

The Raffles Review

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It's The Politics, Stupid!



SOURCE

[*The Politics of Public Services: A Service Characteristics Approach*](#) was published in *World Development*, Vol. 74, 2015. The authors propose a “service characteristics” framework for analysing the political dynamics of public services across a range of developing and developed countries.

BIG IDEAS

- Service characteristics relate to “the nature of the good being delivered, the type of market failure being addressed, the tasks involved in delivery, and how a service is demanded and consumed.” These affect political, organizational and user accountability.
- Key themes emerging from published research and focus groups suggest three specific propositions about the political effects of specific traits of service:
 1. Political incentives to provide particular services are enhanced where services offer: *high excludability, low information asymmetry, high visibility and high attributability.*
 2. Organizational control by policy-makers of service providers is greater where services offer: *low discretion, high measurability, low provider autonomy and high territoriality.*
 3. Users’ power over service providers is greater where services offer: *low rivalry, low monopoly, low information asymmetry, high frequency, and high territoriality.*
- There is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing political constraints because these differ across services and political contexts.
- Analysis using the framework will lead to further illumination on issues of competitive provision, access to and exclusion from services, monitoring and evaluation by policymakers and public managers, organization of demands by users and citizens, and the political salience of services.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

- The service characteristics approach identifies not only differences but also similarities between services – specific sets of characteristics may influence the incentives and accountability of public service stakeholders (e.g. politicians, policymakers, service providers and users) in service provision.
- Recognising the specific political profiles of public services can lead to further collaboration between sector specialists which could change mindsets. This approach can inform policymakers, citizens, activists, service providers and users on opportunities, problems and ways forward to improve services.
- A process of participatory analysis among stakeholders using this framework may raise awareness, generate momentum for change and enable implementation of incremental changes to the quality of public services.

The Raffles Review
aims to ruffle your thinking!

This weekly offering summarises insights on public service matters to challenge assumptions and question the status quo.