

VALUES AND ESSENTIAL PUBLIC SERVICES IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Certain public (and private) services are seen as essential services, while others aren't. In this paper, I will analyse public opinion towards public services to analyse what services citizens consider as essential services. I first show how conceptions of what services are seen as essential services are changing, and how and why these changes happen. I then look at a number of ways for establishing which services are considered as essential within a certain national context. I continue by using Eurobarometer data to test a model exploring what factors determine whether citizens in 15 EU countries consider certain (public) services as essential services and therefore to be provided to all.

Keywords: Services of General Interest, public service values, liberalisation, universal service delivery, political attitudes

VALUES AND ESSENTIAL PUBLIC SERVICES IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The importance of many, if not most, public (and private) service stretches beyond the mere delivery of a service or product to an individual customer. Presence or absence of these services does not only have an effect on the individual customer, but also on the wider society. When a railway station or post office in a rural area closes, this has important implications for the identity and fabric of this area. When a family is disconnected from the electricity or water mains, this has value implications that go beyond this individual case. At the European level, ‘services of general interest’ (SGI) is used as a term to refer to public and private services that have a ‘general interest’ dimension. Generally included in this category are such services such as utilities, public transport, mail services etc. There is a recognition that these services cannot be entirely left to the market, because of a desire to protect certain values (De Bruijn & Dicke, 2006). A core value is the universality of these services. This value reflects the desire to guarantee a certain level of access to these services to all. Some of these services are considered as ‘essential’ services, the lack of which for an individual or a group of individuals is to be considered as problematic and to be remedied by some type of (government?) intervention. In this paper, I will test a series of models exploring what factors determine whether citizens in 15 EU countries consider certain (public) services as essential services and therefore to be provided to all.

There are several dimensions to this ‘essentiality’. A geographical dimension deals with access to services of general interest in all geographical areas. It especially applies to rural, remote, or sparsely populated areas. Delivering services in these areas comes at a cost, and it is not always desirable to have the direct users of these services in these areas bear all the extra costs. A trade-off therefore needs to be made between delivering the same level of services in all geographical areas at the same cost, and delivering differentiated services at differential cost. Typical examples include having post offices in remote areas, the frequency of delivering mail in these areas, or the access and cost of linking houses to water mains or fast internet. The social dimension deals with the fact that accessing services under pure market conditions may be too expensive for some. Certain guarantees may then be required to avoid families being cut off from electricity or water. Recent initiatives in some countries also include access to basic internet services at home for job seekers, or special arrangements for using television and telephone for the elderly.

There is little agreement on what is implied in the ‘publicness’ of public services, or on how the ‘general’ or ‘public’ interest is to be expressed in the regulation and reform of public services. Within the EU countries, we see a myriad of initiatives, and different national systems appear to have their own approaches (Prosser, 2000). Some services are clearly

considered as more essential than others. Universal service obligations for utilities such as water and electricity are very similar across Europe. Approaches to other types of services may show much more national variation.

How comes that certain services are seen as essential services, while others aren't? In this paper I will explore the effect of two potential explanations. One is the role of political ideology, whereby it could be hypothesised that a more leftish political opinion is related to a stronger likelihood of defining certain services as 'essential' services, and therefore to be provided to all, regardless of whether there is a market-economic logic for doing so. The other explanation will look at geography. Much of the debate on universal service delivery has focused on geographical aspects of delivery, and it is likely that inhabitants of rural areas will have a different opinion of essential services than will inhabitants of urban areas. The direction of this effect is difficult to predict though.

In this paper, I first show how conceptions of what services are seen as essential services are changing, and how and why these changes might happen. I then look at a number of ways for establishing which services are considered as essential within a certain national context. The next section then introduces my dataset. I continue by building an explanatory model for 15 EU countries, and develop a number of explanations for the findings.

Why certain services are considered essential

Essentiality is a changing concept, with services being considered as non-essential at one time becoming to be seen as essential at another. We know very little about how the general interest in the provision of public services is defined, and about how collective goods become shared concerns (Schnabel, 2006). Many different actors have a say and an influence in this debate. The European Commission in its SGI policy shies away from defining what public services are to be considered as 'of general interest', and leaves this job to the member states themselves (Commission of the European Communities, 1996: 2; Behrens, 2001). Other actors in society also have an important voice in the debate. Unions, consumer groups, and voluntary, non-profit and mutual providers of services are groups that are especially vocal (Clifton, Comín, & Diaz Fuentes, 2006; Bozeman, 2002; Prosser, 2000; Héritier, 2001). The 'protection' of the 'public' dimension of many liberalised services is mainly organised by a variety of groups at the left of the political spectre (McGowan, 2004).

These developments in European SGI policy and in sector-specific regulation have led to a series of general principles and a series of universal service obligations. The entire process, however, appears to have been very much ad hoc. Decisions on whether certain services are to be considered as essential and therefore to be somehow protected against raw market forces

appear to have been largely based on historical factors and customs. Verhoest for instance claims that “many of our received ideas about universal service consist of historical mystification” (Verhoest, 2000: 595). Many services now defined as ‘universal’ or ‘essential’ are actually relatively new. We for instance had to wait till the 1960s till services such as telephony became truly universal. Paraphrasing Tocqueville, who was speaking about political institutions, we could say that one particularly important factor in deciding whether a public service is essential and of general interest is our tendency to see as necessary services those to which we have grown accustomed (De Tocqueville, 1971). Rather than using a theoretical justification for protecting certain services, decisions have been largely based on how the services were already organised before competition. Universal service obligations (USO) therefore mainly served to continue that what already was or what had always been. Service delivery models existing previous to competition continued after the introduction of competition, but now aided by a number of USO.

In a way, such USO therefore ‘freeze’ the organisation of a public or semi-public service. This has certain risks. ‘Fixing’ of ‘freezing’ essential services may lead to disparity between guaranteed services, and a society and technology that has moved on (Cremer, Gasmi, Grimaud, & Lafont, 2001: 8). The declining importance of public telephone booths as a result of the spread of cell phones is a good example of an area where changes in technology make earlier obligations largely obsolete.

The increasing European interest in SGI, and sector-specific evolutions and legal changes suggest a certain agreement on what is or should be an essential public service. Yet, our conceptions of what constitutes essential public services and essential public service values vary widely. Charles et al. (2007: 5) distinguish between universalistic and relative approaches to public values, whereby the universalistic approach treats certain public values as inalienable or natural rights, and where the relative approach sees those values as changing and context-dependent.

There is quite some evidence of a consensus about the public values guiding the organisation of SGI, be it that this consensus is often limited to a specific sector or territory (Héritier, 2001: 825; Cremer et al., 2001; Higgs & White, 1997: 444). Certain values, such as neutrality, continuity or affordability are mentioned nearly always. USO have lead to a codification of values that were previously much less clearly defined (Clifton, Comin, & Diaz Fuentes, 2005).

At the same time, our conceptions of what services are essential or of general interest are constantly changing. The European Commission, in its 1996 communication about services of general interest speaks of universal service as an evolutionary concept. It is “a flexible

concept, which evolves gradually”, and which “has to adapt to technological change, new general interest requirements and users’ needs” (Commission of the European Communities, 1996: 7). The legal changes and the emergence of legal precedents further confirm this evolutionary and relative character of public service values. Public service values are not an absolute, and always subjective (De Bruijn & Dicke, 2006: 721). SGI, however, are in this respect not different from other notions, such as e.g. the concept of public service in France, which has no precise meaning (Malaret Garcia, 1998). Supiot shows that there is “no such thing as a public service by definition” (Supiot, 1998: 161), and that what constitutes a public service is thus open to constant challenge. There are, he adds, no reasons why bakeries or banking services could not suddenly be deemed essential and thus to be guaranteed to all citizens (Supiot, 1998: 162). What public services or aspects of public services are exactly ‘of general interest’ or ‘essential’ is disputed. We are dealing with a concept that is not fixed (De Bruijn & Dicke, 2006), and changing over time (Obermann, Hall, & Sak, 2005). Using notions such as “le caractère jugé indispensable de ce service” (Van den Abeele, 2005) does little to clarify *why* such a service is deemed indispensable.

So which public services are ‘essential’?

‘Essential’ public services is an undefined and changing concept. There is no fixed definition. Discovering which services are considered to be essential has therefore to be done in an indirect way, by looking at practices, behaviours, documents, and opinions. In a French survey on rural services, postal services, schools, and health care came in on top of a list of services mentioned as ‘of general interest’, and therefore to be provided nearby (Ministère de l’Intérieur et de l’Aménagement du Territoire, 2005). We find some older evidence in a 1997 Eurobarometer opinion survey (INRA, 1997), where a question was included on universal service delivery. Respondents in 15 countries were asked whether they considered certain public services as essential public services (see also further down in this paper). The results showed that services such as water and electricity distribution and garbage collection were most frequently considered as essential services. Despite this being a very crude way of measuring whether certain public services are considered essential services, the results give us a first indication. There are a number of smaller differences between countries. It is also the case that people living in rural as opposed to urban areas appear to have a different view of what are essential services (Van de Walle, 2006). Opinion surveys may not be the best method for establishing whether a public service is considered as an essential public service. Freedland has suggested that in a consumerist public sector culture this may lead to citizens considering *all* services as essential (Freedland, 1998: 24-5). There may also be arguments for considering citizens’ *behaviours* vis-à-vis public services rather than their *attitudes*. One

suggestion could be to look at citizens' reactions to post office closures, or public transport strikes.

An alternative option is to analyse policies and legal documents, and to interpret the concerns reflected in these policies. One source of such information is the European policy on services of general interest, which gives us some hints as to what kinds of services are considered to be different from mere, disposable, market services (Van de Walle, 2007). We see similar concerns reflected in sector-specific universal service obligations imposed on private providers of e.g. utilities. Such obligations regulate issues such as accessibility, quality and continuity of the services (Clifton et al., 2005). These country- and sector-specific practices in regulating public services may help us to deduct what services are considered as 'essential'. Decisions on these obligations are often taken on a case by case and ad hoc basis. Yet there is a strong degree of similarity between universal service obligations in European countries (Clifton, Comin, & Diaz Fuentes, 2003: 132), and in some sectors, there is a quite strong consensus on what is meant by universal service. Postal services and telecommunications are the best examples (Cremer et al., 2001).

In the next sections, I will analyse public opinion towards certain public services to analyse what services citizens consider as essential services, and will make a start with analysing determinants of such opinions and differences in opinions.

Data

The original objective of this paper was to analyse a number of recent Eurobarometer surveys, and look at the effect of certain values on citizen attitudes towards services of general interest. At closer inspection, however, the available data-sources appeared to be less useful than anticipated. The Eurobarometer surveys are organised for a specific purpose: to support EU decision making. A result of this is that some variables that researchers would consider to be extremely valuable are not always included because of the absence of a direct link with current policy objectives.

For this reason, I'm using a historical dataset. Eurobarometer 47.0 (1997) is the only one directly probing for citizens' opinions on universal service delivery in a series of countries. Unfortunately, this specific question was dropped in subsequent surveys. Similar material exists for some individual countries, notably Belgium (Van Roosbroek & Van de Walle, 2006) and France (Ministère de l'Intérieur et de l'Aménagement du Territoire, 2005). For international comparative purposes, this dataset therefore remains a very valuable source. The analysis in this paper builds on an earlier one in which I only analysed the Belgian data (Van de Walle, 2006). The survey has been organised in the then 15 EU member states. Around

1,000 people have been interviewed in each country. The sample for Germany was twice as large to allow for East-West comparisons, and the British sample is larger to allow for separate analysis of Northern Ireland. We will therefore apply weights where appropriate. The total dataset has 16,362 respondents.

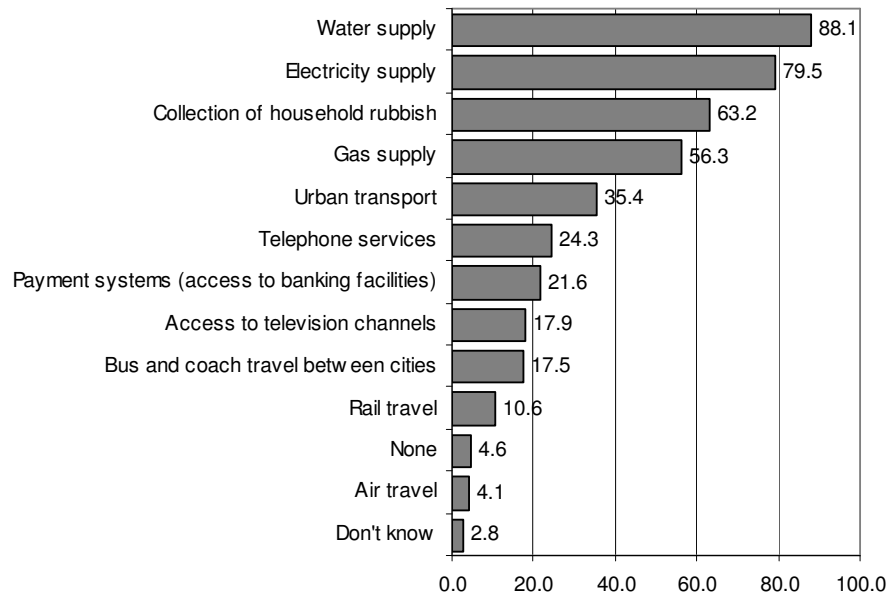
What services are considered essential?

The key variable I will use in this paper is Q38 from this survey.

‘Some people think that everyone should have the right to certain services even if they do not have the means to pay for them. Which of the following services should, in your opinion, be guaranteed to everyone?’

Respondents were provided with a list of services and could select as many services as they liked. The answers have subsequently been noted as ‘mentioned’ or ‘not mentioned’.

Figure 1: Services that should be guaranteed to everyone, 1997, EU15



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

A large majority of respondents considers services such as electricity and water supply as essential services that should be guaranteed to everyone, even to those who don't have means to pay for them. Rubbish collection and gas supply are also mentioned quite often. The number of respondents considering a service as essential starts to decline rapidly after that: about a third thinks urban transport should be guaranteed to everyone, a quarter thinks the

same for telephone services, and about a fifth thinks access to television, coach and bus travel between cities and banking facilities should be guaranteed to all. Just over 10 per cent considers rail travel an essential service. A very small group thinks that air travel should be guaranteed to everyone, and an equally small group thinks that no services should be guaranteed when means to pay for them are not available.

There are a number of important differences between countries. Rubbish collection should be guaranteed to everyone according to 79 per cent of the Dutch and 72 per cent of the Danes, but only 45.7 per cent of Greeks and 52 per cent of Italians agree. Banking facilities are mentioned by 40.2 per cent of the Fins, but by less than 10 per cent of the Italians, Spanish and Portuguese. Urban transport is not considered essential by many Danes, while 40.7 per cent of the French think it should be guaranteed to everyone. More than a third of the Germans think that access to TV channels should be guaranteed to all, while this number is just a bit over 10 per cent for the Danes, French, British and Luxemburgish. We see similar major differences for telephone services: 37.8 and 34.6 per cent of respectively the Greeks and the Belgians consider them essential, while this holds for just 13.3 per cent of the Danes.

A number of these differences are due to country-level differences in organisation of these services. A good example is gas supply, where 83.5 per cent of the Dutch consider this an essential service, compared to less than a quarter of the Greeks and the Fins. A (semi-)public infrastructure to supply individual houses with gas is more common in some countries than in others. Another example is bus and coach travel between cities, which is quite common in some countries, and quasi non-existent in other; or rail travel, which may take a more prominent place in citizens' transportation options in some countries than in others. A related factor is the extent to which citizens of a certain country may have grown accustomed to the provision of certain services, while the same services may be a rather new or a marginal phenomenon in other countries.

A further comparison of country-level differences suggests there may be an effect of population density and degree of urbanisation on the responses. The presence or absence of certain services such as urban transport or rubbish collection may have a different impact on citizens depending on whether they live in an urban or a rural setting.

Finally, national political and administrative cultures may have an effect on opinions. In Belgium, for instance, the percentage of respondents identifying a certain service as essential is generally quite high for many services, while this percentage is often quite low in Denmark.

Obviously, because this data is historical, some changes may have occurred over time. The most important ones being the proliferation of internet (not included in this survey), and the impact of this change on the access to banking facilities or television.

What determines whether a service is seen as essential?

In the previous section, we have shown that there are a number of differences between countries, and that within countries opinions tend to vary considerably. In this section, therefore, we will develop a model for describing and explaining within-country differences. As we have mentioned, the actual provision and organisation of services differs considerably between countries. This makes certain services less amenable to analysis. Examples include gas supply, inter-city bus travel and rail travel. Because of the low frequency, air travel will also be dropped from the analysis. Water and electricity supply are mentioned as essential services by a large number of respondents. The lack of variation in the answers makes these services less suitable for analysis. This leaves us with five services:

- Collection of household rubbish
- Access to television channels
- Urban transport
- Payment systems – access to banking facilities
- Telephone services

We are interested in two main determinants of attitudes towards the provision of (public) services, as already mentioned in the previous sections:

- 1) How do political opinions influence these attitudes?
- 2) How does the degree of urbanisation of one's place of residence influence opinions on the provision of public services?

In the Eurobarometer survey, a limited number of variables is available. For the political dimension we use the following variable:

'In political matters, people talk of "the left" and "the right". How would you place your views on this scale?' (where 1 is left, and 10 is right)

For the analysis, it has been recoded into three categories: left, centre, and right. While this is an essential variable for our model, it is also one where many respondents prefer not to answer. The overall combined don't know/refusal/missing rate amount to 16.4 per cent, ranging from a mere 6.9 per cent in Sweden, to 26.4 per cent in Italy. This may have implications for our models. One implication is that it results in a lower number of cases. If we can assume that non-response is evenly spread over the categories (left, centre, right), this

has few consequences for the results. Unfortunately, we know that non-response, especially on this kind of variable, may be the result of certain attitudes (Loosveldt & Carton, 2002). The exclusion of these cases may therefore have an (undefined) effect on the results.

Many, but not all, bivariate findings point in the same direction: identifying certain public services as essential is related to one's political self-identification. Having Leftish political views is related to a higher probability of mentioning that a certain services should be guaranteed to everyone. However, while significant (X^2), the differences are generally very small.

Table 1: Bivariate relations between political self-identification and defining services as essential

	FR	BE	NL	DE	IT	LU	DK	IE	UK	GR	ES	PT	FI	SE	AT
Water	L														C
Gas	L	L				L				C					
Electricity								R			C		L		
Telephone		L	L	L				R	C			L			
TV	L			L									L		
Rubbish collection		R	L				L								
Rail	L		L			L			L						
IC bus & coach						L									
Urban transport	L		L	L		L			C		L				L
Payment systems	L		L	L			L	L							

Legend: Letters indicate category where service is most frequently mentioned as essential. L=left; R=right; C=centre; only includes significant relations.

The relations are quite consequent in some countries, and less so in others. In countries such as France, the Netherlands, Germany or Luxemburg, a Leftish political orientation is related to labelling a series of services as essential. In other countries, the effects are less straightforward or even absent.

The second key variable is the degree of urbanization of one's locality. Eurobarometer is using a country-specific measure for the size of one's locality is². It has been recoded into a new variable with three values: 1/ rural; 2/ mixed; 3/urban. Table 2 again shows the bivariate findings.

² This recoding is not without risk because different definitions have been used in different countries. Sometimes, there are based on a description of the type of locality, in other cases on population numbers. The latter always have to be interpreted relatively to size of the country. Therefore, the new variable has only 3 categories: rural areas/small villages, large cities, and a middle category

Table 2: Bivariate relations between urbanization of respondent's locality and defining services as essential

	<i>FR</i>	<i>BE</i>	<i>NL</i>	<i>DE</i>	<i>IT</i>	<i>LU</i>	<i>DK</i>	<i>IE</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>GR</i>	<i>ES</i>	<i>PT</i>	<i>FI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>AT</i>
Water		C		R	R				C	CR			C		M
Gas	C	RC					C	C	C		C		M	C	CM
Electricity				RC	R		C	R	C	R	C				RM
Telephone	R							R	C	R					M
TV		C						M							M
Rubbish collection	C	CM						CM		C	C	CM	M		M
Rail		CM				RM						M			RM
IC bus coach			M			R		RM	MC		R			RM	
Urban transport	C	C	C	C	C	RM	C			C	C		M	C	
Payment systems		C				M	C	RM		MC		M			M

Legend: Letters indicate category where service is most frequently mentioned as essential. C=city; R=rural; M=mixed rural/urban; MC=mixed and city; MR=mixed and rural; RC-rural and city; only includes significant relations.

Here, a very mixed picture emerges. However, one observation is striking: living in a city tends to be related to mentioning certain services as essential, more so than living in a rural area. This appears to be counterintuitive. Policies on services of general interest have tended to focus on provision in rural and remote areas. These findings now suggest that inhabitants are less concerned with the universality of these services. There are of course a number of obvious explanations for certain services. One concerns the variable on urban transport. Precisely because of the way how this question was asked, rural populations may consider it as less essential. Had the question been phrased as 'public transport', answers may have been different. Another explanation could be that inhabitants of urbanised areas have grown accustomed to certain services, less than is the case for inhabitants of rural areas.

In what follows, we will further test the effect of political self-identification and urbanization on attitudes towards essential services. To this end, we will build a number of models for the five services mentioned higher, with these two variables, and a number of control variables. The control variables are: sex, age, level of education, income, and opinion leadership.

- Sex is simply coded as 0=female/1=male
- The age variable lists the number of years
- Education has been recorded as the age when the respondent left full time education. Respondents still studying have been assigned to the school-leaving category corresponding to their age.
- The income variable is a transformation of country-specific income groups, and puts the respondents in income quartiles. Given the sensitivity of this income question, there is 26.1 per cent refusal and no answer rate. Because this would lead to a massive reduction of the number of valid cases in the model, we have randomly assigned the

non-responding respondents to the two middle income categories, as to minimize impact.

- Finally, we use an opinion leadership index as a measure of political sophistication. This index is composed of two variables: the frequency of discussing political matters with friends, and the frequency of persuading friends of one's opinion. This index has also been recoded, and can take four values: low, medium low, medium high, and high³.

Findings

International

We ran five types of binary logistic regressions, one for each of the five services. This model was tested both for the entire dataset and for each of the individual countries separately, making a total of 80 regressions. The results were disappointing. One out of seven models did not fit at all. Of the other models, R squares were generally low - only very occasionally higher than .10 - and there were few overall trends. Reporting all the findings in detail would lead us too far, so we only report some observations and trends.

- Political self-identification: In the majority of the models, political self-identification had no significant effect on identifying certain services as 'essential'. Where it did have an effect, however, it was, with just two exceptions, similar: respondents identifying themselves as being politically on the left are more likely to think that certain public services ought to be guaranteed to everyone. This appears to be especially the case for public transport, and to some extent for payment systems. This finding, while very weak, is in line with our expectations. With some minor exceptions, political self-identification is not relevant in the models for telephony, rubbish collection, or access to TV channels.
- Urbanization: Some of the findings are largely in line with our earlier analysis of the Belgian Eurobarometer data (Van de Walle, 2006): Whether one lives in a rural, urban or mixed urban/rural area does not generally have an effect (in a multivariate model, that is) on opinions about the essentiality of certain public services. Where there is an effect, however, the dominant (but by no means strong) effect is that inhabitants of rural areas are less likely to consider certain services as essential. The trend is quite clear for rubbish collection, where those living in a rural area tend not to consider this service as essential. Alternatively, inhabitants of cities tend to consider rubbish collection as essential. Again, however, this variable is not significant in all

³ Not included in the models for Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and Germany

countries. For services such as access to TV channels or telephony, there urbanization is largely irrelevant. Urbanisation does have an effect on attitudes towards urban public transport, which is considered to be less essential for inhabitants of rural areas. This is not surprising given the question wording with a focus on *urban* transport.

- For urban transport, there frequently is an effect of education: A higher education is related to defining this service as services that need to be guaranteed to all.
- Age has an effect on attitudes towards payment systems, telephony, and rubbish collection. Younger respondents tend to see rubbish collection and payment systems as essential services, while telephones are more likely to be seen as essential by older respondents.
- Male respondents are more inclined to consider access to TV channels and essential service. However, we only find an effect in five countries.

If we summarise the findings, they are overall quite disappointing: the models are very weak, and the consistency across countries is limited. However, the analysis suggests some avenues for further research. The age effect suggests that personal circumstances and experiences may play an important role in defining certain services as essential (e.g. telephones for older people). The same may hold for the level of urbanisation, whereby it may be easier to imagine the absence of certain services within a different geographical context. The findings about the effect of political self-identification suggests that it may be necessary to distinguish between services that feature prominently in certain ideologies or party programmes, and those that don't. Public transport is a good example.

Findings - United Kingdom

In this section we look at the findings for the United Kingdom in somewhat more detail. We ran the same regression model on all 11 services. Findings are in table 1. Overall, R squares are relatively low, ranging from .024 for rubbish collection to .096 for air travel (where there actually isn't much variation anyway - so it will not be discussed). The models for electricity supply and rail travel did not fit. The findings are really quite mixed, but it is reassuring that where effects have been found, the direction of the effect is generally the same, with one exception (sex).

- Water supply: older people are less inclined to see water supply as a service that should be guaranteed, even to people who cannot pay for it, while 95 per cent of young respondents (<25) see this as a service that needs to be guaranteed. In rural areas, 15.7 per cent of respondents do not consider water supply an essential service, while this percentage drops to 5.7 per cent in cities and heavily urbanized areas.

- Gas supply. The main effect in the gas supply model is, not surprisingly, urbanisation, where the majority of respondents in rural areas do not consider gas supply as a service that should be guaranteed to everyone, as compared to one third of the urban population thinking so. There also is an effect of opinion leadership, which was mainly used as a control variable.
- Telephone services: 25.5 per cent of the city respondents consider telephone services essential, as opposed to just 17.3 per cent of the rural population. Being lower educated and female is also associated with considering telephone services as essential services.
- TV: young age (< 25), a lower education, and being male all contribute to defining access to TV channels as an essential service. Of the female respondents, 9.2 per cent mention TV as essential, and this number rises to 17.9 per cent for the male population. The differences due to education are quite strong in that TV is considered essential to 17.1 per cent of those who left education at 14 or earlier, while this percentage is considerably less than half for those who left full time education aged 21 or older.
- Rubbish collection: Male respondents are more likely than females to see rubbish collection as an essential service. There also is an age effect, but the difference appears to be mainly due to the older respondents (>65), who are considerably less inclined to mention rubbish collection as an essential service
- Intercity bus and coach travel: a lower education and a lower income both lead to mentioning buses and coaches between cities as essential services. In the highest income groups, just 10.7 per cent of respondents mention intercity buses as essential, while this percentage almost doubles in the lowest income quartile. Location is also very important: just 8 per cent of the rural population mentions buses as essential, while this is 18.9 per cent for inhabitants of cities.
- Urban transport: We find just one effect in the model for urban transport. Respondents scoring low on the opinion leadership index (i.e. discussing with and influencing friends about politics and current affairs) tend not to identify urban transport as essential
- Finally, payment systems or banking facilities are considered essential services by over 30 per cent of respondents under 35. This percentage drops gradually by age to just half that for respondents over 65. Being an opinion leader leads to payment facilities being mentioned more often as an essential service. Finally, medium-low income groups are less likely to consider payment facilities as essential.

Table 3: Binary logistic regressions – should these services be guaranteed to all (1=mentioned/0=not mentioned), United Kingdom

	water supply	gas supply	telephone	acc. TV channels	rubbish coll.	air travel	IC bus & coach	urban trans.	payment syst.
Sex (0=female/1=--male)	.451	-.047	-.304*	.667**	.310*	-.107	-.186	.151	-.215
Age (years)	-.018**	.002	.004	-.014*	-.008*	-.009	.000	.002	-.022***
Age left schooling (9 categ.)	-.053	-.024	-.117**	-.154**	.011	-.365*	-.113**	.037	.015
Income (low) ^a	.206	-.068	.406	.536	.172	1.103	.700*	-.207	-.288
Income (medium low) ^a	-.273	-.084	.161	.510	.111	1.036	.498	-.308	-.556*
Income (medium high) ^a	-.396	-.195	.364	.466	.232	1.018	.658*	.090	-.313
Opinion leadersh. (low) ^b	-.601	-.485	-.446	-.011	-.311	-.778	-.504	-.532*	-.627*
Opinion leadersh. (medium low) ^b	-.235	-.496*	-.357	-.061	-.071	-.875	-.406	-.455	-.524*
Opinion leadersh. (medium high) ^b	-.416	-.345	-.331	-.182	.012	-1.144	-.311	-.322	-.493
Political views (left) ^c	-.091	-.042	-.070	-.014	-.148	-1.258*	.164	.060	.164
Political views (centre) ^c	-.380	.168	.094	-.329	-.271	-.307	.144	-.228	.063
Location (rural) ^d	-.788**	-.909***	-.535*	-.518	-.241	-.444	-1.028***	-.194	.001
Location(mixed urban rural) ^d	-.116	-.351*	-.321	-.178	-.106	-.657	-.021	-.229	-.232
Nagelkerke R ²	.060	.050	.051	.067	.024	.096	.059	.034	.060
N	1,466	1,466	1,466	1,466	1,466	1,466	1,466	1,466	1,466

Source: Eurobarometer 47.0. Models for UK – weight-adjusted for population-size of GB and N. Ireland. *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.001. Reference categories are ^a income (high), ^b opinion leadership (high), ^c political views (right), and ^d city. Models for electricity supply and rail travel do not fit.

Challenges

This paper did not lead to the desired results. Rather than finding the anticipated results, or even contrary relations that would have required rejecting the initial hypotheses, the overall findings generally were weak or even absent. This is obviously a disappointing find for a researcher, but it is more common than what most of the published research suggests (Lehrer et al., 2007). On the other hand, it creates a need to reconsider hypothesis and to rethink data, models, and theories. In this section, I will therefore deal with a number of problems in current data and conceptualizations, and suggest a number of avenues for further research.

Measuring essentiality

The measurement used in this paper was ‘Some people think that everyone should have the right to certain services even if they do not have the means to pay for them. Which of the following services should, in your opinion, be guaranteed to everyone?’. This question touches on one specific element of universal service delivery only, and may therefore be considered incomplete. The absence of other questions measuring different aspects of universal service delivery may have reflected on the answers to this question, in that respondents’ answers may not only have been inspired by the ‘ability to pay’ consideration, but also by other elements. In other words, there are reasons to assume that the formulation of the question cannot be taken at face value, because it may have invited opinions related to other aspects of essential services.

On the other hand, the findings may in fact say very little about attitudes towards essential service delivery, because of the prominent position of the ability to pay issue in this question. This may have distracted attention from universal service consideration to issues of economic inequalities, consumer behaviour, and the acceptability of state intervention.

Further exploration of attitudes towards essential services will require the development of a good measurement scale, rather than just this single item. Such a scale would need to include a number of dimensions of essential service delivery, such as:

- territorial differentiation in price, quality and availability
- socio-economic differentiation price, quality and availability
- differentiation in delivery channels and options.

Such a scale would present us with a ‘fuller’ measure of essentiality, and would allow us to distinguish between different dimensions of essentiality.

Organisation and delivery of services – structural factors

An analysis such as the one presented in this paper is incomplete because it does not take structural factors into account. The analysis does not contain information on actual levels of service provision, recent changes in such provision, and the extent to which certain services are or are not used by the respondents. An international comparison at the macro-level may lead to limited results because of the very different nature of (public) service organisation and delivery in different countries. The examples are rife, and some have been referred to earlier in this paper: some countries have extensive railway systems, while other may rely on coaches or have a higher dependency on cars; Even within countries, the organisation of transport networks may be of an entirely different nature in different regions; Some countries may have extensive gas supply networks, while this is less common in other countries.

Furthermore, this organisation and provision is subject to constant changes. The major change since this 1997 survey has been the enormous penetration of internet connections, which has changed the nature of e.g. television, or banking services. Another example is the change in telephony, where mobile telephony is gradually superseding fixed lines. These changes are visible in opinion data. We find a good example in Special Eurobarometer 260 on services of general interest (European Commission, 2007). One of the questions in this survey asked respondents how important certain services were in their daily life. The findings for fixed telephony showed clear differences between countries. Respondents in most Central- and Eastern European countries (and in Finland, the mobile telephony Mecca) found fixed telephony considerably less important than those in Western European countries. An obvious explanation is the irrelevance of fixed telephony in these countries due to either the massive penetration of mobile phone, or the defective functioning of fixed telephony companies when mobile telephony began to emerge.

Measuring the independent variables

Some of the independent variables used in the models tend to be imprecise. This is for instance the case for the indicator measuring urbanisation. What is considered rural in one country or region may be seen as semi-urbanized elsewhere. There is no indicator, and there probably cannot be an indicator that is perfectly comparable across borders. This is a classical problem of conceptual equivalence (van Deth, 1998). The same may hold for political left-right self-orientations, where these terms may mean slightly different things in different countries.

Data

Finally, the data used in this analysis are quite old (1997). This needs not be a problem when searching for processes, elementary forms, or common foundations (Durkheim, 1915), but may greatly reduce perceived policy relevance, or even the publishability of the findings. However, the data used here are unique. These questions have been asked only once in an internationally comparative survey, and disappeared from the Eurobarometer questionnaire afterwards. To my knowledge, they have not been used in any other analysis. As I have argued elsewhere, there still is a wealth of opinion data available to researchers, much of it underanalysed (Bouckaert, Van de Walle, & Kampen, 2005). The problem with using secondary data, however, is that data have not, generally, been collected for the purposes of the secondary analyst. Eurobarometer typically is a survey for policy-making purposes. Later surveys with a focus on services of general interest have therefore mainly focused on issues that are relevant to European policy makers, and not out of bound. Newer survey items therefore reflect current policy initiatives, or they reflect a desire to enter certain new policy areas in relation to services of general interest. Eurobarometer 65 in 2006 for instance deals with consumer complaints, consumer protection, contracts, switching providers, price information and affordability.

An additional factor is the European Commission's view that the definition of what services are essential or 'of general interest' is not a matter to be decided at the European level (Commission of the European Communities, 1996: 2). Determining whether a service is of general interest is considered to be a matter for national authorities under the subsidiarity principle (Van den Abeele, 2005: 57). It may therefore be viewed as inappropriate for the Eurobarometer survey to include such questions.

Nevertheless, there may be other opportunities to study the perceptions of essentiality of public services by combining a range of national-level quantitative and qualitative studies, and extracting key findings. A number of studies are already available (Van Roosbroek & Van de Walle, 2006; Hope, Anderson, & Sawyer, 2000; Ministère de l'Intérieur et de l'Aménagement du Territoire, 2005).

Towards new explanations

While the findings in this paper were mixed, they did suggest a number of explanations and avenues for further research. One factor that emerged from the research is the element of experience. There were a number of instances where age has an impact on the assessment of certain services as 'essential'. Whereas younger people may consider certain public services as essential because they have always known a situation where such services are available, older respondents may have experienced periods without such services. This may especially

be the case in rural areas, where services such as e.g. rubbish collection, or a connection to a water mains are relatively 'new' phenomena. Furthermore, many public services now considered as 'of general interest' are actually quite recent: access to TV channels, telephone, and more recently, internet are not exactly services that have always been available. Rather than studying public services in an absolute way ('what services are seen as essential'), we should perhaps look at factors explaining how essential services come to be seen as such, including how and when a service makes its transition from a luxury good to an essential one (Verhoest, 2000: 605-6). Such a study will have to have as much attention for service characteristics, and issues of access and affordability, as for processes of political agenda-setting (see e.g. Prosser, 2000; Héritier, 2001).

A second, and related, factor is the impact of one's personal situation on attitudes towards public services, and the question of whether these services are essential. We may well assume that citizens employ an abstract conception of essential public services, but we cannot in fact exclude that the opinions measured in the survey are very personal and context-dependent opinions. That we have found such weak relations in the models (especially for what concerns the relation with political left-right orientations) may in fact be proof that these opinions are very pragmatic attitudes rather than highly-integrated, coherent, and abstract ones (Zaller, 1996). A more in-depth analysis of attitudes held by a specific person in a specific context may actually do more to further our insight into the factors determining whether a service is seen as essential, than does the current survey-based approach.

Finally, local or national circumstances are important. The debate about 'essentiality' is one that is mainly held at the national level. Attitudes towards public services and the values shaping these attitudes are an integral part of national administrative cultures, and national historical developments (Van de Walle, 2007). This for instance means that looking for EU-wide political left-right distinctions may ignore many of the subtleties of the national debates about the reform of services of general interest. What's more, the debate on Service of General Interest, both in terms of content and in terms of the terminology used, appears to be one that is quite dominant in some countries, but less so in others (Scott, 2000).

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