

# The role and functions of government public relations. Lessons from public perceptions of government



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**ABSTRACT:** One of the questions to be addressed in public relations is that of how to measure the stakeholders' perceptions of an organization. This paper applies this debate to government public relations: it analyzes public perceptions of the Spanish national government performance and its implications for governmental public relations. Results of a regression analysis show that in assessing governments, citizens are not only influenced by ideology but they also look at environmental conditions; other public policies (such as education and employment) load higher than economy in explaining overall government performance; and evaluation of different public policies shows that citizens attribute responsibilities exonerating the government from what they think is not of its responsibility or is out of its control. Based on these results, this research finally highlights the importance of understanding what drives the public image of governments and deals with some implications in the conceptualization and practice of government public relations.

**KEYWORDS:** government public relations, government communication, government and public opinion, government performance, evaluation of public relations



## **FUNCTIONS OF GOVERNMENT PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ITS EVALUATION**

Governmental public relations have been inspired by Grunig's models of PR and, particularly, by the concept of symmetrical communication between organizations and publics (Gregory, 2006; Fisher & Horsley, 2007), a concept which, with its relationships with the notion of excellence (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; J.E. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992; Grunig, 2001), has constituted the major framework that has guided public relations scholarship for the past 30 years (Botan & Hazleton, 2006, p. 6). Mutual benefit, mutual understanding, win-win mixed motivated communication, etc. are concepts used to denominate purposes of organizational public relations.

Whether governments can establish symmetrical relationships with their publics is an issue at stake; Grunig in cooperation with Jaatinen (1999) acknowledges



to these authors, recent government modernization initiatives create great expectations. But if great expectations are only rhetoric or born out of the will for political profiling, the outcomes of modernization could even be worse than the present situation. The creation of new expectations has to be accompanied with performance matching these expectations. Another important element for evaluation of government performance has to do with how people attribute responsibilities. In public issues, there is the “cause responsibility” (which determines who or what is the origin of the problem) and the “responsibility for problem handling” (which determines who or what has the capacity and competence to solve the problem) (Weiner, 1985).

This paper explores Spanish citizens’ assessments of government performance attempting to speculate about lessons to be taken for government public relations.

### **CURRENT DEBATES ON CITIZENS’ EVALUATION OF GOVERNMENTS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT PUBLIC RELATIONS**

One of the current debates on citizens’ evaluation of governments refers to the “public presidency,” a notion related to the “rhetorical presidency” (Tulis, 1987) which holds that since presidents need to increase their personal popularity as measured by public opinion polls, they “go public,” getting involved in a “permanent campaign.” Once in power, presidents need to keep the campaigning tools; and since they rely on public support as measured through public opinion polls, they need to extend the rhetorical presidency. As a consequence, the “public presidency” faces outward: the president holds talks and travels around the country looking for support and generating public approval (Blumenthal, 1980; Edwards, 1983; Kavanagh, 1996; Ornstein & Mann, 2000; Canel, 2006). Another consequence of the “public presidency” is the development of a sophisticated and routinized “public opinion apparatus,” as well as a shift from polling the public’s policy preferences to polling its non-policy evaluations related to leaders’ personal image and appeal (Jacobs & Burns, 2004). What makes the public presidency *public*, therefore, is its systematic monitoring of the attitudes of the mass public. In sum, the notion of “public presidency” implies criticism towards presidential and governmental public relations.

But against those who follow the theory of public presidency, there are those who look with scepticism at the capacity of politicians to manage public perceptions (Edwards, 2003), or to use polls in their own way (Jacobs & Burns, 2004). As Jacobs and Burns argue, the capabilities and scope of the presidential polling apparatus to manipulate public opinion are certainly complex, since several factors impede presidential efforts: presidents are not alone in practicing polls and going public; public opinion is not passive receptacle for the crafted messages of presidents; and presidents are constrained by the norms and institutional rules of popular sovereignty.

In this debate there are authors that go further, stating that evaluating is the only way for a government to get the public’s feedback (Jacobs & Burns, 2004) and to give

people a higher scrutiny over the government (Rimmerman, 1991). Evaluation enables to establish an “important connection between the citizenry, presidential promises, accountability, and presidential performance, measured according to public opinion polls as well as policy results” (Rimmerman, 1991, p. 234). Some authors point out that the theoretical and normative significance of the public presidency lies in the two-way relationship that is established between the president and the mass public: evaluation can link the public-talking and the public-listening dimension of the presidency (Jacobs & Burns, 2004). In sum, looking for government evaluation in the polls is neither good nor wrong; it all depends on what the results of the evaluations are used for.

The second debate has to do with the theory of the “electoral cycle” proposed by Mueller (1970; 1973). The starting point for this theory is the fact that every president except Eisenhower has left office less popular than when entering. All presidents’ popularity — Mueller states — follows a common and repeated cycle; an autonomous cyclical trend between elections that takes the form of a steady decline in government popularity after some time following the general election, followed by a steady increase in the immediate time preceding the next general election. In other words, presidents become less popular, but eventually the decline bottoms out and their popularity may even improve, although not to its former high level. Accounts for this cycle can be found in the political allegiances of all voters shifting in favour of the government as the election approaches, and away from the government as the election recedes. The popularity cycle could be also related to what has been termed the “honey moon periods” that result from an overwhelmingly positive balance of media coverage at the beginning of a term as most elites tend to offer little criticism, withholding judgment until the president begins to take controversial actions. Once this happens, opponents offer criticism, media coverage become more negative, and public support falls as a result.

In sum, governments’ popularity — according to the theory of “electoral cycle” — is a cycle which is autonomous and independent of what the government actually does (its performance with its achievements and failures); and it is also independent of environmental conditions like the economic and the political situation. It is even independent of the way governments handle difficult situations like crises, scandals, catastrophes or invasions. Governments’ popularity would be explained then by *inertial variables*, those referring to party identification and allegiance.

But works with more elaborated methodologies have led several authors to reject the electoral cycle theory as an approach to interpret the public image of governments (Stimson, 1976; Kernell, 1978; Ostrom & Simon, 1985, 1988, 1989; Chanley, Rudolph & Rahn, 2000; Brace & Hinckley, 2006). These authors reject Mueller’s novel theory of popularity for conceptual and methodological reasons and return to a more realistic view of presidential popularity. It happens — these authors point out — that not all leaders and governments enjoy the same popularity rates; and throughout periods in between elections, fluctuations can be located in observable events and conditions present in the political environment. Popular-

ity — the conclusion of these works is — is related to real events and conditions, and responds to environmental change (Kernell, 1978). Popularity, in sum, is not autonomous from but responds to environmental forces, which means that it is both experiential and incremental.

What are the implications of these debates for the conceptualization and practice of government public relations?

As has been argued elsewhere (Canel, 2007), rejecting the theory of the electoral cycle implies, first, that public evaluations of government and leaders fluctuate according to what happens. When evaluating government performance, people look at their environment, assessing the political and economic conditions, as well as the way governments handle problems. The public evaluates current and past conditions, punishing or rewarding the government accordingly. Popularity is not only inertial (influenced by party identification) but also experiential (influenced by how people see the economic and political situation).

Rejecting the theory of the electoral cycle casts scepticism on the capacity of leaders and governments to manage public perceptions. They are less able to appeal to party identification, less able to count on political parties to mobilize voters. As a consequence, as Kernell argues, holding governments and leaders responsible for outcomes prompts them to engage in problem solving (Kernell, 1978, p. 515); the popularity of issues rather than the popularity of the leaders is central (Canes-Wrone, 2004). But since the public now obtains most of its information about politics from the mass media, the media stand as an intervening fore between presidents and the public. Governments, then, need to communicate public policies and manage public expectations; but not without cost, since unfulfilled high expectations could generate disillusion and public deception. Therefore, governments have to implement public relations in order to build realistic and appropriate expectations.

## METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

How do Spanish people assess government performance? Following conventional practice (Norpoth, 1984; Citrin & Green, 1986; Ostrom & Simon, 1988; Edwards, Mitchell & Welch, 1995; Gronke & Newman, 1999; Gronke & Newman, 2003; Newman, 2004), we conducted individual studies comparing public perceptions of government for different times (from 1982 to 2006). We took data from CIS *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* — which is called the CIS barometer, in which government performance is assessed every three months — for the third year of each government (two for Felipe Gonzalez's government — Socialist Party, two for José María Aznar's government — Popular Party — and one for José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's — again, Socialist Party).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Data references are the following: for the Felipe González's government (that of 1989–1993), the CIS Barometer of October 1992 was used (study number 2024); for the last government of the



the political situation. Therefore, while political allegiances explain part of the dependent variable, experiential variables are not unimportant. If part of the explanation is to be looked for in environmental conditions, public perceptions on public policies should not load unimportant.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are shown in Table 1. Regression coefficients (both nonstandardized and standardized) for each year are distributed in columns. First, figures for inertial variables are shown; second, figures for sociodemographic (SES) variables; and finally, at the bottom of the table, regression coefficients for evaluations of the political and economic situation are shown.

The top part of the table represents characteristics of each model. As common characteristics to all regression equations (meaning — to all years) we would mention the following:

For all years but 1992 regressions explain almost half of the variance (see figures for adjusted R<sup>2</sup>), a percentage that could be taken as important, following conventional practice in these studies.

Second, all regressions are statistically highly significant (0.000).

Let us now discuss results, going first through the ideological variables and second through variables that measure perceptions of environmental conditions.

### The influence of inertial variables on public evaluations of government performance

The results confirm the hypothesis. First, looking at standardized regression coefficients (since first we are not comparing the years but looking at each regression equation in itself), the inertial variables (ideological scale and party identification) explain some of the variances of government performance evaluation: all regression coefficients are statistically significant; for all cases coefficients are high, party identification being higher than the ideology scale. The direction of the coefficients behaves as expected: the closer the respondent is to party in the government, the higher he/she evaluates government performance. Referring to the ideological scale, when the Socialist Party is in the government, the coefficient is negative (since it is closer to 1 — which is the value that represents left-wing in the scale — than to 10); and when the Popular Party is in the government, there is a positive coefficient (since it is closer to 10 — which is the value that represents the right-wing extreme of the scale — than to 1).

Second, sociodemographic variables do not explain much: gender is not statistically significant in any case (and coefficients are very low); and although age is statistically significant in October 1992 and in March 1995, regression coefficients are low (implying that the older the respondents, the higher evaluation of government performance). Therefore, results for sociodemographics do not deserve much



comment but to confirm for the Spanish case what has been found for studies on public perceptions of government in other countries: sociodemographics do not explain much about public perceptions of government performance.

Third, and again according to the hypothesis, regression coefficients for experiential variables are not unimportant. With high statistical significance for all cases, coefficient for the evaluation of the political situation for different years amounts to .32, .37, .36 and .41 (there is no data for October 1992); and coefficient for the evaluation of the economic situation amounts to .44, .22, .19, .13, .07. It is interesting to find that even coefficients for the perception of the political situation are higher than coefficients for the ideological variables in all cases. It is not the same with the coefficients for the economic situation; but still, this coefficient is higher than party identification in 1992 and higher than the coefficient for the ideology scale in half of the measured years (1992, 1995 and 1999).

In sum, data confirms the hypothesis: if ideological (and not sociodemographic) variables are important, experiential variables are not unimportant; the latter are even more important than the ideological variables in some cases.

If compared across the years (and therefore looking now at nonstandardized coefficients), a trend is not observable, but each year — with each government and leader — behaves differently.

### **The influence of experiential variables on public perceptions of government performance**

Data gathered in Table 1 guides our examination of the dependent variable to what is experiential, inertial variables being only part of the explanation, it is the perceptions of the environment — what happens — that we need to attend to. As has been mentioned, literature distinguishes between “what happens” in public policies and “what happens” when governments have to deal with crises or unexpected events. Research concludes that public policies affect government approval (Bosch, Díaz & Riba 1999; Newman, 2004): when people are happy with the political and economic situation, they are also satisfied with the government.

One of the public policies that the most affect public perceptions of government is the economic policy. Classical theory on economic vote (according to which citizens respond both to past and coming events in the economy) assumes that people hold the government responsible for evolution of the economic situation. A high number of empirical studies confirm this theory: economic conditions and perceptions of them powerfully affect public evaluations of government performance (Hibbs & Fassbender, 1981; Citrin & Green, 1986; Rose, 1991; Nadeau, Niemi & Fan, 1999; Chanley, Rudolph & Rahn 2000; Fraile, 2002; Gronke & Newman, 2003; Brace & Hinckley, 2006). But some studies have found that perceptions of the political and economic environment, not just objective indicators, drive approval, and those perceptions not always perfectly follow objective indicators (Nadeau, Niemi & Fan, 1999).



For present research we used the January 2006 CIS barometer which, apart from the variables already dealt with above, includes items for evaluation of government performance in different public policies. Again, for the dependent variable we took government performance, called here *overall government performance*; the independent variables were citizens' assessments of government performance in different areas. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The effects of government performance in public policies on overall government performance regression coefficients

Model characteristics: R2 adjusted 0.60; Sig 0.000; Durbin–Watson 1.9		
Independent variables: assessment of government public policies	Dependent variable: overall government performance	
Economy	.07	(**)
Employment	.17	(***)
Housing	.001	
Education	.1	(***)
Health	-.01	
Social policies	.06	(*)
Environment	-.03	
Immigration	.007	
Security	.006	
Terrorism	.19	(***)
European Union	.07	(**)
Foreign policy	.18	(***)

(\*)  $p < 0.10$ ; (\*\*)  $p < 0.01$ ; (\*\*\*)  $p < 0.001$ .

Figures for the model (shown at the top of the table) show that the model, which explains 60% of the variance of the dependent variable, is statistically highly significant (0.000).

Referring to regression coefficients, it can be seen, first, that the economic policy loads lower than other public policies: see, for instance, regression coefficient for employment (.17), education (.1), terrorism (.19) or foreign policy (.18) as compared to economy (.07); second, that different loading could be related to different competencies of central government: in general terms, public policies with higher coefficients are those with outcomes that are more attributable to the national central government than to regional or local governments (see coefficients for terrorism .19, employment .17 and foreign policy .18 as compared to coefficients for health -.01, education .1 and security .006, all of the latter being regional or local policies). These results could confirm what Sánchez-Cuenca and Barreiro concluded for previous works: citizens hold government responsible for the public

policies that are of the governments' power. In other words: in assessing government performance, citizens distinguish between different layers of competences, exonerating the government from what is not of its competence. This exonerative effect could also account for other figures in present research: security (which only loads .006 and with no statistical significance) could be attributed to those who cause insecurity (the "cause responsibility" overpasses the "treatment responsibility," following Weiner's (1985) terminology mentioned above); and economy (.07) could be attributed to causes that are under governmental control, like an international crisis.

## CONCLUSIONS

Exploring people's assessments of government performance helps analyzing what drives the public image of governments and hence it also helps conceptualizing the role of government public relations.

First, exploration of citizens perceptions of the last two of Felipe González's governments, the two of José María Aznar's and the first of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's allows to conclude that, in assessing governments, Spanish people are not only influenced by ideology but they also look at environmental conditions. Results have shown that inertial variables (both ideology and party identification) do not hold the key to the ups and downs of public perceptions of government performance; perceptions of the political and economic situation are also shown to be important.

Second, results show also that the economy does not hold the key either; other public policies (such as education and employment) load higher than economy in explaining overall government performance. Evaluation of different public policies shows that citizens attribute responsibilities exonerating the government from what they think is not of its responsibility or is out of its control.

These results continue to press the point that the public evaluates current and past conditions punishing or rewarding the government accordingly.

The influence that perceptions of environmental conditions and of public policies have on government performance approval highlights the importance of understanding what drives the public image of the government, and leads to some implications in the conceptualization and practice of government public relations.

First, the fact that regular citizens' evaluations of government's job performance are rooted in conditions of the economic and political situation should enhance the quality of government performance. Since data shows that the public holds the government responsible, governments should be encouraged to engage in active problem solving. Governments must deal with problems; and government communication strategy should tackle public policies.

Second, since when assessing government performance citizens are aware of who is responsible for what, governments have to tailor communication to contextualize citizens in different competences and governmental layers. Governments

would be more fairly assessed if citizens knew what they can demand of them. In doing so, governments should also (with communication and public relations) build realistic and appropriate expectations.

Third, governments have to have in mind that their public image is a combination of what “they tell people they do” with what “they really do.” Citizens are concerned with public policies. And there are outcomes of public policies which citizens can assess directly (citizens, for instance, can assess the quality of public services such as health and education). Therefore, as other studies for Spanish local governments have argued (Canel et al., 2010, June), governments should not communicate independently of what they really do; and public relations should keep the government’s message in harmony with realities that message refers to.

In the end, it appears that governments are neither entirely at the mercy of outside forces nor in total command of their approval. Data shown in this research lead to the shaping of one of the functions of governmental public relations: if long-standing relationships with the people are to be the aim of governmental communication, governments should track public opinion looking for a better calibration of the gaps between their messages and people’s perceptions. Only by affording these gaps long-standing relationships will be established and endured.

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