FACTORS AFFECTING PUBLIC SERVANTS’ TRUST IN CITIZENS: A CASE STUDY OF SOUTH KOREAN CENTRAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS*

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Most studies of governance have emphasized that trust in government enhances government-citizen cooperation and induces the compliance of citizens with public policies. However, the scope of government-citizen collaboration has been limited to the trust that citizens hold toward their government. True collaborative governance would not work effectively if public servants did not have trust in citizens and were unwilling to engage with them in the public administration process. Given the small number of studies on the trust of public servants in citizens, we measure the trust in citizens by South Korean central government officials and analyze its determinants. Drawing upon surveys of about 250 public servants in South Korea’s central government, this study finds that factors affecting public servants’ trust in citizens are ranked as follows: their individual propensity to trust, their perception of citizens’ integrity, their engagement in coordination relations with citizens, their perception of citizens’ trust in government functions, their perception of citizens’ benevolence, and their engagement in command relations with citizens.

Keywords: public servants’ trust in citizens, propensity to trust, trustworthiness, interactions between government and citizens, citizens’ trust in government
INTRODUCTION

In responding to market or state failure, governance has been regarded as an alternative interest coordination mechanism that can lead interdependent actors to cooperate. Most scholars agree that it is necessary for actors with common policy interests to engage in dialogue, networking, and collaboration if governance is to be effectively practiced. Despite expected benefits, however, such cooperative interactions do not happen frequently unless certain institutional mechanisms constantly guide actors to engage each other. How to coordinate ideas or interests among different policy actors is much more complex than assumed in the studies of governance. Actors engaged in dialogue and communication are often challenged by their lack of representativeness (Jessop, 2000). Participants seeking personal gain will even intentionally block citizen involvement in the decision-making process. Moreover, the collaborative process involving diverse participants has limited efficacy in generating policy change, because participants often address issues outside the venue where public policy is actually decided (Konisky and Beierle, 2001). These problems have been considered major reasons that participatory processes backfire and cause public dissatisfaction (Smith and McDonough, 2001).

From the perspective of governance upholding the value of participation and collaboration (Rhodes, 1997; Pierre and Peters, 2000; Eun, 2009), trust enables cooperation and facilitates actors to participate in the decision-making process with a willingness to resolve conflicts. Even if individual or organizational actors intend to negotiate with each other or form a partnership, they will still find it very difficult to forge such a relationship due to the lack of information or shared values. Given this gap between good intentions and cooperative practices, trust is regarded as the key element in reducing the transaction cost of reaching a consensus on collective actions. Accordingly, many studies have focused on both the effects of trust on public policies and the correlation between citizens’ participation and their trust.

While there is a growing body of literature and surveys on citizens’ trust in government, limited attention has been paid to studies on trust in citizens by government officials. Given that trust is mutual and reciprocal, it is important to research the trust of government toward citizens in order to develop collaboration-based strategies, which are usually aimed at expanding public-private partnerships and enhancing citizen participation (S. Kim, 2010). In this regard, Yang (2005, 2006) suggests that public servants’ trust in citizens is important in building credible democratic governance. He has found that factors such as prior experience, procedural orientation, and criticism of the government affect public servants’ trust in citizens; increased trust will have a positive effect on their efforts to involve citizens. In public-private partnerships, it is public servants who can take the initiative in cultivating trust between government and citizens, since they have better channels and mediums by which to engage citizens who tend to regard government distant and unreachable. Once public servants trust citizens, their efforts to involve and empower