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Public perceptions of cross-sector collaboration and sector bias: evidence from a survey experiment

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ABSTRACT
In recent years, public service delivery models have changed to include non-state actors and cross-sector collaboration as service providers. Using a survey experiment, we investigate if service providers' sector (including single-sector and cross-sector providers) and their performance information shape public perceptions of their legitimacy. We find that cross-sector collaboration does not produce legitimacy gains over traditional public service provision. While providers' sector has overall little impact on legitimacy perceptions, we find an anti-for-profit sector bias regarding value-laden aspects of perceived legitimacy. Additionally, performance information affects legitimacy perceptions. These findings have implications for legitimacy building in contemporary governance settings.

Introduction

Over the last several decades, public service delivery models have undergone reforms based on ideas associated with New Public Management and public value governance (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014). Public agencies have adopted NPM-inspired reforms such as privatization and the contracting of services to non-state actors such as for-profit or non-profit organizations (Hood 1991). Some essential services, which have traditionally been perceived as 'public' and provided by governments alone, are now provided by various actors from the public, for-profit and non-profit sectors. In addition, governance arrangements have transformed from unilateral, bureaucratic models to multilateral, participatory and collaborative ones (Ansell and Gash 2008; Bryson, Crosby, and Middleton Stone 2015; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012). Actors from different organizations and sectors now collectively participate in public decision-making and policy implementation. This cross-sector participation is characteristic of an emerging trend known as collaborative governance (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015). Some public services are now delivered via partnerships across sectors

and organizational boundaries. *Who* provides public services has changed and diversified.

A large and growing body of literature has suggested that these emerging public service models produce better outcomes by improving efficiency, effectiveness, and public value (e.g. Bingham and O'Leary 2008; Bryson, Crosby, and Middleton Stone 2015; Elkomy, Cookson, and Jones 2019; Hodge 2018; Page et al. 2015). However, relatively little scholarly work has investigated public attitudes and perceptions towards these emerging public service delivery models and new types of service providers – particularly cross-sector collaborative arrangements to provide public services. It is often assumed that collaborative governance leads to more favourable public perceptions because citizens expect it to outperform traditional government models and enhance democratic values such as inclusiveness and responsiveness (Cain et al. 2021; Sørensen and Torfing 2009). However, this theory remains speculative, and there is little empirical evidence to this effect. Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) have noted that 'the normative appeal of collaborating across boundaries to solve complex public problems or deliver public goods and services may have slowed the needed scrutiny of these rapidly proliferating forms of governance' (719). Moreover, little is known about the role of sector bias in perceptions of cross-sector collaborations. Some studies have identified sector biases, such as an anti–public sector bias (Marvel 2015, 2016) or positive attitudes towards non-profits (Drevs, Tscheulin, and Lindenmeier 2014; Handy et al. 2010). However, the literature has not yet provided a full picture of the public's view of service providers from the three different sectors – public, for-profit, and non-profit – and how it affects their perceptions of cross-sector governing arrangements. This gap is currently an obstacle to a thorough understanding of the perceived legitimacy of collaborative governance.

Citizens' perceptions of public service providers have crucial implications for their support of service delivery programmes and their satisfaction with the services they receive (Riccucci and Van Ryzin 2017; Tyler 2006). These perceptions may even affect citizens' trust in government, which in turn can have behavioural consequences for their civic engagement and citizenship, tax compliance, and political participation. For example, James and Jilke (2020) report that public services provided by private firms reduce citizens' willingness to coproduce. How do participatory and inclusive governance models change public perceptions and behaviours? Given the recent changes to governance models and historically low public trust in government in the U.S. (Pew Research Center 2022) and in other countries (Haerpfer et al. 2022), it is imperative to understand what drives citizens' perceptions of emerging governance models that incorporate non-state actors and cross-sector collaboration.

This research seeks to address an important gap in our understanding of public perceptions of governance by answering the following questions: *How do citizens perceive cross-sector collaboration compared with traditional single-sector service delivery models? Does sector bias influence perceptions of cross-sector collaboration or service providers from different sectors? What drives public perceptions of cross-sector collaboration?* To answer these questions, we present evidence from a large-scale online experiment conducted with U.S. citizens. In the experiment, respondents were provided descriptions of social service providers that varied across two dimensions: sector and performance. We examined if perceptions of the legitimacy of the service providers were influenced by their sector (including single-sector and cross-sector providers) and by information about their performance.

This study's main contributions are two-fold. First, it expands the existing literature on public perceptions of service providers by considering cross-sector collaborative arrangements. Previous studies have compared citizens' evaluations of single-sector providers: public, for-profit, and non-profit organizations (Meier and An 2020; Meier et al. 2022). Building on them, this study empirically tests the commonly held assumption in the collaborative governance literature that cross-sector providers are perceived as more legitimate than single-sector providers, particularly public agencies. Secondly, this study applies the notion of sector bias to emerging cross-sector contexts and examines if perceptions of providers' legitimacy vary along with the sectoral composition of these collaborative arrangements. To our knowledge, this study is one of the first scholarly attempts to explore both the perceived legitimacy of collaborative governance models compared with single-sector public service delivery models and sector bias in the context of cross-sector collaboration. Our findings challenge the assumption in the literature that collaborative governance produces legitimacy gains and provide important implications for legitimacy building in contemporary governance settings. We elaborate these points in the proceeding sections.

Legitimacy perceptions

Public views of government have long been a subject of great interest in public administration and related fields. While researchers have examined various aspects of public perceptions of government, such as trust in government (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2014; Porumbescu 2017), subjective performance measures (Boyne et al. 2006), and bureaucratic reputations (Lee and Van Ryzin 2019; Overman, Busuioc, and Wood 2020), perceived legitimacy is widely used as an umbrella concept that captures a wide range of these perceptions. Legitimacy refers to 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (Suchman 1995, 574; see also Tyler 2006). While the management literature has identified different types of organizational legitimacy,[1] research on bureaucratic legitimacy has focused on citizens' perceptions of public agencies, specifically in terms of the extent to which they reflect desirable properties of public organizations. These properties include core public values such as efficiency, effectiveness, fairness, and trustworthiness (de Fine Licht et al. 2014; Jacobs and Kaufmann 2021; Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Lavena 2014; Roch, Elsayed, and Edwards 2018).

Bureaucratic legitimacy has been construed as an important factor in garnering public support for government policies, citizens' voluntary compliance and engagement in governance processes, and policy outcomes (Riccucci and Van Ryzin 2017; Schmidt 2013; Tyler 2006). The perceived legitimacy of government regulators and public agencies in traditional government settings, where governments are the sole providers of public services, has received much attention in the literature. However, few studies have examined perceptions of the legitimacy of emerging governance models where non-state actors provide public services in lieu of or in collaboration with government (Lee and Esteve 2022; Melnychuk and Loë 2020).

To fill this gap in the literature, we focus on different service providers that may shape public perceptions of them. Specifically, we compare public perceptions of single-sector and cross-sector service providers and also differentiate among cross-sector collaborations whose composition varies in terms of participants' sectors. First,

we compare single-sector providers from the different sectors – public, for-profit, and non-profit. We draw on the literature on sector bias, which posits that citizens rely on sector as a heuristic to make judgements about organizations (Drevs, Tscheulin, and Lindenmeier 2014; James et al. 2016; Marvel and Girth 2016). Based on our understanding of public perceptions of service providers from the three different sectors, we develop hypotheses as to the public's views of different cross-sector collaborations. We specifically focus on the sectors involved in these collaborations and explore the effects of sector tags in collaborative settings. However, the effects of sector may change when additional information is available, such as information about a provider's performance (Meier et al. 2022; Woodhouse, Belardinelli, and Bertelli 2022; Xu 2020). Performance information is widely considered an important factor in behavioural public administration research (e.g. Baekgaard 2015). We thus test the effect of performance information on legitimacy perceptions across service delivery models. By examining the effects of both sector and performance, we attempt to illuminate the basis for citizens' legitimacy perceptions of emerging service delivery models. In the following section, we discuss the theoretical background for our hypotheses.

Sector bias and cross-sector collaboration

Single-sector provider: sector bias

While distinguishing organizations as public, for-profit, or non-profit is not straightforward due to blurring of the boundaries between sectors (Rainey, Fernandez, and Malatesta 2021), individuals have different sets of assumptions and beliefs about each of the three sectors (Drevs, Tscheulin, and Lindenmeier 2014; Marvel 2015; Schlesinger, Mitchell, and Gray 2004). People have certain images of sectors and sector stereotypes that they use as heuristics when evaluating an organization (Peiffer et al. 2018; Xu 2020). Researchers have examined the sources of these perceptions. Personal experiences, long-term beliefs about certain institutions, and political ideology may inform perceptions of organizations across sectors (Hvidman and Andersen 2016; Marvel 2015). Public discourse and media reporting on key institutions or agencies in society may also contribute to public attitudes towards them (Goodsell 2014).

Public views of government organizations have attracted a great deal of attention in the public management literature. Marvel (2015) coined the term 'anti–public sector bias', defined as '(1) the expression of negative attitudes in the absence of supporting evidence – that is, evidence that public sector organizations or employees perform poorly; or (2) the expression of negative attitudes in the presence of countervailing evidence – that is, evidence that public sector organizations or employees perform well' (210). Marvel (2015, 2016) has also empirically validated anti–public sector bias in the US context. Research on anti–public sector bias suggests that negative views of government organizations may not be attributable to a lack of information (e.g. a lack of positive performance information): citizens may perceive public organizations as ineffective and wasteful regardless of evidence about their actual performance.

Previous studies have compared citizens' general perceptions of public versus for-profit organizations. Based on a survey experiment in Denmark, Hvidman and Andersen (2016) have suggested that public perceptions of public and private hospitals vary across multiple dimensions of performance, with citizens expressing negative views of public hospitals. While this finding could not be replicated by Meier et al.

(2019) in a U.S. context, the existing literature has consistently identified negative perceptions of public institutions (Hvidman 2019; Marvel 2015, 2016; van Slyke and Roch 2004). These studies suggest that individuals associate government organizations with inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and inflexibility, which may influence their evaluation of the services provided by government organizations.

Relatively few studies have compared public perceptions of government to those of non-profit organizations. Van Slyke and Roch (2004) have found that citizens are more likely to incorrectly identify a service provider as a government agency when they are dissatisfied with its services. This may suggest that non-profits are generally viewed as providing sufficient quality and better service experiences than government. This is supported by the non-profit management literature, which suggests that individuals have positive views of non-profits in terms of their trustworthiness, fairness, comfort, and warmth (Drevs, Tscheulin, and Lindenmeier 2014; Handy et al. 2010; Schlesinger, Mitchell, and Gray 2004).

Theories explaining the existence of non-profits are helpful in understanding public views of non-profits compared with their views towards other organizational forms. Contract failure theory, a widely cited theory advanced by Hansmann (1980), posits that non-profits were created in response to consumers' inability to monitor for-profit producers. This is a form of market failure, and it has led individuals to perceive non-profits as trustworthy and reliable (Permut 1981). Supporting the claims of contract failure theory, Handy et al. (2010) have found that non-profits are widely perceived as more trustworthy than for-profits and government organizations (see also AbouAssi et al. 2019; Schlesinger, Mitchell, and Gray 2004). Studies have also suggested that profit-seeking motives are considered greedy and socially immoral, leading to negative perceptions of for-profit organizations (Lee et al. 2017; Xu 2020). Research has suggested that non-profits' reputations, which include their benevolent missions, action on charitable issues, and provision of social services, may have contributed to positive perceptions of non-profits, particularly in the U.S.[2]

While the existing literature provides insights into public perceptions of service providers from different sectors, studies have typically compared only two sectors at a time. Only a few have explored perceptions of all three sectors – public, for-profit, and non-profit – in a single study. Meier and An (2020) investigated citizens' perceptions of the performance of hospitals from different sectors and found no significant sector biases. However, another survey experiment by Meier et al. (2022) that examined U.S. citizens' perceptions of nursing homes from each of the three sectors found an anti–for-profit sector bias and positive perceptions of non-profits. Interestingly, these sector biases were weakened when easily interpretable performance data were made available.

We drew on the above studies that have examined public perceptions of public, for-profit, and non-profit organizations to develop our hypothesis about public perceptions of different sectors. First, research on anti–public sector bias has led us to expect that services provided by public organizations will be perceived less favourably and as lacking in legitimacy compared with those provided by for-profit or non-profit organizations. Research has suggested that public organizations are viewed as inferior to both for-profit and non-profit organizations (Hvidman and Andersen 2016; Marvel 2015; van Slyke and Roch 2004). Second, contract failure theory and empirical studies that have identified positive views of non-profits (Drevs, Tscheulin, and Lindenmeier 2014; Handy et al. 2010; Schlesinger, Mitchell, and Gray 2004) suggest that non-profits

will be perceived as more legitimate than for-profit organizations. Together, these findings suggest the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *Nonprofit service providers will be rated highest on perceived legitimacy, followed by for-profit and then public providers.*

Cross-sector collaboration

Governance models for public decision-making and service delivery have shifted from unilateral and bureaucratic settings towards collaborative and participatory governance arrangements (Ansell and Gash 2008; Lee and Ospina 2022). This is reflected in the definition of cross-sector collaboration provided by Bryson et al. (2015): 'the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately' (pp. 648). This differs from contractual relationships or tacit cooperation (see Gazley and Brudney 2007). While different terms are used, such as new governance (Bingham, Nabatchi, and O'Leary 2005), collaborative public management (Agranoff and McGuire 2003), or collaborative governance regimes (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015), together they highlight the inclusion of non-state actors in governance processes.

Cross-sector collaboration involves a variety of stakeholders from public, for-profit, and non-profit organizations and civil society. The underlying assumption is that actors from different organizations and sectors possess distinct resources and capabilities that contribute to collaborative outcomes (Andrews and Entwistle 2010). While governments often lack the needed resources or insights to address wicked problems, their partnerships with other sectors have potentials to produce solutions and innovations. Bryson et al. (2006) have highlighted the role of sector failure as a driving factor in the formation of inter-organizational collaborations. They explain that when single-sector efforts fail to address a public problem, a cross-sector solution is sought and developed. This implies that public services delivered via cross-sector collaboration can achieve better outcomes than single-sector efforts when it comes to efficiency, effectiveness, equity, and innovation, which can inform citizens' legitimacy perceptions (Andrews and Entwistle 2010; Lee and Esteve 2022).

In addition to the substantive outcomes of collaboration, its 'democracy-enhancing' characteristics have the potential to change public perceptions and generate legitimacy. Contrary to traditional bureaucratic governance models that have suffered a loss of legitimacy, cross-sector collaboration increases the participation and engagement of non-state actors (Hui and Smith 2022; Sørensen and Torfing 2009). Not only bureaucrats but also business firms, non-profit organizations, and ordinary citizens can participate in public decision-making and service delivery processes. This reflects the democratic values of inclusiveness and responsiveness (Sørensen et al. 2020). A pluralist perspective in the political theory also supports the view that collaborative governance enhances public assessments of governance (see Cain et al. 2021). In a recently developed theoretical framework, Dupuy and Defacqz (2022) suggest that collaborative governance can improve the perceived legitimacy of the state and the bureaucracy among participating citizens

when it involves deliberate and active inclusion of citizens, an open and inclusive collaborative process, and thick communication and deliberation. Institutional approaches to collaboration also suggest that collaboration is viewed as desirable and helps organizations gain legitimacy (Gazley and Brudney 2007; Lotia and Hardy 2009).

Based on this literature, we assume that cross-sector collaboration improves legitimacy outcomes.[3] For example, compared with social service delivery by the government alone, cross-sector collaborative delivery models will be more likely to be perceived as legitimate based on the expected benefits of collaborative outcomes and democratic values. While there is a notable paucity of empirical research that investigates the effect of cross-sector collaboration on perceived legitimacy in the context of public services (Melnychuk and Loë 2020), a recent study by Woodhouse et al. (2022) showed that citizens prefer a combined public–private infrastructure delivery mode to service delivery by the government alone. In a survey experiment with a representative sample from the U.S., Hui and Smith (2022) also found that collaborative governance arrangements that incorporate private stakeholders are perceived as more legitimate than traditional governing arrangements (see also Cain et al. 2021). We thus formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: *Cross-sector service providers will be rated higher on perceived legitimacy than public service providers.*

Expanding our expectation about the effect of collaboration on legitimacy outcomes, we predict that its effect may vary with the sectoral composition of the collaborations. Research has shown that cross-sector collaborations with different compositions produce heterogeneous performance outcomes. Based on a meta-analysis of studies of collaboration and performance, Lee and Hung (2022) found that collaboration among all three sectors and public–public collaborations resulted in better performance outcomes than public–non-profit or public–private collaborations. Andrews and Entwistle (2010) have suggested that the performance outcomes of collaborations across different sectors vary across different dimensions of performance. In their analysis of UK local government service departments, they found that public–public partnerships led to better effectiveness, efficiency, and equity, while public–private partnerships had worse outcomes on effectiveness and equity. No effect of public–non-profit partnerships was identified. While helpful, these findings pertain to actual outcomes, which can be perceived by stakeholders and internal actors, but perhaps not precisely by ordinary citizens. We cannot assume the general public keeps abreast of these scientific findings on collaborative outcomes. Citizens with little information about collaborative processes or outcomes may rely on their general assumptions and beliefs about participating organizations, specifically their sectoral orientation, when making judgements about collaborative arrangements.

Research has indicated that citizens recognize sectoral differences in collaborative arrangements, and these have symbolic effects on public perceptions (Beierle and Konisky 2001). A recent empirical study by Lee and Esteve (2022) reported that citizens perceive a collaborative governing body as legitimate when it involves balanced representation of the sectors. This implies that citizens take into account which societal sectors are participating in governance processes. Building on our

earlier expectation about relative evaluations of perceived legitimacy across sectors (non-profit > for-profit > public), we expect that government organizations' collaborations with non-profit organizations generate more legitimacy gains than their collaboration with for-profit organizations. We thus formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: *Public-nonprofit collaborative providers will be rated higher on perceived legitimacy than public-private collaborative providers.*

Performance information

Performance information is an important means by which citizens evaluate government services and hold government accountable and responsive (Baekgaard 2015; James and Moseley 2014; Thomsen 2017). Given that citizens have limited access to detailed information about governance processes, performance information allows citizens to update their knowledge of government and better align their perceptions of government with its actual performance (Baekgaard 2015). Existing studies have found an effect of performance information on various aspects of citizens' perceptions, such as their satisfaction (Noda 2021; van Ryzin 2004), general attitudes (Baekgaard 2015), and trust (Porumbescu, Neshkova, and Huntoon 2019). Examining emerging collaborative settings, Lee and Esteve (2022) found that performance information affects the perceived legitimacy of collaborative governance. Woodhouse et al. (2022) also showed significant effects of performance information on citizens' evaluation of public services in hybrid governance settings.

While some research has found little association between performance information and citizen evaluation (e.g. Brown and Coulter 1983; Kelly 2003), researchers have suggested that this mixed evidence can be explained by the type and quality of the information. First, different types of performance information have varied effects on citizen perceptions; information about good performance positively influences citizen perceptions and evaluations; but in contrast, information about poor performance worsens citizens' perceptions and reduces their satisfaction (James 2011). Second, the clarity and understandability of the information affect the cognitive process for citizens' judgements of it (Noda 2021). Citizens often misinterpret performance information, which can lead to inaccurate evaluations of the performance (Andrews, Boyne, and Walker 2006; Stipak 1979, 1980). Olsen (2015) argue that concrete versus abstract performance information have different impacts on citizens' attitude formation and decision-making. For example, citizens are less likely to misinterpret performance information when the information is presented in a visual format (Larsen and Olsen 2020). Another study reports the importance of intuitive and simple performance metrics; performance information with 5-star ratings influences citizens' evaluations of nursing home services (Meier et al. 2022). When understandable and citizen-friendly performance evaluations such as star ratings are used, we expect information about good performance to be positively associated with perceived legitimacy.

Hypothesis 4: *Service providers with positive performance information will be rated higher on perceived legitimacy than those with negative performance information.*

Methods

Research design

To test our hypotheses, we used a large-N online experiment. A survey experiment was adopted for this study to identify the causal effect of sector and performance information on the perceived legitimacy of service providers. While there are clear trade-offs in using randomized experiments, we note that it is difficult to control for all the factors that affect the perceived legitimacy of real-world social service providers. Survey experiments allow us to precisely manipulate the experimental treatments and increase the internal validity of the study findings. The experiment was designed as a vignette-based factorial survey. The base vignette provided information about a hypothetical social service institution, and respondents were randomly assigned to different treatment groups. We chose a senior care facility as the context of our study, building on studies that have examined public perceptions of healthcare institutions (Hvidman and Andersen 2016; Meier et al. 2022). Senior care services are provided by organizations from all three sectors and have increasingly been provided by non-state actors or via cross-sector collaborations. In addition, nowadays the importance of senior care is recognized across party affiliations (see Pew Research Center 2018).

We use a between-subjects 6 × 2 factor design. The first part of the experimental manipulation is the type of service provider: single-sector a) public, b) for-profit, or c) non-profit organizations, or cross-sector collaborations that consist of a d) public–private, e) public–non-profit, or f) private–non-profit collaborative providers.[4] The second part of the manipulation consists of positive or negative information on the provider's performance. Here, we provide citizen-friendly performance metrics where star ratings are used to describe good or poor performance: the providers are rated either 4.5 or 2.5 stars out of 5 on programme quality. Star ratings are widely used by online review sites such as Google Maps or Yelp. Meier et al. (2022) have suggested that star ratings provide a clear and easy-to-interpret signal. After the experimental instrument was presented, respondents were asked to respond to a series of questions about the perceived legitimacy of the provider and additional demographic questions. At the end of the experiment, we provided a debriefing to the participants that explained the purpose of the study and that the experiment was based on hypothetical information. The research design of this study was reviewed and approved by Singapore Management University Institutional Review Board. The full vignette is available in Appendix A.

Study sample

We designed the experiment in Qualtrics and launched it using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk hereafter), a survey platform that recruits participants from within their pool based on the qualifications set by researchers. MTurk is one of the most commonly used survey platforms in the field of public administration due to its affordability, accessibility, and large pool of participants (Stritch, Jin Pedersen, and Taggart

2017). Nevertheless, scholars have raised concerns about the quality of the data collected through MTurk. To address these concerns, we utilized various screening and filtering tools to increase the quality of the data (see Appendix B).

The descriptive demographics for our sample are shown in Appendix C. Overall, our sample is more educated and younger than the general population (cf. the sample of the General Social Survey), and African American respondents are underrepresented, as has been the case in other research that has relied on Mturk (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Jilke, Van Ryzin, and Van de Walle 2016; Marvel 2015). While not random samples of the population, samples from Mturk represent a wide range of social groups and have been found to produce highly similar results to studies conducted with traditional samples (Paolacci, Chandler, and Ipeirotis 2010). Additionally, respondents were randomized to the different experimental conditions in our study, helping to partially address the potential bias that might have been caused (Mason and Suri 2011). In Qualtrics, researchers can set the randomization to assign participants equally across each treatment group. As a result, the sample size for the 12 treatment groups remained fairly balanced even after the data quality check (see Appendix D for details). The balance test results are presented in Appendix E. Using an F-test, we find no statistically significant differences across the groups in terms of respondents' age, education, income, or political ideology.

Measures

The dependent variable of this study is the perceived legitimacy of social service organizations. Since legitimacy is a multi-dimensional concept, empirical research on government legitimacy has measured legitimacy perceptions using questions that capture perceptions of fairness, job performance, and trustworthiness (de Fine Licht et al. 2014; Jacobs and Kaufmann 2021; Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Jackson 2018; Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Lavena 2014; Roch, Elsayed, and Edwards 2018). We identified multiple dimensions of legitimacy that are widely used in the existing literature and that are also suitable for measuring the perceived legitimacy of social service organizations – namely, perceived efficiency, effectiveness, and equity.[5] We adapted questionnaire items from Hvidman and Andersen (2016) and Meier et al. (2022) because their measures effectively captured public perceptions in similar policy settings (i.e. nursing homes and

Table 1. Measures of outcome variables.

Variable	Items: The senior wellness center _____	Scale and Cronbach's alpha
Efficiency	- is efficient at providing wellness programs. - makes the most of its financial and human resources.	1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; *alpha* = .91
Effectiveness	- is effective at accomplishing its core goal. - provides an outstanding quality of care.	1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; *alpha* = .92
Equity	- provides better services to high-income residents than to low-income residents. (reverse) - delivers its services in a fair and impartial way. - serves every resident, regardless of race, religion, or income.	1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; *alpha* = .75
Willingness to co-produce	- How willing would you be to volunteer for the senior wellness center?	1: very unlikely, 10: very likely

hospitals). Additionally, we measured respondents' willingness to coproduce considering that legitimacy perceptions entail social support and resource contribution from stakeholders (Chaney, Lunardo, and Bressolles 2016; Scott 2008). Survey items from previous studies (Porumbescu, Neshkova, and Huntoon 2019; James and Jilke 2020) were adapted to the current study's context. Table 1 shows the items and the Cronbach's alpha values for each variable. For each item, we used a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

After presenting the dependent variable items, we measured respondents' trust in different sectors by asking 'In general, how much trust do you have in each of the organization types below? [For-profit organizations; not-for-profit organizations; and public organizations]'. Answers for each were given on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from no trust at all (1) to complete trust (7). These were followed by items assessing a series of control variables, including gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, income, and political ideology. We included a question about work experience in the three sectors ('If you have work experience, where has most of your work experience been?') to capture respondents' general attitudes towards these sectors.

Analysis and results

To begin, we compared legitimacy perceptions across the 12 experimental groups (Appendix F). The ANOVA test results suggested that there were statistically significant group differences. To identify the driving factors behind public perceptions of service providers, we conducted regression analyses. In Table 2, we present our OLS regression results on the perceived legitimacy of single-sector and multi-sector providers. The reference category is a public social service institution (i.e. one owned and operated by the government; see Appendix A). The coefficient values of all types of

Table 2. Sector and performance information among single- and multi-sector providers.

	Perceived Efficiency Coefficient (std. err.)	Perceived Effectiveness Coefficient (std. err.)	Perceived Equity Coefficient (std. err.)	Willingness to coproduce Coefficient (std. err.)
Provider (ref: Gov't)				
For-profit	0.033	0.011	−0.246**	−0.724**
	(0.108)	(0.116)	(0.086)	(0.246)
Nonprofit	0.170	0.228*	−0.006	−0.230
	(0.107)	(0.115)	(0.085)	(0.243)
Gov't–For-profit collaboration	0.088	0.069	−0.038	−0.214
	(0.107)	(0.115)	(0.085)	(0.244)
Gov't–Nonprofit collaboration	0.062	0.062	−0.091	−0.474
	(0.109)	(0.117)	(0.086)	(0.248)
For-profit–Nonprofit collaboration	−0.111	−0.076	−0.130	−0.186
	(0.109)	(0.117)	(0.086)	(0.247)
Performance information (ref: low performance ratings)				
High performance ratings	1.323***	1.619***	0.521***	1.020***
	0.062	0.067	0.049	0.142
Constant	4.239***	4.066***	4.936***	5.287***
	0.082	0.088	0.065	0.187
R-squared	0.228	0.277	0.074	0.039
N	1,548	1,548	1,548	1,548

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001; Robust standard errors are presented.

sector providers reflect the difference in the mean of the dependent variables compared with public service providers.

We first compare legitimacy perceptions of single-sector providers, with the results provided in the first two rows. While we expected that non-profit organizations would be perceived most positively and public organizations least positively, our results show that our respondents did not perceive public service providers as different from for-profit or non-profit providers. As shown in the first column, respondents' perceptions of the efficiency of the service provider are not influenced by its sector. We find a marginal effect of non-profit status on citizens' perceptions of effectiveness, such that citizens perceive services provided by a non-profit entity as more effective than services provided by a public sector provider. However, overall, we find little effect of sector bias in perceptions of providers' efficiency and effectiveness.

On the other hand, we find some interesting results in the models of perceived equity and respondents' willingness to coproduce. While we do not see any difference between public and non-profit providers in terms of perceived equity, respondents are less likely to perceive a for-profit service provider as equitable compared with a local government provider. Respondents are also less willing to coproduce when the service provider is from the for-profit sector. This is consistent with James and Jilke (2020) who found that marketization reforms reduce citizens' willingness to coproduce. It is worth noting that we find negative views of for-profit service providers even when we control for the effect of high performance information. In summary, Hypothesis 1 is not supported by our data.

Next, we turn to the main focus of our study. Hypothesis 2 is that cross-sector service providers will be rated higher on perceived legitimacy than public service providers. That is, we expect that when a local government works with a for-profit or non-profit organization to provide a public service, the services are more likely to be perceived favourably than when the government provides the service on its own. Contrary to our expectation, the results in the third and fourth rows of Table 2 show that cross-sector collaborations do not increase providers' perceived legitimacy compared with in-house government service delivery. The coefficients of the cross-sector service providers ('Gov't–For-profit collaboration', and 'Gov't–Non-profit collaboration') across different dimensions of perceived legitimacy are not statistically significant, indicating there is little difference from perceptions of public service providers. Regardless of whether the government worked with for-profit or non-profit organizations to deliver services, no collaborative legitimacy gain was obtained. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is not supported.

To test Hypothesis 3, we explored the difference in means between government–for-profit collaborations and government–non-profit collaborations. The results in

Table 3. Comparison of public–nonprofit collaboration and public–private collaboration.

	Perceived Efficiency	Perceived Effectiveness	Perceived Equity	Willingness to coproduce
Govt-Nonprofit collaboration	4.982	4.960	5.113	5.337
Govt-For-profit collaboration	4.959	4.908	5.148	5.560
Mean difference	.023	.052	−.035	−.223
	(p = .84)	(p = .69)	(p = .69)	(p = .36)

P-values from t-test results in parentheses.

Table 3 show that none of the mean differences between the two cross-sector collaborations in the four dependent variables is significant. That is, we do not find any effect of sector bias in evaluations of cross-sector collaboration. In other words, while we find an anti–for-profit bias in the single-sector provider models above, government–for-profit collaboration is not perceived as less legitimate than government–non-profit collaboration. This suggests that the anti–for-profit bias against single-sector providers in Table 2 does not carry over to cross-sector collaborations involving for-profit organizations. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is not supported. Additional difference in mean tests comparing the 12 experimental groups are presented in Appendix F.

Now we look at the effect of performance metrics on perceived legitimacy in the models of single-sector and collaborative service providers (Table 2). We find a strong effect of performance information across all four models – citizens view services as more efficient, effective, and equitable when the service provider's performance is rated more highly. Citizens are also more willing to coproduce when they are presented with information that a provider is highly rated. Thus, Hypothesis 4 is supported. It is notable, however, that the effect size varies, with performance information having a smaller effect size in the model of perceived equity than in the models of perceived efficiency and effectiveness. We examined any potential interaction between sector and performance. We did not find strong moderating effects of highly-rated performance on the association between the type of service provider and the provider's perceived legitimacy (Appendix H).

We conducted several additional analyses to ensure the consistency of our findings in various ways, including ordered logistic regressions and regressions with demographic variables where the results are highly consistent with our main analysis (see Appendix G). We also conducted a subgroup analysis using the variable of trust in the public sector (high and low groups based on the mean value = 4.18) and found no significant difference in the effects of sector and collaborative governance on perceived legitimacy among respondents with high versus low trust in the public sector, unlike Boyer and Van Slyke (2019) who report the effect of trust on public perceptions towards hybrid governance. Next, we ran a subgroup analysis using education level, classifying 4 years of college education or more as a high level of education. The only significant difference between respondents with and without this high level of education was in their willingness to coproduce. Citizens without a high level of education were less willing to coproduce when the service was provided by a for-profit organization, while this was not the case among citizens with a high level of education. But overall, the results are similar to the main findings of this study.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of sector and performance information on the perceived legitimacy of service providers. Specifically, we examined whether public perceptions of service providers reflect sector biases, whether collaborative service delivery increases perceptions of providers' legitimacy, and how performance information affects perceptions of single-sector and cross-sector public service delivery. The findings from the randomized online experiment provide important insight into public perceptions of emerging governance models.

Specifically, our findings show that cross-sector collaboration is not perceived as more legitimate than traditional public service provision. Citizens do not rate

public service providers any differently from either government–for-profit collaborations or government–non-profit collaborations. This is an interesting and puzzling finding since the theoretical expectation is that collaborative governance will have positive effects on citizens' perceptions, and a few recent studies have provided empirical evidence that collaborative governance increases citizens' legitimacy perceptions. For example, Cain et al. (2021) found that U.S. citizens prefer collaborative governance to traditional policy-making models and expect that such collaborations are more responsive to regional interests and disadvantaged communities. Studies have reported that collaborative legitimacy gains are robust across different functions of collaborative governance (Hui and Smith 2022) and are not affected by citizens' level of trust in government (Liu 2022).

We offer several possible explanations for why cross-sector collaboration did not produce legitimacy gains in our study. First, it may be that collaborative governance approaches enhance perceived legitimacy in policy-making settings more than in policy implementation or service delivery contexts. The 'democracy-enhancing' characteristics of collaborative governance, such as inclusiveness and responsiveness, may be more salient when non-state actors participate in public decision-making and are given power to make their voice heard in the government. Collaborative policymaking usually involves deliberative, consensus-oriented processes and thick communication (Dupuy and Defacqz 2022), characteristics that are closely associated with democratic values and their symbolic effects. In service delivery, however, cross-sector collaboration may be perceived as an instrumental tool that eases service provision rather than a reflection of such values. It is worth noting that the studies described above that found collaborative legitimacy gains examined policy making settings.

Second, the involvement of private citizens may be a key to the legitimacy gains from collaboration. Hui and Smith (2022), in their study of public perceptions of collaborative policy-making processes, found that the legitimacy benefits of collaborative governance are strongest when collaborative governance boards are composed of private citizens, rather than other stakeholder groups such as businesses or community associations representing disadvantaged groups (see also Cain et al. 2021). Applying this logic to service delivery settings, we assume that legitimacy perceptions of collaborative service delivery may improve when private citizens are involved in different phases of the service delivery cycle, such as commissioning, designing, delivering, and assessing services (Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017). When the governing process is open to the public and invites input from local residents, its procedural legitimacy may increase. Third, the effect of cross-sector collaboration on perceived legitimacy may be limited to certain policy areas. Lee and Esteve (2022) have examined whether the perceived legitimacy of collaborative governance arrangements is affected by whether such arrangements address policy problems with high versus low issue complexity. While they report little effect of issue complexity on legitimacy perceptions, other characteristics of policy problems or service areas could play a role in shaping legitimacy perceptions. For example, Xu (2020) found that the effect of sector stereotype is stronger in nursing home settings than in day care or recycling contexts. We can expect that legitimacy gains from collaborative governance are context-dependent. We echo other researchers' calls to further examine 'how and under what conditions collaborative governance may increase the legitimacy of public governance' (Hui and Smith 2022, 241).

A second key finding pertains to sector biases in evaluations of single-sector and cross-sector service providers. First, when comparing public perceptions of single-sector providers, we found little evidence of sector bias in perceptions of their efficiency or effectiveness. This is in line with previous studies that found a lack of anti-government bias (Meier et al. 2022; Meier, Johnson, and An 2019). Given that these studies examined hospital and nursing home contexts, it seems that citizens may not hold anti–public sector biases in the areas of health and human services.

While the analysis shows little effect of sector bias on providers' perceived efficiency or effectiveness, we find an anti–for-profit sector bias when it comes to both perceived equity and respondents' willingness to coproduce. Our data suggest that compared with public providers, for-profit service providers are perceived as providing less equitable services, and citizens report less willingness to participate in for-profit service delivery. James and Jilke (2020) suggest that public services provided by for-profit firms reduce citizens' intentions to coproduce because they may perceive 'for-profit delivery organizations as capitalizing on [the citizens'] prosocial contributions' (954). Our findings suggest that citizens do hold an anti–for-profit sector bias when it comes to value-laden aspects of providers' perceived legitimacy. This is in line with the argument that it may be difficult to ensure public values beyond efficiency and effectiveness in the context of marketization reforms (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014). Together, our findings suggest that the effects of sector may vary across dimensions of legitimacy perceptions, and further research should examine different aspects of public perceptions of service providers.

While we find an anti–for-profit sector bias against single-sector providers in terms of perceptions of their commitment to equity and citizens' intentions to coproduce with them, this effect was not found in perceptions of cross-sector collaborations. Our data reveal that government cross-sector collaboration, regardless of the sector with which the government is paired, is not perceived as better or worse than in-house government delivery. This may suggest that the impact of sector is diluted in cross-sector collaborations and thus has little effect on public perceptions in these contexts. However, one recent work found an effect of sector on the perceived legitimacy of collaborative governance arrangements (Lee and Esteve 2022), and another reported that voters preferred public –private hybrid governance to full public management in the context of infrastructure development (Woodhouse, Belardinelli, and Bertelli 2022). It may be reasonable to suggest that citizens take sector into account when judging a collaborative governance arrangement, but that they need more detailed information about the parties involved in the collaboration and their sectors. Interestingly, the literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) suggests that private firms increase their organizational legitimacy when they show a commitment to social responsibility by collaborating with non-profit organizations (Bachmann and Ingenhoff 2016; Kim, Sejin, and Fong 2014). Future research may explore if cross-sector collaboration provides legitimacy gains for for-profit and non-profit organizations.

It is worth highlighting that we found that information on a provider's high performance ratings was strongly associated with all measures of their perceived legitimacy. This is consistent with previous research that has found an effect of performance information on citizens' perceptions (Baekgaard 2015; James 2011; Woodhouse, Belardinelli, and Bertelli 2022). Using simple and citizen-friendly performance metrics in the form of a star rating system, we found an effect of performance

information that was consistent across different service delivery models. This confirms the findings of Meier et al. (2022), who suggested that 'citizens are able to learn and change their opinions based on performance data' (pp. 80) when presented with easy-to-interpret, commonly used performance indicators. Future studies may further develop this line of research by examining negativity bias (Charbonneau and Van Ryzin 2015) and the credibility of the source of the performance information (James and Van Ryzin 2017; Meier et al. 2022).

One more important implication of our research pertains to the drivers of citizens' willingness to coproduce. Given that citizens are not just passive recipients of public services but may also volunteer their time and effort to achieve better outcomes (Alford 2009; Bovaird 2007), examining their willingness to coproduce can provide important behavioural insights for public administration. Our results show that citizens' willingness to coproduce with for-profit service providers is lower than their willingness to coproduce with public organizations. The finding about the effect of positive performance information on willingness to coproduce also builds on the existing literature on coproduction. Porumbescu et al. (2019) have illuminated the mechanisms through which performance information affects participants' willingness to coproduce in their study of public perceptions of the police and citizens' intentions to participate in a neighbourhood watch programme. They found that positive performance information increases citizens' willingness to coproduce by increasing the perceived trustworthiness of the police, but interestingly, they also find that negative performance information also leads to greater willingness to coproduce. When presented with information about poor government performance, citizens may perceive a need to put their own time and effort into improving the service and their community. While our study compares the effects of high and low performance ratings, future research may further investigate the cognitive mechanisms through which different types of performance information with varying degrees of legibility affect citizens' willingness to coproduce.

Finally, the limitations of this study must be discussed. First, the experimental design was based on the context of social services, specifically senior care services. While we have built connections to the existing literature, which has examined different contexts, this focus on senior care may limit the generalizability of the findings to other settings. Future research may explore sector bias and the potential legitimacy gains of collaborative governance in different policy contexts across different countries while incorporating a deep contextualized understanding of the broader macro-level culture. Second, the inherent features of online survey experiments entail trade-offs in terms of the rigour of the research. While the design is suitable for identifying causal treatment effects, these are investigated in hypothetical settings. Future research may compare public perceptions of actual service providers from three different sectors or collaborative settings and explore if the results are affected by their own experience as a service recipient. Third, this study left out an important process to validate whether the experimental manipulation worked as intended. Manipulation checks are useful for ensuring the quality of experimental results, especially in online settings, since researchers cannot verify whether respondents understood the experimental instruments as intended. The lack of a manipulation check raises the possibility that null results occurred due to a lack of treatment effects. While we tried to address this concern by conducting a pilot test, providing clear-cut instructions, and setting up tools to ensure

respondents' attention (Appendix B), we suggest that future research include manipulation checks to ensure the quality of the data from online experiments. Fourth, due to time and budget constraints, we were not able to include a measurement validation process and instead adapted items from previous studies (e.g. Hvidman and Andersen 2016; Meier et al. 2022) that engaged in extensive measurement validation processes in similar policy settings. Using valid and reliable measures may contribute to the psychometric foundations of behavioural public administration. In line with this point, future studies may further examine the multi-faceted nature of legitimacy and empirically test alternative measures of legitimacy to better capture citizens' perceived legitimacy. Moreover, it would be desirable to test different aspects of legitimacy with multi-items (see Alexiou and Wiggins 2019; Diez-Martin, Blanco-Gonzalez, and Diez-de-Castro 2021). Finally, legitimacy is not static and requires longitudinal assessment. As Melnychuk and Loë (2020) have noted, 'sources that helped legitimize a body at one stage may or may not be useful during other points in a collaboration's existence to enhance, maintain, or defend its legitimacy' (pp. 26). We invite future research to explore sources of perceived legitimacy across different developmental stages of collaborative governance and different service delivery phases.

Conclusion

Citizens' perceptions of government legitimacy have substantive implications for their engagement in governance processes and their support for policy outcomes. Research on bureaucratic legitimacy and the growing literature on behavioural public administration have sought to elucidate citizens' perceptions of public agencies and their processing of information about service providers and their performance (Meier et al. 2022; Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Jackson 2018; Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Lavena 2014; Roch, Elsayed, and Edwards 2018; Woodhouse, Belardinelli, and Bertelli 2022). While these studies shed light on the effects of sector biases and performance information on citizens' evaluations of government, little research has explored public perceptions of service providers from different sectors and cross-sector collaborations. To advance this line of research and extend it to emerging governance models, this study investigated how the perceived legitimacy of single-sector and cross-sector social service providers is shaped by information about their sectors and their performance.

The findings of this study deepen our understanding of legitimacy building in contemporary governance settings. While collaborative governance is often viewed as a strategy to enhance the legitimacy of public governance, cross-sector collaboration itself does not necessarily produce legitimacy gains in service provision settings. It can do so when it produces positive outcomes and when positive information about a collaboration's performance is accessible and easily interpretable. We advocate for research on the legitimacy of collaborative governance arrangements that takes into account the participatory and inclusive dynamics of emerging governance models, such as descriptive and substantive representation in collaborative policy-making (Koski et al. 2018). A better understanding of how legitimacy perceptions are shaped by the input, throughput, and output dimensions of collaborative governance (Schmidt 2013) would contribute to a comprehensive model of governance legitimacy building (Hui and Smith 2022; Lee and Esteve 2022).

Notes

1. Organizational legitimacy is a multi-faceted concept that includes cognitive, regulative, moral, pragmatic, managerial, technical, and emotional legitimacy (Diez-Martin, Blanco-Gonzalez, and Diez-de-Castro 2021; Suchman 1995). Our focus on citizens' perceptions of service providers corresponds with cognitive legitimacy, the most studied dimension in the management literature, which is based on judgements about an organization's activities.
2. In contrast, other studies have argued that non-profits are perceived as incompetent due to their philanthropic amateurism (Salamon 1989), organizational culture, and lack of competitors in the market (Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010).
3. It is worth noting that we focus on legitimacy gains from cross-sector collaboration rather than within-sector collaboration such as intergovernmental networks (Agranoff and McGuire 2003). While collaboration itself can produce some legitimacy gains, we expect that cross-sector collaborative governance will be more likely to exploit resource complementarity and the symbolic effects of inclusiveness and responsiveness. However, this is an open question, and future research may explore citizen perceptions of within-sector and cross-sector collaboration.
4. In the vignettes, we describe collaboration as organizations to 'co-manage the whole process, including funding and running the programs and recruiting volunteers to provide high-quality services' (see the full vignette in Appendix A). Future research may consider how different types of collaboration (Bauer et al. 2023) affect the perceived legitimacy of cross-sector providers. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.
5. While studies examining government legitimacy in policy-making settings (e.g. Lee and Esteve 2022; Ruder and Woods 2019) or policing contexts (e.g. Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2014; Tyler 2006) use direct measures of legitimacy or public acceptance of government decisions, we believe general perceptions about service providers can be better assessed in terms of their service outputs and outcomes. This was informed by research on cognitive legitimacy, which suggests that legitimacy perceptions are based on knowledge of an organization's activities, such as the quality of its goods and services (Bridwell-Mitchell and Stephen 2012; Suchman 1995). However, this remains a limitation of our study. We suggest that future research adopt a more comprehensive approach to measures of perceived legitimacy.

Disclosure statement

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