Linking Competence, Warmth and Trust in Government

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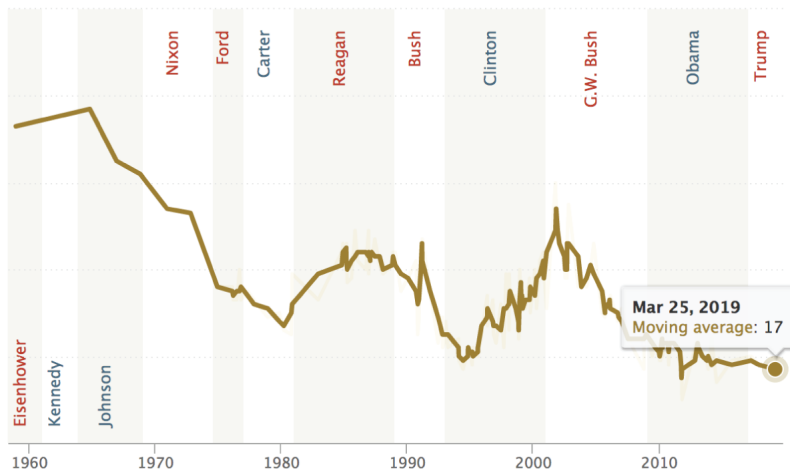
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Outline

Why is it important to study trust in government?

- Trust is vital in every relationship!
- Trust is important to the legitimacy of governmental institutions (Easton 1965, 1975)
- Implications for the effectiveness of public policies, public service delivery and general compliance (e.g., Kettl 2017, OECD 2013, Marien and Hooghe 2011, Cooper et al. 2008)
- Still, scepticism is warranted → critical citizens are important in a democracy (Norris 2011)

Puzzle and RQ

- Government performance has received much attention as *the* explanation of trust in government (e.g., Keele 2007; Van Ryzin 2011; Van Erkel and Van der Meer 2016)
- Mixed results - "[performance] does not consistently explain the trends observed in actual data" (Hamm et al. 2019, 2)
- Most evidence is based on a very general understanding of government performance → how about the effect of performance citizens experience in interactions with government?
- Puzzle: is trust in government susceptible to specific interactions with government?
- Overall RQ:*"To what extent does citizens' concrete experiences with the public sector affect their level of trust in government?"*

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Theoretical argument

Basic intuitive argument in the literature: better government performance $\rightarrow$ more satisfied citizens $\rightarrow$ greater trust in government

- Macro-performance $\rightarrow$ (perceptions of) economic outcomes (e.g., Keele 2007; Van der Meer 2018)

- Micro-performance $\rightarrow$ (perceptions of) public service quality (e.g., Christensen and Laegreid, 2005; Van Ryzin 2007, 2011; Kim 2010; Beeri et al. 2018)

Theoretical contribution

- <u>Contribution</u>: Examine performance in single interactions with government by drawing on insights from social psychology on the formation of general impressions
- Citizens categorize others along two universal dimensions: **'warmth'** (intentions, e.g., friendliness) and **'competence'** (ability, e.g., intelligence) (Fiske et al. 2007) → impressions predict subsequent attitudes and behaviour (e.g., Fiske et al. 2007; Kervyn et al. 2012; Laustsen and Bor 2017)

Expectations

- My argument: impressions of warmth and competence affect trust in government
  - *Prediction*: Impressions of warmth and competence affect trust in public employees
  - *Prediction*: Impressions of warmth and competence furthermore affect trust in governmental institutions in general

Research design

- Major concern in the literature about reverse causality (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2003, Hetherington 2015)
- Contribution: Survey-experimental design among a representative sample of 1,299 Danish citizens (collected by YouGov) and a MTurk sample of 816 US citizens
- All respondents are primed to recall real interactions with government → experimentally varied whether they should think of an interaction in terms of competence or warmth → 4 experimental groups
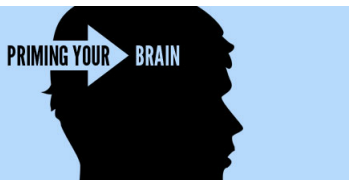
|	High	Low
Warmth	HW	LW
Competence	HC	LC

Example of 'treatment'

*"Please, take a moment to think about the debate about the public sector in Denmark/the United States. It is highly debated whether public or private organizations should provide services to citizens. As citizens, we interact with the public sector in many different ways, and we probably have different experiences of the encounter from one time to the next. Sometimes we have positive impressions; sometimes we have a more negative impression. Please, think about your last **positive** experience with the public sector, where the public employees **competently and effectively** delivered a service (it could be a personal experience, what you heard from friends/family, read in the news etc.). What do you think of? Please list everything that comes to mind"*

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Measures

- Four measures of trust in government - to distinguish between trust in different parts of government
    - How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right? (used in ANES)
    - Trust in civil servants (used in GSS)
    - Trust in administrative institutions (scale; three items, α=.79)
    - Trust in political institutions (scale; four items, α=.94)
- Manipulation -and attention checks
    - Perceived competence and warmth (5-point scales)
    - Attention: "Earlier in this survey you were asked to think back on an experience with the public sector. What were you asked to base your thoughts upon?" (Competent, incompetent, warm or cold public employees)
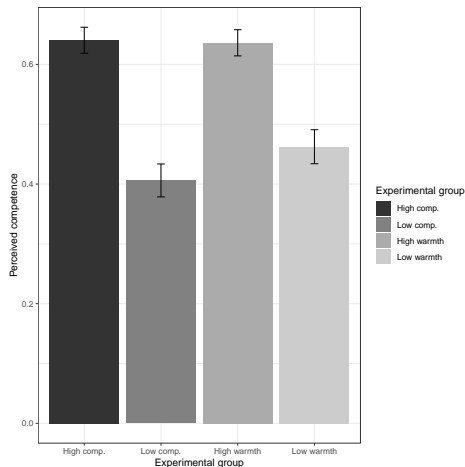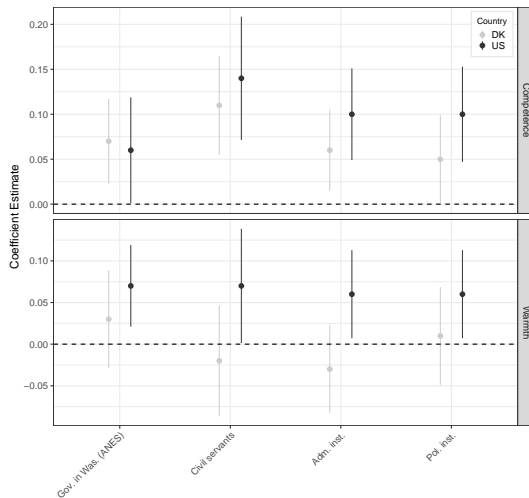- Common socio-demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, education)

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Main results
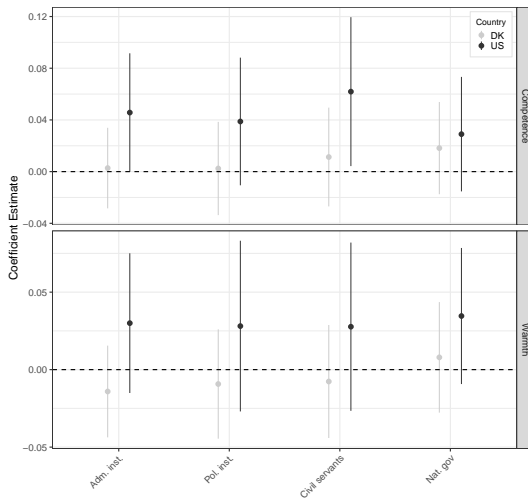
Perceptions of warmth by experimental condition
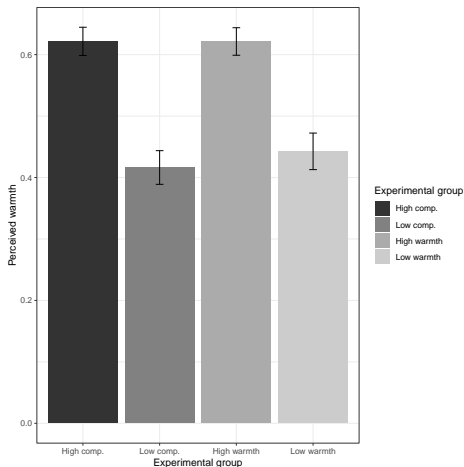
Perceptions of competence by experimental condition

Robustness test: effect for "compliers"

Conclusion and implications

- Results suggest a positive effect of competence on trust in civil servants and adm. inst. among US citizens
- Robustness tests furthermore indicate effect of competence in DK sample - and in the direction of an effect of warmth in the US sample
- Implication → the way public employees act and perform in interactions with citizens seem to matter for trust in government!
- Implication → better performance by government in the everyday-interaction with citizens are important if we want to build greater trust in government!
- Caveat: Hard to say whether the main results are driven by impressions of competence or warmth...
  - Next step: study 2 in a more controlled experimental set-up → plan to conduct a 2 (high/low warmth)x 2 (high/low competence) survey-experiment

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Thank you!

Study 2

- Plan to conduct a 2 (high/low warmth)x 2 (high/low competence) survey-experiment ($\sim$ 1200 US citizens using MTurk)

- More controlled experimental set-up $\rightarrow$ higher internal validity, separate impressions of warmth and competence

- Treatment: Vignette about an encounter with the US Postal Service. Manipulate description of the encounter with regard to warmth (e.g., irritated, friendly) and competence (e.g., skill, knowledge)

- Case: US Postal Service $\rightarrow$ *a priori* expectation about warmth to a lesser degree is part of competence in the eyes of citizens

- In sum: Study 1 enhances ecological validity while study 2 maximized internal validity in a more controlled environment

Treatment (study 2)

Now, please imagine the following happened to you:

*One day you experience missing an important package and you choose to call US Postal costumer service. When you get through, the US Postal Service employee sounds **irritated and cold/friendly and warm** in handling your inquiry. **You get no apology at all for the delay from the employee/The employee tells you that he is sincerely sorry about the delay**. The employee at US Postal Service seems **unskilled/skilled** as he **asks several times about the tracking number and only slowly/immediately retrieves the tracking number and quickly** finds your package in the tracking system. You have a clear impression that the employee is **unsure about what to do/know exactly what to do.***

Future work

- Conducting study 2
- Differences across context: Are the significant results among US citizens a result of the non-representative sample?
- Case-choice: Could the effect of warmth and competence be different across public sector areas?
- Is it inherently positive that citizens are affected by single interactions with government?

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