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Toward an Effective Government–Public Relationship: Organization–Public Relationship Based on a Synthetic Approach to Public Segmentation

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to identify and understand an effective government–public relationship building based on a synthetic approach to public segmentation. Using a national survey dataset, this study examines how different types of publics have trust differently in federal, state, and local government. By exploring how situational and cross-situational variables predict trust in government, the study finds that there are different predictors for trust in each level of government. Further, the results provide important insight into how public relations practitioners and researchers can build and maintain an effective government–public relationship with the key publics. Thus, the current study aims to fundamentally make contribution to theoretical and practical development in relationship-building research.

Keywords

Introduction

This study explores an effective government–public relationship building through public segmentation, a critical concern for government public relations (Hong, Park, Lee, & Park, 2012). For the effective government–public relationships, understanding the diverse publics by segmenting publics is required as an integral step; however, many public relations researchers have rarely applied public segmentation to their research (Hong et al., 2012). Moreover, many academic scholars have not illuminated how segmented publics have different levels of trust in federal, state, and local government (Schario & Konisky, 2008; Hong, 2013). The research gap of government–public relationship is the primary rationale to conduct this study. The current study examines public trust in federal, state, and local government in the United States, based on synthetic approach to public segmentation considering situational and cross-situational variables.

Literature review

Organization–public relationship (OPR) and public trust in government

For decades, organization–public relationship (OPR) has been increasingly highlighted as an essential part of public relations research and practice (Lee & Park, 2013). Researchers have investigated important factors for the quality of OPR and put more effort to find a key indicator; that is, trust (Hong et al., 2012; Ki & Hon, 2007). As the cornerstone of OPR, trust has been closely intertwined with research of government–public relationship because it results in attitudinal and behavioral consequences in a relationship between public and government (Hong, 2013; Waymer, 2013). Trust leads publics to make greater commitment, cooperation, and compliance for government (Kim, 2005). Meanwhile, overall public trust in government has been deteriorating for the past several decades, and it has become the most challenge for the government–public relationship (Hong, 2013; Wang & Wart, 2007). In order to effectively build and strategically enhance trust in the government, the importance of tailored communication to different types of publics (segmented publics) has been suggested; however, the existing studies have overlooked it (Hong et al., 2012).

Public segmentation and government–public relationship

Public segmentation research has suggested that understanding the diverse spectrum of publics is a primary step for effective organization–public relationship (Kim & Ni, 2013; Kim et al., 2008; Ni & Kim, 2009). Public segmentation becomes considerably prominent as a vital process in government public relations (Hong et al., 2012). In government public relations, government should be operated to enhance public good in contrast to other private organizations' role and function making profit (Horsley, Liu, & Levenshus, 2010). Public segmentation has been researched in terms of two different approaches which have run parallel to each other; cross-situational (static: demographics and psychographics) and situational (dynamic: ephemeral notions such as problems or issues) approaches (Kim et al., 2008). Since it has potential to maximize the power of situational and cross-situational

approach, synthesizing situational and cross-situational approaches has been increasingly suggested for the successful organization–public relationship (Hong et al., 2012; Kim & Ni, 2013).

As the first attempt, Hong et al. (2012) applied synthetic approach to public segmentation for effective government–public relationship building. They proposed a new model consisting of *the underserved inactive majority, the cluster in between,* and *the satisfied active public* by integrating situational (social behavior and cognition), cross-situational variables (demographics), and other objective variables (media use) (Hong et al., 2012). Their model demonstrated that inactive publics, as the majority group, are likely to have low trust in federal government (Hong et al., 2012) (See Table 1). Despite theoretically and practically worthwhile finding, Hong et al. (2012) failed to illuminate how well their situational and cross-situational variables can predict trust differently in federal, state, and local government as the essential effort to find the key publics. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gaps, leading to the following hypotheses:

H1

The satisfied active public will be more likely to have high trust across different levels of governments than the underserved inactive majority public.

H2

Characteristics of public segmentation, particularly situational (social cognition) and cross- situational (demographic factors) variables will significantly predict well high public trust across different levels of government, controlling for other variables.

Table 1. Characteristics of public segments.

Factors	The underserved inactive majority (largest: Cluster I)	The cluster in-between (Cluster II)	The satisfied active public (smallest: Cluster III)
Media use	High TV watching	⇔	Low TV watching
	High political news watching		Low political news watching
	Low internet use		High internet use
Social behavior	Low participation in voluntary organizations		High participation in voluntary organizations
Social cognition	Low interest in politics		High interest in politics
	Low satisfaction with democracy work		High satisfaction with democracy work
	Low trust in others		High trust in others
	Low standards in citizenship		High standards in citizenship
Demographics	Low education		High education
	Low income		High income

Note: Adapted from "Characteristics of public segments" by Hong et al. (2012).

Methods

Dataset description and measurements

This study used a dataset of a national survey, the 2012 Value Survey, which Pew Research Center conducted with 3008 adults over 18 years old living in 50 states in April, 2012. The survey was based on telephone interview survey, 1800 landlines and 1200 cell phones (Pew Research Center, 2012). The questions asking the favorable level in government (local, state, and federal level) were used to measure trust in federal, state, and local government as dependent variables on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unfavorable) to 5 (very favorable) (Price, 2012). As independent variables, six survey items were selected from the same questionnaire, which came out of Hong et al.'s (2012) public segmentation model (See Table 1). Four questions of situational variables (social cognition: *interest in politics*, *standards in citizenship*, *satisfaction with democracy work*, and *trust in others*) and two questions asking cross-situational variables (demographics: *education* and *income*) were chosen for public segmentation and prediction of trust in different levels of governments. Additional demographic variables, including age, gender, and race, were included based on the literature of public trust in government (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005; Price, 2012).

Segmentation procedure

As an easy and powerful method, Kim's (2011) summation method has been growingly used in public segmentation research (Kim & Ni, 2013). The summation method was adapted to identify Hong et al.'s (2012) public segmentation typology for this study. The survey question items measuring *interest in politics, satisfaction with democracy work, trust in others, standards in citizenship*, *education,* and *income* were recoded into dichotomous scale, 1 (=high) or 0 (=low) after taking the midpoint of the survey scale. Since the summation was conducted by six variables, the points were ranged from 0 to 6. Therefore, *the satisfied active public* ranged from 4 to 6 as summated scores, and *the underserved inactive majority* has from 0 to 2. The mid-point, 3, was used for *the cluster in between*.

Results

To perform a more rigorous statistical analysis, any cases with missing or invalid value were excluded. This led to 965 for data analysis from the original dataset of a total of 3008 respondents. 48.2% (n = 465) were female, and 51.8% (n = 500) were male. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 81 (M = 52, SD = 18). Regarding trust in different levels of government, publics had higher trust in local government (M = 2.70, SD = .82) than other governments (federal: M = 2.1, SD = .81, state: M = 2.49, SD = .88). The summation method resulted in different types of publics, the underserved inactive majority (n = 247, 25.6%), the cluster in between (n = 207, 21.5%), and the satisfied active public (n = 511, 53.0%). A MANOVA analysis revealed that there was a significant effect on the combined levels of public trust in government for different types of publics, Wilk's λ = .987, F (6, 1920) = 2.16, $p < .05$, partial η^2 = .01. However, there was no significant effect on each level of government. Therefore, H1 was not supported (See Table 2).

Table 2. Different levels of public trust in each government by different types of publics.

Government	Different types of publics (segmented publics)			Univariate F	Partial η^2
	The underserved inactive majority	The cluster in-between	The satisfied active public		
Federal	M 2.20	2.08	2.07	2.07	.00
	SE .06	.06	.04		
State	M 2.45	2.44	2.52	.04	.00
	SE .06	.06	.04		
Local	M 2.63	2.62	2.76	2.49	.01
	SE .05	.06	.04		

Wilk's λ = .987, F (6,1920) = 2.16, $p < .05$, partial .01.

Note: There is no significant effect on each univariate analysis.

Multiple regression was conducted to test H2. Trust in others (β = .05, $p < .05$) and standards in citizenship (β = .32, $p < .001$) were positively associated with public trust, but interest in politics (β = − .12, $p < .001$) and satisfaction with democratic work (β = − .06, $p < .05$) were negatively significant in federal government, controlling for other variables, R^2 = .24, F (4, 953) = 40.093, $p < .001$. Nevertheless, the significant effects of a few factors were found in state and local government. Controlling for other variables, gender (β = − .12, $p < .05$) had a significantly negative effect, but standards in citizenship (β =.18, $p < .001$) had a significantly positive relationship with public trust in state government, R^2 = .04, F (4, 953) = 8.407, $p < .001$. Local government has a similar result. When controlling for all other variables, trust in others (β = .06, $p < .05$) and standards in citizenship (β = .12, $p < .001$) were a positively associated with public trust in local government, R^2 = .02, F (4, 953) = 4.597, $p <$ .01. Accordingly, H2 was partially supported (see Table 3).

Table 3. Multiple regression analyses for predictors of public trust in different levels of government.

Variables	Federal government (β)	State government (β)	Local government (β)
Constant	2.02***	2.20***	2.36***
Age	−.00	.00	.00
Gender	.17**	−.12*	.02
White race	−.26	.14	.08
Black race	.29*	.22	.17
Asian race	.20	.23	.20
Income	−.03*	−.02	.00
Education	.02	−.02	.01
Interest in politics	−.12***	−.01	-.00
Satisfaction with democracy work	−.06*	−.03	-.01

Variables	Federal government (β)	State government (β)	Local government (β)
Trust in others	.05*	.05	.06*
Standards in citizenship	.32***	.18***	.12***
R^2	.24	.04	.02
F	40.093***	8.407***	4.597**

Note: N = 965.

*

   $p < .05.$

**

   $p < .01.$

***

   $p < .001.$

Discussion

This study provides important insight into how public relations practitioners and researchers can focus on "the relationship with their key publics" for an effective government–public relationship by finding the strong predictors for trust in each government (Ledingham, 2003, p. 185). Controlling for other variables, gender, African–American race, income, and all situational variables (*interest in politics, satisfaction with democracy work, trust in others,* and *standards in citizenship*) were strong predictors for trust in federal government. Accordingly, the characteristics of the key publics can be identified from the result; that is, federal government public relations managers should focus on those (key publics) who are non-African–American men with *high income* and have *high interest in politics, high satisfaction with democracy, low trust in others,* and *low standards in citizenship* in order to build public trust and favorable-relationships (See Table 3).

Nevertheless, demographics variables were not significant predictors for trust in state and local governments. Controlling for other variables, only two variables, gender and *standards in citizenship*, appeared as strong factors for trust in state government. These findings are in accordance with previous studies' results of public trust in state and local government (Nicholls & Picou, 2013). In general, the publics are more likely to interact with state and local government than federal government because they have direct-experiences such as public health and social services (Hong, 2013). For this reason, more situational variables, especially personal experiences (e.g., satisfaction with public services), are closely connected to trust in state and local government rather than cross-situational variables.

More important, *standards in citizenship* variable was the strong predictor for trust across all levels of governments (see Table 3). Those who have *high standards in citizenship* were more likely to have high trust in federal, state, and local government. Since the variable was measured by a question asking about voting behavior frequency in elections, the result can be translated into those who always vote in elections have high trust in government. The finding is in line with other studies revealing the political–cultural variable, especially political cynicism, has a strong effect on variation in public trust in federal, state, and local government (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005). Those who were integrated, involved, and engaged in the political system (e.g., voting behavior) had a significantly higher level of trust in most governmental institutions than others (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005). In other words, the cynical views of elected parliamentary representatives make the publics distant from integration, involvement, and engagement in political system and they want to keep their promises. In this sense, it could be better understood that *standards in citizenship* variable (voting behavior) was the strong predictor for trust across all governments. Those who do rarely vote have the cynical views from distrust in government. Government public relations managers should find and reduce factors (e.g., the cynical views) influencing publics' voting behavior in order to enhance trust in government, thereby building and maintaining the effective government–public relationship.

The findings can advise how government public relations managers not only identify the key publics differently in federal, state, local government, but also "communicate involvement of those activities/programs that build the organization–public relationship to members of their key publics" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 63). In terms of an effective and sustaining OPR, government public-relationships need to be based on mutually beneficial and interest between government and its key publics (Ledingham, 2003). The results can direct government public relations managers where to go to communicate with the key publics and how they can find mutual benefit and interest, leading to enhancing trust in government and building an effective government public-relationship. Consequently, the results provide more useful and tangible implications for government public relations managers.

However, there are several limitations. This study did not include or control for other influential variables such as media use, personal experience, and partisanship for trust in government (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005). Also, trust is a multifaceted concept which consists of integrity, dependability, and competence (Hong, 2013) and should be assessed by various dimensions in relevant governmental institutions (i.e., the parliament/congress, the legal system, and politicians) (Hong et al., 2012). Future research should take these factors into consideration to provide more meaningful insight into the effective government–public relationship.

Conclusions

For the past several decades, the US government has been grappling with falling trust of publics which has been deteriorating government–public relationship (Hong et al., 2012; Hong, 2013). Against this backdrop, this study sought to identify and understand an effective government–public relationship building based on a synthetic approach to public segmentation. The findings from public segmentation approach did not provide much statistical evidence, but this study demonstrates more practical implications through the summation method. The summation method to segment publics practically helps public relations practitioners understand how to apply public segmentation approach to relationship-building research. Furthermore, the current study identifies the key publics through

situational and cross-situational variables, leading to effectively build and sustain an effective government public-relationship. This study provides how government public relations managers and the key publics can find mutual benefit and interest, thereby enhancing trust in government and building the mutually satisfying government public-relationship. Thus, this study fundamentally paved theoretical and practical foundation in relationship-building research in the hope that subsequent studies will provide more fruitful results toward an effective government–public relationship.

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