The Public Understanding of Public Service
Briefing on Key Survey Findings

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Abstract
Efforts to promote the ideal of public service cannot succeed without an appreciation for how ordinary members of the public understand the term and which factors influence this understanding. In furtherance of the John Smith Centre’s goals, in February 2019, the research team carried out an online survey of British adults to ascertain their attitudes to public service. In this report, we present findings in relation to key research questions, providing an initial overview of the public understanding of public service. We find that citizens view public service mostly through the prism of the public sector and government amenities. However, we uncover substantial nuance behind this understanding, and show that public service is a highly valued concept.
“Public service must be more than doing a job efficiently and honestly. It must be a complete dedication to the people and to the nation.”
— U.S. Senator Margaret Chase Smith, Nov. 1957

Introduction

The John Smith Centre’s first research project is called “The Public Understanding of Public Service”. The research team were given an open remit to interpret this title, with the understanding that the development and administration of an online survey questionnaire was of central importance to the project’s completion and the Centre’s future work. In this report, we provide a summary of our initial findings from this survey. The findings in this report form the basis of two academic manuscripts to be sent for peer review in the coming months, following the forthcoming submission of a conceptual paper on the topic.

The first stage of the project was a review of the academic literature, during which we identified the key themes and takeaways from existing research which relates in any way to the concept. We concluded that, however we chose to approach the Centre’s central research problem, we would be entering uncharted territory. Following this, we delved deeper into the conceptualisation of public service to determine how we should think about public service. We noted that public service is a contested concept and developed a series of key questions any conceptualisation must answer. In particular, we highlighted the need to distinguish between the civic and public spheres, clearly identify the servant’s ultimate source of accountability and take account of differences in employment sector.

Research questions

Following the literature review, we designed the survey instrument to test our own hypotheses and the stipulations of the Board. We used the opportunity to collect data on as many variables as may be relevant to the Centre’s long-term goal of promoting public service and its associated virtues. Based on our research and discussions with Board members, we interpreted the title of the project to encompass four overarching research questions:

1. What does public service mean to members of the public?
2. To what extent do citizens value public service, however it is conceptualised?
3. What determines attitudes to public service?

\[1\] In recent draft paper, which combines parts of the two previous reports, we developed our own definition of public service which we believe is all-encompassing and definitive: “Continuous official service by an agent of the state, engaged in work which aims to contribute to the overall good of society, who submits themselves to mass public accountability as a condition of that work.”
4. What role do attitudes to public service play in political attitudes, behaviour and participation?

Though we cannot yet provide definitive answers to all of these questions, the following report details what we have ascertained from the data so far. We can already provide a robust descriptive answer to the question of what public service means to citizens, and present early indications of our conclusions in relation to the project’s other research questions. We have also used this framework to develop a clear plan for delivery of the project’s final outputs. Before advancing to the findings, we briefly describe the fieldwork and sample.

Data

The survey questionnaire was designed using the Qualtrics platform and administered online by Qualtrics XM via partner organisations. A total of 1,458 British adults were sampled in February 2019. The survey instrument contained a wide variety of questions to tap variables including, inter alia, respondents’ views on public service and public servants, their political beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and behaviours, their institutional and generalised social trust and socio-demographics. Due to the nature of the topic, responses were expected to be sensitive to priming effects. As such, careful attention was paid to question formats and ordering within the questionnaire.

The unweighted sample is not precisely population representative. However, it is of sufficient size that weighting is unlikely to be problematic, and is sufficiently close to representative that the findings will not be dramatically affected. We note this only because we have not applied sample weights for the analyses in this briefing. The weighting strategy will depend on the type of analyses we intend to publish, and the representativeness of the sample is not of overwhelming concern for the initial findings we present here.

What does public service mean?

To prime respondents to answer questions on the topic and determine what people think of public service spontaneously, we asked respondents to outline what the term means to them at the beginning of the survey. The first way we did this was to ask respondents for their personal understanding of the concept using the following formulation: “The idea of ‘public service’ can mean different things to different people. Briefly, in your own words, how would you define public service?”

Overwhelmingly, respondents referred to public services, plural, in their own definitions. Citizens seem to view public service mostly through the prism of government amenities. Figure 1 shows a wordcloud of the fifty most commonly mentioned words across all responses. Words relating to government and public services, particularly local and emergency services, are clearly dominant.

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2 Common stop words such as “a” and “the” were removed from vector containing the text responses, as well as “public”, “service” and variations of these words.
Survey Findings

Although wordclouds provide useful visual clues about the relative prevalence of text features, they do not convey information about the absolute number of times a word appears. As such, Figure 2 is a bar graph showing the percentage of responses (document frequency\(^3\)) which contain the ten most frequently mentioned words. It shows that nearly one in five respondents mentioned “government”, while nearly as many mentioned the “police”. Nearly one in ten mentioned “fire”, referring in most cases to the fire brigade. More than one in ten respondents thinks of public service in relation to their “local” area. It is perhaps not surprising that citizens tend to think of public service and government in terms of the state services which are most immediately relevant to them, such as local amenities and the emergency services.

We can further investigate the relative prevalence of different themes in the open-ended responses by grouping individual features together. During data processing for text analysis, it is possible to create a “dictionary” of terms containing one or more particular words. If any of these words is mentioned, it counts as a mention of the overarching term. This allows us to determine how many texts in the corpus might touch upon a given theme. So, for example, how many respondents mentioned any emergency service, as opposed to just the police, fire brigade or ambulance service. We created a dictionary of eight terms related to various *prima facie* themes in the responses\(^4\), and checked the document frequency of these.

The results, shown in Figure 3, demonstrate that just under a quarter of responses mentioned government in general and/or local issues. Around one-in-five mentioned public sector services in general, and a similar number mentioned the

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\(^3\)As opposed to the total number of times a word is mentioned.

emergency services. However, 24% respondents mentioned more normative aspects of the concept, captured by the "affective" feature. Around 17% also mentioned citizens or "the people" in some capacity. Although understandings of public service clearly revolve primarily around the public sector and government services, this is clearly not the only thing brought to mind when the term is mentioned. The next step in analysing text responses to the open-ended question will involve exploring feature co-occurrence. That is, which words or themes were mentioned together. Using other text analysis techniques like topic modelling, it may also be possible to identify a latent typology of responses and use this to assign respondents to certain categories, which could be used as a variable in other analyses.
These aggregate level findings to some extent disguise the nuance of many individual responses. Examining these, it is clear that some citizens subscribe to a more general, normative idea of public service, or a multifaceted understanding which is closer to the Centre’s own. For example:

- “Doing something for another persons [sic] benefit rather than your own/working for the public sector”
- “Anything from being a politician to a policeman, a teacher to a bin collector. Basically anyone whose wages comes from the public purse”
- “Various degrees from serving in office or government to the BBC and public transportation”

Some other respondents used the question as an opportunity to complain about service provision or make a political point. For example:

- “Not reliable, over crowding, no seats, delays”
- “No comment to make – people of this country are being let down by ‘public servants’ in government and local authorities”
- “Not good due to the fact of having no money for more policing to be done on the streets where it clearly needs it”
- “THEY COULD BE A LOT BETTER STILL NOT UP TO THE JOB”

It is encouraging to note that these sentiments were shared by handful of respondents. A significantly greater number of respondents gestured toward the specific notion of self-sacrifice, a concept typical of scholarly and applied understandings of public service. This is difficult to capture with individual terms or dictionaries because there are many ways to formulate the concept. For example:

- “Help to the needy without anything in return”
- “Putting your country before your self interest”
- “Public service is to help society by doing charity things for the less fortunate”
- “Doing something for the good of other people”
- “Serving the public interest, either in a paid role or voluntarily”
- “Serving the community in a proactive way”
- “Serving the public in one’s daily life in one of a wide variety of ways rather than purely aiming to be self-serving in one’s activities and ambitions”

Overall, the spontaneous responses to the open-ended question provide a helpful guide for the Centre. When people hear the term, they tend to think of government amenities. However, this does not tell the whole story. The idea of public service seems to have a large number of connotations. The idea of public service could be considered a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance” concept, which has a variety of interconnected meanings but is difficult to pin down definitively.
Who qualifies as a public servant?

To develop a clearer idea of the sectoral and occupational distinctions made in understandings of public service, we asked respondents to indicate which of a series of social roles they believed to constitute public service in a multiple-choice format: “Based on your views, which of the following groups of people would you consider to be public servants?”

Figure 4 shows a bar graph of the percentage of respondents who selected each role. Police officers are by far the most likely to be considered public servants, with nearly nine in ten respondents selecting this option. Civil servants and nurses were the next most highly rated, with around three quarters of respondents indicating that these workers were public servants. Four other roles were considered to be public servants by more than 60% of respondents, including elected politicians, selected by nearly two thirds. There is a steep drop-off after refuse collectors to bus drivers, sitting at around 40%.

The clear distinction between the top and bottom halves of Figure 4 is that all of the occupations which were selected by over 60% of respondents are almost always directly engaged by the state. For bus drivers, who sit in the middle, it is more ambiguous: typically they are not government employees, but sometimes they are, and government often plays a prominent role in funding and organising public transport even when it is privatised. We find much less ambiguity for private sector employees like supermarket workers, football players and estate agents, all found at the bottom end of the graph.

Rather surprisingly, fewer than 5% of respondents believe that journalists are public servants. We would expect this to be higher, since the news media is widely considered to be the “Fourth Estate” in democratic societies, an unofficial but heavily institutionalised accountability mechanism in democratic societies. It does not seem likely that the low proportion for journalists is due to generally unfavourable sentiments towards the profession, since a healthy majority of respondents iden-
Survey Findings

The findings suggest that citizens generally view the distinction between public servants and non-public servants through the lens of employment sector.

So far we have not explored any cross-tabulations or group differences, yet these will be key in understanding how citizens differ in their assessments of public service. Figure 5 shows a striking example. This graph is a Cleveland dot plot which, like Figure 4, shows the percentage of respondents who selected particular job roles. This time it is broken down by gender, with the difference between men and women visually highlighted. There is little difference between the groups for most job roles, with most small differences reflective of gendered social expectations e.g. slightly fewer men than women consider nurses public servants, while the opposite is true of bin collectors and soldiers. By far the biggest difference is seen for the politicians category, with nearly 20 percentage points
of difference between the groups. There could be any number of explanations for this difference, which we would anticipate to be related to the historical exclusion of women from politics and their continuing under-representation. This dynamic may also be driven by other factors, such as women’s greater dissatisfaction with politics at the present time. In multivariate analysis it will be possible to test this explanation by accounting for other relevant factors like political attitudes and institutional trust.

Finally, we consider the “broadness” of respondents’ conceptions of public service i.e. how widely they apply the idea. To assess this, we calculated the total number of occupational roles selected by each respondent (with “None of the above” counted as zero). Figure 6 shows this variable’s distribution. The modal value is seven, with very few respondents selecting more than ten answers and the overwhelming majority selecting between around four and eight categories. We intend to explore the determinants of this measure as a dependent variable and also use it as an independent variable in tests of willingness to stand for office and other aspects of political participation.

![Figure 6: Distribution of responses to the occupational roles question.](image)

**Figure 6: Distribution of responses to the occupational roles question.**

Is public service valued?

Though we have established what citizens think of public service in and of itself, how highly do they regard the idea of public service? We also asked respondents about the extent to which they agree with the following statement: “Public service is essential to the functioning of democracy.” Figure 7 shows the breakdown of answers to this question. More than 85% of respondents agreed with the statement overall, with half strongly agreeing. Only a very small handful disagreed with the statement, while around one in ten were noncommittal.

Of course, it is no surprise that we find little variation in responses to this question. It should not come as a surprise that most people, when asked in iso-
Figure 8: How important are these values or features of democracy?

lation, agree with the idea that public service is important. In a sense, asking respondents about universally appealing abstract ideals provides little more information than asking them about whether they like sunshine or birthday presents; there is not enough variation to draw any conclusions. It is difficult to determine the esteem in which the concept is held without comparison to others.

As such, much later in the survey (to ameliorate the impact of possible priming or framing effects), we asked respondents to rate the importance of a series of democratic features, values and concepts on scale of 1 to 5, with 5 meaning most important. Figure 8 shows the breakdown of responses for each category, while Table shows the mean value of responses for each question.

Few of these values are controversial, with a majority of respondents rating each one a 4 or 5 according to the graph. Voting rights, the right to privacy and free speech are the most highly rated. Public service performs relatively well in comparison to other values, coming sixth overall in Table with a mean score of 4.09. Nearly three quarters of respondents rated public service a 4 or 5. It is perhaps surprising that public service is generally considered more important than fundamental democratic values like press freedom, minority rights and freedom of religion. This speaks, however, to the high regard in which members of the public view the concept. Of course, before we draw strong conclusions from this data it will be necessary to conduct tests of statistical significance to ensure that we can be confident in this.

Takeaways

In this report, we provided a short, descriptive overview of citizens’ views on public service in three ways. First, we discussed how citizens spontaneously conceptu-
alise public service. Though we demonstrate that the most common conception relates to government services and the public sector, we provide compelling evidence of more nuanced and normative understandings of the term lurking beneath the surface. Secondly, we reinforce this impression by discussing which occupational roles citizens believe comprise public service. We show that the main distinguishing factor in citizens’ minds is whether or not an individual is employed by the government. We also find evidence of a significant gender gap with regard to politicians. Finally, we report on the perceived importance of public service compared to other key democratic features and concepts. We find that public service is well-regarded by members of the public, moreso than some fundamental freedoms. Clearly, there is value to conceiving of public service in this manner.

Because the dataset is so rich and there are so many potential avenues for analysis, we have deliberately limited the scope of the report to the basics question of “The Public Understanding of Public Service”. More detailed analyses, including statistical models which test the specific research questions identified above, are currently under development. Additionally, we have not reported on the “Public Service Motivation” scale items we asked respondents in an attempt to tap their underlying motives with regard to the topic. Work is ongoing to develop these items into a coherent index which will be used to predict respondents’ attitudes to public service and participation, and these efforts will comprise one of the two academic papers we intend to initially publish using this dataset.

On the whole, what we have presented in this report provides some interesting answers to the Centre’s main area of interest. However, it also raises a number of pressing questions, and gestures toward the need for detailed analysis. In the coming weeks we will carry out the primary analyses using these initial findings as a starting point.