EQUITY OR EFFICIENCY? EXPLAINING PUBLIC OFFICIALS´ VALUES

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Abstract

This article analyses the position of top public officials in an equity-efficiency trade-off, and the determinants of this position. It uses data from a survey across 14 European countries. The results show that differences in public officials' position on equity-efficiency are related to the context within which they work and their personal background. Officials at the top of the hierarchy and those with a business or economics education. Additionally, results show important differences associated with country administrative culture, including a stronger equity orientation in Scandinavian countries, and a stronger efficiency orientation in Southern European countries. The position of public officials reflects that held by citizens in their country, confirming the contextualized nature of administrative values. This article contributes to understanding the determinants of public official's dominant values.

PRACTITIONER POINTS

- Understanding the determinants of the value trade-offs public officials make is key for the analysis of their policies.
- Managers’ level in a public organization significantly influences their position on a trade-off between equity and efficiency.
- Exposure of public officials to business or economics education, working experience in the private sector and seniority in the public sector is related to the equity-efficiency trade-off they make in their job.

- Important country-differences exist as regards the equity-efficiency trade-off position of senior bureaucrats. These differences are strongly related to the administrative culture of the country and to the dominant values held by the population in general.

INTRODUCTION

Conflicting values and value trade-offs have received a lot of attention in philosophy and economics. In public administration, attention for public values appear to be on the rise (Bryson, Crosby and Bloomberg, 2014; Van der Wal, Nabatchi and De Graaf, 2015), and substantial progress has been made in relation to mapping, categorizing and conceptualizing public values (Van Wart, 1998; Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007; Van der Wal and Huberts, 2008; Molina and McKeown, 2012).

Easton famously described politics as the authoritative allocation of values (Easton, 1965). Government has to make choices between conflicting values. These tensions between values can be found everywhere within the public sector, especially when there is allocation and redistribution. The 'uneasy compromises' between values are represented in institutional arrangements (Okun: 1975: 1). Public management is about managing contradictions (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004; Greener, 2013). Civil servants want to achieve values and objectives that may be incompatible (Andrews and Entwistle 2010; Andrews and Van de Walle, 2013; De Graaf, Hubert and Smulders, 2016) and thus have to choose in daily administrative practice. This article contributes to the body of research on conflicting public values and value pluralism in the public sector (Spicer, 2015), as well as to the literature on trade-offs between equity and efficiency, both in general (Okun, 1975), and in the particular context of public services (Norman-Major, 2011). In particular, the objective of this article is to analyze what factors determine the position of public officials in a balance between equity and efficiency, using data from a large survey among top public officials in 14 European countries.

THE EQUITY-EFFICIENCY TRADE-OFF

The efficiency-equity trade-off is one of the perennial questions in the social sciences. A trade-off refers to a situation where one has to balance or choose between two objectives that are opposite or that cannot be had at the same time (Merriam Webster dictionary). Examples of the efficiency-equity trade-off can be found in the allocation of landing slots to planes, or in the order of serving clients in an administrative office, where it may be more efficient not to allocate in order of appearance. The issue is also very salient in school reforms, where officials have to find a balance between school efficiency improvements and avoiding social segregation.

The academic beginnings of the debate on the efficiency-equity trade-off were attributed by Le Grand (1990) to Barry (1965), who discussed the evaluation of social outcomes in politics and policy. Barry argued that, if there is for someone a trade-off between equity and efficiency, this means that 'If it's a question of choosing between efficiency and equity, it takes a large potential increase in equity to make him accept a potential reduction in efficiency (and vice versa)' (Barry, 1965: 7).

Okun's 1975 'Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff' is probably the best known treatise on the efficiency-equity trade-off. While being different concepts, equity and equality are often used interchangeably. Equality refers to a situation where everyone is given equal resources (here, public services), whereas equity refers to achieving an equality of outcomes (that is, the resources are related to needs). We will use equity in this article, except for situations where the original source uses equality. Okun discussed the observation that society often prefers equality-based approaches over market-based efficiency-oriented ones, and that, for this reason, checks on markets would be common and sometimes desirable. He argued that there are areas where society opts for more equality, thereby compromising efficiency (Okun: 1975: 5). The opposite is not discussed in great length in Okun's book, because, addressing economists, he assumed they would be familiar with such market logic already. Markets pursue efficiency 'But that pursuit of efficiency necessarily created inequalities. And hence society faces a trade-off between equality and efficiency' (Okun, 1975: 1). In other words – 'We can't have our cake of market efficiency and share it equally' (Okun:, 1975: 2)

The book is written with distributive policies in mind, and introduced the image of a 'leaky bucket'. The leaky bucket refers to efficiency losses due to redistribution addressed at reducing inequality, which result from changes in incentives and administrative costs involved in redistribution (Okun: 1975: 92). For Okun, the size of the leak – or how much efficiency loss one is willing to tolerate to increase equality -, is a matter of taste. Okun compared a Rawls who would always prefer equality no matter how large the leak, to a Friedman who would give priority to efficiency, and would have a very low tolerance for leaks (Okun, 1975: 92).

Okun's equality/efficiency trade-off has become a classic, but not everyone agrees there is actually a trade-off between equality and efficiency. Osberg (1995) refers to the observation that countries with high equality also tend to grow fast, and that hence the trade-off probably does not exist. Le Grand elaborated a convincing argument: 'efficiency can be defined only in relation to the ability of forms of social and economic organization to attain their primary objectives and that therefore efficiency cannot itself be one of those primary objectives. In this sense, if equity is one of the objectives it is meaningless to talk of a trade-off (either in value or production) between equity and efficiency. Efficiency is […] a secondary objective that only acquires meaning with reference to primary objectives such as equity' (Le Grand, 1990: 560). Trade-offs, he argues, 'can only occur between […] primary objectives, of which efficiency is not one' (199: 566). Le Grand (1990) further argues that when people talk about the equity-efficiency trade-off, they probably don't mean efficiency in its technical sense, but instead they are thinking on economic growth or Pareto-optimality.

DID EFFICIENCY BECOME A PRIMARY VALUE IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT?

Technically, Le Grand is right. Yet, Rutgers and van der Meer (2010) argue that efficiency has always had a more substantive meaning in public administration (mainly up till the 1960s) beyond the mere technical one (as also used in Le Grand's argument). Especially in recent decades, we would argue that efficiency in the public sector has also become a primary objective itself. Efficiency improvements have been at the core of many public management reforms, and the big NPM reforms such as consumerism, agencification, performance management, or competition were all implemented with an aim of improving efficiency (Andrews, 2011: 282). Bozeman similarly posits the primacy of efficiency within NPM: 'according to almost all descriptions of NPM, the driving values are performance and efficiency, while fairness, by any definition, rarely received much emphasis in NPM' (Bozeman, 2007: 80). In the same book, he argues: 'The values embodied in privatization and NPM […] are efficiency and effectiveness values, not equity, fairness, or communal values' (Bozeman, 2007: 82). NPM's focus on efficiency in this way stands in sharp contrast to the New Public Administration in the 1970s, where social equity was the core value (Box, 2015: Frederickson, 2005a; Gooden, 2015). While the dominance of NPM appears to have waned in public administration scholarship and practice, it remains a core value in newer paradigms as well.

From the administrative point of view, efficiency is broadly considered a core administrative value (Rutgers and van der Meer, 2010; Andrews and Entwistle, 2013: De Graaf and Paanakker, 2014). The traditional bureaucratic model is characterized by both equity and efficiency: equity as the result of law and rule based behavior; and efficiency as a result of specialization and standardization. Yet efficiency ‘has come to be associated with the private sector solutions embraced by the New Public Management’ (Andrews and Entwistle, 2013: 247). Van Wart and Berman (1999) see a move towards a tougher standard of efficiency, and a wider value change of what is defined as productivity following the introduction of NPM-management tools. Especially after the introduction of the new public economics thinking in public administration, efficiency has become an objective in its own right, rather than a secondary one supporting the achievement of other objectives, such as equity. Jørgensen and Rutgers (2014), following an analysis of historic public sector job adverts, find that, while the importance attached to NPM values has increased substantially over time, “New Public Management values do not crowd out other values, rather value intensity increases” (2014: 59).

The apparent contradiction between equity and efficiency has been one of the main bases for criticizing NPM. NPM´s focus on the bottom line may have come at the cost of equity and therefore safeguards are needed to protect values that are under attack. This has been the case in utilities where public values such as universal service, affordability or continuity has to be legally protected in the wake of privatization or liberalization (De Bruijn and Dicke, 2006; Van de Walle, 2008).

In Hood's (1991) seminal article on NPM, efficiency (a 'sigma' value) and equity (a 'theta' value) represent different families of administrative values. According to Hood, NPM is characterized by sigma values, with little regard for equity. The latter can be achieved through typical NPM-like programming and target setting (Hood, 1991: 10). One could also argue equity-efficiency tension is not inherent to NPM, but that efficiency is a precondition for equity to be possible – first increasing the size of the cake in order to allow for a more equitable distribution of it.

EXPLAINING THE VALUE TRADE-OFFS CIVIL SERVANTS MAKE

Early studies on public values have limited themselves to categorizing values or studying the presence of values within organizations (Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007). Some scholars have looked at value statements of government organizations (Kernaghan, 2003) or at codes of conduct (Jørgensen and Sørensen, 2013). Other research has looked at value preferences of civil servants, and increasingly, scholars have started to look at the value conflicts they experience (De Graaf, Huberts, and Smulder, 2016; Oldenhof, Postma, and Putters, 2014).

Recent debates have focused on value pluralism in public administration (Perry et al., 2014). This is "the idea that our moral values or conceptions of the good are many and varied and that we often find they come into conflict with one another in ways that do not permit any easy reconciliation or solution" (Spicer, 2015: 25). A lot of research has looked at how organizations cope with such trade-offs (see, e.g., Thacher and Rein, 2004; Stewart, 2006; Steenhuisen and van Eeten, 2008).

Our article contributes to the latter growing body of research by focusing on the equity-efficiency trade-offs public officials make. Earlier research looked at the value choices and preferences of public officials (Guy, 1990), or at the a correlation between civil servants' support for efficient supply and their commitment to the public interest (Andersen et al., 2012). Yet, in a study among state and local administrators, Molina and McKeown (2012) found that efficiency ranked low in importance among a set of values. In a similar vein, Vrangbæk (2009), in a study of value orientations of public managers in Denmark, found that while managers listed efficiency as a value, they do not put it on their list of the most important values in their work. He also found that efficiency was seen as less important by managers working in more operational organizations (who, instead, emphasized satisfying user needs), and more important by those working in more traditional bureaucratic and administrative organizations. De Graaf and Paanakker (2015) reported on interviews with Dutch aldermen and senior administrators about conflicts between performance and procedural values. They found that respondents mainly considered that conflict exists between lawfulness and transparency on the one hand, and between efficiency and effectiveness on the other.

EXPLAINING VALUE PREFERENCES

We follow Molina's definition of value – 'as a complex cognitive-emotional preference for some object, quality, or characteristic that serves as either a means to an end (instrumental value) or an end in itself (terminal value)' (Molina, 2015: 50). Molina´s definition emphasizes the importance of taking into account the social and administrative context of the administrators when explaining their values and the trade-offs they make (see also, Bozeman, 2008). We have earlier referred to the New Public Administration's attention for social equity as a result of poverty and discrimination in society, and to NPM's focus on efficiency as the result of inefficiencies and savings and the rise of new public economics. In this article, we assume that the context influences the value trade-offs officials make. This context is multifaceted, and consists of public officials´ daily work environment, their prior experience and exposure to administrative values, the administrative system they are part of, and the society within which they operate. Four hypotheses emanate from this assumption.

H1: Distance hypothesis: Closer distance to recipients of policies and services is related to a higher pro-equity orientation

We expect that proximity to the recipients of policies and services makes a public official more equity-oriented. The context of working at a larger distance (not necessarily physical) from the actual recipients may make officials more concerned with internal organizational pressures towards efficiency (such as budgetary pressures), rather than with the needs of external recipients. On the contrary, proximity means public officials can more easily observe the consequences of their choices on individual people, and have a more direct knowledge of their needs. This argument follows those that have been made in studies on representative bureaucracy (Oberfield, 2016) and on street-level discretion that describes public sector workers as either state agents or citizen agents (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2010).

We assume, first, that heads of unit are physically closer to the recipients of policies and services than top managers. Lower-ranked officials are more likely to be operational managers of units providing services, and one could argue they are therefore better informed about what is happening on the street-level. Second, we assume that public officials working for a smaller organization are closer to the actual recipients, because they may have a higher likelihood of coming in touch with actual recipients, whereas such direct contact is delegated to lower-level employees in large organizations. Also, large organizations are more likely to consist of several regional offices, with most of the management residing in the head office. Thus, we expect both distance measures (a lower hierarchical position and working in a smaller organization) to be positively related to a higher pro-equity orientation. We also expect that officials working for public sector agencies will have a higher pro-equity orientation. We follow a definition of agencies as an executive body within government with a certain degree of autonomy and specialization, and mainly involved in implementation rather than in policy making (Verhoest et al., 2010). In this article, agencies are contrasted with ministries and departments (labeled as government in the tables). Their structure and tasks mean agencies might be closer to the recipients of services and policies, and tend to serve them more directly than ministries and departments. This assumption is in line with earlier findings by Vrangbæk (2009) who found that Danish managers working in operational organizations tended to find satisfying user needs more important than efficiency, whilst efficiency was mainly seen as important in more administrative parts of government. Jørgensen (2006) found that Danish agency-level respondents attached considerable lower importance to efficiency and higher importance to equal opportunities and user needs than respondents in departments did. Both findings go against the expectations of agencies as carriers of NPM values, such as efficiency. On this regard, Van Thiel and Van der Wal (2010) found that Dutch agencies considered NPM-related values, such as profitability, more than ministries did. Andersen et al. (2012), however, did not find a significant difference between the score on efficient supply as a value for respondents working in authorities (ministries and equivalent organizations) and agencies in the Danish public sector, neither a difference between service provision versus regulatory/administration oriented-organizations

H2: Private sector exposure hypothesis: the more a public official has been exposed to private sector management values, the more pro-efficiency oriented he/she will be

This hypothesis conceives that the habitus of a public official shapes his or her value preferences. Public officials' values have been impacted by private sector management ideas (Maesschalck, 2004). More specifically, we assume that exposure to a private sector environment instils officials with stronger preferences for efficiency. Frederickson (2005b) described the crucial distinction between the public and private sector as a different trade-off between efficiency and fairness: whereas for the former, fairness is the main value, efficiency is the leading value for the private sector.

Public-private differences have attracted a fair deal of attention in the public values literature, especially following an influx of managers in the public sector with private sector experiences – so called sector switchers (De Graaf and van der Wal, 2008; Boardman, Bozeman and Ponomariov, 2010). Still, there is discussion on whether differences in values between the public and private sectors are actually that important. On this regard, Van der Wal, De Graaf and Lasthuizen (2008) pointed out that there are indeed differences in the values public and private managers find important, yet their empirical work showed that both groups attach equal importance to efficiency as a value driving their work.

Exposure to the private sector can happen in different ways: prior work experience in the private sector, or having enjoyed a business-oriented education. Long tenure in the public sector is, on contrary, an indicator of having been exposed to the public sector habitus. We assume that public officials with long tenure in the public sector had their formative years before the advent of NPM and its strong focus on results (Tait, 1997).

H3. Country administrative tradition hypothesis: Public officials in Scandinavian countries are more pro-equity oriented, those in Transition countries are more pro-efficiency oriented

This hypothesis looks into the assumption that it is not just an official's organization or individual background what shapes his or her value preferences, but rather the broader administrative tradition within which they work. Administrative tradition refers to what is seen to be normal and acceptable in a country or organization (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004: 41). It is "a more or less enduring pattern in the style and substance of public administration" (Painter and Peters, 2010: 6). Classifying countries according to their dominant administrative tradition is far from simple, because most countries exhibit characteristics of different administrative traditions, although many attempts have been made (Peters, 2001; Hajnal, 2003).

To address this hypothesis, we take Hammerschmid, Meyer and Demmke´s (2007) classification of European countries according to their administrative traditions. These authors classify the European countries according to five different administrative traditions: Continental European, Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, South European and Transition. The core of this distinction is based on the centrality of the state and the importance of administrative vs. common law in a country. In Rechtsstaat-oriented systems, the state defines what the public interest is (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014), and uses this to regulate society whilst strict equality before the law is an important value. Within this diverse group of countries, Southern-European countries are characterized by a very strong legal approach to governance (Hajnal, 2003), and we thus expect a strong orientation towards equity. In Scandinavian countries the state is an important actor at the core of the social democratic welfare system, reflected in an equity orientation that is0 stronger than that in Continental and Southern European countries (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In those countries where the Rechtsstaat tradition is less prominent, a public interest approach is reflected in administrative pragmatism and thus more tolerance for a pure efficiency orientation. This is especially the case for Anglo-Saxon countries. Transition countries, as they are still frequently called, in Central and Eastern Europe also exhibit similarities to these countries because of the lower importance attached to egalitarianism values (Schwartz and Bardi, 1997).

H4. Popular preferences hypothesis: Public officials in countries where population is more left-wing are more pro-equity oriented

A fourth hypothesis assumes that public officials are responsive to their environment and make choices that reflect the make-up of the population they are serving. This is in line with Peters´ (2001) hypothesis that public bureaucracies and the people therein ´are bound by many thin but strong bonds to their societies, and the values of those societies´ (2001: 36), and that “general value orientations in the society will influence the behavior of individuals working within formal organizations” (2001: 36). Though far from perfect (Bauer et al., 2016), the left/right distinction is traditionally used to describe broad political preferences, whereby left is generally associated with a redistributive preference, whereas right stands for a more market-oriented outlook (De Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013). In the context of this article, this means that public officials will be more equity-oriented in countries where the population is more politically left wing and thus presumably supportive of redistribution and equity, and more efficiency-oriented where the population is more right wing.

METHODS

For our analysis, we use data from the COCOPS Top Public Executive Survey (Hammerschmid et al., 2016). This survey was part of the European Union Seventh Framework research project "Coordinating for Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future" (COCOPS). It provides a cross-national perspective of European's public officials' views on public administration and its reforms, as well as on their values and motivations as regards their civil service The COCOPS survey, launched between 2012 and 2014, is an open access, large-scale survey, based on a full census of public officials at central government and agencies in all policy fields, encompassing 16 European countries at the time of analysis. It was originally organized to study administrative reform trends, but also contains items about officials´ values.

The secondary use of the data means that not all independent variables are available in the survey in the desired form. For the purposes of this article, we consider data corresponding to 14 countries. Prior to the data analysis we dismissed data for the UK, due to the low overall response rate in this country and the very high item non-response for the dependent variable, as well as the absence of a number of core independent variables due to the use of a different questionnaire among a part of the sample. We also decided not to use the Serbian data, due to the different composition of the sample, and due to the fact that Serbia is not a member of the European Economic Area, which means not only it has a political context rather different than that in the rest of the countries under analysis, but also that information required for the analysis, derived from the European Social Survey), is not available. For the 14 countries considered, the survey yields a sample of 4,866 observations. The sample size corresponding to each country, as well as the country-level response rate is detailed in the appendix.

Our dependent variable is public officials' position on an equity-efficiency scale. The COCOPS survey inquires public officials to answer the following question: "Public services often need to balance different priorities. Where would you place your own position?". Answers are provided in a scale ranging from 1 ("equity") to 7 ("efficiency"). The average value of the dependent variable is 3.55, with a standard deviation of 1.62. In 614 observations (12.6%), information on the dependent variable misses. Thus these cases are excluded from the analysis. The main statistics of the dependent variable are described in the appendix.

As independent variables, we use the information from the COCOPS survey on the respondents' individual characteristics (sex, educational attainment, field of education, seniority in the public sector and experience in the private sector), the characteristics of their post (hierarchical position, size of the organization, type of organization and policy area) and the country where the respondent carries out his/her job.

The first hypothesis posits that public officials working in a lower hierarchical level, those working in smaller organizations and those working in an agency are more oriented to equity. We operationalize this hypothesis by testing the effect of three variables which reflect characteristics of the post. First, the hierarchical level, considering the second ("level 2") and the third levels ("level 3") as independent variables, in comparison to the top level ("level 1", used as reference category). Second, the size of the organization, considering those with less than 50 employees and those with between 50 and 500 employees, in comparison to those with more than 500 (reference category). And third, the type of organization, comparing those working in an agency to those working for a department or ministry.

Our second hypothesis proposes that public officials with working experience in the private sector and those with a business education are more oriented to efficiency because they have been exposed more to values typically associated with the private sector. On the contrary, we hypothesized that those with longer tenure in the public sector are more oriented to equity as a result of a lower exposure to private sector values, especially because their formative years in the public sector were mainly before the mainstreaming of private management thinking in the public sector. We operationalize this hypothesis by analysing the effect of three variables which reflect private sector exposure of the respondents. First, to have at least one year of experience working in the private sector, in comparison to those who do not have such experience (reference category). Second, having a degree in business or economics, considering those with a degree in law and in other social sciences or humanities as controls, and the rest as reference category (in all cases, the field is referred to that of the highest level of education achieved). And third, focusing on seniority in the public sector, we introduce independent variables measuring length of tenure in the public sector corresponding to the intervals of less than 5 years, from 5 to 10 years and from 10 to 20 years, in comparison to those with more than 20 years (reference category).

The third hypothesis, used Hammerschmid, Meyer and Demmke´s (2007) classification of European public administrative traditions to hypothesize that public officials in Scandinavian countries are more oriented to equity than those in countries with a Continental tradition, whilst those in transition countries are more oriented to efficiency. The categorization of our 14 countries according to its public administrative tradition is specified in the appendix. We test the effect on the dependent variable of a

Scandinavian, a South European administrative tradition and a Transition country, as independent variables, in comparison to the Continental European administrative tradition (considered as reference category). We aggregate Ireland to the reference category, as it is the only country representing the Anglo-Saxon tradition in our sample, and it is a very particular case (rather different to the UK), whilst the Continental tradition already encompasses a heterogeneous set of countries.

The fourth hypothesis asserts that public officials in a country with a population more politically left-wing are more oriented to equity, and those with a population more politically right-wing are more oriented to efficiency. We operationalize this hypothesis by considering the average political placement of the population in each country in 2012, obtained from the European Social Survey (European Social Survey Round 6 Data, 2012). Average values by country, ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right), are detailed in the appendix. Also, we include the standard deviation of the political placement at the country level as a control variable, in order to control for the political polarization in each country.

We control for the effect on the dependent variable of other factors included in the survey. As regards the individual characteristics, we include the sex of the respondent (females in comparison to males) and the highest degree of education achieved (those holding a master degree, and those holding a PhD, versus the rest). We dismiss the age of the respondent, as it is strongly correlated to his/her seniority in the public sector.

Studies on administrative tradition assume the existence of a dominant administrative tradition within a country that sets its administration and civil servants apart from those in other countries. Our approach does not negate this possibility, but also recognizes that different parts of the system are (made) responsible for the realization of different value sets (see Thacher and Rein, 2004), which may result in different value trade-offs in redistributive vs. distributive parts of the public sector. For this reason, we include both policy sector controls (the area in which the public official works), and country controls.

The composition of the sample according to the independent and control variables is described in the appendix. The respondents not reporting their sex, seniority in the public sector, hierarchical position and size of the organization (326 cases, 6.7% of total) are excluded from the econometric analysis. As regards the educational level and the experience in the private sector, we combine those cases with item non response with the reference category.

The average value of the equity-efficiency position of public officials for each category of independent and control variables used is described in the appendix. Also, figure 1 shows country averages in public officials' position as regards this trade-off. As observed, Scandinavian countries appear to be notably oriented towards equity. Most of the Continental countries are also oriented towards equity, but the Netherlands is slightly more oriented towards efficiency. Southern European countries are all close to the middle point (4). Finally, the Transition countries show a high heterogeneity: from Lithuania, highly oriented towards equity, to Hungary and Estonia, oriented towards efficiency.

[Figure 1 here]

We estimate using OLS regressions with robust standard errors clustered at the country level, in order to correct for correlation of the error term within countries (clusters). We test two different models: model 1 is used to test the distance and the private sector exposure hypotheses while controlling for country differences; model 2 is used to test all four hypotheses (including those focused on the country level) at the same time. These models result from the following equations:

(1) $y_i = f(IndChar_i, PostChar_i, Country_i)$

(2) $y_i = f(IndChar_i, PostChar_i, AdmTrad_i, AvPol_i, DevPol_i)$

Where:

y_i = position on the equity-efficiency scale by individual i.

$IndChar_i$ = vector of individual characteristics by i.

$PostChar_i$ = vector of characteristics of the post of i.

$Country_i$ = country of individual i.

$AdmTrad_i$ = administrative tradition of the country of i.

$AvPol_i$ = average political placement in the country of i.

$DevPol_i$ = standard deviation of the political placement in the country of i.

Model 1 includes independent variables and controls corresponding to individual characteristics, characteristics of the post and country binary variables. Model 2 includes also countries' administrative tradition and political placement (average and standard deviation), instead of the country binary variables. In model 2, robustness checks are carried out after the estimations, in order to test for country representativeness. This permits to find out if the results are robust to the exclusion of data from a single country, and thus to reject that any of the effects obtained result from particular circumstances or data anomalies in a single country. To do so, we repeat the estimation 14 times, excluding one country in each of them.

RESULTS

Public officials working at the third hierarchical level of an organization, and also those at the second level, are more oriented towards equity than those at the top level. Results are statistically significant both in model 1 and model 2. There are no significant differences in the equity-efficiency position of public officials working in an organization with less than 50 employees, compared to those working in one of more than 500 employees. However, those working in organizations with between 50 and 500 employees are more oriented towards equity than those in larger ones, both in model 1 and model 2. In model 2 we find that those working in an agency are more oriented towards equity than those working for the departments or ministries. However, in model 1 this result is not significant. This indicates that this result disappears when controlling for country heterogeneity.

For the private-sector exposure hypothesis, we find no significant differences in the equity-efficiency position between public officials with at least one year of experience in the private sector and the rest, neither in model 1 nor in model 2. We find that those whose last educational degree is in business or economics are more oriented towards efficiency than the reference category. These results are obtained in both model 1 and model 2. In model 1 we obtain that those with less than 5 years of seniority in the public sector are more oriented towards efficiency than those with more than 20 years. However, this result is non-significant in model 2. That is, the result only appears if controlling for country heterogeneity. Further details about this finding are provided later when explaining the results of robustness checks.

Public officials working in a country with a Scandinavian administrative tradition are more oriented towards equity than those in a country with a Continental European tradition. Those in a country with a South European administrative tradition are more oriented towards efficiency than the same reference category. For the Transition countries, the results are non-significant.

The test of the popular preferences hypothesis finds that public officials in a country where population is more politically right-wing are more oriented to efficiency, whilst those with a population more left-wing are more oriented to equity. Political polarization, measured by the standard deviation of this variable, has no significant effects.

Among the control variables, looking at the policy area, those working in employment services are more oriented to efficiency, whilst those working in health and social protection and in education and recreation are more oriented to equity. Finally, there are large effects on the dependent variable associated with country differences.

[Table 1 here]

Robustness checks show the vast majority of the results do not change when any single country is dismissed, which proves that they are robust to country representativeness.

Nevertheless two results are non-robust. One is working in an agency, which was found associated with a more pro-equity orientation in model 2, whilst this effect became non-significant when controlling for country heterogeneity (model 1). The robustness checks show this effect is also non-significant when dismissing data from Austria, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania or Spain. This indicates that the relation between working in an agency and a more pro-equity orientation only exists in some European countries, but not in others. Thus, it is not accepted as a general effect.

The other effect found as non-robust is that associated with seniority in the public sector. In the estimations, seniority in the public sector below 5 years was, in comparison with seniority over 20 years, associated to a more pro-efficiency orientation in model 1 , but not in model 2. The robustness checks show that a significant effect only appears when dismissing data from Spain, Sweden or Portugal, but not in the rest of the cases. Thus, this result cannot be accepted as a general effect.

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DISCUSSION

This article tested four distinct hypotheses to explain top public officials´ position on an equity-efficiency trade-off. We found that a lower hierarchical level is related to a higher pro-equity orientation of a public official. This could be considered a partial validation of the first hypothesis, which associates a higher pro-equity orientation with a closer distance to recipients of policies and services. Nevertheless, alternative explanations are also possible. Managers at the top of a public organization appear to see their role as being the ultimate responsible person in charge of the proper use of resources, including budgetary accountability towards the political level. Other policy-relevant concerns – such as equity- may then being taken care of more intensively by the managers of specific divisions or departments within the organization. We also found that the effect of the type of organization (agency versus a department or ministry) is non-significant when controlling for country heterogeneity, and non-robust to country representativeness. That is, this effect depends on the country. This result is probably due to the large variety in agencies and agencification trends across countries (Verhoest et al., 2012). We had hypothesized that respondents in agencies would be more equity-oriented because of agencies´ proximity to recipients, yet we also know that the specific founding conditions of many agencies as part of wider NPM-style reform may have made them more managerial and thus possibly more efficiency-oriented. Thus, NPM may have resulted in a higher pursuance of efficiency-related objectives as a result of the agencification of public administration, at least in certain European countries. Finally, the effects obtained as regards the size of an organization are not those expected: public officials in medium-size organizations (50 to 500 employees), but not those in the smallest organizations, are more oriented towards equity than those in the largest organizations.

A second hypothesis looked at whether having been exposed to private sector values influences a public official´s position on the equity-efficiency trade-off. This is clearly the case for an official´s field of education: those who had a business or economics education tend to value efficiency higher. We of course do not know whether this is a result of having been exposed more to ways of thinking related to efficiency, whether it reflects an absence of concerns for equity in a typical business or economics education, or whether it reflects self-selection of individuals more prone to value efficiency higher into such fields of education. On the contrary, having worked for the private sector does not have a significant effect. An explanation could be found in the specific profiles of managers who have decided to switch from the private to the public sector, which may differ depending on the country. The relation between working experience in the private sector and public official values needs to be explored further. In sum, NPM´s focus on bringing in private management skills does have an impact on value trade-offs through the prior education managers received, but the same is not demonstrated for the influx of managers with private experience. Finally, the less senior public officials are found more oriented to efficiency than their most senior counterparts only when correcting for country heterogeneity. Robustness checks showed there are remarkable differences between countries on this effect. For this reason, the expected relation between a longer track record in the public sector and equity orientation (which can be associated with a higher exposure to the traditional public sector habitus) cannot be confirmed.

Besides that, country administrative tradition shows significant effects in public officials’ position on a balance between equity and efficiency. Officials in Scandinavian countries have a stronger equity-orientation, which confirms the general view of these countries as being more concerned with equity. Public officials in Southern European countries have a stronger efficiency orientation. Interpreting this effect is not necessarily straightforward. Taking a position on the equity-efficiency trade-off can indicate also an experienced absence of that value in the organization. This may be the case of Southern European countries, as they are characterized by a particularly poor self-perception of public sector efficiency, as reflected in the results of the expert survey developed by Dahlström et al. (2015). We do not find significant effects for transition countries, which could be due to the high heterogeneity of this group.

Finally, we found that the values held by senior public officials reflect those held by the population in general. This again confirms the importance of looking at context when studying administrative values (Molina, 2015). Overall, country effects, and effects of characteristics at the country level are very large in the models.

CONCLUSIONS

This article analyszed the factors that condition European public officials' position in an equity-efficiency trade-off, using a unique survey which provides information on public official's views and motivations across 14 European countries. The results obtained contribute to the body of research on conflicting public values in the public sector and, particularly, to understand a trade-off which has very remarkable policy implications, as that between equity and efficiency.

The results show how public officials' daily work context deeply influences their views: their individual characteristics, the characteristics of their post and, especially, their field and the country where they work condition their position in the equity-efficiency trade-off. The hierarchical position, the field of education, the administrative tradition in the country and the average political position of the population show significant effects on public official's positions on equity and efficiency. The evidence obtained also suggests that NPM reforms may have favoured a more efficiency-oriented public administration through a more market-oriented education of public officials and, in certain countries, by the increasing role of agencies.

This article opens the door to further research on public officials' views on equity and efficiency. In particular, there are various points which require further specific analysis.

First, the value trade-off is offered in a context-free, abstract way, and the measurement is based on a single item. This means answers do not reflect concrete situations, and cannot ensure that all respondents interpret the concepts in an equivalent way. Multidimensional measures may change the findings. Second, this article has only looked at the value trade-off, and not at how public officials cope with such trade-off and value conflicts, as is more common in public value research (Van der Wal, de Graaf and Lawton, 2011). This would require looking at their actual behaviors. Third, coverage of transition countries is limited and includes three highly diverse countries. This makes an analysis of the effect of administrative tradition difficult for this group, and probably explains the absence of a significant effect for it. Fourth, the agency effect reflects the wide variety in agencification trends across European countries, although it is hard to interpret because the dataset contains no information about task-specificity of the agencies involved beyond an indication of the policy sector within which they operate. Fifth, the results obtained for seniority in the public sector and working experience in the private sector should be also object of further research, focused on which mechanisms (and in which contexts) may contribute to explain the relations observed. Finally, and in connection with the two previous points, future research should look at the extent of NPM reforms in an organization to see how and whether this is related to the value trade-offs made in it.

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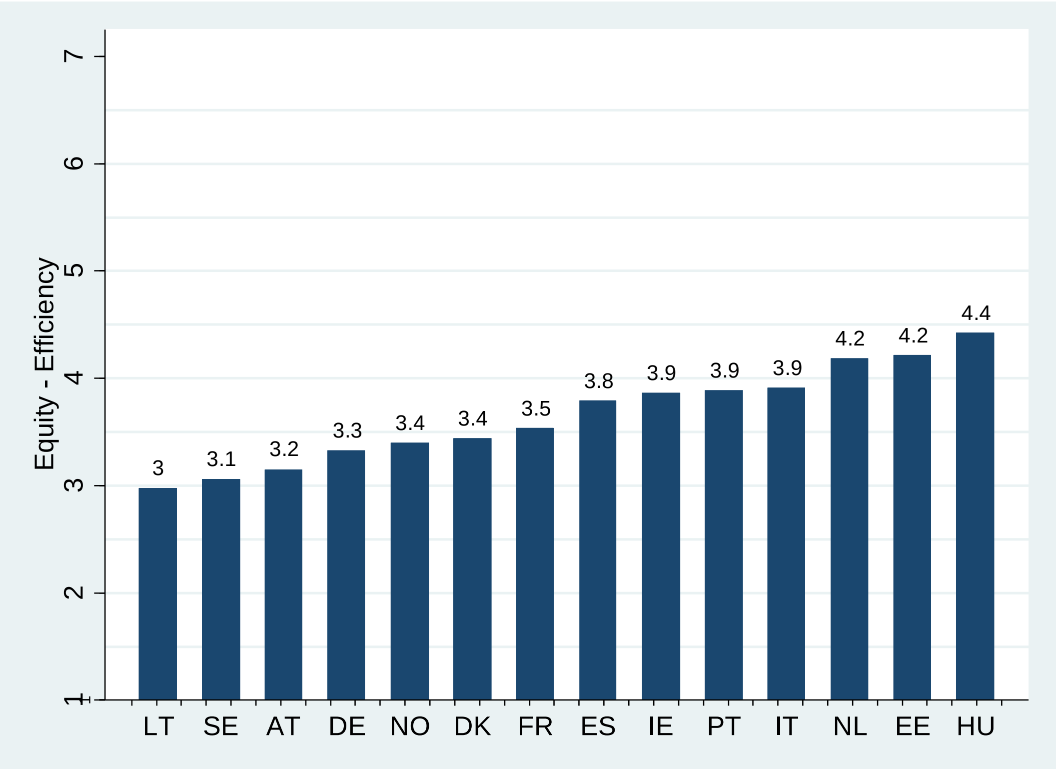
Table 1. Estimates on the factors explaining public official's equity/efficiency views

	Model 1	**Model 2**
DISTANCE HYPOTHESIS		
Position		
Level 1		
Level 2	-0.190 (0.081)**	-0.206 (0.075)**
Level 3	-0.273 (0.079)***	-0.300 (0.065)***
Size of the organization		
< 50 employees	0.021 (0.100)	-0.064 (0.106)
50-500 employees	-0.121 (0.045)**	-0.168 (0.044)***
> 500 employees		
Type of organization		
Government		
Agency	-0.097 (0.075)	-0.157 (0.075)*
PRIVATE SECTOR EXP. HYPOT.		
Experience in the private sector		
1 year or more	0.055 (0.060)	0.074 (0.066)
Field of education		
Law	-0.086 (0.072)	-0.037 (0.074)
Business / Economics	0.148 (0.061)**	0.141 (0.057)**
Other social sciences / humanities	-0.045 (0.052)	-0.034 (0.050)
Seniority in the public sector		
< 5 years	0.193 (0.089)**	0.122 (0.102)
5-10 years	0.135 (0.109)	0.151 (0.108)
10-20 years	0.100 (0.064)	0.098 (0.063)
> 20 years		
COUNTRY ADM. TRADITION HYPOT.		
Scandinavian		-1.007 (0.111)***
Continental European		
South European		0.623 (0.163)***
Transition		-0.187 (0.172)
POPULAR PREFERENCES HYPOT:		
Average political placement		1.495 (0.210)***
St. dev. political placement		0.015 (0.102)
ADDITIONAL CONTROLS		
Sex		
Male		
Female	-0.023 (0.082)	-0.054 (0.079)
Education		

MA	-0.017 (0.048)	-0.030 (0.042)
PhD	0.090 (0.059)	0.145 (0.043)***
Policy area		
General gov. & foreign aff.	0.068 (0.057)	0.076 (0.057)
Finance & economic affairs	0.011 (0.075)	-0.006 (0.081)
Infrastr., transport & environment	-0.019 (0.053)	0.021 (0.057)
Defence, justice & pub. order	0.022 (0.076)	0.010 (0.075)
Employment	0.234 (0.091)**	0.286 (0.095)**
Health & social protection	-0.187 (0.042)***	-0.208 (0.044)***
Education & recreation	-0.200 (0.065)***	-0.201 (0.061)***
Country		
Austria	-0.373 (0.031)***	
Denmark	-0.144 (0.067)*	
Estonia	0.639 (0.059)***	
France		
Germany	-0.358 (0.056)***	
Hungary	0.787 (0.041)***	
Ireland	0.285 (0.040)***	
Italy	0.315 (0.022)***	
Lithuania	-0.542 (0.063)***	
Netherlands	0.566 (0.037)***	
Norway	-0.057 (0.046)	
Portugal	0.259 (0.083)***	
Spain	0.236 (0.025)***	
Sweden	-0.507 (0.073)***	
Constant	3.795 (0.087)***	-3.584 (0.971)***
N	3,926	3,926

Standard errors in parenthesis. Statistical significance at 1% (***), 5% (**), 10% (*)

Figure 1. Average value of the dependent variable, by country



Appendix

Independent variables at the country level

Country	N	Response rate	Country model (Hammerschmid et al., 2007)	Political placement (0 –left - to 10 –right-) (EES, 2012)	
				Average	Standard dev.
Austria	493	35.04%	Continental European	4.74	1.85
Denmark	147	19.39%	Scandinavian	5.33	2.37
Estonia	318	34.83%	Transition	5.46	2.06
France	587	17.25%	Continental European	4.95	2.54
Germany	446	22.76%	Continental European	4.61	1.90
Hungary	250	27.06%	Transition	5.40	2.11
Ireland	375	38.27%	Anglo-Saxon	5.13	1.77
Italy	172	17.72%	South European	4.76	2.68
Lithuania	432	39.34%	Transition	4.93	2.22
Netherlands	196	29.25%	Continental European	5.41	2.12
Norway	334	27.90%	Scandinavian	5.64	2.11
Portugal	296	28.52%	South European	4.90	2.10
Spain	297	17.64%	South European	4.51	2.39
Sweden	523	40.45%	Scandinavian	5.33	2.22

Composition of the sample, by individual and post-related characteristics

	N	%
Sex	4,148	
Male	2,634	63.5%
Female	1,514	36.5%
Education	4,238	
MA	2,547	60.1%
PhD	738	17.4%
Field of education	4,238	
Law	1,099	25.9%
Business / Economics	1,075	25.4%
Other social sciences / humanities	1,255	29.6%
Seniority in the public sector	4,177	
< 5 years	302	7.2%
5-10 years	399	9.6%
10-20 years	1,262	30.2%
> 20 years	2,214	53.0%
Experience in the private sector	4,238	
1 year or more	1,964	46.3%
Position	4,112	
Level 1	921	22.4%
Level 2	1,765	42.9%
Level 3	1,426	34.7%
Size of the organization	4,195	
< 50 employees	394	9.4%
50-500 employees	1,918	45.7%
> 500 employees	1,883	44.9%
Type of organization	4,238	
Government	2,139	50.5%
Agency	2,099	49.5%
Policy area	4,238	
General gov. & foreign affairs	840	19.8%
Finance & economic affairs	788	18.6%
Infrastr., transport & environment	675	15.9%
Defence, justice & pub. order	630	14.9%
Employment	477	11.3%
Health & social protection	781	18.4%
Education & recreation	576	13.6%

Average value of the dependent variable, by individual characteristics, post-related characteristics and country

	Average	s.d.
Equity-efficiency position (min =1, max =7)	**3.55**	**1.62**
Sex		
Male	3.59	1.61
Female	3.48	1.62
Education		
MA	3.56	1.62
PhD	3.41	1.59
Field of education		
Law	3.51	1.62
Business / Economics	3.76	1.60
Other social sciences / humanities	3.49	1.61
Seniority in the public sector		
< 5 years	3.88	1.68
5-10 years	3.69	1.68
10-20 years	3.62	1.60
> 20 years	3.45	1.59
Experience in the private sector		
1 year or more	3.57	1.61
Position		
Level 1	3.68	1.60
Level 2	3.58	1.60
Level 3	3.47	1.64
Size of the organization		
< 50 employees	3.49	1.70
50-500 employees	3.50	1.59
> 500 employees	3.63	1.63
Type of organization		
Government	3.64	1.66
Agency	3.47	1.56
Policy area		
General gov. & foreign affairs	3.67	1.61
Finance & economic affairs	3.72	1.64
Infrastr., transport & environment	3.55	1.57
Defence, justice & pub. order	3.61	1.68
Employment	3.67	1.49
Health & social protection	3.38	1.57
Education & recreation	3.29	1.59