

# Is impartiality enough?

## Government impartiality and citizens' perceptions of public service quality

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# Self-introduction

- Kohei (Ko-Hey) Suzuki
- Assistant Professor at the Institute of Public Administration, Leiden University, the Netherlands
- Japan, USA (Washington D.C. & Indiana), Sweden, and the Netherlands
- Ph.D. Indiana University, the U.S.
- The Quality of Government Institute, Sweden
  
- Comparative public administration/management
  - Bureaucratic structure
  - Managerial characteristics
  - Gender
  - Organizational performance
  - Bureaucratic attitudes/behavior

# Today's topic

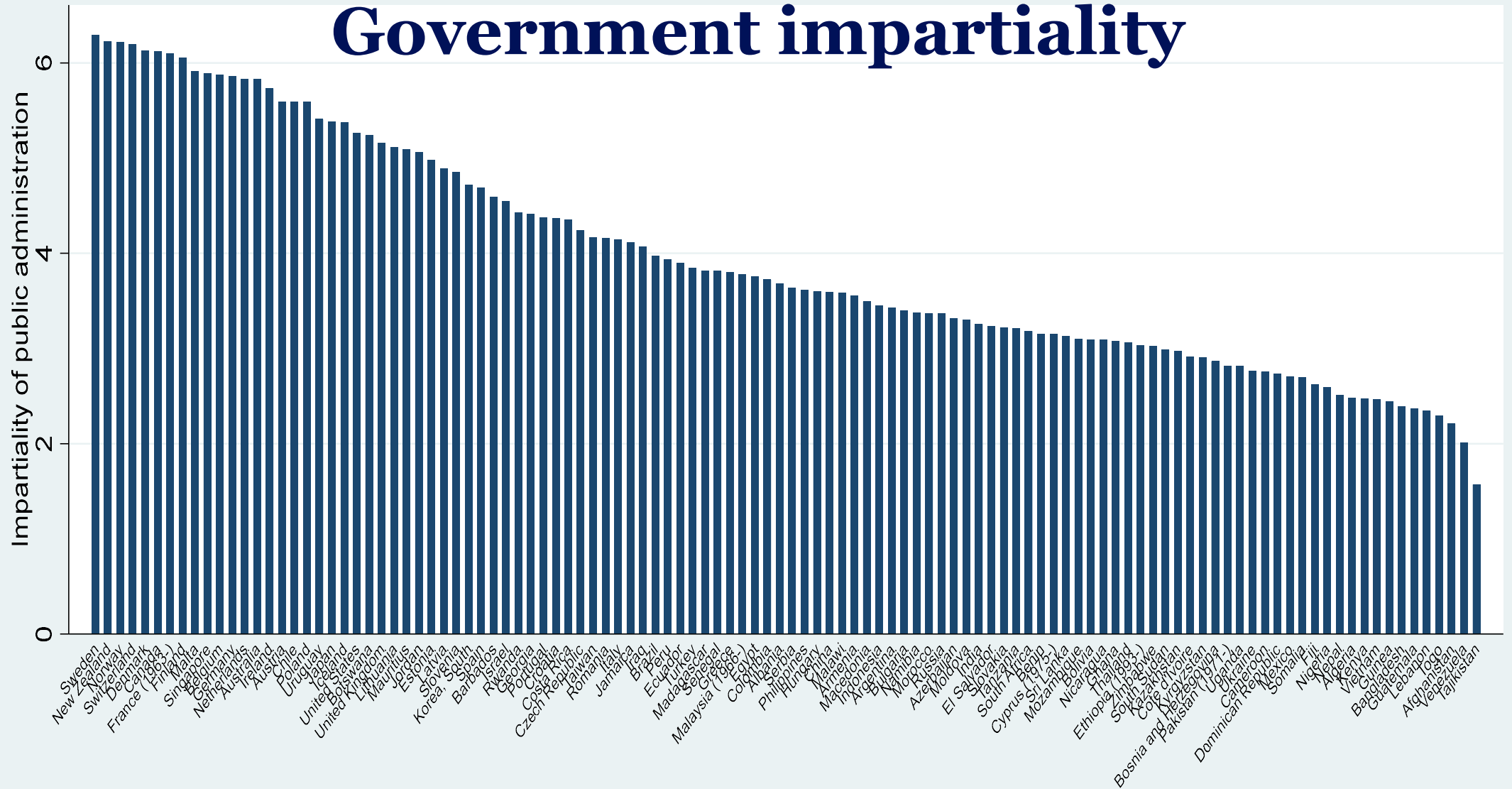
- Suzuki, Kohei, and Mehmet Akif Demircioglu. 2021. "Is impartiality enough? Government impartiality and citizens' perceptions of public service quality." *Governance* 34 (3):727-764.
- Dr. Mehmet Akif Demircioglu
- Assistant Professor, The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP)
- National University of Singapore (NUS)
- Paper goal
  - To further refine the concept of quality of government as impartiality
- Research question
  - Does everyone equally benefit from government impartiality?
  - Does the benefit of impartiality depend on socioeconomic status of citizens?



# Question

- What is impartiality?
- Impartiality in implementation of public policies?
- Impartiality
  - “When implementing laws and policies, government officials shall not take anything about the citizen or case into consideration that is not beforehand stipulated in the policy or the law” (Rothstein & Teorell 2008)
  - Rules and expectations for public services should be equally applicable to everyone in a way that is stipulated in laws and regulations
  - “Treat similar cases in similar ways” (Stensöta, 2012, p88)
- Which countries score high in terms of government impartiality?

# Government impartiality



Source: QoG Expert Survey

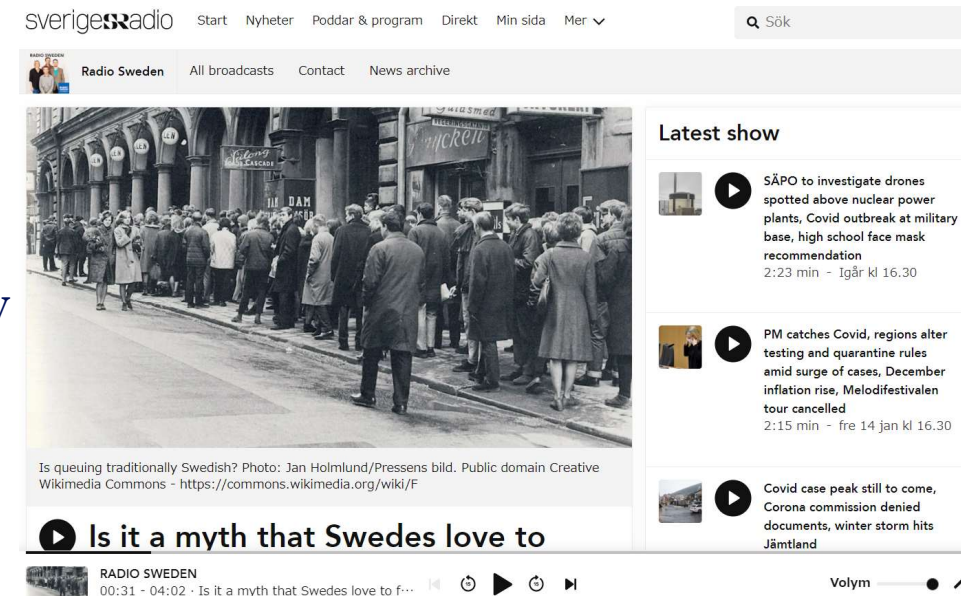
# Government impartiality

Source: QoG Expert Survey

The index is constructed based on the mean values of the following five survey items: (1) “Firms that provide the most favorable kickbacks to senior officials are awarded public procurement contracts in favor of firms making the lowest bid”; (2) “When deciding how to implement policies in individual cases, public sector employees treat some groups in society unfairly”; (3) “When granting licenses to start up private firms, public sector employees favor applicants with whom they have strong personal contacts”; (4) “Generally speaking, how often would you say that public sector employees today, in your chosen nation, act impartially when deciding how to implement a policy in an individual case?”; and (5) “Hypothetically, let’s say that a typical public sector employee was given the task to distribute an amount equivalent to 1,000 USD per capita to the needy poor in your country. According to your judgement, please state the percentage that would reach: The needy poor.”

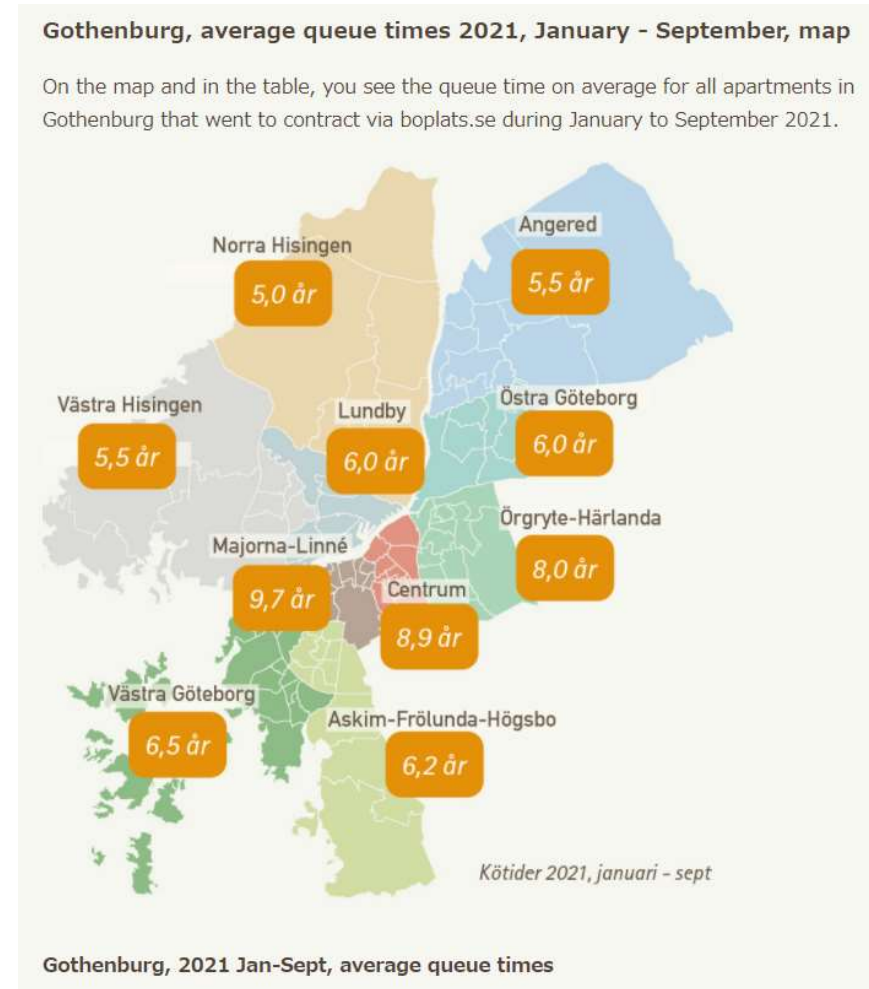
# Research motivation

- Personal experience in Sweden
- Lived in Gothenburg from 2016 to 2018
- First time experience living in Northern Europe
- Sweden as a high impartial country
- #1 in the QoG Expert Survey in the degree of impartiality
- High transparency
- Very well-structured and orderly society
- Facilitator taking questions in order



# Research motivation: personal reason

- Administrative impartiality and individual circumstances
- Very long wait time for apartment
- Wait time for treatment in hospitals
- Foreigners (and people with special needs) and locals treated equally
- Equality and equity





# Research motivation: scientific reasons

- "Rediscovery" of Weberian bureaucracy in the last two decades (Dahlström & Lapuente 2017, Evans & Rauch 1999, Fukuyama 2013, Miller 2000, Olsen 2006, Rauch & Evans 2000)
- Institutional turn in the social sciences (Holmberg & Rothstein 2012)
- Increased scholarly attentions to bureaucratic quality and features from a comparative perspective
- Impartial bureaucracy as a core element of good governance and government quality (Aucoin 2012, Rothstein & Teorell 2008)

# Research motivation

- Positive impacts of impartial government institutions and meritocratic recruitment on
  - Socioeconomic development (Evans & Rauch 1999, Nistotskaya et al. 2015)
  - Corruption prevention (Charron et al. 2017, Dahlström & Lapuente 2012)
  - Regulatory quality and entrepreneurship (Nistotskaya and Cingolani 2015)
  - Scientific productivity (Fernández-Carro & Lapuente-Giné 2016) and country level innovation outputs (Suzuki & Demircioglu 2018)
  - Political legitimacy, satisfaction with government, and support for democracy (Boräng et al. 2017, Dahlberg & Holmberg 2014)

# Research motivation

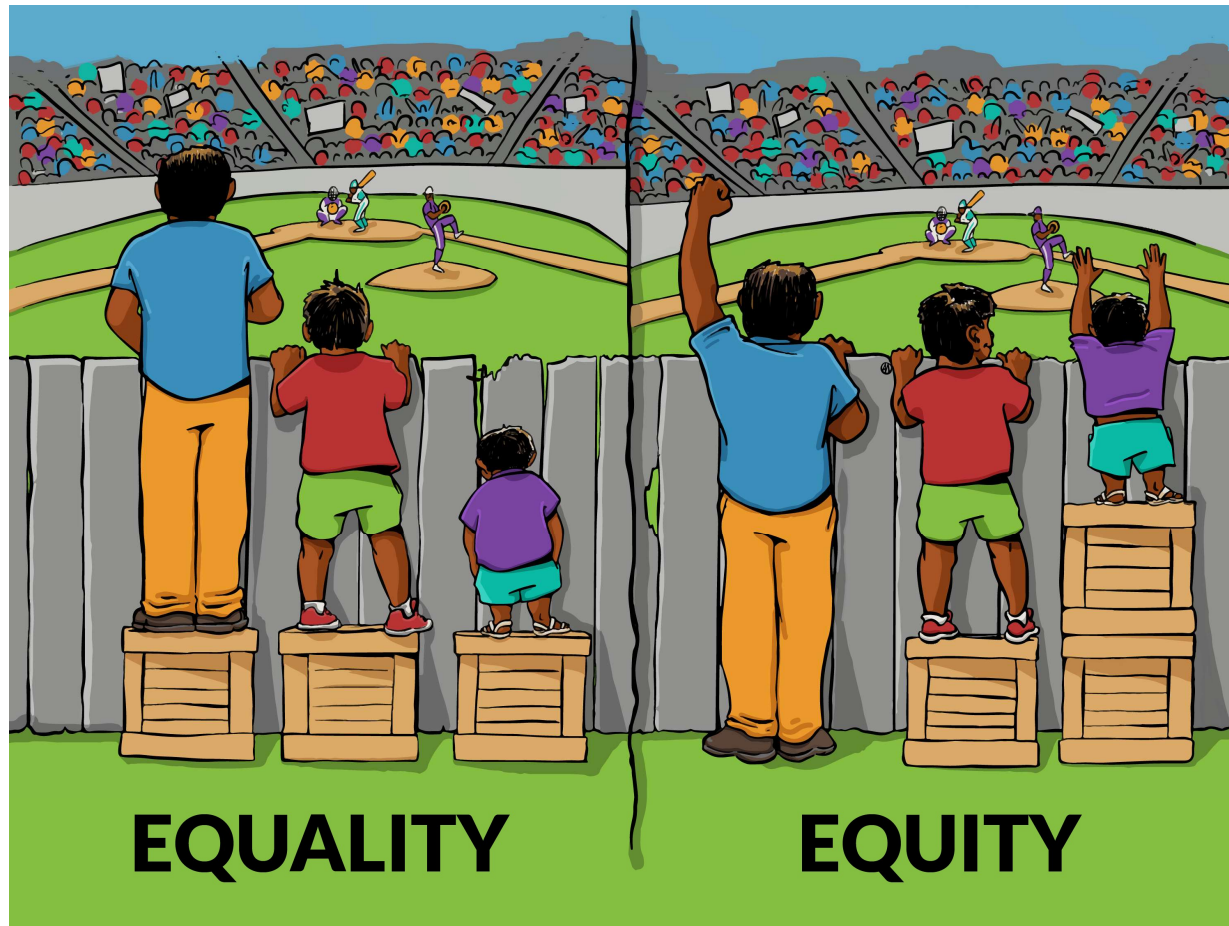
- Impartiality in bureaucratic decision making as a theoretical tenant for determining government quality (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).
- Critiques of bureaucratic impartiality as a core of government quality (Fukuyama 2013, Im & Hartley 2017, Im & Choi 2018, Longo 2008, Rotberg 2014)
  - “Impartial public administration may not be a sufficient condition for high-quality government” (Rotberg 2014, Fukuyama 2013)
- **Impartiality should be separated from public service quality (i.e. output measure)**
- **Formal equality vs. substantive equality**

# Research motivation

- **Formal equality vs. substantive equality (Grabham, 2009a, 2009b)**
- Impartiality as formal equality
  - Weberian model of bureaucracy: impartiality, neutrality, or equality
  - Impartial treatment of citizens
  - Rules and expectations for public services should be equally applicable to everyone in a way that is stipulated in laws and regulations
  - “Treat similar cases in similar ways” (Stensöta, 2012, p88)
  - **Formal equality**
  - Equal application of rules
  - Equal treatment of citizens regardless of their backgrounds

# Research motivation

- **Formal equality vs. substantive equality (Grabham, 2009a, 2009b)**
- Substantive equality
  - Real or actual equality
  - Equality of access, equal opportunity, and equality of results (Legaldictionary)
  - Social equity
  - The concept mainly developed in the American public administration
- “Fair and just treatment, justice, and the equal and **equitable distribution of benefits** to the society at large” (Gooden 2014 in Riccucci & Van Ryzin 2017)
- “public administrators are particularly **attentive to differences** in fairness and justice based on important social characteristics” (Johnson and Svara 2011, pp. 3, 17)



Interaction Institute for Social Change HP

<https://interactioninstitute.org/illustrating-equality-vs-equity/>

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# Research motivation

- Does everybody equally benefit from government impartiality?
- How about socially disadvantaged and vulnerable citizens?
- **Vulnerable consumers/citizens argument**
  - “at a disadvantage in exchange relationships where that disadvantage is attributable to characteristics that are largely not controlled by them” (Manning 1990)
  - Various sources of vulnerability: age, education, employment, race, disability, and income
  - Fewer available resources, less knowledge, lower cognitive abilities (Clifton et al. 2014, Clifton, Díaz-Fuentes, et al. 2017, Clifton, Fernández-Gutiérrez, et al. 2017, Jilke 2015)

# Research motivation

- **Administrative burden** (Herd & Moynihan, 2018)
  - “learning, psychological, and compliance costs that citizens experience in their interactions with government” (Moynihan, Herd, & Harvey, 2014, p. 43),
  - Examples
    - Citizenship applications require complex paper work, demanding documentation, application fees, language proficiency, etc.
    - College applications
    - Tax return
    - International travel under the current circumstances
    - Citizens in more socially disadvantaged positions may have higher administrative burden (learning, psychological, and compliance costs)



# Our research focus

- Using the European Quality of Government Index data (EQI 2013)
- Examine the relationships among government impartiality, public service quality, and citizens' vulnerable status
- Focus on 1) public education and 2) public health
- Vulnerable status: 1) income and 2) educational levels
- Examine the following questions
  - Does government impartiality lead to higher perceived public service quality?
  - Does the benefit of impartiality depend on socioeconomic status of citizens?

# Hypotheses

- Importance of procedural justice/fairness or fair treatment of citizens (=impartiality)
  - Fair treatment as a moral right
  - Perceived procedural fairness increases citizen trust in public officials
  - Fair procedures make citizens feel they are respected by the institutions making and implementing the procedure.
  - Fair procedural processes allow citizens to better evaluate the legitimacy of these outcomes
- When citizens positively evaluate administrative processes because of fair treatment, rule following, and treatment with respect, citizens are likely to rate government performance highly (Van Ryzin, 2015).
- Procedural justice/fairness matters for
  - citizen trust in or support for government (Grimes, 2017; Linde, 2012)
  - decision acceptance or compliance (Esaiasson, 2010; Grimes, 2006; Mazerolle et al., 2013)
  - satisfaction with government (Erlingsson et al., 2014)
  - legitimacy of public organizations (Hinds & Murphy, 2007)
- *H1: Government impartiality is positively associated with citizens' perceived public service quality*

# Hypotheses

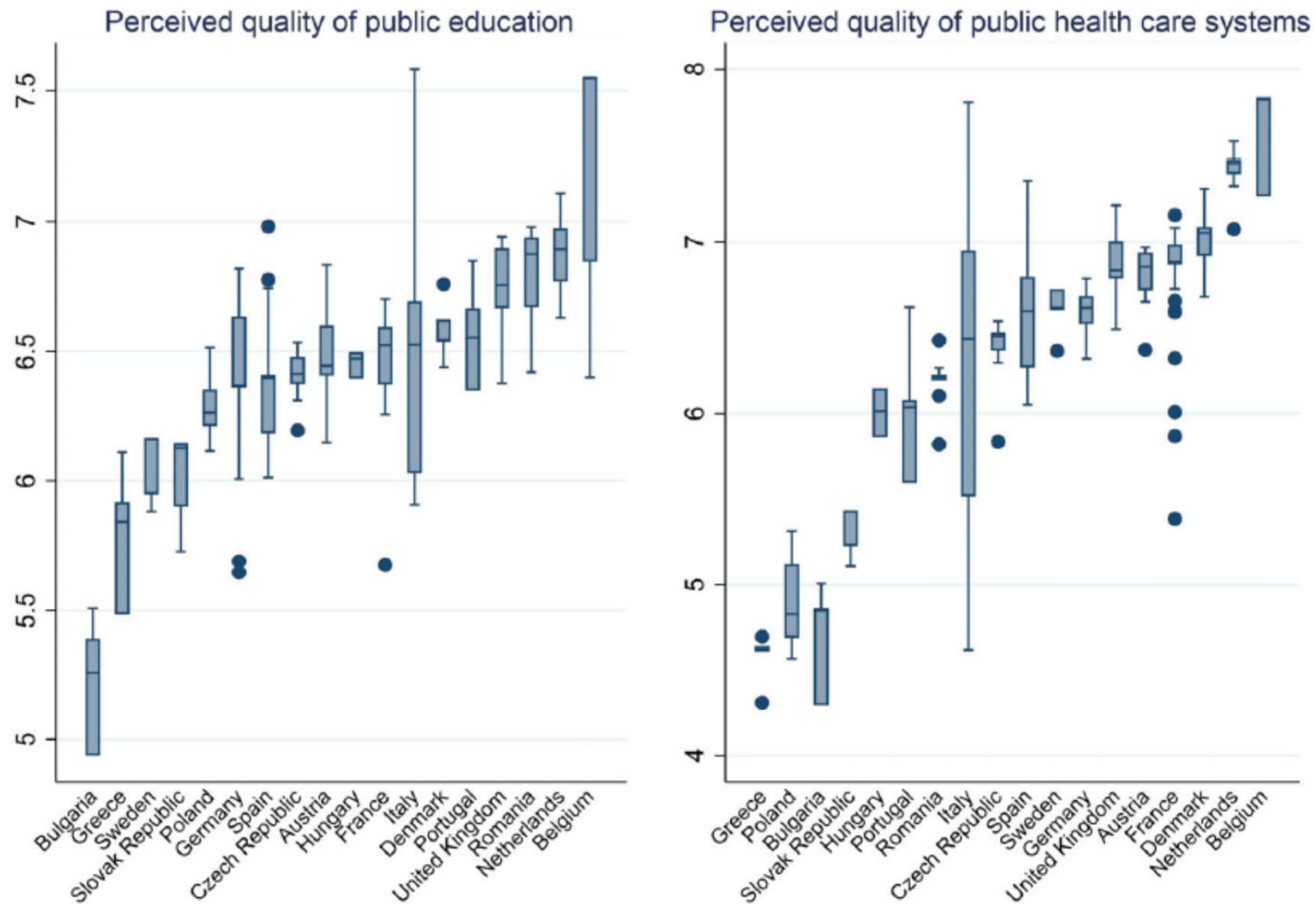
- Citizens with socially disadvantaged status may gain less from public services when the government emphasizes impartiality.
- Vulnerable consumers/citizen argument
- Administrative burden
- Limited cognitive resources and capabilities to enjoy benefits of public education and health care
- Impartiality may not be enough for citizens with disadvantaged status
- Strong emphasis on impartiality norms impede more customized and flexible case handling and treatment of citizens in government tasks
- Public services, and particularly those pertaining to care, should be more personal and needs-based rather than strictly following stipulated rules (Stensöta 2010, 2012)
  
- *H2: Government impartiality does not lead to higher perceived public service quality among citizens with a disadvantaged status*

# Examples

- Not tested due to data unavailability
- Impartiality in public education and health care
  - Citizens have equal access to public education and health care systems regardless of their income, educational level, ethnicity, disability, age, previous medical records, etc.
  - Same rules and regulations apply to everyone
- Potential disadvantages for vulnerable citizens when impartiality is stressed
  - Citizens with low educational or income background may not fully take advantage of public education and health care due to lack of knowledge, cognitive limitations, lack of network, etc.
  - Students with bad performance may need more customized care/attentions
  - Also, private market alternatives may not be an option due to financial costs
  - Choosing better school, seeking for scholarship opportunities, seeking for additional educational help, etc.
  - Maximize benefits from public health insurance,

# Dependent variable

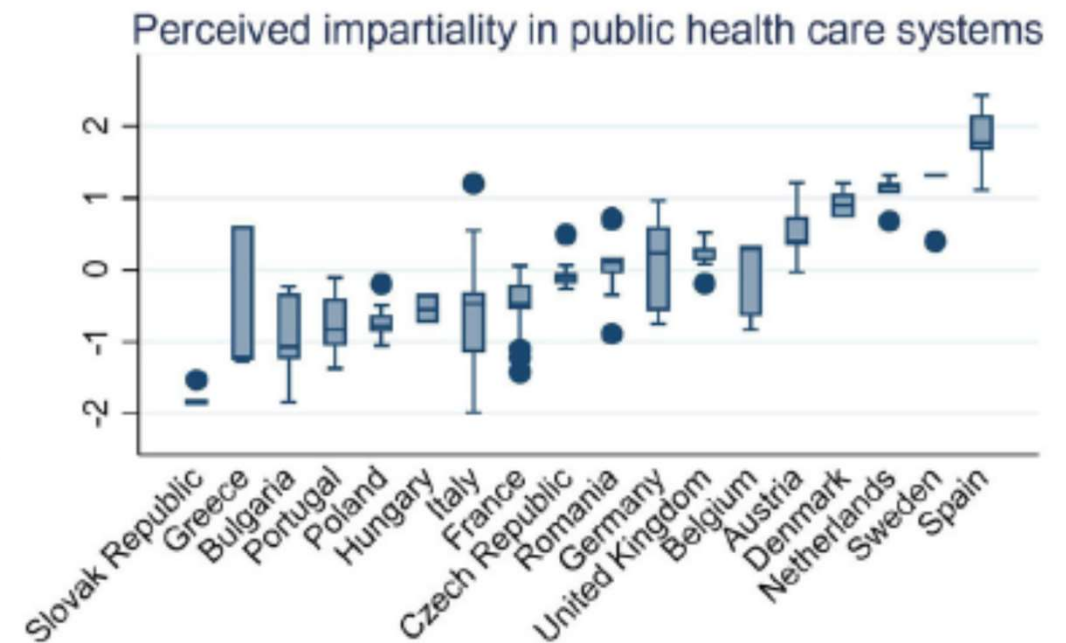
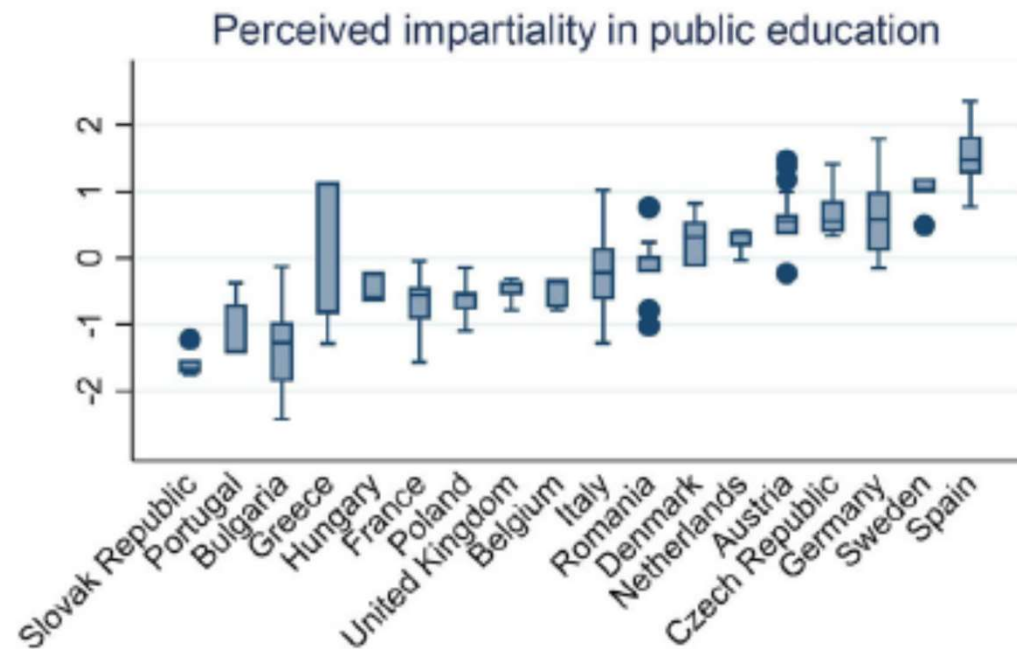
- Quality of public services measured by citizen satisfaction
  - Public education
  - Public health care system
  - *“How would you rate the quality of public education (public health care system) in your area?”* (0-10, with ‘0’ being very poor and ‘10’ being excellent quality)
  - Individual-level variable



**FIGURE 2** Citizens' perceived public service quality: national average and within-country variation  
*Note.* Sorted by country mean. Survey design weights used

# Independent variables

- Impartiality of government institutions
  - Regional-level aggregated measurement from previous wave of EQI survey (2010)
  - Dealing with common source bias
  - “*all citizens are treated equally in the public education system (health care system) in my area* (1-4, Agree, rather agree, rather disagree or Disagree’)
  - Standardized (z-score) aggregated regional level variable
- Vulnerable status of citizens (individual level)
  - Educational level (High (ref.), Medium, and Low education)
  - Income level (High (ref.), Medium, and Low education)



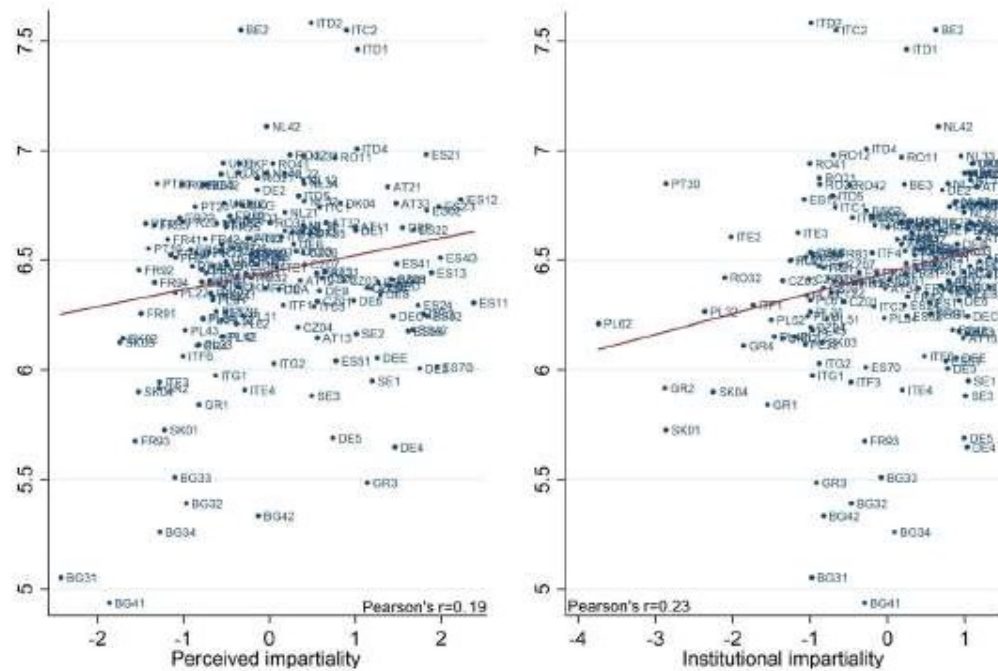


# Empirical strategy

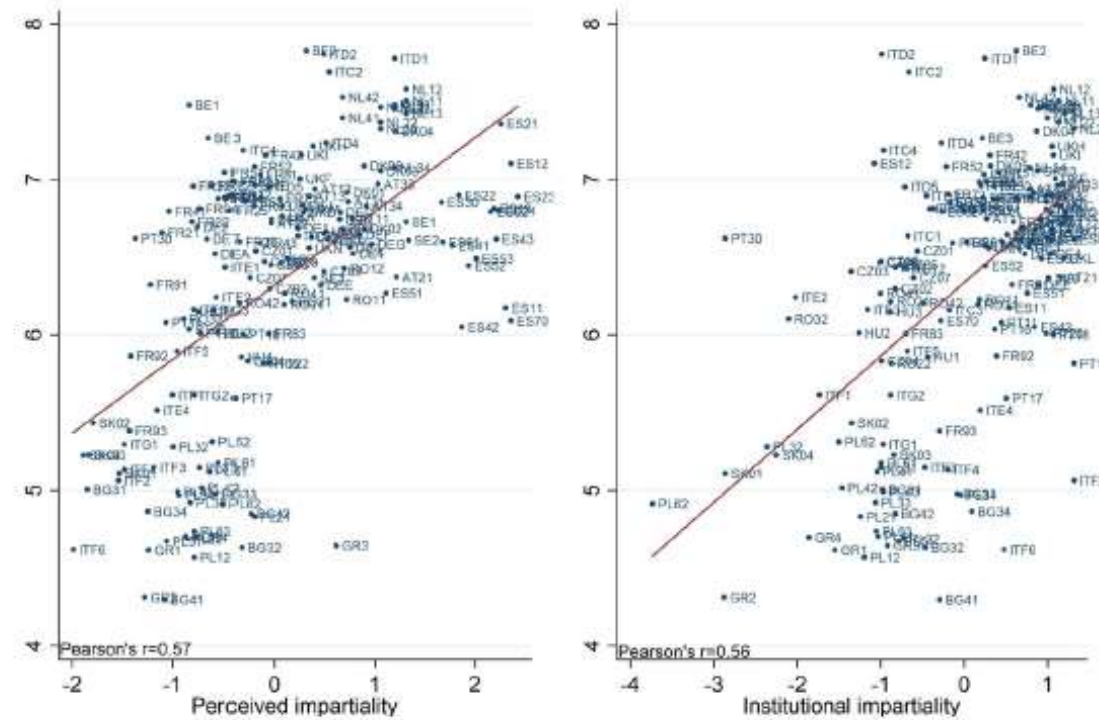
- Multilevel mixed-effects ordered logistic regression (min 0, max 10)
- Hierarchical structure nature of the data set: citizens nested in regional-and country- level contexts
- Random intercept & slope model

# Empirical results

Perceived quality of public education



Perceived quality of public health care systems

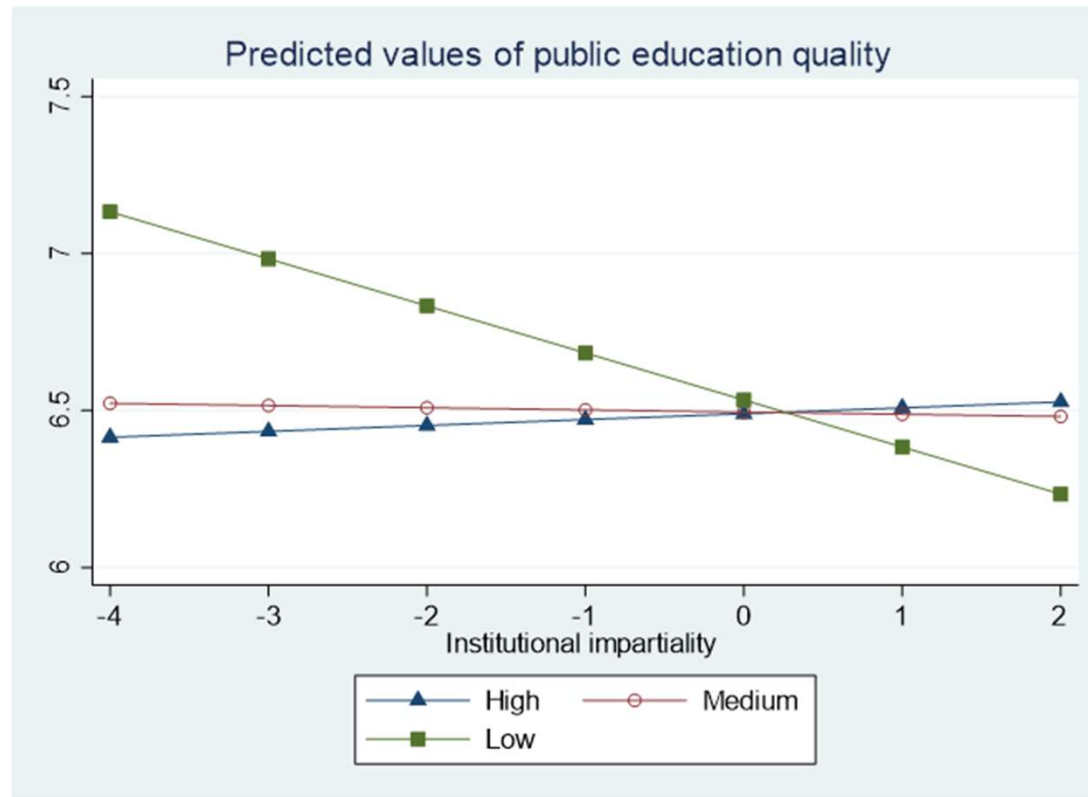


# Empirical results

- No empirical support for the impacts of impartiality on perceived public service quality after considering country-level factors (H1).
- Impacts of impartiality are conditional (H2)
- Citizens with vulnerable background are less likely to be satisfied with quality of public education and health-care services compared to nonvulnerable citizens in regions with high impartiality
- An increase in impartiality negatively influences perceived quality of public education for vulnerable citizens

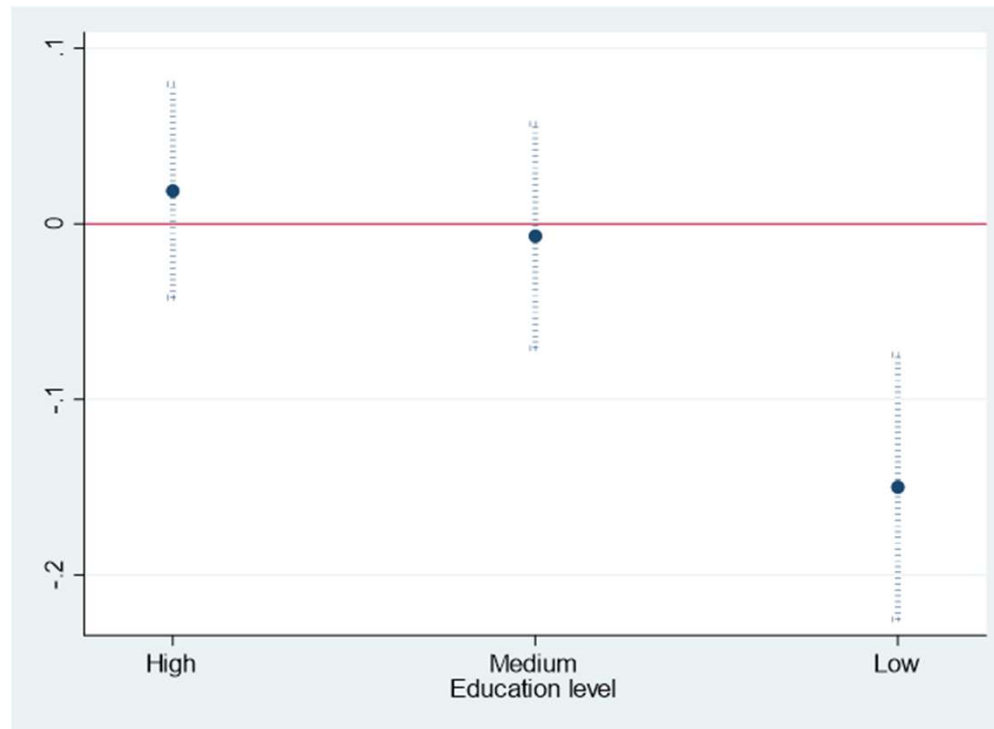
# Suzuki & Demircioglu (2021)

- Figure S1. Predicted values of public education quality by educational level over institutional impartiality: dependent variable treated as continuous



# Suzuki & Demircioglu (2021)

- Figure S5: Conditional marginal effects of institutional impartiality on perceived public education quality by education level: dependent variable treated as continuous



# Discussion and conclusion

- Results show that impartiality alone does not lead to higher perceived quality of public services
  - Citizens do not benefit equally from government impartiality.
  - Impartiality alone does not lead to an increase in perceived public service quality.
  - However, government impartiality leads to decreased public service quality for vulnerable citizens.
- 
- Contribution to the discussion on the concept of quality of government
  - Is impartiality enough for quality of government?
  - Call for refinement of the concept of quality of government
  - Substantive equality/social equity perspective

Thank you!