) and infer causal relations among the potentially influencing factors.
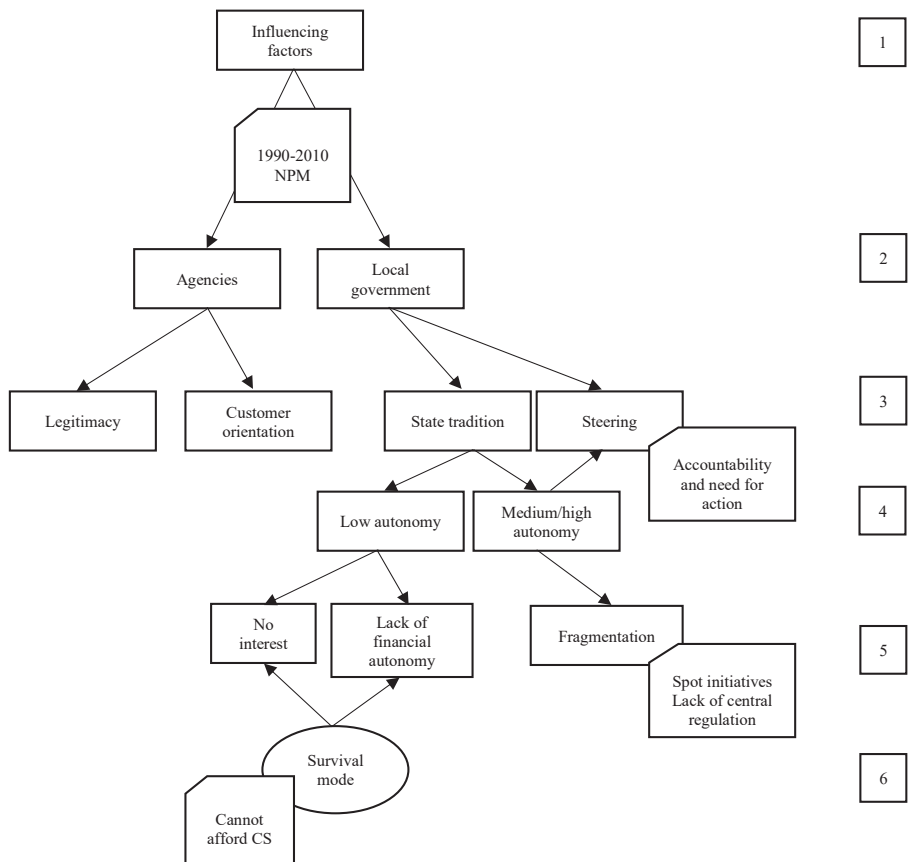
Figure 1.
Template of the analysis

Source(s): Figure created by authors

This template is designed to structure the primary themes that began emerging from the interviews, aiding systematic analysis of the remaining data while referencing the template for guidance (King and Brooks, 2017). Figure 1 shows the template created during this phase.

First (Figure 1, lev.1), we find that influencing factors of CS evaluation depend on the service provider's nature: direct delivery by the local government or delivery via an agency (Figure 2, lev.2). In both scenarios, a surge in CS evaluation initiatives is noticeable around the years 1990–2010, which we associate with the adoption of new public management policies by the countries impacted by an overall shift towards a managerial approach, as exemplified by Italy and Hungary:

> In 2009 there was this project of the emoticons, [. . .] those totems that still exist

> Italy

> I recall there used to be some in the first. You know, as I said in 2012, there used to be a level of enthusiasm, even among the central government.
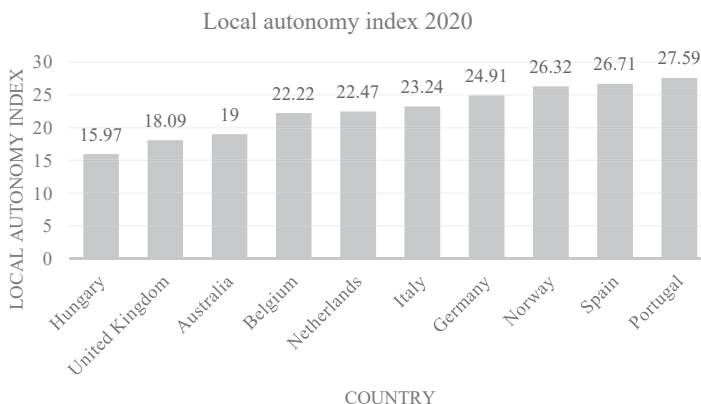
> Hungary

During this period, we find an increase in the establishment of agencies to streamline service delivery and introduce competition to leverage market dynamics:

> Then the idea rises we could establish a new arm's length body, a local corporation, digital unit which has other payment opportunities which can be more attractive, and more dynamic, for the working environment.

> We need a level playing field, how they call it, a fair competition between private and public and enterprises.

> Germany

The growing corporatization was accompanied by a need for performance measures and sporadic CS measurements. However, this enthusiasm waned after the Global Financial Crisis and the subsequent austerity measures. New policies were implemented to increase

Note(s): * At least for the countries which are included in the computation of the LAI. As showed in fig.3, Australia, Hungary, and the United Kingdom have a lower autonomy index for 2020, compared to Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and Spain

Source(s): Figure created by authors based on data from LAI* (Ladner A., 2020)

Figure 2.
Local Autonomy Index
for the Countries of
this study

control over agencies, especially from a financial perspective, as evident in Spain, where a financial reform of the public sector was enacted in 2013:

> In 2013 there was passed what was called a law of rationalisation of the public sector. And in this law in 2013, and this law establish a stronger constraint to create and to maintain public agencies and public firms.

> As a consequence, corporatisation, which had been on the rise for the century decreased after 2013.

> Spain

In other cases (Hungary, New Zealand and the United Kingdom), the decline in evaluation policies, including CS, was linked to deliberate efforts by the central governments to curtail the dissemination of performance information (blue-penciling).

> I don't want to overstress this, but actually [. . .] the philosophy of, and practice of government since 2010, [. . .] in the initial years there were some efforts [. . .] to really restrict, some sensitive, politically potentially sensitive information, but to provide information which is not sensitive.

> Hungary

The term "sensitive" in this quote pertains to information concerning public performance, especially during a period marked by heavy sector restructuring.

Despite the prevailing corporatization and public sector reforms, the factors influencing the use of CS evaluation depend on the service provider (Figure 1 lev.2). On the one hand (Figure 1 lev.3), agencies use evaluation tools, specifically CS, for legitimacy and customer-centricity:

> So they really feel a need to improve and know if they perform badly

> The agencies also collect data and that, that is a way of reporting to municipalities on their performance.

> The Netherlands

On the other, municipalities use data for steering and control:

> So maybe they use they use this information in the steering relationship.

> The Netherlands

Simultaneously, a misalignment exists between the governments' desire to oversee the agencies, and their ability to influence their actions:

> Maybe the municipalities feel the need to improve, but then they [municipality, ed.] would need the agencies to improve and not them to improve.

> The Netherlands

This causes an accountability gap, affecting both service delivery and evaluation. As mentioned earlier, ALBs provide a way for governments to distance themselves from services. Consequently, it is often unclear whether the accountability for services and their evaluation rests with the government or the delivering ALB.

Furthermore, we observe differences in CS utilization depending on the autonomy level of municipalities (Figure 1 lev.4 and 5). In cases of greater local autonomy (e.g. in Germany), there is a higher incidence of evaluation initiatives, often tied to high fragmentation due to the absence of overarching guidelines.

> Unless there are some provisions by the state, this is quite rare in general; cities, municipalities, and local governments decide on their own within the framework of organisational autonomy.

> There was very little comparative data across public agencies, so the comparative element was lost.

Germany

there's no general regulation, it might be, for example in the performance contract that agencies have
with their municipality, there is something all regular surveying citizens about satisfaction. But it's
very scattered, [. . .] it's rather seldom.

Belgium

On the other hand, in municipalities with limited autonomy, such as New Zealand and
Hungary, where service delivery is centralized, a desire to evaluate CS exists. However, these
municipalities often lack the necessary resources (both human and financial) to engage in
such evaluations. The motivation lacks due to their inability to exert control over the services
(Figure 1 lev.6). Consequently, they attribute blame to the central government.

One of the biggest problems is that simply the government doesn't understand local government. It's
something that's there to be tolerated.

New Zealand

The initial interview analysis did not place substantial emphasis on two of the three
sensitizing concepts derived from the theoretical exploration.

First, the typology of tools for CS evaluation received limited attention from informants.
While all interviewees noted fragmentation in CS evaluation, only two interviews mentioned
scientific tools like SERVPERF, SERVQUAL (UK) and emoticon-based evaluation (Italy), the
latter being associated with potential confirmation bias ("*it's often used by municipalities
where things go well*"). In most cases, surveys are expected to be the primary tool, aligning
with the results from our literature review. Hence, we decided not to delve deeply into specific
tools, due to their diverse nature, extending beyond our scope.

Across most analyzed countries, experts unanimously emphasized the significance of CS
as a crucial tool for local governments and ALBs, particularly in building trust and enabling
value co-creation. In some cases (UK, Hungary and New Zealand), CS fell beyond the scope of
local governments due to factors like limited autonomy or resources. Notably, no informants
cited reasons against using CS for performance evaluation. Consequently, we excluded the
theoretical factor regarding reasons against CS use from our analysis.

The last sensitizing concept revolved around measuring CS concerning public service
delivery by ALBs. During our research, we expected CS to be undervalued or avoided, but the
data contradicted this assumption. However, we observed fragmented efforts of CS
evaluation, lacking systematic approaches. While numerous public and private initiatives
collected CS data (cf. Table 2), these data often remained unanalyzed or, when analyzed, were
not applied for performance management, decision-making or dissemination.

A weakness of these (CS assessment) projects is of doing customer satisfaction, doing participative
evaluation, but after you collect the data, nothing changes.

Italy

But actually, as far as I am understanding, it's pretty common this phenomenon of data collection
that ends up in some data warehouse, and nobody, ever (uses it)

United Kingdom

Explanations for CS evaluation in local services and ALBs
Now, we move from describing findings to proposing explanations for the use, or lack thereof,
of CS evaluation in local services and ALBs. This analysis rendered four testable propositions
for future research (see Table 3 at the end of this section).

Table 2.
Sources of CS data

Database	Author	Year	Country	Topic
European Social Survey	Sjors Overman	2017	EU	Delegation of tax and police services to semiautonomous agencies in 15 countries
European Social Survey	Díaz-Serrano, Rodriguez-Pose	2014	EU	Data drawn from European Social Survey
Lissdata	Coffe, Michels	2014	NL	Public support for direct, stealth and representative democracy according to educational level
Norwegian citizens panel Survey on Municipal Organization Statistics from the municipal reporting register	Holum, Jakobsen	2016	NO	Effects of IMC on citizen satisfaction for waste management and fire services
Halifax Citizens survey	McDavid	2002	CA	Citizens perception after amalgamation of the police services
Halifax Citizens survey	Dale H. Poel	2000	CA	Citizen responses to a municipal amalgamation that created the Halifax Regional Municipality
Hoosier Survey	Taylor	2015	USA	Citizen perception on service quality following tax caps on property taxes
Council Community Satisfaction Survey	Drew, Dollery, Kortt	2015	AU	Relationship between population size and citizens satisfaction (to determine the ideal municipal size, in alternative to the relationship cost-size). Uses Annual Community Satisfaction Survey data for Victorian local government
Telephone survey	Kushner, Siegel	2005	CA	Quality of municipal services (scale) and also if they perceived that the quality changed since the amalgamation
Citizens Satisfaction Index	Zenker et al	2013	GE	Citizen's satisfaction, and a comparison between German cities, through two surveys conducted online
Statistics Norway	Marthe L. Holum and Tor G. Jakobsen	2016	NO	Multilevel analysis combining data from the Norwegian Citizens Study, Study from Municipal Organization, the official Register of Legal Entities (Brønnøysundregistrene) and Statistics Norway
Place Survey	Rhys Andrews and Steven Van de Walle	2012	UK	Citizens perceptions with local councils
New Zealand Productivity Commission	N/A	N/A	NZ	New Zealand productivity commission issues report and data about several topics, including citizens satisfaction with local services
Gemeente Stadsmonitor	N/A	N/A	BE	City Monitor collects data about the Flemish municipalities by a three-yearly citizen survey
COST action	Kuhlmann, Bouckaert, Schwb, Magli, Guilfoyle	N/A	GE	Action addressing information fragmentation by establishing comparative knowledge on public sector
Municipal Social Domain Monitor	N/A	N/A	NL	Developed by Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) and Statistics Netherlands, collects data from municipalities about facilities under the Social Support Act (Wmo)

P1a	The more autonomy a local government has, the more local initiatives they show to measure and evaluate CS with service delivery by ALBs
P1b	The more autonomy a local government has, the fewer national initiatives for CS evaluation exist
P2a	New Public Management caused the increase of initiatives of CS evaluation with services provided by ALBs
P2b	Political interest in CS decreases after cuts in public expenditure
P2c	The lower the local autonomy, the lower the national interest in CS
P3a	CS is not more likely evaluated for services delivered by ALBs than for services delivered by local governments
P3b	Data about CS are more often publicly available when collected by local governments than those collected by ALBs
P4a	The kind of service influences the number of initiatives of CS evaluation
P4b	Political changes may disrupt the continuity of CS evaluation implementation

Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 3.
Propositions

Autonomy

The 11 countries present different levels of local autonomy and accountability that strongly impact their initiative regarding CS evaluation. From the interviews, three clusters emerged: centralization-oriented countries (Hungary, New Zealand and the United Kingdom), autonomization-oriented countries (Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands), and countries subject to a high degree of regulation at the local, regional and national level for local services (Australia, Italy, Norway, Portugal and Spain). These categories were compared for confirmation with data from the Local Autonomy Index (Figure 2, elaborated by the authors; cfr. Ladner, 2020; Ladner *et al.*, 2016, 2023).

In countries with limited local government autonomy, interest in CS and evaluation was minimal. Experts from these countries cited two primary reasons for this disinterest. Firstly, municipalities have limited control and capacity to effect change, making it challenging to enhance or sustain CS with local public services.

> Even if they wanted to do something about citizen satisfaction, if you are struggling for your life [...] then probably you will not introduce any ambitious measures to, you know, to measure and manage satisfaction and so on.
>
> Hungary

Secondly, limited resources lead local administrations to view CS measurement as an unaffordable luxury, pushing them into "survival mode".

> Even if local governments were interested in something, their ability to do things is extremely limited.
>
> Hungary

From this result, we draw the proposition:

> *P1a.* The more autonomy a local government has, the more local initiatives they show to measure and evaluate CS with service delivery by ALBs.

Conversely, countries with more autonomous local administrations display greater interest in comprehending CS. However, experts noted infrequent endeavors to measure CS and incorporate it into performance management. Additionally, these countries lacked national regulations or initiatives in these regards.

> The federation in Germany, which is at the national level, and the federal level, has no direct powers of intervention towards the local level.

Germany

Consequently, available data, if any, are not systematically collected and lack nationwide comparability:

> There isn't a continuous database over a longitudinal period of time for any given local authority or social care organisation or whatever. And secondly, because they're used mainly to inform the inspections, they are marketing data, they're not being used internally to manage improvements in the service.

United Kingdom

> We are a parochial lot and individual governments at all levels like to control their own patch.

Australia

Moreover, data are primarily for internal use and is often not publicly accessible. Occasionally, municipalities expect ALBs to collect data for the municipality to oversee ALB's performance (steering strategy), but those cases are infrequent due to the high autonomy level of many ALBs and the unclear accountability, limiting public entities' control over ALB activity. Thus:

> *P1b.* The more autonomy a local government has, the fewer national initiatives for CS evaluation exist.

At the same time, most data are not scientific enough to be used for research purposes:

> They're not reliable. I'm embarrassed about this. You know, much of the citizen satisfaction work which has been done in the last 20 years in the UK. It's very crude and very unreliable.

United Kingdom

Timing

In all analyzed countries, a shift in CS measurement coincided with the adoption of NPM policies and, a few years later, the effects of the Global Financial Crisis on the public sector.

> All of that was swept away in 2010 when the Cameron government, the conservative, liberal coalition government, or 2010, came into power and an infrastructure for exploring citizen satisfaction was swept overnight.

United Kingdom

We observe an increase in ALBs and an interest in CS following the rise of NPM, emphasizing the citizen-as-consumer perspective. Thus:

> *P2a.* New public management caused the increase of initiatives of CS evaluation with services provided by ALBs.

That increase correlated with an increase in public service regulation, including those provided by ALBs, and a decline in CS initiatives, which appears to coincide with the Global Financial Crisis and subsequent austerity measures, which involved significant budget cuts:

> *P2b.* Political interest in CS decreases after cuts in public expenditure.

Simultaneously, governments centralizing local service management are inclined to restrict CS evaluation and dissemination. This practice, labeled as blue-penciling (text censorship), is aimed at evading responsibility for subpar services and citizen discontent:

> People would be angry, dissatisfied, and publishing such information would undermine the credibility of the government.

United Kingdom

Based on these findings, we can postulate:

P2c. The lower the local autonomy, the lower the national interest in CS.

Use of data
Initially, we anticipated that ALBs would display a greater interest in CS due to their focus on efficiency and customer orientation. However, our experts did not identify a strong correlation between the delivery form and the inclination for CS evaluation. ALBs do not consistently prioritize CS evaluation compared to local governments, and when they do, data and outcomes are frequently inaccessible to the public or exhibit a bias towards positive reporting.

> What do they report? If they only mention slight pieces, it's not possible to use it for scientific purposes.

> Germany

> If we go and see the quality of the indicators … there is a bit of everything!

> Italy

> The agency says what it wants to say in the board and does not always give all the information.

> Belgium

> Most of the research that I've conducted is always with data that either I personally collect through surveys, or the ones where … there is a national dataset of some sort where the information is collected.

> Portugal

Therefore, we posit:

P3a. CS is not more likely evaluated for services delivered by ALBs than for services delivered by local governments.

P3b. Data about CS are more often publicly available when collected by local governments than those collected by ALBs.

Fragmentation
Additionally, performance evaluation, including CS assessment, exhibits significant variation among sectors and regions:

> I should stress this, there is significant variation, in terms of sectors. For example, in terms of the water sector you find the best indicators of performance, also because we have a regulatory body at the national level that requires them so, for example if you want to report.

> Portugal

> For instance, water and solid waste are mostly regulated at the regional level. So, you can still find regional variations in regulation.

> Spain

Therefore, we find that:

P4a. The kind of service influences the number of initiatives of CS evaluation.

Lastly, CS evaluation initiatives hinge on political inconsistency:

> And they change quite often so sometimes they can't carry on with such initiatives because as soon that as the party changes, they dismantle everything.

Norway

Thus:

P4b. Political changes may disrupt the continuity of CS evaluation implementation.


Discussion

This study delves into the role of CS evaluation in assessing local services, exploring its application as a performance measurement tool in ALB-driven services. The findings of the study contribute to a better understanding of the nuances, challenges and opportunities associated with CS in evaluating ALB performance.

The study yields two main outcomes. The first presents data sources available in different countries, for researchers – and practitioners – to conduct empirical research about CS with local services. A database (Table 2) was assembled through desk research and literature review and integrated with experts' interviews. The second discusses CS evaluation initiatives in 11 countries and proposes four avenues for future research.

The study uncovers that despite its potential benefits in evaluation public service delivery, there is limited real-world application of CS. Initiatives surged between 1990 and 2010, aligning with the adoption of new public management policies and the generalized shift to efficiency. The rise of NPM policies coincided with a renewed interest in citizens as consumers, emphasizing CS as an indicator of policy and service effectiveness. However, the enthusiasm appears to wane after the Global Financial Crisis and ensuing austerity measures, which led to increased service decentralization by local governments and reduced CS evaluation initiatives. Governments prioritized austerity and efficiency, with many local governments seeming in "survival mode", lacking resources for CS evaluation. In some cases, the decline in evaluation policies, including CS, was linked by our experts to deliberate efforts by central governments to restrict the dissemination of performance information, a practice we refer to as blue-penciling.

ALBs play a strategic role in achieving efficiency, yet their presence does not always equate to customer satisfaction analysis, especially in local services. This exploratory study finds that ALBs that do use CS, seem to do it for legitimacy and customer-centricity, while municipalities may use data for steering and control. However, it is unclear whether the accountability for services and their evaluation rests with the government or the delivering ALBs (cf. Voorn *et al.*, 2019). Autonomy levels of municipalities play a crucial role, with higher autonomy correlating with higher incidence of CS evaluation initiatives at the local level but lower initiatives at the national level. A relationship emerges between a country's state tradition and the presence of CS evaluation initiatives, primarily driven by the autonomy level in local government, whether high (as in Germany) or low with centralized national coordination (as in New Zealand). It would be interesting to empirically ascertain whether the level of local government autonomy positively influences CS evaluation initiatives (proposition P1a, b). Consequently, we recommend further investigating the connection between the level of local government autonomy and the inclination of ALBs to evaluate CS, along with the existence of regulations and standardized CS metrics.

Figure 3 depicts the conceptual model emerging from this study. Notably, we suggest empirically testing the impact of autonomy levels on local governments' interest in CS. Furthermore, external factors should be considered such as budget constraints, blue-penciling and central regulations about the topic.
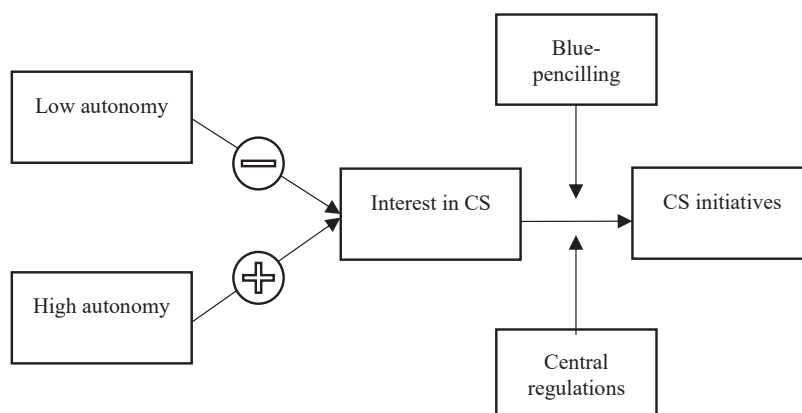
Source(s): Figure created by authors

Overall, accordance among all the experts was found throughout the study regarding the fragmentation of the available data, also confirmed by the literature review. Information regarding CS and local services appears fragmented and inconsistent and so does data usage, when collected. Different sectors and regions exhibit significant variation in performance evaluation, with some actors and services being regulated more than others.

Lastly, this study contributes to the ongoing debate about recent research trends (Osborne *et al.*, 2016; Schmidthuber *et al.*, 2019) that emphasize the increased significance of citizens and their active role in the community, not just as passive recipients of customers, recognizing the gradual shift towards more participatory governance worldwide. However, several experts in this study noted that citizens' involvement, although desirable, remains highly fragmented and subject to political and cultural shifts. Further research is required to analyze the discourse on CS in local government, to offer practitioners a solid framework of tools and insights, including benefits and limitations of the assessment of local services CS and to overcome the limited utilization of available CS data for decision-making and lack of systematic approach.

External factors such as political changes, financial constraints and government policies also appear to impact the enthusiasm for CS initiatives. The role of ALBs and their relationship with local governments adds complexity to the evaluation landscape. Autonomy levels of municipalities emerge as a critical factor influencing the utilization of CS in performance measurement. On the other hand, the study acknowledges its limitations based on the scarcity of research on ALBs – which is also highlighted by some of the experts in the study – and the potential bias introduced by the focus on expert opinions and by the limited scope of the study, which may not capture the full spectrum of CS evaluation initiatives in all sectors or regions.

Conclusion
This study provides insights into the role of CS as an evaluation tool in assessing local services, particularly focusing on services driven by ALBs. The findings contribute to an initial, yet nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with CS in evaluating ALBs performance. It presents two primary outcomes: firstly, the availability of data sources across different countries, facilitating empirical research on CS with local services. Secondly, a focus onto CS evaluation initiatives across eleven countries and their

influencing factors, integrating desk research, literature review and seventeen expert interviews.

CS, though holding potential, faces challenges influenced by external factors. Despite the potential benefits of CS in evaluating public service delivery, the study uncovers limited real-world application, particularly post-Global Financial Crisis, and the following austerity measures. ALBs play a crucial role in achieving efficiency, but despite their assumed customer orientation, their presence does not always manifest customer satisfaction analysis in local services. An accountability gap is identified, questioning the responsibility for services and their evaluation.

Fragmentation and inconsistency in available CS data and its usage reflect challenges in systematic evaluation efforts. The emerging relationship between a country's state tradition, local government autonomy and CS evaluation initiatives prompts further empirical investigation. The study emphasizes the potential impact of autonomy levels of municipalities, suggesting empirical testing of their influence on local government's interest in CS.

The study concludes by proposing a research agenda with four testable propositions, inviting further investigation to enhance understanding and inform policy and practice in the evolving landscape of CS evaluation – and participation – in public service delivery.

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