



What Services Are 'Public'?

A Review of Attitudes Across Europe



Steven Van de Walle
Erasmus University Rotterdam

Background

Who counts what as 'public services'? The term 'public service' is often used as if it had some single canonical meaning. But in fact there are many different possible ways of defining what services are to be counted as 'public' and many cases in which opinions will differ.

Some individuals would consider access to a range of TV channels, an internet connection, or frequent and affordable public transport as essential, and therefore to be guaranteed in some way by government. Others would dispute the 'general interest' component in many of these services.

So, who sees what as 'public services' and how much difference is there across countries in public attitudes?

What I Did

- ❖ I analysed European public opinion towards public services to determine which services citizens consider to be essential. I used Eurobarometer data to test a model exploring which factors determine how respondents see some services as 'essential' and therefore to be provided to users irrespective of their ability to pay.
- ❖ I also analysed EU policy documents to track how the trade-off between European internal market requirements and universal service obligations has changed over time. These documents revealed the extent of disagreement about the categorization of services as 'essential' and how their performance can be assessed.

Aims

Taking the case of so-called 'services of general interest' (SGI)—an EU term applied to services that are considered outside the realm of ordinary commercial transactions, this project aimed to:

- ❖ map what respondents in 15 EU countries (the countries that were member states of the EU prior to its expansion to 27 states in 2004-7) considered as (the values of) public services, in the sense of SGIs;
- ❖ analyse differences in public opinion towards SGIs in the 15 countries, and
- ❖ explore changes over time in how public opinion and policy have defined the 'public' (SGI) dimension in public services.

The pre-2004 EU15 Countries

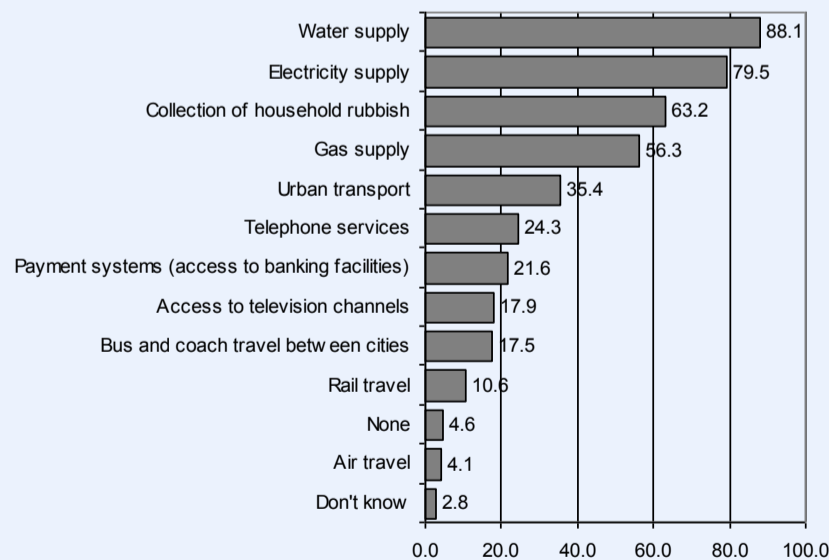


Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EU15-1995_European_Union_map.svg

Findings

- ❖ What individuals consider as essential public services varies widely across EU countries. For instance, rubbish collection is much more taken for granted by the Dutch and Danish than by the Italians or Greeks, while electricity and water supply are considered as essential services throughout Europe
- ❖ Such ideas change over time, as the policy documents revealed;
- ❖ Current data on public opinion towards public services in EU countries is generally not internationally comparable, and much of the available data is not up-to-date;
- ❖ Ranking the performance of public services requires a common definition of what counts as performance and what doesn't. For services of general interest, this definition is disputed, but international rankings rarely take close account of such differences of opinion.

What Services Should be Guaranteed to Everyone Regardless of their Ability to Pay for Them?



Source: Eurobarometer 47.0, ZA2935, Jan.-Feb. 1997. Figure shows % of respondents who mentioned the services. Results for entire EU15, weighted by countries' population.

Find out more...



For more information contact Steven Van de Walle
(vandewalle@fsw.eur.nl)

www.publicservices.ac.uk

