

## THE IMPACT OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL ON PUBLIC SERVICE SATISFACTION: MEDIATION BY ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN AND MODERATION BY GOVERNMENT TRUST

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### Abstract

Public service satisfaction is a critical instrument for evaluating the effectiveness of public services. However, the mechanisms through which both individual and environmental factors influence public service satisfaction remain inadequately explored and uncertain. This study delves into the intricate mechanisms underlying public service satisfaction, with a focus on individual-level factors such as citizen participation and social capital, and environmental-level factors, including administrative burden and government trust. A survey of 671 Chinese citizens provides data on their evaluations of public service satisfaction. Data from 671 Chinese citizens were analysed, revealing positive effects of citizen participation and social capital on public service satisfaction. Additionally, the issue elucidates the pathways through which administrative burden influences public service satisfaction and the moderating role of government trust. The findings highlight the complex interaction between individual and environmental factors in shaping public service satisfaction, emphasizing its significance in democratic governance beyond mere service evaluation.

**Keywords:** Citizen participation; public service satisfaction; administrative burden; government trust; influence mechanism

### Introduction

Citizen satisfaction with public services—defined as "how citizens perceive and evaluate the public services provided by the government"—is an essential strategic tool for optimizing government management, assessing democratic accountability, and enhancing public service performance (Van, 2015; Miyeon et al., 2024; Alizadeh&Kianfar, 2013). In public administration, the focus on satisfaction and other subjective

indicators within citizen-based evaluation models have increasingly been recognized as a means of providing governments with insights into the perceived effectiveness of public services, while also pinpointing areas for service improvement. Many local governments worldwide consider citizen satisfaction a key metric for assessing public service quality (Ni & Li, 2010; Poister&Streib, 1999; Lee, 2025), using it to gauge whether public services meet citizens' needs and preferences. However, for citizen satisfaction to serve as a reliable instrument for evaluating public service performance, it is essential that subjective assessments align with the actual outcomes of these services. Consequently, a substantial body of research has sought to identify the factors influencing citizen satisfaction and to establish the connection between satisfaction and public service performance. External factors like the national context (Judith et al., 2020), party politics (Sebastian & Martin, 2020), and e-government services (Zhang et al., 2020), alongside internal individual factors such as cognitive biases (Simon&Morten, 2016) and social class (Song et al., 2020), collectively shape citizens' contentment with public services. Although existing research acknowledges the significant role of service quality and citizens' perceptions in influencing satisfaction, it has yet to effectively integrate the individual and environmental factors at play. In

particular, the active role of citizens as demand-side agents and the corresponding public responsibilities of governments as supply-side providers have not been sufficiently incorporated into public service satisfaction studies. Miyeon et al. (2024), in their systematic literature review, similarly find that the mechanisms by which individual and environmental factors impact public service satisfaction remain inadequately understood and uncertain.

Overall, few studies have integrated both individual-level and environmental-level factors into the analysis of the mechanisms underlying citizen satisfaction. To address this gap, this study investigates the impact of individual-level factors—such as citizen participation and social capital—and environmental-level factors—such as administrative burden and government trust—on public service satisfaction. First, citizen involvement in the provision of public services is widely regarded as a critical strategy for improving public service satisfaction (Guan, 2015). Differential political communication and participation among citizens significantly shape public service satisfaction (Zheng, 2017). From the perspective of citizen participation, citizens shift from the traditional role of "passively receiving public services" to one of "actively co-producing public services." Studies based on surveys of U.S. citizens indicate that those dissatisfied with public services are more likely to engage in co-production of these services (Mok, 2019). Second, public services are intended to address imbalances in service delivery across regions, urban and rural areas, and social groups. Notable disparities in the public services received by different social classes persist. An analysis of the 2013 data from China's Comprehensive Social Survey (CGSS) found that social capital significantly enhances citizens' satisfaction with public services. Third, the administrative burden—resulting from the cumbersome experiences or demands imposed on citizens during policy execution—is a fundamental aspect of government-citizen interactions (Zhu & Tong, 2023). Citizens inevitably interact with government agencies when accessing public services, and the effect of administrative burden on public service satisfaction warrants further exploration. Lastly, for the government, delivering high-quality public services enables the demonstration of its administrative competence, thereby fostering trust among citizens. Empirical research reveals the existence of a "Satisfaction Mirror" in the public sector (Nicolai et al., 2023). Enhanced government trust can positively influence citizen satisfaction with public services.

Thus, this study situates government-level administrative burden and government trust elements, as well as individual-level citizen participation and social capital determinants, inside a mechanistic analytical framework for public service satisfaction. To clarify the explanatory capacity of citizens' public service satisfaction in evaluating public service performance, the goal is to investigate the fundamental mechanisms of public service satisfaction from an integrated viewpoint that considers both human and environmental dimensions. To investigate the mechanism of public service satisfaction, a theoretical model is first developed through theoretical analysis; a survey questionnaire is then created to gather primary data, which is subsequently examined, and the findings reported; and lastly, the study looks at the ways in which environmental and individual factors affect citizens' public service satisfaction.

## **Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses**

### **Citizen Participation, Social Capital, and Public Service Satisfaction**

The word "citizen participation" describes the steps that individual individuals take to participate in public affairs or decision-making directly or indirectly, so emulating the efficacy, legitimacy, and social fairness of democratic governance (Archon, 2015). The

notion of participation-induced change states that people's attitudes can be changed or even determined by how they engage in group activities. People who participate in public service projects that are directly relevant to their interests have a more unbiased and logical grasp of government governance operations, and their opinions and assessments of how the government provides public services also shift as a result. Participation by citizens might thereby increase their level of satisfaction with public services. Empirical studies further support this claim, demonstrating that citizen participation plays a pivotal role in enhancing government performance evaluations and significantly influences public service satisfaction (Ma, 2018). In contrast, passive, or superficial participation—or, more critically, a lack of participation—can diminish citizen satisfaction with public services to varying degrees. Therefore, citizen participation not only fulfills individuals' diverse needs but also fosters a deeper understanding of government governance, thus positively influencing citizens' satisfaction with public services. Based on these observations, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1: Citizen participation is positively correlated with public service satisfaction.

Social capital refers to the resources and relationships embedded within social networks, characterized by functional attributes (Nan, 1999), which individuals can access and utilize in their activities. In the context of China, a more specific definition of social capital pertains to the invisible wealth of individuals or their families, particularly the interpersonal networks formed through kinship and regional affiliations, such as those with relatives, fellow villagers, and alumni. High levels of social capital not only bolster individuals' psychological sense of identity but also enhance their competitive edge in securing opportunities for education, healthcare, and employment. This study defines social capital in the context of Chinese society, encompassing the full range of capital endowments that individuals can mobilize at the macro level, including human, administrative, political, financial, and micro-level social capital. These multiple dimensions collectively form a comprehensive resource base that shapes both access to and experiences of public services. In practice, citizens with higher levels of social capital typically possess higher educational attainment, greater income, and elevated social status. This not only strengthens their ability to access public services but also facilitates assistance from members of their social networks. Consequently, individuals with greater social capital are more likely to obtain the public services they require, with enhanced outcomes, thereby increasing their satisfaction with these services. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H2: Citizens' social capital is positively correlated with public services satisfaction.

### **Mediating Mechanism of Administrative Burden**

Administrative burden refers to the burdensome experiences individuals face when engaging with the policy implementation process, encompassing learning, compliance, and psychological costs (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Learning costs involve the efforts required to understand relevant rights, rules, and requirements. Compliance costs pertain to the resources expended to adhere to specific regulations during interactions, while psychological costs reflect the stress, frustration, and discomfort individuals endure in the process. As administrative burdens are not equally distributed among individuals, they may seem less significant from the perspective of government entities. However, for citizens, varying levels of resource endowment, cognitive capacity, and execution ability result in differing perceptions of administrative burden, sometimes leading to profound negative impacts. Scholars have suggested that satisfaction levels can effectively reflect the presence of administrative burden, as most citizens view it as

unpleasant and discouraging, thereby reducing their satisfaction with policy procedures (Gilad&Assouline, 2024). In the context of public services, administrative burdens influence citizens interacting with government agencies. Both the objective severity of the burden and citizens' subjective perceptions significantly affect their satisfaction with public services. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H3: Administrative burden is negatively correlated with public service satisfaction.

According to management system theory, government departments are conceptualized as "black boxes." Due to opaque decision-making procedures and restricted public engagement, the populace possesses minimal comprehension of the operational dynamics of governmental "black boxes" (Wu et al.,2008). Citizens encounter increased administrative barriers when accessing fundamental public services, resulting in diminished satisfaction with these services. A study including 808 Swiss farmers (Mack et al., 2021) revealed that an increase in administrative load correlated with diminished support for public policy, leading to more unfavorable assessments of government public services. Consequently, administrative burden, resulting from the contact between citizens and the government, serves as a mediating factor in the relationship where citizen participation affects public service satisfaction. Based on this, the subsequent hypotheses are proposed.

H4: A negative correlation exists between citizen participation and administrative burden.

H5: Administrative burden mediates the relationship between citizen participation and public service satisfaction.

Research on administrative burden underscores the ramifications of bureaucratic impediments that persons encounter while attempting to acquire the rights and services to which they are formally entitled. Citizens are frequently seen as passive victims of bureaucratic burdens, with weak individuals being especially prone to its impacts (Rick et al., 2025). The existence of social capital may contest this traditional interpretation. Social capital can enable even relatively disadvantaged individuals to alleviate the administrative challenges they encounter (Rik&Sergio, 2021), and elevated levels of social capital among people might diminish their perceived administrative responsibilities. Certain scholars contend that bolstering human capital can affect citizens' perceptions of administrative burdens by augmenting their confidence in engaging with the government, thus mitigating the adverse experiences associated with administrative burdens (Christensen et al., 2020) and enhancing citizens' satisfaction with public services. Consequently, the subsequent hypotheses are proposed.

H6: Citizen social capital is negatively correlated with administrative burden.

H7: Administrative burden mediates the relationship between citizen social capital and public service satisfaction.

### **Moderating Mechanism of Government Trust**

Government trust, or political trust, is generally defined as the faith citizens have that the government or political system will deliver results aligned with their expectations in its functioning (Hetherington, 1998). The degree of faith in government fluctuates with alterations in the environment and circumstances. Rational choice theory posits that rational calculation and the pursuit of utility maximization underpin all human behaviors. Government trust might be perceived as the outcome of citizens' reasonable assessments concerning their respective interests. Government trust embodies citizens' direct and indirect assessments of the government's administrative efficacy, governance competencies, and overall performance, significantly influencing citizens' participation behaviors and satisfaction with public services (Tang et al., 2023). Current research

demonstrates that when governmental governance behaviors and performance outcomes correspond with citizens' psychological expectations, citizens exhibit a greater propensity to engage actively in public affairs and services (e.g., offering feedback and suggestions to governmental entities, overseeing the development and execution of public policies) (Li et al., 2017), thereby augmenting citizen participation and favorably impacting citizens' satisfaction with public services. Consequently, the subsequent hypothesis is proposed.

H8: Government trust moderates the relationship between citizen participation and satisfaction with public services.

Government trust signifies citizens' faith in the government's capacity to execute its responsibilities, provide public services, and protect public interests. Certain scholars have identified a correlation between individual citizens' social capital and faith in government, which subsequently affects people's satisfaction with public services. Individuals with weaker interpersonal relationships typically exhibit diminished trust in the government (Schyns&Koop, 2010), which adversely influences their perception and accessibility of public services, consequently diminishing their satisfaction with these services. In contrast, higher levels of government trust strengthen citizens' confidence in mobilizing social capital to obtain services beyond their initial expectations, thus enhancing satisfaction. Accordingly, government trust is viewed as influencing the use of social capital by reinforcing positive expectations of governmental effectiveness and encouraging citizens to leverage administrative resources and social networks to secure additional services, thereby improving satisfaction with public services.

H9: Government trust moderates the relationship between citizen social capital and public service satisfaction.

Studies on government trust indicate that higher levels of trust enhance both political and social participation. Although the mechanisms underlying different forms of participation vary (Cui, 2020), government trust fundamentally reflects citizens' sense of belonging and evaluative orientation toward governmental performance, which necessarily shapes citizen-government interactions. As citizens' willingness and capacity to participate continue to increase, their involvement in policy formulation, implementation, and oversight enables governments to identify public needs more precisely, while fostering citizens' deeper understanding of governance processes. This reduces policy reversals and implementation deviations arising from information asymmetry, thereby lowering the time and information costs of participation. Accordingly, government trust is posited to facilitate citizen participation and to diminish the administrative burden perceived in interactions with government.

H10: Government trust moderates the relationship between citizen participation and administrative burden.

In regions with relatively high levels of government trust, social and political networks are organized horizontally rather than hierarchically. Citizens in these regions possess greater awareness of governmental practices and service delivery and consistently demonstrate willingness to contribute their knowledge, skills, and resources to public affairs (Mou&Hu, 2010). Individuals with richer social capital—particularly those connected to government officials—are more likely to access information on institutional operations and policy processes, as well as to exert influence on policy formulation and implementation. These groups tend to exhibit higher levels of trust in government and can mobilize social capital to alleviate administrative burden. This suggests that strong government trust stimulates citizens' motivation to utilize social capital in understanding and supporting governmental work, thereby reducing



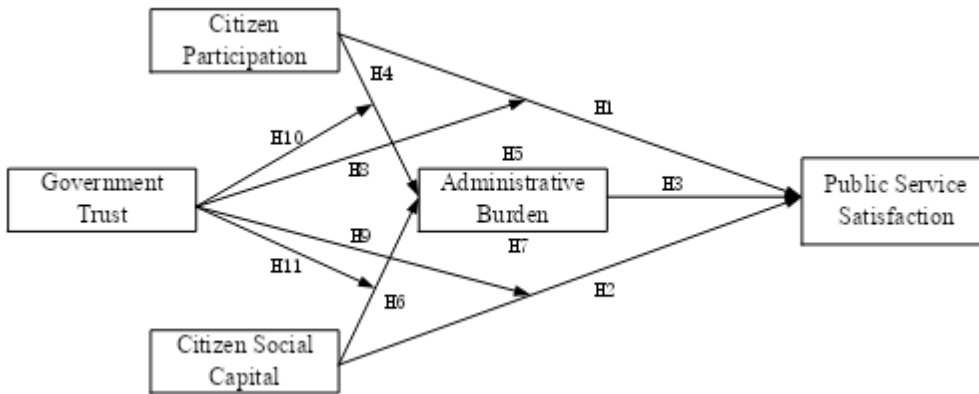
administrative burden. By contrast, low government trust discourages citizens from mobilizing their own resources to address challenges in interactions with government, resulting in a lack of effective feedback channels or reluctance to provide feedback, which in turn intensifies administrative burden. Therefore, government trust is considered to shape both the willingness and capacity of citizens to employ social capital in mitigating administrative burden.

H11: Government trust moderates the relationship between social capital and administrative burden.

Based on the above analysis and research hypotheses, a theoretical model is constructed to analyze the mechanisms influencing citizens' satisfaction with public services.

**Figure 1**

**Theoretical Model**



## Research Methods

### Data Collection

In line with the theoretical analysis model, five core measurement variables are employed: satisfaction with public services (SAT), citizen participation (PAR), social capital (CAP), administrative burden (BUR), and trust in government (TRU). The measurement items are developed from prior research and refined to fit the specific objectives of this study. Except for several control variables, all items are assessed using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 denotes “strongly disagree” and 5 denotes “strongly agree.”

The survey is conducted among Chinese citizens. Between March and June 2025, a total of 759 questionnaires are distributed. After excluding responses marked as “unclear,” “unaware,” or blank/invalid, 671 valid questionnaires are retained, resulting in an effective response rate of 88.40%. The sample exhibits strong representativeness across gender, age, occupation, and geographic region. Detailed characteristics of the respondents are provided in Table 1.

**Table1**  
**Sample Characteristics**

Features	Category	Number	Proportion (%)	Features	Category	Number	Proportion (%)
Sex	Male	318	41.9%	Education Background	Junior high and below	50	6.59%
	Female	441	58.1%		High	70	9.22%

					school/secondary school		
Age	17 years old and below	4	0.53%	Occupation	Bachelor's Degree/College	448	59.03%
	18 to 28 years old	300	39.53%		Graduate students and above	191	25.16%
	29 to 40 years old	305	40.18%		Citizen servant	91	11.99%
	41 to 55 years old	106	13.97%		Employees of state-owned enterprises and institutions	216	28.46%
	Above 55 years old	44	5.8%		Private sector employees	103	13.57%
Political	Communist Party member	305	40.18%	Occupation	Freelancer	87	11.46%
	Democratic Party	3	0.4%		Students	122	16.07%
	Communist youth league members	148	19.5%		Others	140	18.45%
	Masses	303	39.92%				

### Variable Measurement

Five core variables are employed in this study. Satisfaction with public services (SAT) is conceptualized as citizens' subjective evaluation of public services and is measured through items covering basic education, basic healthcare, public infrastructure, social security, and administrative efficiency. Citizen participation (PAR) reflects the extent of civic engagement in governance and is assessed through indicators such as participation in community activities, provision of opinions and suggestions, attention to official accounts, and active understanding of governmental responsibilities and procedures. Social capital (CAP) captures the differentiated resources influencing public service satisfaction and is measured through human, economic, social, and political capital. Administrative burden (BUR) denotes citizens' perceived difficulty in interactions with government and is measured through the complexity of procedures and document submission, convenience of information acquisition, friendliness of staff, and timeliness of feedback and problem resolution. Trust in government (TRU) indicates confidence in governmental institutions, personnel, and activities and is measured through trust in government information, trust in government staff, and trust in the government's capacity to resolve problems. Demographic characteristics—including age (AGE), gender (GEN), occupation (CAR), educational attainment (EDU), and political affiliation (POL)—are incorporated as control variables.

**Table 2**  
**Variable operationalization and description**

Variable Type	Variable name	Specific Indicators and Measurement Methods
Dependent Variable	Public Service Satisfaction	Basic education services (accessibility of school resources, quality of school education, educational equity, affordability of education, etc.): Very satisfied with the government's provision of the above basic education services, assign a value of 5.
		Basic healthcare services (accessibility of healthcare services, quality and attitude of healthcare services, public health services, and balance of healthcare resources): Very satisfied with the government's basic healthcare services, assign a value of 5.
		Public infrastructure: (transportation, public utilities, environmental sanitation, information and communications, public safety facilities, etc.) Very satisfied with the above public infrastructure matters of the government, assign a value of 5.
		Social security services (social insurance, social assistance, social welfare, housing security, etc.): Very satisfied with the above social security services provided by the government, assign a value of 5.
		Government administrative efficiency (service convenience, service efficiency, service attitude and professionalism, information transparency and fairness, etc.): Satisfaction with the efficiency of government services. If very satisfied, assign a value of 5.
Independent Variable	Citizen Participation	Participation in government-organized activities: Do you frequently participate in various government-organized activities? If you strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
		Suggestions or complaints on government websites: Do you often submit complaints or suggestions on government websites? If you strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
		Follow government official accounts and short video accounts: Do you frequently follow government-related information platforms? If you strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
		Understanding government responsibilities and business processes: Do you actively seek to understand government responsibilities and processes? If you strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
Independent Variable	Social Capital	Human capital: Assign a value to the actual human capital possessed by citizens. If strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
		Economic capital: Assign a value to the actual economic



		capital held by citizens. If strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
		Social capital: Assign a value to the actual social capital possessed by citizens. If strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
		Political capital: Assign a value to the actual political capital possessed by citizens. If they strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
Mediating Variable	Administrative Burden	The complexity of the application process and submission of materials: The application process and submission of materials are very time-consuming and labor-intensive. If you strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
		Understanding the process and information: Understanding the process and information required for handling matters in advance takes a lot of time and effort. If you strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
		Friendliness of staff: Encountering unfriendly staff while conducting business causes significant psychological stress and emotional distress. If you strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
		Speed of public sector feedback and problem resolution: If you think the speed is very slow, assign a value of 5.
		“Difficult to enter, unfriendly, and difficult to get things done”: This is often the feeling when dealing with government departments. If you strongly agree, assign a value of 5.
Moderating Variable	Government Trust	Authenticity of government information disclosure: If the information is authentic and reliable, and if it is completely trusted, assign a value of 5.
		Professionalism and impartiality of staff: If you believe that the staff are professional and impartial, and you trust them completely, assign a value of 5.
		Compliance with government problem-solving methods: Belief that the government can solve problems through prescribed channels or methods. If completely trusted, assign a value of 5.
Control Variables	Basic Information	Age (range)
		Gender (Male/Female)
		Occupation (citizen servant, state-owned enterprise employee, private enterprise employee, freelancer, student, other)
		Educational background (junior high school or below, high school/vocational school, bachelor's degree/college, master's degree or above)
		Political affiliation (Communist Party member, member of a democratic party, member of the Communist Youth League, ordinary citizen)
		Permanent residence province (nationwide survey)

### Reliability Test

The scales underwent reliability and validity assessments to guarantee the research data's reliability and validity. Reliability was evaluated by Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for each scale. The results demonstrated that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for all variables exceeded 0.8, signifying that the scales met the consistency criterion. The KMO values for all scales exceeded 0.7, signifying that the scales met the validity criterion. The scales exhibited strong reliability and validity (Table 3).

**Table 3**  
**Test results for each variable**

Variable Type	Variable Name	Cronbach's Alpha	KMO
Dependent Variable	Public Service Satisfaction (SAT)	0.939	0.907
Independent Variable	Citizen Participation (PAR)	0.877	0.856
Independent Variable	Social Capital (CAP)	0.886	0.819
Mediating Variable	Administrative Burden (BUR)	0.839	0.814
Moderating Variable	Government Trust (TRU)	0.857	0.872

To mitigate potential common method bias, three diagnostic approaches are employed. First, Harman's single-factor test is conducted, and the largest factor accounts for 36.77% of the variance, below the 40% threshold, indicating no substantial bias. Second, confirmatory factor analysis is performed. An unrotated principal component analysis extracts eight factors explaining 61.051% of the variance, with the first factor accounting for only 17.563%, far below the recommended 50% (Tang & Wen, 2020). Furthermore, the single-factor model exhibited the poorest fit ( $X^2/df = 8.028$ , TLI = 0.342, CFI = 0.419, IFI = 0.425, RMSEA = 0.159), further suggesting that the common method bias in this study is not significant. Ultimately, a latent method factor technique is applied to address the limitations of Harman's test. Although the seven-factor model with a method factor ( $X^2/df = 1.872$ , TLI = 0.919, CFI = 0.937, IFI = 0.937, RMSEA = 0.055) outperforms the six-factor model, the improvement in CFI over the hypothesized model is only 0.002, well below the 0.050 benchmark (Bagozzi&Yi, 1990). Collectively, these results demonstrate that common method bias is not a serious concern in this study.

### Empirical Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

#### Descriptive Statistical Analysis and Correlation Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis and correlation analysis were performed on the primary variables to preliminarily evaluate the research hypotheses. As shown in Table 4, a substantial positive correlation exists between citizen participation and public service satisfaction, a notable positive correlation between citizen social capital and public service satisfaction, and a significant negative correlation between administrative burden and public service satisfaction, offering initial evidence for future research hypotheses. This study performed multicollinearity tests on the core variables, employing the variance inflation factor (VIF) to evaluate the extent of high correlation across variables and to confirm the explanatory power and stability of the regression model. Following the multicollinearity criteria, a VIF value between 0 and 10 indicates that multicollinearity concerns among variables are negligible. This study examined the

dependent variable of public service satisfaction, the independent variables of citizen participation and social capital, together with the control variables. The results indicated that the VIF values of the core variables ranged from 1.162 to 1.703, signifying the absence of significant multicollinearity issues among the variables.

**Table 4**  
**Descriptive statistical analysis and correlation analysis**

Variable Abbreviations	Mean	Standard Deviation	SAT	PAR	CAP	BUR	TRU
SAT	3.693	0.786	1				
PAR	3.270	0.851	0.314**	1			
CAP	3.451	0.746	0.453**	0.654**	1		
BUR	3.424	0.770	0.373**	-0.086*	0.217**	1	
TRU	3.788	0.710	0.533**	0.441**	0.589**	0.297**	1

Note: \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* indicate that the correlation coefficients passed the significance tests at the 0.01, 0.05, and 0.10 levels, respectively.

#### **Influence Mechanisms of Public Service Satisfaction**

##### ***Influence of Citizen Participation and Citizen Social Capital on Satisfaction with Basic Public Services***

Hierarchical linear regression is applied to assess the effects of citizen participation and social capital on satisfaction with public services, with results presented in Table 5. Model 1 shows that among all control variables, only occupation significantly influences satisfaction with basic public services ( $\beta = -0.085$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Model 4 demonstrates that administrative burden exerts a significant negative effect on satisfaction with public services ( $\beta = -0.374$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting Hypothesis H3. Model 5 indicates that the inclusion of citizen participation yields a significant negative association with administrative burden ( $\beta = -0.086$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), confirming Hypothesis H4. Similarly, Model 6 reveals that social capital is significantly and negatively related to administrative burden ( $\beta = -0.214$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), thereby supporting Hypothesis H6.

**Table 5**  
**Regression analysis of the relationship between variables in the mediating effect model**

Variable Categories	Variable Abbreviate	SAT				BUR	
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Control Variables	GEN	-0.050	-0.010	-0.018	-0.053	-0.020	-0.025
	AGE	-0.044	-0.019	-0.025	-0.075*	-0.089**	-0.092**
	CAR	-0.085**	-0.092	-0.063*	-0.063	0.061*	0.049
	EDU	-0.012	0.067	0.041	-0.004	-0.001	-0.005
	POL	-0.043	0.010	0.041	-0.024	0.036	0.011

Independent Variable	PAR		0.326** *			- 0.086 **	
	CAP			0.453** *			- 0.214** *
Mediating Variable	BUR				- 0.374** *		
R <sup>2</sup>		0.125	0.340	0.461	0.392	0.144	0.240
△R <sup>2</sup>		0.016	0.100	0.197	0.138	0.007	0.044
F		2.117	14.458* **	29.910* **	20.078* **	2.333 **	6.761** *
△F			74.987* **	166.250 ***	108.180 ***	4.683 **	30.887* **

Note: All regression coefficients are standardized coefficients, with \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* indicating that the correlation coefficients passed the significance tests at the 0.01, 0.05, and 0.10 levels, respectively.

#### ***Mediating Effect Analysis of Administrative Burden***

The mediating effects are examined using the Bootstrap method. This approach generates more stable and accurate estimates by repeatedly resampling from the original dataset to approximate the sampling distribution. The Bootstrap method is employed in mediating effect analysis to evaluate the stability and significance of the mediating effect, effectively accommodating small samples and non-normal distributions while offering a thorough perspective on the effect's variability (Wen&Ye, 2014). This study utilized the PROCESS approach to examine the mediating effects of administrative burden on the link between citizen participation and public service satisfaction, as well as between citizen social capital and public service satisfaction. Table 6 reports the findings of the total effect analysis of citizen participation and citizen social capital on perceptions of public service satisfaction. Citizen participation has a substantial positive effect on public service satisfaction ( $P < 0.01$ ), exhibiting a total effect of 0.301 and a confidence interval of [0.233, 0.370]. Since the interval excludes zero, the result is statistically significant, thereby supporting Hypothesis H1. Similarly, Citizen social capital exerts a substantial positive effect on public service satisfaction ( $P < 0.01$ ), with a total effect of 0.477 and a confidence interval of [0.405, 0.550]. The exclusion of zero from the interval confirms statistical significance, thereby supporting Hypothesis H2. Moreover, the standardized coefficients indicate that the effect of citizen social capital on public service satisfaction is greater than that of citizen participation. In addition, the control variables—gender, age, occupation, and political affiliation—are all found to exert significant effects on public service satisfaction.

Subsequent analysis reveals that, reported in Table 6, shows that the mediating effect of administrative burden between citizen participation and public service satisfaction is 0.026, with a confidence interval of [-0.002, 0.059]. Because the interval includes zero, the effect does not reach statistical significance. By contrast, the direct effect of citizen participation on public service satisfaction is 0.273, with a confidence interval of [0.210, 0.337]. Since the interval excludes zero, the effect is statistically significant. These results indicate that administrative burden does not mediate the relationship between citizen participation and public service satisfaction; therefore, Hypothesis H5 is not supported. In comparison, Table 5 shows that the mediating effect of administrative

burden between citizen social capital and public service satisfaction is 0.066, with a confidence interval of [0.034, 0.106]. As the interval excludes zero, the effect is statistically significant. The direct effect of social capital on public service satisfaction is 0.411, with a confidence interval of [0.341, 0.482], which also demonstrates statistical significance. Taken together, these findings suggest that administrative burden partially mediates the relationship between citizen social capital and public service satisfaction, thereby supporting Hypothesis H7.

**Table 6**  
**Analysis of the Mediating Effect of Administrative Burden**

	Administrative Burden	Effect	SE	t	LLCI	ULCI
PAR→SAT	Total Effect	0.301	0.035	8.660***	0.233	0.370
	Direct Effect	0.273	0.033	8.421***	0.210	0.337
	Effect	BootSE			BootLLCI	BootLLCI
	Mediating Effect	0.028	0.016		-0.002	0.059
CAP→SAT	Total Effect	0.477	0.037	12.894***	0.405	0.550
	Direct Effect	0.411	0.036	11.460***	0.341	0.482
	Effect	BootSE			BootLLCI	BootLLCI
	Mediating Effect	0.066	0.018		0.034	0.106

Note: All regression coefficients are standardized coefficients, N=1010, Bootstrap=5000, LL=upper limit, CI=confidence interval, UL=lower limit, for a 95% confidence interval. \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* indicate that the correlation coefficients passed the significance tests at the 0.01, 0.05, and 0.1 levels, respectively.

#### ***Analysis of the Moderating Effect of Government Trust***

The moderating effects of government trust on the relationships between citizen participation and public service satisfaction, as well as between citizen social capital and public service satisfaction, are assessed using hierarchical linear regression. The results are reported in Table 7. The interaction between citizen participation and government trust exerts a significant positive effect on public service satisfaction ( $P<0.01$ ), and the inclusion of the interaction term leads to a statistically significant increase in  $R^2$  ( $P<0.01$ ). These findings confirm that government trust significantly moderates the relationship between citizen participation and public service satisfaction, thereby supporting Hypothesis H8. Likewise, the interaction between citizen social capital and government trust also exerts a significant positive effect on public service satisfaction ( $P<0.01$ ), with the inclusion of the interaction term producing a statistically significant increase in  $R^2$  ( $P<0.01$ ). Taken together with the preceding analysis, these results demonstrate that government trust functions as a strong positive moderator in the relationship between citizen social capital and public service satisfaction, thereby supporting Hypothesis H9.

**Table 7**  
**Analysis of the Moderating Effect of Government Trust**

Variable Categories	Variable Abbreviation	SAT			BUR	
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Control	GEN	-0.050	-0.025	-0.028	-0.001	-0.018
Variables	AGE	-0.044	-0.014	-0.016	-0.101**	-0.099**



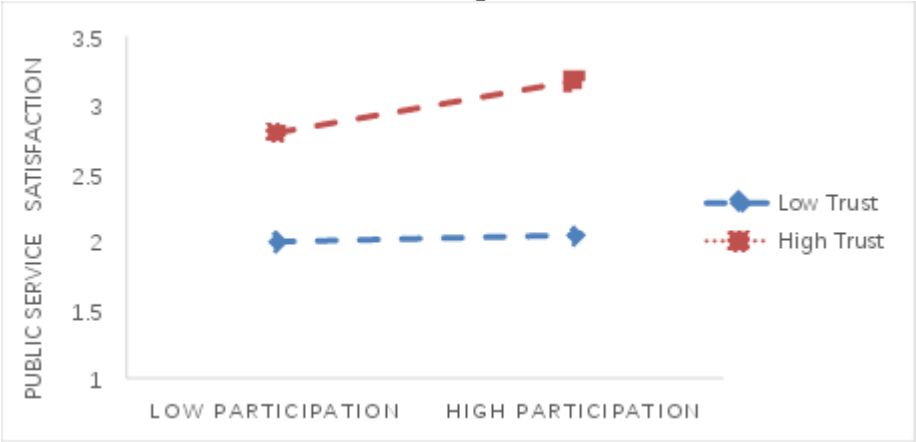
	CAR	- 0.085* *	-0.042	-0.034	0.028*	0.031
	EDU	-0.012	0.050	0.049	0.002	-0.010
	POL	-0.043	0.040	0.055	0.014	0.002
Independent Variable	PAR		0.106***		0.055	
	CAP			0.206***		-0.060
Moderating Variable	TRU		0.485***	0.410***	- 0.319***	- 0.261** *
Interaction Item	PAR×TRU		0.082***		0.093**	
Interaction Item	CAP×TRU			0.091***		-0.023
R <sup>2</sup>		0.125	0.552	0.572	0.329	
△R <sup>2</sup>		0.016	0.282	0.303	0.088	
F		2.117*	36.198***	40.187***	10.018** *	
△F			133.068** *	137.982** *	32.335** *	

Note: All regression coefficients are standardized coefficients, with \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* indicating that the correlation coefficients passed the significance tests at the 0.01, 0.05, and 0.10 levels, respectively.

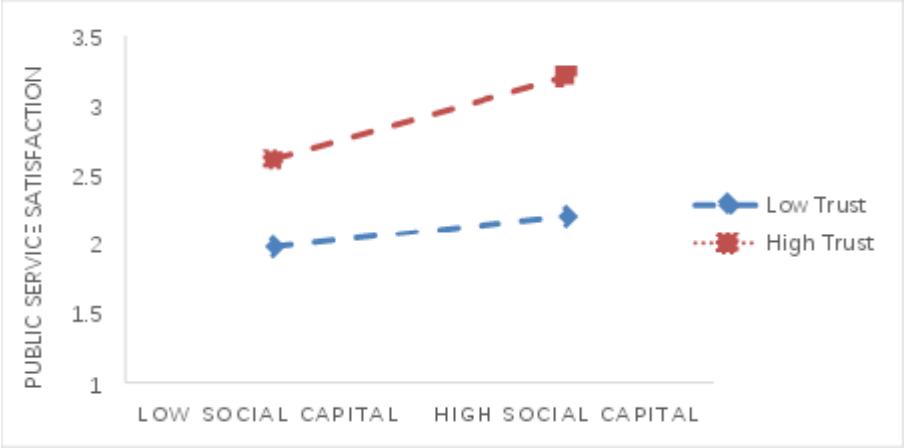
In addition, Table 7 presents the moderating role of government trust in the relationships between citizen participation and administrative burden, as well as between citizen social capital and administrative burden. The analysis indicates that the interaction between citizen participation and government trust exerts a significant positive effect on administrative burden ( $P < 0.05$ ), with the inclusion of the interaction term producing a statistically significant increase in  $R^2$  ( $P < 0.01$ ). These results confirm that government trust significantly moderates the relationship between citizen participation and administrative burden, thereby supporting Hypothesis H10. In contrast, the interaction between citizen social capital and government trust does not yield a significant effect on administrative burden ( $P > 0.1$ ). Hence, Hypothesis H11 is not supported.

To provide a clearer illustration of the moderating role of government trust, moderating effect plots are generated for Figures 2, 3, and 4 using the method recommended by Fang et al. (Fang et al., 2022). Figures 2 and 3 show that both citizen participation and social capital exert significant positive effects on public service satisfaction under conditions of both high and low government trust. However, the slope for the high-trust group is considerably steeper than that for the low-trust group, indicating that the positive effects of citizen participation and social capital on public service satisfaction are amplified when government trust is high. These findings suggest that the predictive effects of citizen participation and social capital on public service satisfaction strengthen progressively as government trust increases. Similarly, Figure 4 shows that the slope for the high-trust group is steeper than that for the low-trust group, indicating that the mitigating effect of citizen participation on administrative burden is more pronounced under high levels of government trust. Thus, the predictive effect of citizen participation on administrative burden becomes stronger as government trust rises.

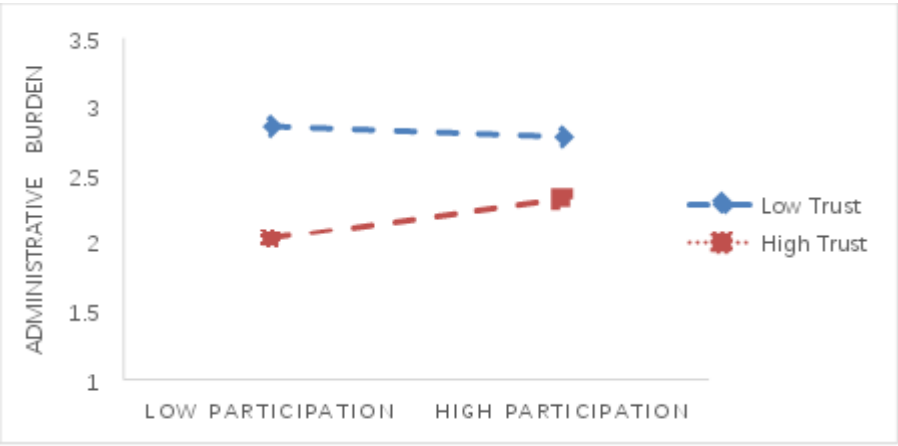
**Figure 2**  
**The mediating effect of government trust between citizen participation and satisfaction with public services**



**Figure 3**  
**The moderating effect of government trust on the relationship between citizen social capital and satisfaction with public services**

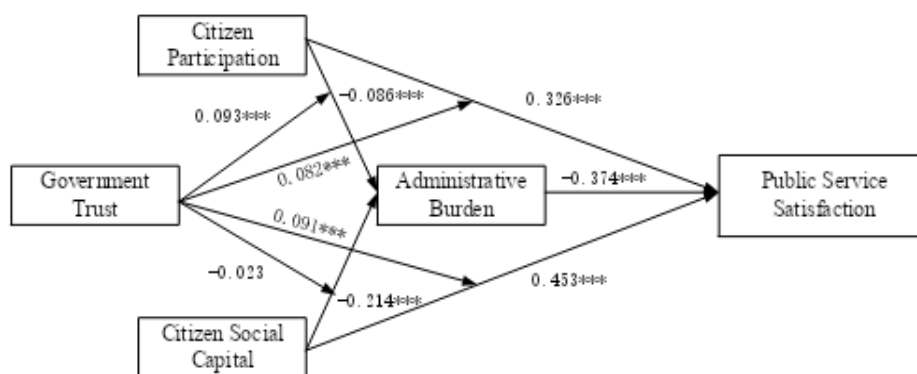


**Figure 4**  
**The moderating effect of government trust between citizen participation and administrative burden**



In conclusion, this study investigates citizen participation and social capital as independent variables and public service satisfaction as the dependent variable, while testing the mediating role of administrative burden and the moderating role of government trust. The analysis demonstrates that administrative burden mediates the relationship between social capital and public service satisfaction. Moreover, government trust is found to moderate not only the relationships between citizen participation and public service satisfaction and between social capital and public service satisfaction, but also the relationship between citizen participation and administrative burden. The integrated mechanism is illustrated in Figure 5.

**Figure 5**  
**Mechanism of citizen participation and citizen society capital on public service satisfaction**



## Conclusion and Discussion

### Conclusion

As a citizen-centered performance measure, public service satisfaction requires the unpacking of its underlying “black box” to achieve a precise understanding of its complexity and to guide more effective policymaking. In China, the long-standing input-oriented model of public service provision has relied heavily on input–output performance evaluations while neglecting citizen demand and satisfaction. As a result, substantial investment in basic public services has failed to generate correspondingly high levels of citizen satisfaction (Xie, 2017). With the evolution of policy environments and citizen preferences, public service satisfaction has become an increasingly central benchmark for assessing both the quality and effectiveness of public services. Drawing on survey data from Chinese citizens, this study investigates the determinants of public service satisfaction, constructs a theoretical model of its underlying mechanisms, and validates the model empirically. The principal conclusions are as follows:

Citizen participation and social capital exert clear and positive influences on satisfaction with basic public services. Participation is not merely symbolic; it makes service provision more responsive to actual needs. When citizens engage in decision-making, implementation, or oversight through multiple channels, information asymmetries are reduced, service relevance is strengthened, and perceptions of effectiveness are enhanced. Social capital represents access to and reliance on social resources and networks. Citizens with greater social capital tend to approach service challenges with stronger confidence and resilience, enabling them to manage unexpected situations more effectively and to form more favorable evaluations of public services overall.

Administrative burden operates as a mediating mechanism between social capital and satisfaction with public services. It encompasses the costs citizens incur in accessing

services; even when services are ultimately delivered, the cumbersome procedures diminish the user experience and depress satisfaction. Higher levels of social capital mitigate this burden: citizens with stronger networks and resources expend less time and effort to secure services, and the consequent reduction in administrative burden fosters more positive perceptions of service quality and raises satisfaction. This finding is consistent with prior research. Studies on the psychological costs of unemployment insurance claims in Denmark show that social capital alleviates claimants' administrative burdens (Döring&Madsen, 2022), while research on maternity leave applications in Pakistan demonstrates that individuals rely on economic, social, and cultural capital to offset such costs (Ayesha&Muhammad, 2020). Together, these results suggest that social capital enhances satisfaction with public services both directly and indirectly, by lowering the costs of access. In doing so, social capital reveals a latent pathway through which it shapes citizen evaluations of public service delivery.

Government trust serves as a significant moderator in the relationships between citizen participation and public service satisfaction, between social capital and public service satisfaction, and between citizen participation and administrative burden. Its moderating influence across these dynamics underscores its pivotal role in state–citizen relations, public service performance assessment, and democratic governance. In the participation–satisfaction nexus, higher levels of government trust reinforce citizens' confidence that their involvement produces tangible outcomes, heighten their sensitivity to the positive changes stemming from engagement, and ultimately enhance satisfaction. Within the link between social capital and public service satisfaction, government trust magnifies the beneficial effects of social networks, enabling citizens to project positive social experiences onto their evaluations of public services. In the participation–administrative burden relationship, stronger government trust mitigates doubt and resistance, fosters more active engagement in governance processes, and attenuates the adverse effects of administrative burden.

## Discussion

The descriptive results suggest that administrative burden does not mediate the relationship between citizen participation and public service satisfaction. From a theoretical perspective, however, citizen participation enables governments to detect service deficiencies, unmet needs, and critical bottlenecks, while simultaneously deepening citizens' understanding of governance. This process reduces administrative barriers in state–citizen interactions and ultimately enhances satisfaction with public services. To address this apparent inconsistency, participation levels are stratified, and the mediating role of administrative burden is reexamined. The analysis reveals that administrative burden exerts a mediating effect only within the high-participation group, indicating that such mediation emerges only when participation reaches a substantive level. In practice, limited citizen participation frequently exists at a superficial level, preventing individuals from genuinely participating in the fundamental elements of public services. Only substantial citizen participation may effectively compel the government to reassess irrational elements of public service processes, simplify procedures from the outset, eliminate superfluous steps, and consequently diminish administrative burdens.

Government trust at the environmental level exerts a foundational influence on public service satisfaction. Citizens' public service satisfaction is not merely contingent upon objective assessments or subjective perceptions of service outcomes, it also encompasses factors such as the degree of citizen participation, the application of social

capital, and the alleviation of administrative burdens. Within this context, government trust serves a pivotal regulatory function. When citizens possess a high degree of trust in the government, they are more inclined to view deficiencies in public service processes positively; conversely, low government trust exacerbates the adverse effects of service shortcomings, leading to potential misinterpretations of service quality, even when it meets established standards, due to "preconceived distrust" or "stereotype effects." This subjective filter, arising from variations in governmental trust at the environmental level, results in markedly varied satisfaction evaluations of public services of identical quality among groups with differing trust levels.

The mechanisms affecting public service satisfaction are complex, diverse, and multilayer, arising from the interplay and dynamic interaction of individual and environmental elements. From an individual standpoint, citizen participation positively impacts public service satisfaction by articulating demands and fostering a sense of involvement, whereas citizen social capital leverages relational networks and resource advantages to improve individual public service experiences. The administrative burden at the environmental level and public trust collectively influences the intricate dynamics of public service satisfaction, preventing a reductionist evaluation that equates satisfaction solely with service outcomes, and underscoring the critical significance of satisfaction evaluation in democratic governance.

### **Research Limitations and Prospects**

This study, situated within the Chinese setting, has conducted valuable investigations into public service satisfaction; nonetheless, it possesses several shortcomings that require enhancement and supplementation in subsequent research. First, the accuracy of measuring public service satisfaction requires enhancement. Public service satisfaction serves as a multifaceted evaluation metric encompassing factors such as service accessibility, equity, and sustainability. Simplified measurements of public service satisfaction in various sectors may inadequately reflect the intricate sentiments of citizens. Future studies may implement a multi-dimensional measurement strategy to improve accuracy. Second, the framework of variables affecting public service satisfaction requires enhancement. Current research predominantly emphasizes factors such as citizen participation, social capital, administrative encumbrance, and government trust. Nonetheless, in practical situations, the influence of additional variables such as policy transparency, service efficiency, and perceptions of justice has not been adequately examined or substantiated. Continuously broadening the array of factors is crucial for a full analysis of the mechanisms influencing public service satisfaction. Ultimately, research has inadequately examined the influence of geographical variation on public service satisfaction. Various regions display significant gaps in economic development, provisioning capacities, and governance frameworks, potentially resulting in varied patterns of citizen satisfaction views and the rationale behind their formation. Future study should enhance regional comparative studies to thoroughly elucidate the factors contributing to the varying levels of public service satisfaction across areas.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the conduct, results, or publication of this research.



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