

**Role perceptions of public servants and public service: a compared case  
between Colombia and the Netherlands**

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## Abstract

Public service is a fundamental pillar of public administration as it is the way through which governments can fulfill the society's needs and move towards creating economic and social development. How the public service and public servants are being perceived by citizens is fundamental since they, as beneficiaries, are the ones that should assess its performance and functioning. Therefore, a comparison case between Colombia and the Netherlands is being conducted to analyze how and why people perceive public officials and public service in each case. As so, the dependent variable is the perception of citizens and the interdependent variables have been categorized in three set of factors as possible explanations to citizens perceptions on public service, those being socio-economic factors, socializing factors, and external factors. The research design chosen is a qualitative approach with a comparative case study as the method and with interviews as the main source of data collection to be able to answer to the research goal proposed. Results show that perceptions are rather negative in the case of Colombia and quite positive in the case of the Netherlands. When diving into the reasons behind that perception, socializing factors turned out to be the most relevant of them all, followed by socio-economic factor and external factors as the least pertinent in both cases. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the public service is very different between countries as the Colombian is regarded as slow and procedural, not diligent, and not approachable while the Dutch appears to be well focused, working properly and efficiently and committed to the provision of quality services for the people.

## Table of contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	2
<b>List of tables and figures</b> .....	4
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>2. Literature review</b> .....	7
<b>3. Theoretical framework</b> .....	10
<b>4. Research design</b> .....	13
<b>4.1. Choice of a qualitative approach</b> .....	13
<b>4.2. Comparative case study and case selection</b> .....	15
<b>4.3. Data collection</b> .....	18
<b>5. Analysis</b> .....	20
<b>5.1. Colombian’s perceptions</b> .....	21
<b>5.2. Dutch perceptions</b> .....	24
<b>5.3. Discussion of findings: Comparison between the two cases</b> .....	26
<b>6. Discussion and conclusions</b> .....	28
<b>7. Recommendations and limitations</b> .....	29
<b>8. References</b> .....	30
<b>Appendix: Questionnaire for participants of the interviews</b> .....	33

## List of tables and figures

<b>Figure 1. Conceptual model</b> .....	15
<b>Table 1. General information of Colombian respondents</b> .....	18
<b>Table 2. General information of Dutch respondents</b> .....	19
<b>Table 3. Codes used to analyze the data</b> .....	20

## 1. Introduction

Public service is a fundamental pillar of public administration as it is the way through which governments can fulfill the society's needs and move towards creating economic and social development. According to Perry and Recascino Wise (1990) public service “is often used as a synonym for government service embracing all those who work in the public sector” (p.368). Gumah and Aziabah, refer to the concept as “the continuous provision of services offered by those in authority while performing to prescribed values and attitudes” (2020, p.1). Moreover, it can be defined as “a concept, an attitude, a sense of duty—yes, even a sense of public morality” (Staats, 2000). Therefore, public service can be understood as the exercise of someone's duty in the scope of the public sector and its institutions. Now, the perception that citizens have towards public service is fundamental since citizens as beneficiaries, are the ones that should assess its performance and functioning. As so, the way of how public service and public servants are being perceived might rely on a lot of factors such as historical background, political affiliations, the context of the country in a specific time or even some personal background.

However, public service is often perceived negatively by citizens in the western world because “public sector employees are taken as individuals who settle at mediocre performance and who would not pay any extra effort to exceed expectations” (Karam, 2016). Very often, this negative perception is not the result of how the public services actually work, but the belief lies only on the mere thought of observation that they are public services and because they are public then do not function optimally (Van de Walle, 2004). This public-private dichotomy has been studied by scholars encountering that people tend to prefer private services but when asked for examples of when private services have worked better than public ones, their argument lost foundation (Van de Walle, 2004). Therefore, the public-private cliché is still latent among citizens, but it is not substantiated since the general thought of people is that public service does not work but when they are asked for specific cases that might have led them to that way of thinking, their responses lack background and evidence.

Taking this into account, we usually assume that citizens have a negative perception of public service despite it is indispensable to run any public organization across the globe since can be considered as the core of the Government's administrative machinery, and it is the way through which the state can fulfill its duty to society. Yet, citizens may still have negative perceptions about public service and public servants which might eventually lead to distrust from citizens towards public officials and organizations and eventually bad consequences for our democracies. Therefore, this research aims at answering this predicament by assessing if citizens truly have a negative perception towards public service, and if that is the case, then dive into the reasons behind it.

This topic is relevant in the field of public administration since the research on administrative cultures has been focusing on institutions and politico-administrative elites within the system but citizens' perceptions have been left aside (Bouckaert et al., 2005). The need for thorough research on citizens' opinion about the public administration has been identified on several occasions, but this did not give rise to a real research tradition" (Bouckaert et al., 2005, p.4).

On the same path, looking at citizens' perceptions is valuable because positive perceptions of the performance of the public sector can promote active citizenship, can be an indicator of a strong and thriving democracy and if the perceptions overall are positive, then perceptions on the provisions of services might also be positive, and that will ultimately lead to more willingness to pay taxes and changes in ideologies (Aitalieva & Morelock, 2019, p.199).

To contribute to filling that gap in the literature, a comparison case analysis will be conducted to contrast similarities and differences between perceptions and to dive into the reasons behind them. Throughout the literature review made on the subject, it was found that there are several studies assessing the perception of citizens towards public officials and public service in the international scope, but the comparative studies found are mainly between countries with the same background, or the same region, or from countries that share some political and economic characteristics. There are several cases in which governments have tried to measure perceptions and trust towards public service in their own contexts, meaning only one country, but the data is limited to their own national context and thus, it has been very difficult to do a comparison study based on that information (Bouckaert et al., 2005). Following on Bouckaert et al, there is not much international comparative research that focuses on citizens' attitudes towards public service and if there are, they have focused on general attitudes but not on the values and beliefs behind those attitudes (2005).

Consequently, two countries with a similar politico-administrative organization but different administrative, institutional, cultural, and historical background from two different continents have been chosen to compare how public service is perceived by its citizens. This study will bring new insights on how perceptions can differ or be alike between a parliamentary constitutional monarchy and a presidential participatory democracy with very different political backgrounds and administrative systems. Additionally, the objective is to examine what can be learned from both cases to make people more satisfied about public officials and public service in general. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following key question: **“How and why do people have different perceptions on public officials and public service?”**

Both the Netherlands and Colombia share characteristics in their administrative organization but the division of tasks between the three levels differ in both cases. These common characteristics are one of the reasons why this study will take place; but also, because both countries' political trajectory and the role of institutions has been very diverse from each other. Therefore, it is very appealing to assess how perceptions on public officials and the service that they provide are alike or differ from each context and then being able to draw conclusion from it.

Now, to answer the research question, a qualitative method will be conducted with interviews as the main source of empirical analysis. Since the objective of this research is to dive into the perceptions of people, the interviews will be semi structured as the idea is to also consider each of the interviewees' own experiences to find the reasons why they have a specific perception of public officials and public service. Fourteen interviews will be conducted, seven on Colombian and seven on Dutch citizens with an age range is from 22 to 28 years old. It will focus on students that have done or are doing their undergraduate and postgraduate studies in the area of political science, international relations, public administration, government etc. More specific information about the methodology will be presented in the Research Design chapter of this paper.

## **2. Literature review**

Citizens' perceptions towards public service are very relevant as good or bad perceptions can have a direct impact on other administrative and political areas related to public administration. Before looking at the comparison case proposed in this study, it might be relevant to assess what has been said about citizens' perceptions up until now and what are the main findings of the studies conducted. For this chapter, studies from all over the world will be considered that deal with the topic of perceptions on public service, to gain insights on the topic and to be able to build upon what has already been said about it. On each relevant topic, a couple of studies are going to be presented that can be either from one country or comparison studies, highlighting the main findings about perceptions that citizens have on public service.

The first topic that was found to be very relevant when looking at citizens perception is trust. Trust is regarded as an important factor as people tend to have a good perception of public service and public officials if they trust the government and its institutions (Aitalieva & Morelock, 2019; Van de Walle et al., 2008). However, distinguishing between 'perceptions on the performance of the public sector' and 'trust in the public sector' might be harder than it sounds as they might not be that differentiated among citizens, and they can be mistaken in some ways (Van de Walle et al., 2008). In the studies found on

the subject, the two terms were used in parallel, and findings were applicable in the two ways, without making a proper differentiation, which at some point was a little confusing.

In Bangladesh, for instance, citizens overall do not trust the public servants because they are corrupt, irresponsible and they lack cooperation when they are needed, but the perception might vary when there is a differentiation between the executive, legislative and judicial branches (Charu, 2017). In the case of the executive, they do not trust public officials as they are often looking out for their own benefit and do not intent to help people out (Charu, 2017). However, a clarification must be made because the respondents were only asked about police officers as the public officials in the executive branch. The same negative perception was upheld in the other two branches as in the legislative, they also do not trust the parliament members as they are regarded as “puppets of the party in power”, not transparent, not reflecting their people’s demands and they are biased; and the judges seem not trustworthy, only thinking about “the money matter” and taking too long on legal procedures (Charu, 2017). In another study made in OECD and EU countries, trust was found not as clear from the mid 1960’s until the 2000’s, since some countries show high levels of confidence in the civil service, in others the levels of trust remain overall stable and in some there is a decline; as so there was no evidence of a general trend about citizens’ trust in government over time (Van de Walle et al., 2008). Trust or distrust and perceptions are two terms that go by hand and can be considered as a positive or negative perception towards public service.

Another relevant topic that might influence citizens' perceptions is the quality of the services that are being provided and the performance of the government as a sign of good or bad outcome. When the government performs well in delivering public services and meeting citizens' expectations, a positive impact on satisfaction levels is reached (Van Ryzin, 2007). That same logic can apply the other way around as bad government performance might lead to low levels of satisfaction and therefore, bad perception towards public service and public servants. This was confirmed by a study comparing India, USA, Russia, Australia, Japan and China that showed that citizens' assessment in government is directly linked to its performance and whether that performance is positive or negative then the perception will be on the same path (Wang, 2010). However, it can be argued that the perception on quality of services and performance can also be influenced by “exogenous variables”, such as demographic differences or general attitudes toward government, or even prior expectations on the service (Van Ryzin, 2007).

That last subject leads us to another explanation to perceptions from citizens towards public service and that is the expectations that they have towards them. It applies the same logic as the previous argument about performance and quality of services. Citizens have different needs and expectations and when public officials or the service that they provide do not match their expectations or are not able to respond to those specific needs, then that can result in having a bad perception (Meier & Nigro, 2001). That can



also happen the other way around in the case that expectations are met, then it will have a positive impact on their perceptions. In South Korea, the expectancy – disconfirmation theory was tested to see if citizens are “dissatisfied when a performance does not meet their expectations (negative disconfirmation) and satisfied when the performance either meets (simple agreement) or exceeds expectations (positive disconfirmation)” (Kang & Park, 2018, p.5). The results showed that “larger the gap between what the public expects the government do and what the government actually does, the larger the negative impact on trust in government” and that to obtain a more positive perception and meet expectations, participation is needed for citizens to engage with the government role (Kang & Park, 2018, p.13).

Social and economic factors like income, occupation, education, social status and where someone lives can also shape citizens' perceptions of public servants and public service. In 21 North American and European countries, citizens' perceptions are overall positive, but they can vary based on socio demographic attributes and political attitudes and that they also have to do more with the quality of public institutions rather than the economic conditions of people (Aitalieva & Morelock, 2019).

As it has been shown in all the literature presented above, plenty has been said about explanations on perceptions of citizens towards the government and the service provided by the state. Nevertheless, most of the literature found and the papers addressing the issue of perceptions are using mainly a quantitative approach, with surveys as their main source of data. This gives a window of opportunity for this study as a qualitative approach is missing that considers a more comprehensive manner on what citizens have to say about the role of public officials and the public service provided by the government through them, and not merely narrow it down to whether they have a positive or negative perception.

Additionally, most of the cases that were found that study perceptions of citizens are studies on one country or comparison studies between multiple countries that share some characteristics, those being western countries, or high-income countries, or emerging markets like the BRICS. In that sense, countries from South America besides Brazil are not included in these comparison studies and there are not any cases that compare a middle-income country with a high-income country. Therefore, a comparison case between a country like Colombia with a country like the Netherlands will help to fill in that gap in the literature.

Moreover, the literature about perceptions of public officials is mainly about those that have been elected by popular vote (Charu, 2017; Kang & Park, 2018) or even public service in general, but there weren't any studies that focused on the public officials that have not been elected by popular vote and that work in public institutions like ministries or municipalities. Therefore, this study will also bring new insights on the topic since the interest of this thesis is to focus mainly on the public officials that

have not been elected by the people and that work for the executive institutions like the ministries or the municipalities. These public officials oversee the daily management of the public institutions as they are the ones formulating recommendations, coming up with solutions for the society's needs and creating and implementing policies (VNG, 2008). It can be said that they “do not play the game of politics as they only serve as support” (VNG, 2008).

Taking this into account, the focus of this study are the perceptions of citizens towards the public officials that work in public institutions from the executive branch, the administrative staff that works behind the scenes or the “back office” of any public organization or institution, and the service that they provide to the public. Also, the purpose is to go beyond a positive or negative assessment and find out the why behind the perception and try to go as deep as possible on explanations to their viewpoint.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

Opinions towards public service have been on the academic research debate to explain how and why citizens perceive the public servants that work in the government and the services that they provide. After doing extensive research for creating a proper literature review on the topic, a lot of possible explanations came to place that could give an explanation to the reasons beneath a good or bad perception of public service from citizens. However, there was not a theory in particular that could answer the question as a whole; therefore, for this research no overarching theory is used but rather a combination of theories that can build upon the explanations for a positive or negative perception to public service and the reason behind it. Consequently, a set of factors that are present in some studies have been selected and organized to give a theoretical answer for the proposed research question. In that manner, three set of factors, those being: socio economic, socializing, and external factors, are going to be presented and explained in this chapter to fulfill the objective outlined before.

#### **3.1. Socio-economic factors**

Very often socio- economic factors such as age, education, income, or occupation come to place as possible explanations for the perception that one might have on the services provided by the government. That same logic can also apply to the perception that citizens have towards public officials since they are the way through which governments are able to fulfill society’s needs. Therefore, some factors have been selected as possible explanations of a positive or negative perception towards public servants and public service in the case of Colombian and Dutch citizens. Age, on firsthand, comes as an explanation since attitudes towards government have found to be positively related to age (Aitalieva & Morelock, 2019). As people tend to age, they become more aware of public affairs and they tend to

be “more collectively oriented and more inclined to have an attachment to institutions” (Aitalieva & Morelock, 2019, p.200).

Some research shows that “higher levels of education can contribute to a better understanding of the political system in a country” (Aitalieva & Morelock, 2019, p.201). In that sense, education can be considered also a relevant topic because when citizens are “better educated and politically more informed”, they are able to understand the different roles of each agency or institution (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003, p.904). Age then can lead to a more positive perception towards the public service since citizens are more aware of the proper functioning of the state and its institutions (Foster & Frieden, 2017).

Work experience can also become a relevant factor when assessing perceptions. However, since this study is analyzing the perceptions that people have towards public service, the relevance of work experience must be in the public sector or the government, since there can only be a relation in the perception if they have been able to see how the state and its institutions function daily and what the job in a public institution entails. Government employees tend to have a positive perception towards the public service than private sector employees or employees that do not have any ties with the government (Brewer & Sigelman, 2002). As so, this can lead to having a better perception towards public service because you have to know what working in the public sector entails and how things actually work in the administrative part of the public institutions. The same logic can also be applied to people that do not work in a public institution but that work daily with the public sector and public officials as they are also seeing the functioning of the government from the inside. Hence, it can be expected that older people age, more educated and with work experience in public affairs people might have a more positive perception towards public officials and public service.

### **3.2. Socializing factors**

Social experiences are a relevant feature when it comes to perceptions as well because the environment that an individual is surrounded with can influence their way of thinking and the perception that they have towards something. Someone’s closest social circle, those being family and friends, can play a major role in shaping one’s point of view. Following on Brewer & Siegelman (2002) it is high likely that people that interact with public employees at home or in their social encounters among friends, might develop more trust and a better perception of public service since they know someone close that works on a public institution. As so, “when they think about the government, they might tend to focus on their co-workers, family members, and friends rather than on impersonal—and negatively charged—symbols” (Brewer & Sigelman, 2002, p.626).

However, family and friend are so important in the process of socialization, as they can also share if they have a good or bad perception towards a specific topic and then that perception can be spread within their closest relatives or friends. Generalization or a generalized negative attitude towards the government can also be considered as a factor to citizens' perception towards public service because people can be influenced by the people that surround them and what those people have to say about public service. This is part of socialization, a political culture, a prejudice, or a cultural element, as people tend to evaluate all governments' actions in a negative way just because they come from the government, and they do not trust the whole system (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003).

Another relevant factor in perceptions are experiences. Good or bad experiences can also lead to a positive or negative perception towards the public service. If an individual goes to a public institution with a specific concern and the government official that attends them listens closely, informs, and responds actively, then that will lead to satisfaction of the public service (Lamsal & Gupta, 2022) and therefore good perceptions on the role of the public servants and public service can be achieved. Citizens are more likely to have good perceptions of public service if they receive good quality on the services that are being provided; therefore, a causal relationship might be built upon satisfaction and quality of services provided and maintained (Lamsal & Gupta, 2022) However, this can also be applied to if they have a negative experience when approaching a public institution.

### **3.3. External factors**

Now, citizens can also be influenced by factors from a more rational and objective perspective. Following on Van de Walle et al (2008), the most common explanation to a bad perception is that the government and the public sector have failed to perform, and that outputs and outcomes have not been reached, that levels of efficiency and effectiveness are quite low and that in general governments, and therefore public officials have failed to deliver what they promised to their voters before taking office. In that sense, citizens might be leaning towards having bad perceptions about public servants and public service because they are not able to see good and tangible results, and therefore believe that nothing has been really done within public institutions.

On that same path, a possible explanation is performance. The Micro-Performance Theory explains the relation between both as “better quality performance is supposed to lead to satisfied citizens and eventually to trust or a positive attitude towards the government” (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003, p. 894). Very often citizens are good at evaluating performance of a service that they receive or use but the knowledge that they have on public agencies or specific branches of governments are not as clear; as so, establishing cause-effect relations is tricky: do citizens have bad perceptions of the public sector

because it is seen not to perform properly, or do they think it does not perform because they don't have a good perception in the first place? (Van de Walle et al., 2008).

Additionally, information can play a key role on how citizens perceive public servants and the service they provide. On one side, information, in the way of mass media, can lead to negative perceptions of public service as media tends to “promulgate critical themes of government activities and sensationalize discussion of public affairs in order to attract readers” (Wang & Niu, 2019, p.318). On the other side, providing information to citizens can lead to higher levels of satisfaction with the services provided (Wang & Niu, 2019). A dichotomy might be reached then between what is better for creating satisfaction among citizens: “should government make the effort to effectively communicate more and better information to citizens in order to gain their trust and favorable opinions about public sector performance, or should government conceal certain information in order to make itself look better and keep citizens satisfied?” (Wang & Niu, 2019, p.318).

Socio-economic, social and external factors mentioned above come as a way to respond to the research question from the theoretical perspective about how and why citizens perceive the public servants and the public service. Those factors are going to be analyzed during the interviews when respondents are diving into the reasons why they have a specific point of view regarding public service.

## **4. Research design**

This thesis aims at exploring the perceptions of young people towards the public service, emphasizing on the institutions that are part of the government, i.e., the executive branch, and the public servants understood as the people that work in these institutions or agencies. The approach that will be used in this study is qualitative research as the objective is to assess the perceptions but also the reasons behind them.

Taking that into account, this chapter is going to have three different sections to explain how the study will be conducted and the justification of it. First, the justification of a qualitative approach will be explained, followed by the explanation of the use of a comparative case study and the case selection. Lastly, the data collection section will be presented where the justification on interviews will be explained followed by the methods used to gather and analyze the data.

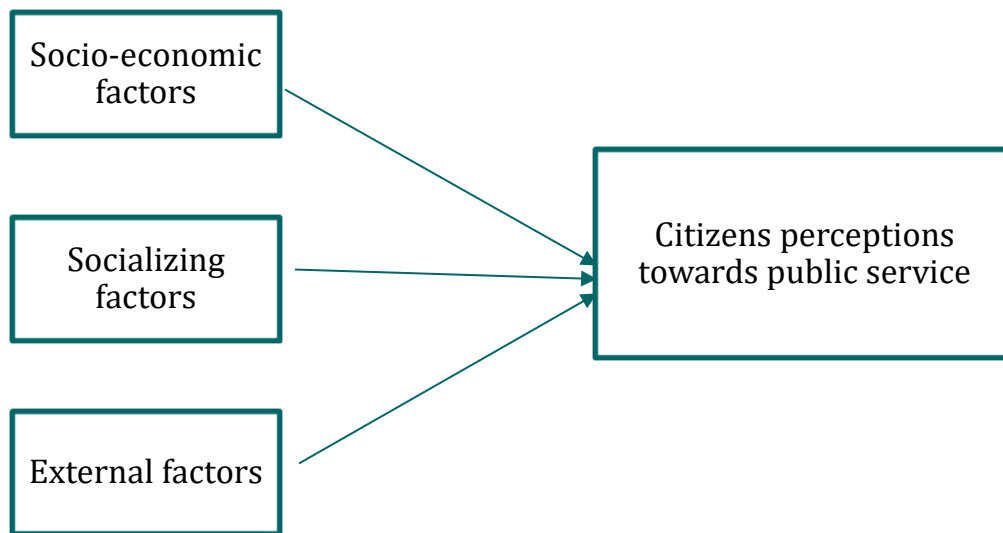
### **4.1. Choice of a qualitative approach**

Creswell defines qualitative research as “a research process that uses inductive data analysis to learn about the meaning that participants hold about a problem or issue by identifying patterns or themes” (as cited in Lewis, 2015, p.473). In that manner, perceptions are the meaning that participants have towards an issue. To achieve understating perceptions and the reasons behind it, qualitative data will be gathered as it will allow this study to describe and understand the respondent’s way of thinking considering their own context and will provide better insight of their complex reality. This is seen as one of the main advantages on the usage of a qualitative research design since it allows you to gain understanding of the research topic but also the meanings, motivations and expectations of individuals and their interpretation of reality (Van Thiel, 2014).

As it was showed in chapter three, a theoretical framework was constructed to provide possible answers from the literature to the research question proposed. Therefore, this study can be categorized as a deductive one since all relevant information and the steps that are going to be taken are decided beforehand; those being testing a theoretical explanation of a phenomenon (Van Theil, 2014).

Typically, a qualitative approach focuses on cases rather than variables but that does not mean that it does not use variables at all. A variable in this context “refers to a characteristic or attribute of an individual or an organization that can be measured or observed and that varies among the people or organization being studied” (Creswell, 2009, p.59). In that sense, the variable that will be studied in this thesis will be the perceptions of citizens, which can be categorized as the dependent variable as it is the outcome of the study conducted (Creswell, 2009). In a deductive research study, the researcher must be able to come up with expectations on the relationship between “which (independent) variables are related to and contribute to the dependent variable (the factor)” (Van Theil, 2014, p.133). Therefore, the relationship on which this study is build upon is the three categories of factors presented in the theoretical framework (socio-economic, socializing, and external factors) that are considered the independent variables with the perception of citizens, which is the dependent one. Figure 1 is presented with the conceptual model of this study to better understand what the purpose is.

**Figure 1. Conceptual model**



Source: Own elaboration

## **4.2. Comparative case study and case selection**

One of the main features of this study is to understand the how and why of perceptions of citizens; therefore, the case study method gives us the opportunity to conduct out research in an everyday, real-life setting, which is an approach mostly used in Public Administration and Public Management research as these disciplines assess “topical events from everyday life” (Van Thiel, 2014, p.86).

Now, this method was selected because comparing two units can be considered as more compelling and more robust in terms of the outcomes of the research (Yin, 2009). By comparing two countries, this research will allow us to identify similarities and differences between both cases that will eventually lead to a deeper understanding of the perceptions that they have on public officials and public service. Also, the context of both countries play an important role and that can be considered when doing a comparative case study.

Therefore, this study will be conducted between Colombia and the Netherlands, to assess perceptions on public service and to compare and understand the reasons behind them. These two countries have been chosen because they share some politico-administrative similarities, but they have very different administrative structures. As it was stated before, they both have a decentralized structure with three

levels of government, but very different historical backgrounds and the cultural and economic characteristics are very diverse as well.

In terms of the public administration as a whole and the functioning of the state, the trajectories of both countries have been quite different. For starters, on one hand, Colombia is ranked according to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as an upper-middle income country, with a reasonably capable public sector and it is considered as “one of the longest-lasting democracies in the American continent” (Sanabria Pulido & Leyva, 2022). On the other hand, the Netherlands is categorized as a high-income country with a very steady administrative sector with a “particular level of autonomy and initiative within the framework of the sovereign unitary state” (Van de Meer, 2018, p.762).

As such, the priorities of each country in terms of public policies can be very different considering their context. Colombia has had major politico-administrative reforms in its public administration and has done some public reforms to attempt to solve the absence of the state in its fragmented territory with one of the longest-lasting internal conflicts in the world (Sanabria-Pulido & Velasquez, 2021). Therefore, the priorities of Colombia have been focused on broadening the state presence in the territory and tackle some structural problems that are still an issue in the territory such as multidimensional poverty shown in the deficiencies in the educational system, a lack of access to a quality healthcare system, and a lack of employment opportunities. In the case of the Netherlands, these are not main concerns since they do not have these deficiencies in terms of provision of public services and such structural problems are not an issue since they have already been able to fulfill the basic needs of society and now, they are moving forward towards policies in different areas such as e-governance, sustainability, and trade.

More practical matters were also part of the case selection process. Firstly, the researcher comes from Colombia, has three years' work experience in the public sector at the national level and while working was able to see firsthand how public servants are often perceived as lazy or not as focused as they should be when working in a public institution. As so, an opportunity came to place as it would be interesting and appealing to assess if public servants are perceived in the same way in other countries. Secondly, comparing Colombia with the Netherlands was also suitable because of the researcher's ability to contact Colombian and Dutch people that would be willing to participate in a comparative case study. Thirdly, while the researcher was working as a public official in a ministry which is part of the executive branch of power, was able to perceive that people in general do not know much about the administrative part of institutions and are unaware of the job that is carried out on a day-to-day basis there. Therefore, an inquiry on how people that work in the executive branch are perceived by citizens and the services that they provide came to place.



Now, comparing Colombia and the Netherlands made sense since the aim is to focus on the executive branch, both countries have similarities in terms of administrative division and responsibilities that the levels of government have. In terms of division of responsibilities and tasks between the three levels of government, both countries have an alike division between the national, the regional and the local level. To exercise those responsibilities, the executive power comes into place as the one in command of creating and developing policies in each of these areas to fulfill its objectives. As it was stated before, the executive power, understood as the people working for the government in the administrative areas, is the main concern in this research as they can be seen as the machinery behind the proper functioning of the government.

At the national level, the Netherlands has 11 ministries with 13 ministers while Colombia has 19 ministries. In the Netherlands their main role is to formulate policy, prepare legislation in their area of expertise and are responsible for coordination, supervision, and policy implementation (Koninkrijksrelatie, 2011). In Colombia, the ministries oversee only the formulation and adoption of the policies, general plans, programs, and projects of the Administrative Sector they direct (Ley 489 de 1998). At the local level, the Netherlands has 342 municipalities compared to the 1123 that Colombia has. This information is relevant because inside the political structure of each body, whether it is national or local, there are public officials working on the administrative part that assist, support, and implement daily management (VNG, 2008). In Colombia by 2022, there were approximately 1.3m public servants and around 67% are in the executive brand at the national level and 17% correspond to the executive at the local level (El Tiempo, 2022). In the Netherlands by 2020 the estimated number of public administration employees are around half a million in the entire country (Statista, 2020). The objective of this study is therefore to see how these around million public servants are being assessed by the public.

Now, the sample of this research will only focus on students and young professionals between 21 and 28 years old as some research has found that “attitudes towards government are positively related to age” (Aitalieva & Morelock, 2019, p.200). Then, it can be said that is likely that the youth have negative perceptions towards public service because they do not possess enough information or are not as politically aware (Aitalieva & Morelock, 2019). Therefore, the objective is to assess whether that assumption is true and can be applicable to students and young professionals from Colombia and the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the students and young professionals chosen have to have done their undergraduate studies in in the area of political science, international relations, public administration etc. Another condition will be that they are now doing or have already finished their undergraduate or postgraduate studies in the same fields mentioned above. This decision was made because to assess perceptions on public service, people that are aware of the functioning of the state and its institutions is

needed to be able to draw conclusions based on the theoretical factors that have mentioned in the previous chapter.

### 4.3. Data collection

Data for this thesis is going to be collected by the qualitative method of interviews. Interviews are considered the most common method applied in case studies as it is a flexible way to collect information and provide a better insight of the complex reality of society (Van Thiel, 2014). Bearing in mind that the objective is to dive into perceptions on public service and the reason behind them, a semi structured interview will be used. The main advantage is that the researcher can “ask supplementary questions to gain a better and fuller understanding of any answers that have been given (more background information, added explanation, asking someone to expand on a subject)” (Van Thiel, 2014, p.93). The latter is much needed in this research because the respondents will be asked to talk about their experiences, their points of views, their backgrounds, and the researcher must be able to do follow up questions to understand the reasons why they think in a specific way. However, a path has to be drawn by the interviewer to be able to get the answers needed from the respondents. Thus, a questionnaire is going to be prepared to use in the interviews but depending on each interview carried out, the researcher will be able to do follow up questions or ask respondents to expand or explain on a topic that might be considered relevant for the study. The questionnaire can be found in the appendix.

Fourteen interviews will be conducted, seven Colombian students and young professionals and seven Dutch ones. The Colombian interviewees are between 23 and 27 years old that have some work experience in the public sector or in non-profit or non-governmental organization that entails working along with the public sector in some way. The sampling of these respondents were people that were approachable by the researcher and that were willing to participate in an interview that will take around one hour of their time bearing in mind the time zone change. Relevant information about Colombian interviewees can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1. General information of Colombian respondents**

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Date of the interview	Master's student	Master's degree	Working
Respondent #1	Male	25	May 11 <sup>th</sup> 2023	No	No	Yes
Respondent #2	Male	23	May 10 <sup>th</sup> 2023	No	No	Yes
Respondent #3	Female	27	May 11 <sup>th</sup> 2023	No	No	Yes
Respondent #4	Male	26	May 16 <sup>th</sup> 2023	Yes	No	Yes
Respondent #5	Female	26	May 9 <sup>th</sup> 2023	No	Yes	Yes

Respondent #6	Female	26	May 17 <sup>th</sup> 2023	Yes	No	Yes
Respondent #7	Female	27	May 18 <sup>th</sup> 2023	No	No	Yes

Source: Own elaboration

In the case of the Dutch interviewees, they are between 22 and 26 years old and all of them are doing or have done both a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. Out of the seven respondents, only two have had some work experience related to public sector, but none of them have worked in a public institution as a full-time job, besides doing a short internship. However, all of them have had some sort of encounter with public servants and public institutions in some way during an internship or as a part of their part time jobs. The sampling criteria on these respondents was also the researcher's approachability, since characteristics as the age and the field of studies made it difficult to find more respondents that were willing to participate in an interview, that felt comfortable doing it in English and that met the criteria. Information about Dutch respondents can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2. General information of Dutch respondents**

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Date of the interview	Master's student	Master's degree	Working
Respondent #8	Male	22	May 23 <sup>rd</sup> 2023	Yes	No	No
Respondent #9	Female	27	May 19 <sup>th</sup> 2023	Yes	No	No
Respondent #10	Female	24	May 17 <sup>th</sup> 2023	Yes	No	Yes
Respondent #11	Female	22	May 19 <sup>th</sup> 2023	Yes	No	No
Respondent #12	Male	23	May 17 <sup>th</sup> 2023	No	Yes	Yes
Respondent #13	Male	22	May 23 <sup>rd</sup> 2023	Yes	No	No
Respondent #14	Female	24	May 19 <sup>th</sup> 2023	Yes	No	Yes

Source: Own elaboration

Mostly, the interviews were conducted online and had a duration between half an hour and 45 minutes depending on the follow up questions that could be done in each case. Around 12 to 15 questions were asked to find out the perception that they have on public servants and the service they provide. The language used in the interviews was Spanish in the case of Colombia and in English in the case of the Dutch. This can be seen as a limitation since the Colombian respondents were able to answer in their mother tongue while the Dutch respondents did it in their second one. These limitations will be discussed further in the analysis chapter of this thesis.

All interviews were transcribed and then analyzed with codes. Although the ideal is to have the three phases of a qualitative study, those being data collection, data ordering and data analysis, the approach

used in this study is an iterative process because the research might have small shifts or changes during the entire process; this ensures that results can be repeated (reliability) and that they are credible (validity) which are essential characteristics of a qualitative study (Van Thiel, 2014).

The interview transcripts were analyzed using codes as a way of indicating what is the meaning of a certain qualitative data unit and then comparing different data units to draw conclusions from them (Van Thiel, 2014). Since this is a deductive study, codes were developed and defined during the analysis process. Table 3 shows the codes used and the relation between the dependent and independent variables of this study. Mainly interpretative or descriptive codes were used to denote some specific characteristics that might be relevant to the study or to reflect on interpretations that the respondents might have in a topic of interest. All the codes are directly related to the theoretical framework presented on chapter 3. The results will be presented in the analysis section of this study.

**Table 3. Codes used to analyze the data**

<b>Dependent variable</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Independent variables</b>	<b>Codes</b>
<b>Citizens perceptions</b>	General perception	Socio-economic factors	Age
			Master
			Education
			Work experience in/with the public sector
		Socializing factors	Influence of family and friends
			Good/bad experiences
			Generalization
		External factos	Performance
			Outcomes/results
			Information

Source: own elaboration

## 5. Analysis

In these chapter the results of the interviews are going to be presented taking into consideration the theoretical assumptions made in chapter three. It is structured in three parts. The first part analyzes the responses from the Colombian interviewees, followed by the findings on the Dutch interviewees and finalizing with the comparison between both countries. In each part of the analysis, the general perception is going to be addressed first and then each of the three factors (or independent variables)

are going to be presented with every feature that was considered within each variable. Afterwards, a discussion about the findings and the conclusions will be presented, finalizing with recommendations and limitations that might arise.

### **5.1. Colombian's perceptions**

To start with the interviews, respondents were asked about their general perception towards public officials and public service. Overall, it can be said that the perception that Colombians have is rather negative. According to respondents, the relationship with the citizens is very far, public officials are too immersed in the administrative processes of the institutions and therefore do not engage with the citizens at all because there are a lot of procedures and paperwork to follow. There is a belief among respondents that the role that public officials play in the functioning of the state is crucial and that the work that they perform is valuable, but they think that they do not engage with this way of thinking since their actions do not show their willingness to serve society. Also, respondents mentioned that there is a barrier between the public servant and citizens, even though providing services to them is their main objective. The reasons that explain this perception are going to be explained with the findings on each independent variable.

However, a clarification must be made because respondents argued that they cannot categorize their perception as positive or negative because it depends on which public officials from the executive branch are we talking about, or in what institution do those public officials work at, or it depends even on the experiences that they have had with them in different settings. Therefore, it can be said that yes the perception of Colombians can be negative because of bad comments and criticisms, but also was positive when they were asked to talk about experiences or what they have been able to see while working in public institutions.

#### **Socio-economic factors**

Based on the responses gathered, it can be said that age turned out to be not a relevant factor in perceptions on public service since all respondents were very critical about public service and they had strong argumentation when they were asked to explain the reasons why they had such a perception. Education, however, turned out to be a very relevant factor when it comes to perceptions on public service. Since all respondents have studied in the field of public administration and political science, they have a lot of knowledge about public affairs and the role of the government in fulfilling society's needs.

In this topic, respondents were asked if they thought that education can be considered a relevant factor when discussing perceptions of public service and public officials. Respondents agreed that education

can have an impact on perceptions but also the type of education that you have. “The more education you have, the better your perception might be, but this perception can also be more critical because with more information you are more aware how things are supposed to work, and in our case that is something that you acquire when studying in this field” (Respondent #1; Respondent #4).

In that sense, during primary school and high school you are taught in a broader way how the state works and how the politico-administrative system works but you do not get a chance to dive in much more than that (Respondent #2). However, if you do your graduate and/or postgraduate studies in the field of social or political sciences, then you will be taught how government works, what do public institutions do, what’s the role of public servants, the branches of power and your perception can be more positive since you know more about how public affairs works and the challenges that that entails. As so, education is a relevant factor but it is more about what type of education do you have and not the level or degree of education that you obtain. There is no comparison between the level of awareness on public affairs of someone that studied economics or engineering compared to someone that studied political science or public administration (Respondent #1; Respondent #2). Therefore, it is more about the understanding on how public affairs are runned to have a better perception towards public servants and public service.

In the subject of work experience, it is relevant to state that respondents were very aware and well informed about the functioning of the public sector and the role of public servants. Most of them have worked in a public institution or their work has been to work along with public officials at the national or local level. As so, one factor that influences greatly on their perception of public officials is the extent to which they know first-hand about the functioning of the state and the role of public servants in that sense, specifically in the executive branch. On this matter, one respondent claimed that when you know both sides, those being a citizen and a public official, then you are less likely to be biased and have a more accurate opinion (Respondent #5). However, there was not a direct relationship between working in the public sector and having a better perception of public service since respondents claimed that they cannot generalize to every public servant they know or have met because their perception about some of them is positive and to others is negative. As so, it comes to the experiences that each of them has had with public officials and the public service, which will be explained in the next set of factors.

### Socializing factors

Socializing factors turned out to be the most relevant when it comes to perceptions on public service. One of the main reasons behind the perception is that they have had previous experiences when approaching a public institution when they need some specific document or have a specific concern. Respondents argue that when they have approached, public servants always take so much time in giving

them a proper response, or say that they cannot provide the information or the document requested because they do not have the faculties or permission to do so or, in the case of the need of documentation, they start the process but it can take days or weeks to actually get it (Respondents #1, #2, #4, #5). It is highlighted through the responses that they have felt that the public servants, more at the local level, do not seem to have the willingness to serve the public and to help citizens in need of something from them; in other words that the ideal of serving the people is not being met by the people that work in public institutions (Respondent #3). This logic can also be applied to the national level, according to respondents, but is not that latent since the faculties and procedures are more established and organized, so it does not depend that much on the public servants to answer an inquiry or to provide documentation (Respondent #2, #6). As so, it can be argued that past experiences can play a major role in defining citizens' perceptions, since based on what people have encountered, they can have a good or bad perception about the service provided.

Moreover, another factor that was relevant for having a negative perception towards public servants and public service is the influence of family members and friends. Most of the respondents highlighted that they have parents, uncles or aunts that have worked in the public sector and have told them about how the work in public institutions is and what are the daily work dynamics in these institutions (Respondent #2, #5, #7). Their relatives' experiences have been also differentiated, in some cases public servants are lazy, only caring about themselves and not willing to help people, but in other cases they are really diligent and attentive on what they can do to help anyone that needs it. In that case, those experience were shared with their family members and others, respondents included, and that started building their own perception on public service. This logic also applies to close friends as some respondents also mentioned (Respondent #5, #7). Once again, the relevance of past experiences comes to place as this is the knowledge that is being shared with others, and whether that experience was good or bad can shape the perception in a positive or negative way.

### External factors

When it comes to external factors, performance, outcomes and the amount of information were the topics considered relevant that theoretically will impact citizens perception. Nonetheless, In the Colombian case, performance and outcomes or results were not considered relevant features when it comes to perceptions as respondents did not mention results as one of the reasons of having a good or bad perception on public service. However, information turned out to be one of the most relevant topics.

On that matter, all respondents agreed that information can play a major role in shaping perceptions and that that is the case for them in some way. The type of information that they mentioned has different understandings. On one hand, people might have a better perception towards public service if they would be more informed or have more knowledge about how the government works, how the

institutions work, what are the competences of the public officials that are in office, how the services work and finally what are they entitled to as citizens when they approach to a public institution for a specific need (Respondents #1, #2, #4, #7). On the other hand, they mentioned misinformation as false or inaccurate facts that might be spread among citizens about the role of the government, the fulfillment of their duties, the outcome achieved by the government in office (Respondent #3, #6). Taking this into account, it is safe to say that knowledge of information is a relevant factor when it comes to perceptions on public service. The more information you have regarding the functioning of the governments and its institutions can have a major impact on the perception that you might have towards the people that work in those institutions and the service that is being provided to citizens.

The role of information that comes from media also came as an explanation to citizens' perceptions. According to respondents the influence that the media can have in their perception on public service is important since the news can be not as accurate as you would think and the television and radio in Colombia may usually distort facts negatively (Respondent #3, #6). As such, perceptions can become negative based on what they see and read in newspapers, radio or tv.

## **5.2. Dutch perceptions**

The general perception of Dutch citizen according to the seven respondents is quite good regarding public servants and the service that they provide since they are regarded as people that want to contribute to society and that is why they work in public institutions. This perception has been shaped by many factors that will be explained in the next sections. However, there was one respondent whose perception on public officials was not that positive because of what he was able to see and hear when talking to some of them at the local level. Details on this interview will be presented in the upcoming sections as well.

### **Socio-economic factors**

For the Dutch interviewees, age turned out to be not a relevant factor as well because the respondent's responses were pretty much the same when it comes to the argumentation and the explanation of their point of view. Respondent #12 was much more critical, but age is not considered to be the reason because his age was in the medium of the respondents. More about this respondent will be explained further. Moreover, education was found to be also a relevant factor for citizens' perceptions. However, like the Colombian interviewees, they agreed that it is not about the level of education obtained but the type of education that you have. Respondents argued that people with a studies background in Public Administration can definitely have a better perception about public service since they are more informed about governmental and state affairs (Respondent #8, #10, #14).



Now, work experience turned out to be a relevant factor but not in the sense of having a more positive or negative perception, but in the way of just being much more aware of the tasks of public officials and the public sector in general. The respondents that have a job in something related to the public sector were more argumentative and had much more to say about public officials. Respondent #12 was the one that already graduated and the only one that has a full-time job, and his perception was also good but more critical, also because he has had some experiences with public servants that has led him to think in a different way. Since his responses were based on experiences, the explanation of his way of thinking will be presented in the socializing factors.

### Socializing factors

As the Colombian case, experiences and the influence of family and friends turned out to be very relevant for shaping their perception. All respondents mentioned having a relative or a friend that works in the public sector and according to them, they are really devoted to service people that always try to do their best at their jobs, so that is why they believe that that behavior can be replicated to everyone that works at a public institution (Respondents #10, #11).

When it comes to experiences, most interviewees did not have much to say about some event that they have experienced when approaching a public institution or a public official. But there were two outliers among them. In one instance, respondent #13 argued that he needed to approach a municipality regarding the need of bike racks in his street and based on what he mentioned, approaching was quite easy as the channels of communication were open, and he was able to easily speak to someone about his concerns. According to him, the public official that talked to him was very kind and concerned about how he might be able to help him and diligent about getting a proper response (Respondent #13). As such, he has a very good perception of public service based on his own experience. However, he did make a clarification that he believes not everyone can have as good a perception as he does because most people do not just approach the municipality when they have a concern, like he did (Respondent #13).

The other outlier was the respondent #12 that does not have as good of a perception as the others but more in the sense of the public value that other respondents highlighted. By encounters with public officials from his job, the mindset that others mentioned about the devotion to serve the people is not very much true, from his experience. According to him, people that work in the municipalities are just worried about having a good and steady job for a while and then retiring when they reach age, and the reason that they work in public institutions is because these places give that to their workers (Respondent #12). Also, he mentioned that a common thing to see in the administrative part of

municipalities is the lack of appropriateness of the job, meaning that when something goes wrong no one feels responsible for it. It is important to highlight that this respondent was the only interviewee that already finished his studies and now has a full-time job where he has to deal with public officials on a regular basis (Respondent #12).

### External factors

From the Dutch perspective, performance and outcomes and results were not mentioned as something relevant for having a positive perception towards public service. However, Dutch interviewees argued that information is important when it comes to perceptions. Misinformation was highlighted as the main issue since there is a lot of inaccurate information about public servants lately and that has influenced a shift to a more negative perspective the perception that citizens have (Respondent #8, #9, #10). Also, the misinterpretation of information and the fact that only knowing one side of facts was brought up as an influencer factor (Respondent #12). The importance of media was also brought up by the respondents as a factor that can influence citizens' perceptions of public service. Several interviewees mentioned one scandal that was all over the news that really stood with them as an example on how media can contribute to good or bad perceptions of public service (Respondents #9, #11, #13). They referred to the Dutch childcare benefits scandal in 2018 when thousands of parents were falsely accused of fraud by the tax authorities (UVA, 2023).

### **5.3. Discussion of findings: Comparison between the two cases**

The general perception about public servants and public service is very different between Colombian and Dutch respondents. On both cases, it can be stated that the public service is quite different. For the Netherlands, it appears to be very diligent, well focused, working properly and public officials are really committed to the provision of quality services for the people. In Colombia on contrast, public service is slow and full of process and procedures, it takes time to get responses and the channels of communication are not so open, so approaching a public institution and getting a proper response might not be as easy as the Netherlands case. A clear difference can be highlighted since overall, the public service and the people that work in public institutions is perceived positively in the case of the Netherlands and negatively in the case of Colombia. When looking for possible answers to the reasons behind the perceptions that people might have towards public service a lot of possibilities came up; however, after reviewing the interviews, some features turned out to be relevant and some others turned out to be unrelated.

Age, for starters, is not a relevant feature in Colombia or the Netherlands because there is no relation between being older and having a more positive perception of public service, as it was stated in

theoretical part of this study. As so, age can be categorized as a not relevant factor in terms of having a better perception of public officials and public service.

An aspect that is believed to be relevant is the work experience that respondents have had, that have nourished their understanding of public service much more and therefore, can say much more about it, compared to someone that has not had that professional encounter yet. That is the case of all Colombians that were interviewed since all of them have full time jobs after graduating and their jobs are in something relating with the public sector, even some have worked within the national or local public institutions. This can be proven also by the response made by one of the Dutch interviewees, who was mentioned as an outlier, because he was the only one that has a full-time job with the public sector after graduating, and his perception was quite different as the other respondents from the Netherlands.

Education also turned out to be relevant but more in the sense of understanding how the government works and the institutions within than in acquiring more levels of education. There was no relation between a higher level of education with a better perception of public service because in the case of Dutch, all respondents had a postgraduate study and had a positive perception of public service. In the case of Colombia, it was the opposite since the respondents were critical about the public service, no matter if they had a postgraduate taught or not. It can be concluded in this aspect that a relevant factor is the type of education that one can have because having a background in areas related to public service will lead to having a in depth comprehension of the public sector and the functioning of it, and therefore, when it comes to assessing the services provided, people can have a more evidence-based stance.

As to socializing factors, the influence of family and friend turned out to be very pertinent when shaping citizens perceptions, as both in Colombia and the Netherlands, respondents mentioned having a relative or a friend working in/with the public sector and their perception has been influenced by it for better or for worse depending on the case. Experiences turned out to be the most relevant factor among respondents, especially in the Colombian case, because “while citizens interact with government officials, the institutional arrangements and practices shape their personal experiences with the state” (Young & Hassan, 2018, p.281). This can also be applied to the two outlier cases that were explained in the Dutch responses. Finally, in the theoretical section, the possibility of a generalized negative attitude towards the government was explained. As so, based on the responses, that can only apply for the Colombian case since the perception of Dutch citizens was overall quite positive.

Concerning the external factors, performance and results were not a relevant topic for either since no one mentioned outcomes or results, whether they were good or bad, as an important factor for the perception that they have towards public service. Therefore, the Micro Performance Theory presented in the theoretical framework is not relevant to this specific case. It can be said that perhaps the reason

why these aspects are not relevant is because when asked about perceptions, people think more about how they feel about the service provided and not about tangible things like results or outcomes. Nonetheless, these elements are still relevant when discussing perceptions of government as it was shown in the theoretical framework and literature review.

Information, conversely, turned out to be relevant in shaping citizens' perceptions in both cases. Respondents from both countries agreed that the more information you have on governmental and public affairs, the more objective and rational you are in the way you assess the services being provided by the state and the work that the people working in the public sector perform, and then it is likely to have a positive perception. Misinformation was a relevant topic in both cases as a shaper in having a negative perception of public service.

## **6. Discussion and conclusions**

Going back to the question proposed in this paper on “how and why do citizens have different perceptions on public officials and public service”, it can be said that Colombians and Dutch perceive public official and public service in two different ways; the first ones have a more negative perception towards it meanwhile the latter is more positive overall. At the beginning of this study, it was considered highly likely that citizens would have negative perception towards public service because the literature mostly discusses the reasons behind a negative perception and there is a latent stereotype among western countries that the public sector does not work properly. However, with the interviews carried out for this study it was proven that that was only the case for Colombia, since the Netherlands interviewees were quite positive about their perception and seemed quite satisfied about the service that has been provided by the government.

Concerning the why on the research question, three set of factors were outlined to give explanations on the perception that citizens might have towards public service. As it was showed in the analysis part, socio-economic, socializing, and external factors turned out to be relevant when shaping perceptions on Colombians and Dutch. However not all factors included in each set were as relevant. In the socio-economic ones, age was not relevant compared to education and work experience that was shown to be very pertinent to influence perceptions. In the socializing ones, all features included turned out to be significant as the influence of family and friends and experiences were remarkable features influencing perceptions towards public service. Lastly, only information as one of the external factors was considered influential in perceptions since performance and outcomes were not part of the reasoning of respondents when addressing perceptions of the public sector.

In more general aspects, some findings are relevant to address in this chapter as well. Respondents from both countries were very much aware of the importance of public service and the relevance that the tasks that a public official carries out are fundamental for the proper functioning of the governmental apparatus. They also still believe in the ideal that people that work in the public sector do so because they have a will to help society and to make a change with the work that they will be able to do from the public sector. Although this might be true, this study only gives us the possibility to highlight that aspect but not to really argue if that in fact is the case for public officials that work in public institutions.

Another aspect that must be highlighted when comparing responses is the amount of information acquired during the interviews is very extensive and rich in the case of Colombians, but not so much in the case of the Dutch. When interviewees were asked about public service, Colombian respondents were very much engaged with the conversation and had a lot to say about the topic; they were also very critical and well informed and aware of the whole landscape. In the case of the Dutch interviewees, they did not have that much to say about the topic and their responses were very short, concise and did not go into much detail on the actual tasks that the public officials perform. This can be related to the work experience factor and also due to the fact that Colombian have had more encounters with public officials and public institutions than Dutch. Another relevant topic that comes to mind after reviewing the responses is that the extension and detail of the responses when comparing both countries might be because Colombians were responding in their mother tongue while Dutch were responding in their second language. This can also be seen as a limitation because the question whether the Dutch responses would be the same if they were speaking in their mother tongue cannot be answered by this study.

Another finding is that interviewees are very much interested in working in the public sector in their respective countries. Through the responses it was seen that respondents understand that working in the public sector is not an easy job because there is bureaucracy, procedures and specific paths to follow, and that politics might be entangled with their duties. Nevertheless, they are aware of these possibilities and are still interested in performing because they still believe in the importance of public service and the possibility to create change by working from the government and helping society.

## **7. Recommendations and limitations**

When finalizing the interviews, respondents were asked what was needed for improving their perception. Colombians mentioned more transparency, more accountability, that public servants could acquire a job in the public sector just by meritocracy, that the administrative processes in public institutions were more agile and straightforward and that public officials have more sense of serving

the people and thinking about the added value that they are giving to society (Respondents #1, #2, #4, #6). Contrasting, when Dutch were asked the same question, they were not as demanding and only came up with not having too many procedures and being more diligent, which can relate to the Colombian respondents, and that the government should keep updated on how to meet society's needs in the modern present (Respondent #10, #12, #13).

Taking this into account, there is a lot that the Colombian public sector needs to learn from the Dutch one as the problems that are being identified are more in depth and require a bigger reform in the public administration than the Dutch ones. However, this study did not go that far on comparing the public administration on both countries, so that can be a window of opportunity for another comparison case between Colombia and the Netherlands that would be able to use the finding presented here as a starting point.

However, some limitations of this study would have to be considered. The sample would have to be more homogeneous in terms of interviewing individuals that are either all students in the same level or are all young professionals with a full-time job related to the public sector; then it would be easier to draw conclusions from findings. Also, the language barrier must be addressed and decide whether to do all interviews in the mother tongue or all in the second language, so that respondents are in equal footing and perhaps see as in the Dutch case, the responses are more elaborated.

Another recommendation that comes to place is to broaden the sample and consider older people to be able to prove the age hypothesis. Additionally, would be interesting to consider respondents from other fields such as economics, law, or engineering, to assess if the same conclusions regarding education and information can be proven. Finally, the last recommendation for future studies would be to keep the qualitative approach as there is still a literature gap waiting to be filled.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire for participants of the interviews.

### ESPAÑOL

**Contexto:** El objetivo de este estudio es indagar sobre las percepciones de los ciudadanos sobre el servicio público y cuáles son las razones detrás de su forma de pensar. Se está realizando un estudio comparado entre dos países como Holanda y Colombia que comparten algunas características en su organización político-administrativa pero que su trayectoria política ha sido muy diferente y el rol de las instituciones tiene un enfoque distinto pues las necesidades de la población en los dos contextos son muy diferentes. Por esta razón, se realizarán entrevistas a jóvenes entre los 22 y 30 años en los dos países respectivos, que hayan cursado o estén cursando sus estudios de pregrado o postgrado en áreas de la ciencia política, relaciones internacionales, administración pública, gobierno y afines, pues la idea es conocer la perspectiva de jóvenes que conozcan un poco del funcionamiento del estado y sus instituciones y que estén familiarizados con el servicio público.

Bajo ese contexto, antes de comenzar con las preguntas quisiera realizar una aclaración sobre el concepto de servicio público sobre el cual girará en torno la presente entrevista. En el contexto del presente estudio, se entiende como servicio público el servicio prestado por el estado a sus ciudadanos o bien el ejercicio de las funciones de un empleado en el ámbito del sector público y sus instituciones. Un ejemplo de esto sería los burócratas o servidores públicos que trabajan instituciones como el Departamento Nacional de Planeación, la presidencia de la República en el caso colombiano o el personal que trabaja en una alcaldía o un ministerio; aquellos trabajadores que no fueron elegidos por voto popular, sino que tienen un trabajo de planta o de contratista, algo que es muy común en Colombia y en Holanda. Siendo así, el enfoque de la presente investigación es ese personal administrativo que trabaja tras bambalinas o el BackOffice de toda institución u organización pública, Ahora bien, teniendo en cuenta las tres ramas del poder público, nuestro interés es saber cómo las percepciones del servicio público en el contexto de la rama ejecutiva, es decir toda la parte administrativa de las organizaciones e instituciones del estado.

Ahora bien, ya sabiendo ese contexto de manera preliminar, la primera pregunta sería

1. Para fines de este estudio ¿Tengo su consentimiento para grabar la entrevista?
2. Preguntas de contexto ¿Cuál es su nombre? ¿Cuántos años tiene? ¿Qué estudio y hace cuanto se graduó? ¿Qué está haciendo en este momento?
3. ¿Cuál es su percepción a grandes rasgos del servicio público?
4. ¿Cuáles es la razón o razones de su percepción? ¿Qué lo ha llevado a pensar de esa forma?
5. ¿Cree que puede haber una diferencia si se piensa en el servidor publico o el servicio público del nivel nacional o del nivel regional o local?
6. ¿Se ha visto influenciado por algo o alguien para pensar de esta manera?
7. ¿Ha tenido alguna experiencia que lo haya llevado a pensar de esa forma?
8. ¿Esta percepción difiere si usted piensa en el director o directora de una institución en particular y en la misma institución como tal? (ej. alcalde y alcaldía, ministro/a y ministerio)
9. ¿y entre diferentes organizaciones o instituciones del mismo rango pasa lo mismo?
10. ¿esta percepción ha cambiado con el tiempo? Si, no ¿Por qué?
11. ¿Cree que la opinión que usted tiene la comparten las mismas personas de su entorno? ¿Puede ser generalizada?
12. ¿Cree que la desinformación puede jugar un papel importante en la percepción de los ciudadanos sobre los servidores públicos y el servicio que prestan los mismos?
13. ¿Considera que un factor relevante sobre la percepción de los ciudadanos puede ser el nivel educativo alcanzado?
14. ¿que podría pasar o debería pasar para que su percepción cambie o mejore?

## ENGLISH

**Context:** The objective of this study is to inquire about the perceptions of citizens about public service and what are the reasons behind their way of thinking. A comparative study is being carried out between two countries such as the Netherlands and Colombia, which share some characteristics in their political-administrative organization but whose political trajectory has been very different, and the role of the institutions has a different approach because the needs of the population in the two contexts are very different. For this reason, interviews will be conducted with young people between 22 and 30 years old in the two respective countries, who have studied or are currently studying at the undergraduate or postgraduate level in the areas of political science, international relations, public administration, government and related fields, since the idea is to learn the perspective of young people who know a little about the functioning of the state and its institutions and who are familiar with public service. In this context, before beginning with the questions, I would like to clarify the concept of public service on which this interview will be based. In the context of the present study, public service is understood as the service provided by the state to its citizens or the exercise of the functions of an employee within the scope of the public sector and its institutions. An example of this would be the bureaucrats or public servants who work in institutions such as the National Planning Department, the presidency of the

Republic in the Colombian case, or the personnel who work in a mayor's office or a ministry; those workers who were not elected by popular vote, but who have a staff or contractor job, something that is very common in Colombia and in the Netherlands. Thus, the focus of this research is the administrative staff that works behind the scenes or the BackOffice of any public institution or organization. Now, taking into account the three branches of public power, our interest is to know how the perceptions of public service in the context of the executive branch, i.e. all the administrative part of the organizations and institutions of the state.

Now then, knowing this preliminary context, the first question would be

1. For the purposes of this study, do I have your consent to record the interview?
2. Background questions: What is your name? How old are you? What did you study and how long ago did you graduate? What are you doing at the moment?
3. What is your general perception of public service?
4. What is the reason(s) for your perception? What has led you to think that way?
5. Do you think it makes a difference whether you think of the public servant or the public service at the national level or at the regional or local level?
6. Have you been influenced by anyone or anything to think this way?
7. Have you had any experience that led you to think this way?
8. Does this perception differ if you think of the director of a particular institution and the institution itself (e.g., mayor and mayoralty, minister and ministry)?
9. and between different organizations or institutions of the same rank?
10. Has this perception changed over time? Yes, no Why?
11. Do you think that the opinion you have is shared by the same people around you? Can it be generalized?
12. Do you think that misinformation may play an important role in citizens' perception of public servants and the service they provide?
13. Do you think that a relevant factor in the perception of citizens may be the level of education attained?
14. What could or should happen for your perception to change or improve?