

## TRUST AND EXPECTED COSTS AS ANTECEDENTS OF CITIZENS' MOTIVATION TO PARTICIPATE IN PUBLIC POLICYMAKING

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives.** The present study aimed at testing whether costs, trustworthiness of government, and expected voice could predict citizens' willingness to get involved in participatory governance processes. Participants and setting. Research participants were one-hundred and ninety-two volunteer students of Sapienza University of Rome, 66% female. Hypotheses. We hypothesized both main effects of trust (positive) and expected costs (negative) and an interactive effect of the two variables on citizens' willingness to participate. We also expected voice to be a mediator of such an interaction effect on willingness to participate. Statistical analyses. A 2 (costs) by 2 (trust) ANOVA was applied both to manipulation checks and to motivation to participate. Following this, we performed a bootstrap mediated moderation analysis (Hayes, 2013). Results. Motivation to participate was significantly affected by trust, in fact participants in the high trust condition, were more willing to participate ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = .91$ ) rather than those in the

low trust condition ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = .99$ ). Also, a main effect of costs emerged, with low costs inducing higher motivation to participate ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) than high costs ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ). More importantly, these effects were qualified by the predicted interaction between costs and trust: while in the high trust condition costs did not affect willingness to participate, in the low costs condition they made a significant difference. Finally, mediated moderation analysis showed that that expected voice was responsible for the impact of the trust by costs interaction on motivation to participate. Limitation. The main limitation of the study concerns generalizability of its results across populations of different ages and occupation.

### *Key words:*

citizens' participation,  
policymaking,  
costs expectations,  
trust in government,  
voice effect

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of citizens participation within governance processes has currently gained wide attention, both in academic discourse and actual practice. Analysts have used theoretical constructs such as *deliberative democracy* or *participatory democracy* to analyze the scope and limitations of people's participation in the process of governance, through a review of the traditional democracy theories. Effective participation by all stakeholders at local levels of government and reduction of social exclusion and political apathy have come to be viewed as a necessary condition for promoting good governance and a cohesive society.

The shift of focus towards new horizontal governance models (as opposed to the traditional vertical ones) in recent years highlights a fundamental need to reconceptualize public sector. In this regard, participatory governance practices (Edwards, 2002; Lovan, Murray and Shaffer, 2004; Osmani, 2007) are aimed to provide non-government actors, both individuals and organizations, with a means

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to genuinely and actively be part of the process of developing policy. Such processes have taken hold as intermediary spaces that readjust the boundaries between the state and its citizens, establishing new places in which participants from both can engage each other in new ways.

Therefore new deliberative institutions seek to colonize the state power by transforming the interfaces between local citizens and higher levels of government where citizens are viewed as an integral part of governance processes and their active involvement is considered essential in the substantive decisions facing a community.

#### ADVANTAGES AND PITFALLS IN PARTICIPATION

Citizens' participation in governance processes is largely recognized as a valuable process (Nylen 2002; Buchy and Race 2001). The arguments in favor of enhancing citizen participation frequently focus on the benefits of the process itself as stated by King and Stivers (1998), suggesting that improved citizen participation could stop the deterioration of public trust evidenced by widespread hostility toward government entities.

Citizen involvement is intended to produce better decisions, and thus more benefits for the entire society (Beierle, 1999). Irvin and Stansbury (2004) suggest a list of advantages, distinguishing between those concerning citizens and governments. Both citizens and governments are likely to learn from each other, the former becoming citizen-experts, understanding technically difficult situations and seeing holistic, community-wide solutions, while the latter would also benefit from receiving education on specific community groups' positions. Also, both citizens and governments may have the chance to improve their persuading skills on the other part in order to achieve acceptance of its own instances.

However, a number of authors claimed that participatory governance practices are not always rational nor exempt from critical issues. As one of the authors remarked (Antonini and Fini, 2011), one of the most common problems concerning public participation is to effectively encourage citizens to concretely participate in policymaking (and to political life in general) and it is not unusual for citizens to still staunchly refuse to get directly involved in policymaking. Participation is inevitably selective and it may occur that some individuals recognized as relevant participants are considered to be part of the citizenry, while those excluded are left without a voice, without a way to express their involvement and enact their citizenship (O'Neill, 2001; Turnhout, Van Bommel and Aarts, 2010). Furthermore, participation may repress differences requiring citizens to achieve consensus that is considered to be a robust basis for high quality and legitimate decisions (Innes and Booher, 2003).

In sum, when given the opportunity to participate in policymaking one cannot automatically assume that citizens will chose to do so. Declining rates of citizens' participation mean on one hand fewer opportunities for state and local governments to understand the needs and concerns of their constituents, on the other hand less participation enhances itself a cleavage between citizens and politicians in a situation of big changes.

The present study aimed at assessing whether expected costs and benefits, and factors related to the quality of the relationship between citizens and their public administration, such as trust toward the administration and perceived voice, can affect citizens' motivation to participate in public policymaking.

Before describing the experimental study, in the following section we will briefly review literature concerning these variables.

### **The rational choice explanation of citizens' participation**

Rational choice scholars have typically approached people's motivation to participate in politics (i.e., voting) adopting models based on pure self-interest (e.g., Aldrich, 1993; Downs, 1957; Feddersen and Pesendorfer, 1996; Ledyard, 1981; Palfrey, Rosenthal, 1985) and expected value (e.g., Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Feather, 1982) thought in terms of collective action. According to such a perspective, political participation could be considered as the result of a rational costs-benefits evaluation.

Social movement research has typically viewed the motivation to participate as a function of the individual as well as collective costs of participation (Klandermans, 1984, 1997; Oberschall, 1980; Opp, 1989, 2001; Stürmer and Simon, 2004). Perceived material or psychological costs of participation can reduce public willingness to participate: those are usually related to energy level (Fishkin, 1997), economic loss and time investment (Abelson et al., 1995; Grant, 1994). Similarly, benefits include not only material advantages but also psychological and social ones: satisfaction (Hirschmann, 2002), sense of belonging and social status rewards (Kelly and Breinlinger, 1996).

Although the costs approach seems useful to precisely grasp the individual determinants of willingness to get engaged, on the other hand such a rational-choice approach paints an over-individualistic picture. Therefore, only focusing on individual advantages and drawbacks may not provide an exhaustive framework leading to ignore how people's decisions are influenced by their relationship with the administration government as well as the extent to which they believe their voice will be heard.

### **Trust in government as a tenet of participation**

Within public policymaking it is often the government that encourages citizens to participate. In this type of participation processes where governments reach out to their citizens, it is necessary that citizens trust their government administration in order to get actively involved. Thus, as trust in authority is an important psychological antecedent of collective behavior (e.g. De Cremer and Van Vugt, 1999; Tyler, 1989; Van Vugt and De Cremer, 1999), we will take into account the role of trust in predicting citizens' motivation to participate in public policymaking.

In contemporary political debates and scientific literature on the subject, there is a growing recognition on the part of administrators that decision-making without public participation is ineffective. Although trust in government is a nebulous and contested notion (Goldfinch, Gauld and Herbison, 2009), it is inevitably important in democratic society, because democracies rely on the voluntary compliance of citizens to authorities' rules (Lenard, 2008). In terms of government actions or behaviour, trust in government can encompass whether one expects a government will act more-or-less in one's and/or the public's interest; and/or more-or-less legally, legitimately and ethically; as well as perform its jobs adequately (Nootboom, 2002). Basically, a trustworthy government is one whose procedures for making and implementing policy meet prevailing standards of fairness and which is capable of credible commitments.

Furthermore, trustworthiness is also a central tenet of the extent to which citizens accept or reject decisions taken by a decision makers (Terwel et al.,

2010). People who know that an authority is trustworthy are more likely to accept the decision taken by the authority than people who know that the authority is untrustworthy. Therefore, one can assume that citizens' trust in public authorities is necessary in order to achieve public consent for political decisions and more in general trustworthiness provides a government a stable context where achieving public decisions will thus be easier than in a distrusting atmosphere.

Although controversial outcomes have emerged from studies on the relationship between perceived trust in institutions and participation, evidences support the idea that citizens' participation can only be developed on the basis of a reciprocal trust between people and institutions (Alford, 2001; Orren, 1997; Uslaner and Brown, 2005; Mannarini, Fedi and Trippetti, 2010). From a rational point of view (Perry and Wise, 1990) citizens are likely to trust their government only to the extent they believe that it will act in their interests, that its procedures are fair, and that their trust of the state and of others is reciprocated. This is the condition necessary to produce behavioral compliance with government demands even when individual's costs somewhat exceed individual benefits and even in the absence of strong ideological convictions that make costs totally irrelevant (Levi, 1998).

Therefore, building on the claim of a number of authors that trust should elicit more participatory behavior than distrust (Almond, 1989), we will assess the impact of trust on citizens' engagement. Specifically, we hypothesize that trustworthiness should foster citizens' involvement in participatory processes, since the more trustworthy citizens perceive government to be, the more likely they are to comply with its demands (e.g., Levi, 1989, 1997; Levi and Stoker, 2000; Tyler, 1989, 2006). Also, we expect that when citizens trust their administration government costs will not be relevant in determining their willingness to participate. In fact, in a condition of trustworthiness, costs may be thought as necessary individual losses in order to achieve superordinate collective goals.

### **Voice effect and participation: when citizens' opinions matter**

Voice effect is explained by presuming that a person given an opportunity to express his/her views will believe that voice will help controlling the outcomes of a decision-making process and that these expectations will lead to higher procedural fairness judgments (Thibaut and Walker, 1975). People value voice because it suggests that their views are worthy of hearing and procedures that accord people status in this way are viewed favorably. Thibaut and Walker (1975) articulated a psychological model to explain procedural preferences suggesting that the distribution of control between participants and the third party is the key procedural characteristic shaping people's views about both fairness and desirability.

Furthermore, several experimental and theoretical works introduced the voice effect into the analyses of participation showing interesting results. Earley and Kanfer (1985) reported that voice-based participation in earlier rather than later stages of decision making has a stronger, more positive impact on satisfaction and performance. Similarly, Lawler (1975) suggested that having a voice is not only a way of being active within the decision-making process: in his view, voice evenly overlaps with participation, which means that expressing one's own opinion is the only way for participating in decision-making.

Thus, we expect that the extent to which citizens anticipate that their opinions will influence the final decision, that is expected voice effect will at least partially mediate the impact of costs and trust on citizens' willingness to participate.

Summarizing, we hypothesized both main effects of trust (positive) and expected costs (negative) and an interactive effect of the two variables on citizens' willingness to participate. Moreover, we also expected voice to be a mediator of such an interaction effect on willingness to participate.

### **Participants and design**

Research participants were one-hundred and ninety-two volunteer students, 66% female,  $M_{\text{age}}$  between 20 and 40 years old (measured on a 20 year-interval scale on 4 points,  $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = .687$ ). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions of a 2 (High vs. Low trust) x 2 (High vs. Low expected costs) between subjects design. Willingness to participate in policymaking was the main dependent variable.

### **Procedure and manipulation of independent variables**

After being given an informed consent, participants were told the purpose of study was an examination of participatory governance engagement. Then, participants were given the prompt of the study: firstly participants were asked to read a scenario and try to identify with it, subsequently they should respond to a number of questions. Accordingly, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions (High vs. Low costs and High vs. Low trust in government), manipulated through asking them respectively:

*High costs: Try to imagine that regardless your personal interest for the project, you will realize that participating will entail high costs. A large amount of time will be asked to all participants so that you will have to withdraw your work, study or family and personal commitments; moreover, it may occur that clear and exact decisions as well as consent with other participants will be hard to achieve. Lastly, it may occur conflicts with other participants that may reflect into your everyday life. These costs (as well as others that you may imagine), will be a necessary effect of such a participation.* This manipulation was adapted from previous research examining the costs-benefits of political participation (Wandersman et al., 1987).

*Low costs: Try to imagine that regardless your personal interest for the project, you will realize that participating will entail low costs. A little amount of time will be asked to all participants so that you will not have to withdraw any of your work, study or family and personal commitments; moreover, you will be supported in achieving clear and exact decisions as well as consent with other participants. Lastly, it may occur that relationships with other citizens will benefit from such experience. Any possible costs, (as well as others that you may imagine) will thus be limited as possible.* This manipulation was adapted from previous research examining the costs-benefits of political participation (Wandersman et al., 1987).

*High trust: moreover, the administration government has a good reputation, having shown across years a great care for citizens' need: his political model is particularly connected with society's needs which represent a set of guidelines for political action aimed to satisfy citizens' needs.* This manipulation was created for the purpose of this study.

*Low trust: moreover, the administration government has not a good reputation, having shown across years a lack of care for citizens' need: his political model is not particularly connected with society's needs, appearing more aimed to respond to the political concerns rather than to satisfy citizens' needs.* This manipulation was created for the purpose of this study.

After being given the scenario, participants were asked to try to keep focusing on such a scenario while responding the subsequent set of questions.

## MEASURES

Finally, motivation to participate, manipulation check of trust, expected costs and voice were measured.

- *Willingness to participate*: specifically participants responded two questions (1 not very much, 5 very much) measuring their likelihood to engage in the participatory governance process highlighted within the scenario. (1) “Imagining to be one of the people described in the scenario, I would be willing to participate in policymaking as proposed by the depicted administration government”; (2) “whether the depicted administration government would be real I would be happy to engage in such a policymaking project” ( $\alpha = .77$ ).
- *Expected costs manipulation check*: participants were asked to think about their expected difficulties and costs involved in political participation on a 5-point scale (1 not very much, 5 very much): (1) “The feeling of frustration from lacking “real” results from participation”; (2) “The need to give up personal and family members for participation”; (3) “Interpersonal conflict with others during participation”; (4) “Any other kind of costs you imagine” ( $\alpha = .828$ ). These questions were adapted from previous research examining costs of political participation (Wandersman et al., 1987).
- *Trust manipulation check*: participants then completed two-questions measuring trust in the government on a 5-point scale (1 not very much, 5 very much): ‘To what extent do you trust the administration government?’ and, ‘To what extent do you consider the administration government to be trustworthy?’ ( $\alpha = .96$ ). These questions were adapted from previous research examining trust in authorities (de Cremer and van Vugt, 1999).
- *Voice*: participants completed one item measuring voice on a 5-point scale (1 not very much, 5 very much): “In the light of the proposal received by the administration government, participating could be a chance to voice my own ideas”.

## RESULTS

*Expected Costs Manipulation check*. A 2 (High vs. Low costs) x 2 (High vs. Low trust) ANOVA on costs revealed the expected main effect of costs’ manipulation,  $F(1, 188) = 19.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ . More personal costs were expected in the high ( $M = 3.91, SD = .70$ ) rather than in the low costs condition ( $M = 3.44, SD = .81$ ). The ANOVA also revealed a main effect of Trust,  $F(1, 188) = 5.91, p = .02, \eta^2 = .03$ , indicating that when high trust was induced participants expected less costs ( $M = 3.55, SD = .74$ ) than in the low trust condition ( $M = 3.80, SD = .82$ ). No other significant effects emerged.

*Trust Manipulation check*. A 2 (High vs. Low costs) x 2 (High vs. Low trust) ANOVA was conducted on the score of perceived trust toward the administration. The main effect of trust,  $F(1, 188) = 75.78, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29$ , confirmed the adequacy of the manipulation. More specifically, participants in the high trust condition reported higher scores ( $M = 3.41, SD = .78$ ) than those in the low trust condition ( $M = 2.48, SD = .69$ ). No other significant effects emerged.

*Motivation to Participate*. The 2 (High vs. Low costs) x 2 (High vs. Low trust) ANOVA on motivation to participate highlighted a main effect of trust,  $F(1, 188) = 14.90, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$ , indicating that participants in the high trust condition

were more willing to participate ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = .91$ ) than those in the low trust condition ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = .99$ ).

Also, a main effect of expected costs emerged,  $F(1, 188) = 5.35$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Inspection of means revealed that motivation to participate was more pronounced in the low expected costs condition ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) rather than in the high costs condition ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ).

More importantly, these effects were qualified by the predicted interaction between expected costs and trust,  $F(1, 188) = 3.93$ ,  $p = .049$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . As can be noted in Figure 1, in the high expected costs condition, participants were willing to participate especially when they were in the trust condition ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) rather than distrust ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) the administration government,  $F(1, 188) = 17.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ . When costs were expected to be low, motivation was relatively unaffected by trust,  $F(1, 188) = 1.72$ ,  $p = .19$ .

Simple effect analysis within the trust conditions showed that the manipulation of costs only affected participants motivation when trust was low,  $F(1, 188) = 9.74$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ , with high expected costs leading to reduced motivation ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) as compared to low expected costs ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = .93$ ). Expected costs did not affect participants motivation when trust was high ( $F < 1$ ).

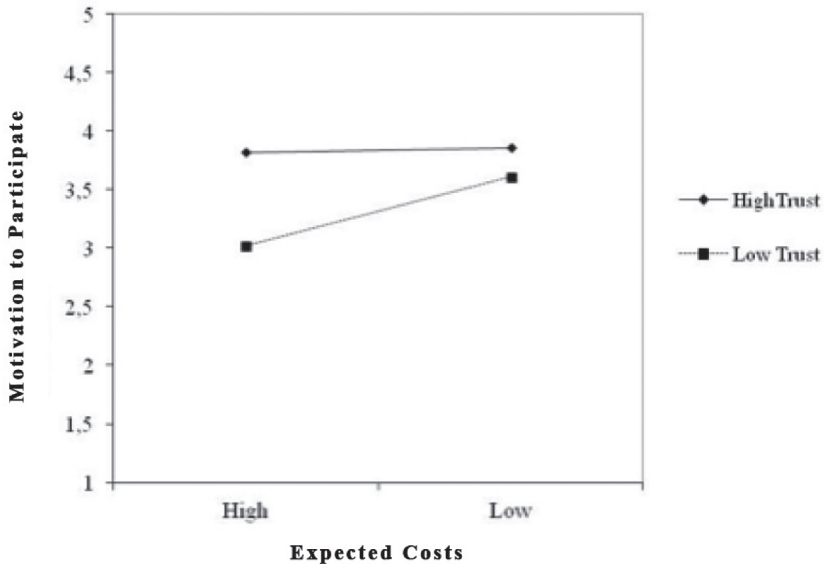


Figure 1 Motivation to participate as a function of trust and costs

*Mediated Moderation Analysis.* Voice was highly correlated with motivation to participate ( $r = .58$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Building on this association, we wanted to test whether voice could mediate the impact of the interaction between trust and expected costs on motivation. To test for the mediated moderation we first regressed motivation to participate on the interaction between our independent variables. As can be noted in Figure 2, the interaction had a significant impact on motivation to participate,  $\beta = .13$ ,  $t = 1.98$ ,  $p < .05$ . However, after controlling for voice, the interaction between trust and expected costs was not significant anymore,  $\beta = .03$ ,  $t = .56$ ,  $p = .55$ . This result suggests the presence of a full mediation.

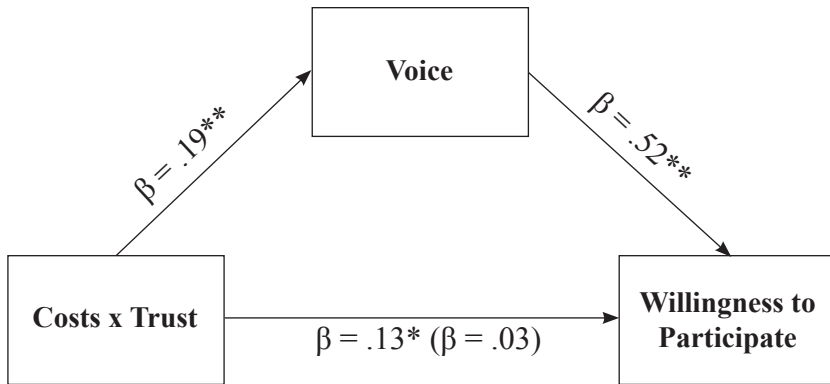


Figure 2 Mediated moderation analysis

In brackets is the direct effect of the interaction between the independent variables on willingness to participate after controlling for voice. Note: \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$

The significance of the indirect effect was tested by mean of a bootstrap mediated moderation analysis (Hayes 2013). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect of the interaction did not include zero (Lower = .14; Upper = .73), indicating that the indirect effect was significant.

## DISCUSSION

The general purpose of this study was to test whether previous findings concerning participation in collective action could be extended to a diverse type of participation, specifically within participatory governance. More specifically, we expected a rational variable, such as expected costs, would interact with a more relational variable, such as trust in government, in predicting citizens' willingness to participate.

Results highlighted a main effect for both costs expectations and trust in government, with high costs reducing willingness to participate and high trust increasing it. Moreover, these variables interacted in predicting citizens' willingness to participate. That is, when citizens trust their administration government they are willing to get engaged within policymaking regardless of costs, but when they do not trust the administration they are motivated to participate only if they expect low costs for the participation.

Furthermore, results revealed that voice mediated the interaction between expected costs and trust on willingness to participate. Such a result highlighted that citizens' engagement is primarily driven by the expectation that their own opinion will be taken into account and will have an impact on the final political decision (expected voice).

Concerning the limitations of the present study, firstly we are aware that a sample of students may not be compared to an enlarged population. Indeed, it is possible to imagine that the effect of a costs manipulation may be different for another type of population. Secondly, as part of the literature on civic engagement focuses on groups processes (Simon, 1998; Stürmer and Simon, 2004), we believe that further studies could interestingly analyze the relation between collective identification processes and the variables used in our study (see for example Antonini et al., in press).



Lastly, this study may imply some practical suggestions for public Administrations who want to increase citizens' participation. Trusted governments can design participatory practices without worrying too much about how costs while, low-trusted ones must necessary design participation focusing on low costs for citizens. Finally, both types of administrations might try to construct communication campaigns by means of which citizens perceived voice is increased, since our results show that voice is the ultimate determinant of citizens' willingness to participate.

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