

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Policymakers' Preferences Over Public–Private Modes of Service Delivery and Credit-Claiming: Experimental Evidence

Eleanor Florence Woodhouse¹ | Paolo Belardinelli²  | Nathan Lee³

¹Department of Political Science and School of Public Policy, University College London, London, UK | ²Paul H O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs Bloomington, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA | ³CivicPulse, Rochester, New York, USA

Correspondence: Eleanor Florence Woodhouse (eleanor.woodhouse@ucl.ac.uk)

Received: 19 December 2025 | **Revised:** 27 March 2026 | **Accepted:** 31 March 2026

ABSTRACT

A survey experiment on US *elected* local policymakers allows us to test how incumbents strategically use infrastructure projects in their electoral campaigns. Each local official is presented with a scenario in which they are asked to imagine that they are going to run for office again and that a new infrastructure project has just been approved in their district. We manipulate the type of project and whether it is delivered by the local government, private actors, or a mixture of the two. We find that the *mode* of delivery influences credit-claiming behavior: respondents are more likely to claim credit for projects where the government is involved in delivery, even while respondents' expectations of the projects' ultimate benefit to the community are similar across delivery mode. This electoral connection to the mode of delivery illustrates the potential for bias in project delivery that could compromise the efficient use of public revenue.

1 | Introduction

In 2018, public procurement amounted to \$11 trillion, or 12% of global GDP (World Bank 2020). Today, policymakers have a host of different contracting options available to them when deciding how to procure, that is when deciding how they deliver essential public goods and services. Private involvement in the delivery of public goods and services has been increasing across the globe for decades, with some countries now spending more on contracts than on providing services themselves (UK National Audit Office 2016; US Budget 2011; Washington Post; O'Keefe and Yoder 2011).¹

Decisions around procurement are complicated by electoral politics (Eckersley et al. 2023; Fazekas et al. 2023). In particular, incumbent politicians have strong incentives to ensure that voters know whom is to thank for delivering goods and services (Cain et al. 1987; Ferejohn 1974; Lazarus and Reiley 2010; Levitt and Snyder 1997; Mayhew 1974). We also know that policymakers are extremely attuned to credit-claiming opportunities

associated with a whole range of different types of government projects, even claiming credit for projects they are not associated with (Cruz and Schneider 2017) and going as far as to put their names (and even likenesses) on projects, programs and policies in a bid to emphasize to whom the credit for such goods should be attributed (Oliveros et al. 2023). As such, there is good reason to believe that policymakers' decisions over procurement options may be shaped by electoral forces even if such decisions are, theoretically, meant to be dictated by technical criteria.

We are concerned with better understanding what it is about *modes* of public service delivery that drives policymakers to claim credit for particular types of projects. We know that citizens respond to different modes of public service delivery by varying their support for incumbent politicians (Woodhouse et al. 2022). However, we do not know how policymakers make these decisions. Our goal in this study is to establish how elected policymakers perceive different modes of delivery and whether they are sensitive to their varying levels of credit-claim potential. This gap in our understanding is important to fill. By better

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2026 The Author(s). *Public Administration* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

understanding how procurement contracts affect politicians' preferences over credit claiming, we can shed light on how efficiently and accountably a swath of fundamental public administration decisions are being made. This is crucial for improving governance and ensuring that public resources are used effectively. To this end, in this study we ask: How do elected policymakers perceive different modes of public service delivery and to what extent are their credit claiming strategies influenced by contracting arrangements?

We contribute to and advance the extant literature by providing evidence of the factors that influence policymakers' credit-claiming strategies and offering practical insights for balancing technical criteria with political considerations. We administered a survey experiment on a sample of 509 local elected policymakers in the United States, recruited by CivicPulse, a nonprofit organization that collaborates with local government organizations and consistently samples a diverse representation of elected officials for surveys. In the experiment, participants are presented with a hypothetical scenario in which they are running for office again after their current mandate, and a new infrastructure project has just been approved in their district. We manipulate the type of project and whether this would be delivered by private or public actors. We then measure the expected time to complete the infrastructure project, its perceived impact, and participants' credit-claiming intentions. We also ask two open-ended questions, which allow participants to explain their credit-claiming intentions and their preferences for public or private delivery.

Our experiment shows that projects with public involvement are more likely to be chosen by policymakers as credit-claiming opportunities than those without and suggests that expectations about the beneficial impact of the project or its likelihood of being delivered on time may not influence policymakers' credit-claiming behaviors, whereas the *means* of service delivery do. This provides some initial evidence that policymakers seem to, at least under some conditions, prioritize their political exigencies over their performance expectations about projects when deciding how to engage in credit claiming activities.

2 | Policymakers' Perspectives on Service Delivery and Credit-Claiming

Existing evidence is scant on what drives *individual* policymakers' decision-making over these important procurement decisions, in general, and the extent to which the politics of credit claiming may affect such decisions, in particular. Extant literature provides some evidence on *aggregate* patterns of procurement decision-making, for example showing that there is a positive relationship between "fiscal stress, economic efficiency and the strength of interest groups opposed to public production" and the likelihood of municipalities deciding to privatize a service (Bel and Fageda 2017, 508). Another example is Alonso et al. (2016, 258–289) who present evidence from English local government that "institutional factors play an important role in shaping the contracting out decision, but that the choice of contractor is driven by political and economic considerations [...] [whereby] local governments serving populations with a

'collectivist' disposition prefer to contract with not-for-profit providers rather than commercial firms." In a similar vein, there is some evidence to suggest that governments prefer to adopt public–private partnership (PPP) contracts that have a higher degree of public ownership as this makes it easier and more credible for them to claim credit for said projects, as it is easier to attribute the project more directly to them (Bertelli 2019). Relatedly, we know that PPPs often provide a way to finance large-scale projects that the government may otherwise be unable to provide (Yehoue et al. 2006), allowing the government to push forward expenditures (Ball et al. 2001; Siqueira et al. 2018) such that they do not appear on the current balance sheet, acting like a "mega credit card" (Hodge et al. 2010, 5) for incumbents.² Indeed, governments have been found to front-load investment obligations onto private partners in PPPs, such that the government itself has essentially no up-front costs (Post 2014). That is, we have reason to believe that incumbents have incentives both to prefer private involvement in the delivery of public goods and services (due to the fiscal benefits that come with such arrangements) and that they may face trade-offs as to how successfully they believe they will be able to claim credit for different contracting arrangements (depending on how attributable the arrangement is to the government).

In sum, whilst not testing the relationship directly, the existing literature provides some guidance as to the directions in which policymakers' credit claiming strategies might be influenced by mode of delivery.³ Some literature suggests that higher public ownership of a project makes policymakers more likely to claim credit for it as the *publicness* of the asset is clearer (Bozeman 1987; Bozeman and Moulton 2011; Bertelli 2019). Echoing this point, Dawkins (2021) and Van Slyke and Roch (2004) contend that public participation in delivery clarifies the government's role, thereby increasing opportunities for credit-claiming, given that citizens frequently misattribute contracted public goods. Other literature suggests that rhetoric around private sector efficiency gains or concerns about finances might outweigh policymakers' desire for attributability or visibility, particularly, given that private involvement often brings short-term gains and long-term costs which can be politically expedient (Flinders 2005; Boardman and Vining 2012; Woodhouse 2024). Other parts of the literature suggest that policymakers may believe they can credit claim just as easily *regardless* of attributability or visibility, since politicians and political agents have been widely documented claiming credit for projects they are not directly involved in (Grimmer et al. 2012; Cruz and Schneider 2017; Breslawski 2023).

Previous research has found that voters prefer a mixture of public–private financing and management when it comes to the delivery of infrastructure (Woodhouse et al. 2022). However, once performance information is available, the mode of infrastructure delivery no longer influences their voting intention. The successful delivery of these infrastructure projects is what ultimately matters to voters. However, we do not know what policymakers' preferences over modes of public goods and service delivery are or how they are shaped by concerns about credit claiming.

This is important to understand as we know that policymakers are very sensitive to credit-claiming opportunities and that this

can shape the types and quality of public services that citizens enjoy. Evidence from Brazil, for example, shows that credit claiming is a “vital engine for political budget cycles” (Bueno 2023, 1), with politicians accompanying their pre-election messaging to citizens about their success in delivering goods with an actual expansion in spending, as “credit claiming accompanied by the distribution of benefits [is perceived] as more effective in yielding electoral returns than the distribution of government benefits alone” (Bueno 2023, 1).

Moreover, we know that a multitude of types of goods are used by incumbents with which to claim credit. Kramon and Posner (2013, 463) observe that patterns of targeting in how a whole range of public goods and services are distributed across the electoral maps of countries around the world, goods as varied as: public employment, federal grants to local governments, water and sewage infrastructure, agricultural credit, municipal budgets, educational slots, allocation of forest land, and cash transfers. Kramon and Posner (2013), rightly make the point that all the studies that they mention suffer from the same weakness, namely that “the pattern of favoritism that has been identified with respect to [a single] outcome” (p. 462). Whilst this is certainly true, it does not detract from the fact that the targeting of public goods and services for the purposes of being able to claim credit for the benefits associated with the goods and services is an extremely widespread and well-documented phenomenon.

Further still, we know that incumbents go as far as to claim credit for projects that they have no association with. Such a phenomenon is documented by Cruz and Schneider (2017) who use a World Bank foreign aid project in the Philippines to document undeserved credit-claiming. They present evidence that even when “donors design projects to prevent politicians in recipient communities from exploiting aid for political purposes, local politicians can still derive significant electoral advantages from development aid” (Cruz and Schneider 2017, 406). That is, we have evidence that incumbents are highly motivated to credit claim, even to the extent that—in some contexts—they will do so when they have no link to the project for which they seek to claim credit.

We also know that the type of credit claim messages that incumbents send matters for how effectively politicians can convert particularistic spending into votes of support. Grimmer et al. (2012, 703) show that “[l]egislators use credit claiming messages to influence the expenditures they receive credit for and to affect how closely they are associated with spending in the district [and that] [c]onstituents are responsive to credit claiming messages.” That is, it matters not just what citizens receive in terms of public goods and services, but *how* incumbents talk about these goods and services and link them to their own persons and actions. Policymakers think about these questions and try to maximize the probability that voters will associate them with the provision of public goods and services. However, we have very little evidence of how policymakers make these decisions and what the types of trade-offs are that they face when making these choices. This is especially important, we argue, for the case of procurement as the types of contracting arrangements that incumbents choose have far-reaching and persistent effects on both the fiscal health of our governments (Wei and Chen 2024; Kim and Choi 2023) and the quality of the essential

goods and services that citizens experience (Petersen et al. 2018; Poutvaara and Jordahl 2020).

Credit-claiming is only one of the strategies policymakers use to build political influence (Mayhew 1974), alongside, for example, targeting constituencies (Kriner and Reeves 2015), signaling fiscal prudence (Alt and Lassen 2006), or advancing social objectives (Hacker 2004). A large literature shows that contracting and procurement are not merely administrative procedures, but inherently political instruments through which governments allocate resources, pursue policy goals, and express underlying values (Thai 2001; Dimitri et al. 2006). These choices shape not only efficiency and cost-effectiveness, but also distributive outcomes, democratic accountability, and the balance of authority between public and private actors (Johnston and Girth 2012; McCrudden 2007). Each governance tool carries distinct advantages, constraints, and political implications. For instance, some make government action more visible to citizens, others shift fiscal burdens off the current budget, and still others embed service delivery within networks of nonstate actors. Ultimately, such tools are not neutral mechanisms, but strategic political choices that signal governments’ priorities, values, and governing styles (Salamon 2002).

We ask the following overarching research question: How do elected policymakers perceive different modes of public service delivery and to what extent are their credit claiming strategies influenced by contracting arrangements? The extant literature does not directly examine what it is about certain modes of public service and goods delivery that drives policymakers to choose them or use them as part of credit-claiming strategies. However, it can offer some sense of what types of reactions we might expect from policymakers faced with choices over differing degrees of public/private involvement, which allows us to formulate competing hypotheses.⁴ First, the literature suggests that the government having clearer ownership rights over a particular public good means that they are better able to credit claim for it as the chain of responsibility is clearer for citizens (Bozeman 1987; Bozeman and Moulton 2011; Bertelli 2019). This lens has been used to study a number of dimensions of publicness and how they can affect aggregate phenomena (Andrews et al. 2011) such as local authority company mortality (Andrews 2022) or the performance of substance abuse treatment organizations (Heinrich and Fournier 2004), but it has not examined individual policymakers’ decision-making. This leads us to formulate Hypothesis 1a: that a high degree of *public* delivery and management would be positively associated with propensity to claim credit. Second, as mentioned above, the literature suggests that PPPs are powerful credit-claiming opportunities for policymakers in that they both shift expenditure for major infrastructure forward, taking it off the current balance sheet (Ball et al. 2001; Siqueira et al. 2018) and allow governments to finance infrastructure that they may not otherwise be able to afford (Yehoue et al. 2006). This leads us to formulate Hypothesis 1b: that a *mixture* of public delivery and management would be positively associated with propensity to claim credit. Third, the literature suggests that public provision is associated with poorer performance expectations than private provision (Lerman 2019; Lerman and Acland 2020). This suggests that incumbent policymakers may feel that by outsourcing to the private sector this entitles them to credit claim for a

project by dint of its higher expected efficiency in terms of performance. This leads us to formulate Hypothesis 1c: that higher *private* delivery and management would be positively associated with propensity to claim credit.

Desmidt and Meyfroidt (2021) offer some evidence pertaining to the individual behaviors of policymakers vis-à-vis credit-seeking/blame-avoiding behaviors. However, their focus is on how incumbents (Flemish council members, in this case) respond to the release of performance information, comparing the effects that this information has on policymakers and varying whether it will be publicly disclosed or not. The authors find that even performance information with “a low propensity for media attention still impacts politicians’ decision-making processes” (Desmidt and Meyfroidt 2021, 768). However, their dependent variable—councilors’ attitudes toward engagement in strategic board roles—does not capture a specific decision being made by a policymaker and is also attitudinal, potentially capturing other considerations made by the policymaker. This makes it difficult to be sure that it is measuring incumbent *decision-making* rather than how incumbents respond in their support of institutional structures when faced with specific performance scenarios. Desmidt and Meyfroidt (2021), as such, aim to assess whether the provision of a performance cue about government activity affects politicians’ attitudes, rather than investigating how policymakers make decisions about the credit claim potential of particular projects, which is what we seek to do in our analyses.

In this paper, we seek to directly test how policymakers respond to different contracting arrangements in terms of their propensity to claim credit. Given the lack of evidence from the extant literature as to what policymakers’ preferences over contracting arrangements may be in terms of their credit claiming behaviors, we do not have strong priors about the direction in which the effect may go. As expressed in our competing hypotheses above, it could be that policymakers are more likely to claim credit for the project under full public provision than PPPs or outsourcing (H1a). Or that policymakers are more likely to claim credit for the project under PPPs than full public provision or outsourcing (H1b). Or that policymakers are more likely to claim credit for the project under outsourcing than full public provision or PPPs (H1c).

In addition to our focus on the propensity of policymakers to claim credit for various combinations of public service delivery, we also explore whether partisanship has an impact on the propensity to credit claim.⁵ The literature gives us reason to believe that left-wing policymakers might be less likely to claim credit for public-private or private-private projects than right-wing policymakers. This expectation follows from research showing that left-wing parties tend to pursue lower levels of privatization, favoring public provision over market-based delivery (Boix 1997; Zohlnhöfer et al. 2008; Obinger et al. 2014) and that, broadly, left-wing voters tend to have less of an appetite for privatization than right-wing voters. That being said, there is some debate as to whether this effect is robust across countries and sectors (Bortolotti and Siniscalco 2004; Henisz et al. 2005; Schneider et al. 2005; Hicks 2016). Moreover, left-wing governments have been responsible for some of the biggest waves of private involvement in public service and goods delivery in recent decades (Geddes 2005; Hodge and Greve 2017).

3 | Data and Methods

We fielded a pre-registered survey experiment on a sample of 509 US elected local policymakers (of which 501 provided complete responses).⁶ The experiment was part of a larger omnibus survey administered by CivicPulse, a nonprofit organization working with US local government organizations and consistently sampling a diverse representation of leaders from all 50 states and from small towns to large cities to participate in their surveys. In other words, our experiment was included as a subsection of the omnibus survey administered by CivicPulse. Participants in our experiment are a subset of the larger panel managed by CivicPulse, that includes top elected officials (e.g., mayors, chairmen, supervisors) and governing board members (e.g., council members, commissioners, etc.) who meet the following criteria: (i) they represent a locality of 1000 people or more, (ii) they are elected, and (iii) their role is to influence public policy, either as an executive or as part of a governing board. The policymakers serve in “general district” governments (county, municipality, or township) rather than “special district” governments.⁷

3.1 | Survey Description

The survey began on May 4, 2023, and was closed on June 26, 2023. Our experimental sample is randomly drawn from the larger panel participating in the omnibus survey, which includes a comprehensive list of local elected policymakers in US township, municipality, and county governments serving communities of 1000 or more (see Table 1). Elected policymakers include top elected officials and governing board members.

3.2 | Experimental Sample Composition

3.3 | Sample Representativeness

Table 2 compares the omnibus survey sample to the full population of local elected policymakers in US township, municipality, and county governments serving communities of 1000 or more. The figures here refer to the whole sample included in the omnibus survey (not just the sample we use for our experiment, whose descriptive statistics can be found in Table A1). CivicPulse surveys routinely include government officials from all 50 states and across urban and rural communities. Consistent with nationally representative mass public surveys, CivicPulse surveys modestly overrepresent more urban and populated localities, to address this, we use survey weights based on conventional ranking procedures.

TABLE 1 | Distribution of respondents by government type.

Government type	Number of respondents
County	67
Municipality	335
Township	107
Total	509

TABLE 2 | Sample representativeness.

Type	Population size median	College educated median	Democratic vote share median
Population	4950	0.21	0.39
Sample	6510	0.26	0.46

3.4 | Survey Design

Our experimental design allows us to test how incumbents can strategically use infrastructure projects as part of electoral campaigns. Elected local policymakers participating in our survey experiment are asked to imagine that municipal and county officials have just approved the development of a new project in their area that should be ready for use in 2 years. We manipulate the type of project, so that participants are randomly assigned to either a recreation center or a health clinic. We do so to guard against critiques that the results we uncover are driven by a particular type or sector of project. We have chosen recreation center and health clinic projects as they are both projects that it is realistic a municipal or county level policymaker would oversee and because they are in different sectors/departments: recreation centers usually fall under the jurisdiction of local Departments of Parks and Recreation and health clinics under the jurisdiction of local Departments of Health. After being informed about the project, participants are then presented with the organization that will be in charge of the construction of the infrastructure project and the organization that will be in charge of its management. We manipulate the specific organizations in charge of these two different phases of the project, which can be either local government authorities or a private company. More specifically, subjects are randomly assigned to one of three different experimental conditions: public–public, public–private, and private–private. These conditions are intended to reflect traditional full public provision (public–public), PPPs (public–private), and outsourcing (private–private) delivery options (in line with Woodhouse et al. (2022)).

In sum, two variables are manipulated:

1. *Type of project*, two levels: recreation center and health clinic.
2. *Mode of delivery*, with three levels varying organizations in charge of the construction of the infrastructure project and its management, respectively: full public provision (public–public), PPPs (public–private), and outsourcing (private–private) delivery options. Although this operationalization of the mode of delivery can be seen as a simplification that does not capture the full range of complex dynamics and contracting arrangements observed in the real world, it draws on previous research in this area (i.e., Woodhouse et al. 2022), which has been shown to be valid from an ecological perspective and effective in inducing variation in participants' perceptions.

After reading the scenario, elected local policymakers are asked: (i) to indicate how beneficial they think the project would be in

their area once constructed, on a 4-point Likert scale from very beneficial to not at all beneficial; (ii) to indicate when they think the project would actually be finished, given that the organization in charge of the construction committed to having the project up and running after 2 years. They could do so by selecting one of three options: less than 2 years, about 2 years, more than 2 years; and (iii) to imagine that they were going to run for re-election after their current mandate and therefore to indicate how likely they would be to mention this project as part of their re-election campaign on a 7-point Likert scale, from extremely likely to extremely unlikely.

Whereas the first two outcome measures are adapted from Woodhouse et al. (2022), our operationalization of credit claiming intentions was precisely developed to empirically investigate our theoretical interest in politicians' responses to different modes of public service delivery. These questions are presented in a random order. After these questions, participants are asked two open-ended questions asking them to explain: (i) why they would or would not mention the project as part of their re-election campaign, and (ii) what considerations would lead them to favor more or less involvement from the private sector in the development of the project in their community. The full text of the survey is included in the appendix.

Due to the difficulty and cost of obtaining a representative sample of elected public officials, we had to keep our survey design very simple. As such, we present policymakers with procurement decisions that have already been authorized—that is, they have no say over how the recreation center/health clinic is delivered—rather than allowing them to first make a decision over the type of procurement contract and then eliciting their propensity to claim credit for the project. To mitigate this lack of direct test, the vignette is set up to encourage policymakers to imagine that they were involved in the authorization decision—it is their level of government (or very similar) which has made this decision—and to give them a chance to express their expectations about the performance of the project such that we have a sense of whether they think this contracting arrangement is a good fit for the project, but we recognize that this is a limitation.

In addition to our survey items, we have access to subjects' demographic information data, including gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, party affiliation, ideology, that are part of the larger survey administered by CivicPulse. In terms of weighting, we used the following procedure: probability weights created with a post-stratification raking procedure using the Census and presidential vote share variables. This procedure follows the methodology outlined in DeBell and Krosnick (2009) for the American National Elections Study (ANES).

The CivicPulse omnibus survey also provides all researchers with additional pre-coded information about the characteristics of the community associated with each respondent. These include government type, state, Census region, the proportion of the community that is college-educated, the population size of the community, and the presidential vote share of the associated county.

To the best of our knowledge, no prior study has ever tried to directly measure elected officials' propensity to credit claim for different types of project delivery through a survey. As such, we did not have precise parameters to do any power analysis. Nonetheless, we can report power analysis based on a range of standard deviation estimates. To do this, we focus on our credit-claiming outcome and our main treatment about the mode of delivery. Based on an alpha of 0.05, power analysis indicated that, with a sample of 500, we will be able to detect a causal effect between 0.28 and 0.43 points, based on standard deviation estimates between 1 and 1.5 at a power of 0.80. These standard deviations' estimates should be considered approximations, given that no prior study was available to ground them.

4 | Results

4.1 | Experimental Findings

Table A1 reports descriptive statistics of demographic characteristics of our sample and Table 3 our outcome variables. 33% of participants are female policymakers, about half of them (53%) were born before 1961, and 60% of them have either a graduate or a college degree. The majority (85%) of policymakers participating in our experiment are white and 41% of them self-identify as Democrats. On average, on a scale from zero (very conservative) to 4 (very liberal), their ideology score is 1.76. Participants in the three experimental conditions (i.e., public–public, public–private, and private–private) did not significantly differ in terms of age, ethnicity, education, political party, and ideology. However, we detected a significant difference across experimental arms in terms of gender, as the proportion of female participants in the public–public condition (0.42) was significantly higher than in the other two conditions (0.29 in both of them).

Table 4 reports the average effects of randomly varying organizations in charge of the construction of the infrastructure project and its management on our outcomes. For each outcome, we report results from linear regressions. On average, we do not observe different performance expectations depending on the mode of delivery, neither in terms of expected compliance with deadlines (Model 1), nor in terms of expected beneficial

TABLE 4 | Average treatment effects, by outcome.

Outcome	Timing	Impact	Credit-claiming
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
N	501	501	501
Public–private	0.04 (0.070)	0.03 (0.078)	0.43* (0.170)
Public–public	−0.01 (0.068)	0.13 (0.076)	0.52** (0.166)
Constant	2.41*** (0.048)	3.32*** (0.053)	4.69*** (0.116)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

impact of the project on their constituency (Model 2).⁸ We note that performance expectations were not independently randomized, so we cannot make causal claims about their role here, but we do see that delivery models systematically affect credit-claiming preferences, and that this effect does not appear to operate via performance expectations (at least as measured here). An avenue for future research would be to experimentally vary performance expectations independently to isolate their role.

On average, policymakers are *more* likely to claim credit for projects in which the government has some degree of involvement, compared to projects whose mode of delivery includes only private actors (Model 3). This lends support to H1a and H1b. Indeed, it seems to be that the greater public involvement, the better for policymakers, with public–public projects being associated with a larger effect size than public–private projects. In other words, projects whose responsibility can be directly attributed to policymakers are more likely to become the object of credit-claiming behavior, independent of their expected benefits with the caveats noted above about performance expectations.⁹ The statistical significance of these findings holds after adjusting for multiple tests,¹⁰ accounting for the two independent variables. Respondents exposed to the public–public treatment are 0.52 units more likely to claim credit for the project than respondents exposed to the (baseline) private–private treatment. Given that the standard deviation of our credit-claim variable is 1.56 units, this is quite a significant effect (about one third of a standard deviation) and equates to about half a unit on our scale of 1–7 (extremely unlikely–extremely likely). These results hold when including control variables (Table A2, Appendix), thus setting aside possible confounding effects due to over-representation of women in one experimental condition. We observe a similar pattern of results for both projects randomly assigned to participants, that is the health clinic and the recreation center. The coefficient for the public–private mode in the health clinic model is not statistically significant, but it is still positive, and the lack of significance may be due to low statistical power. Table 5 reports results from linear regressions of the treatment on our outcomes, separately for the two groups of participants

TABLE 3 | Descriptive statistics of outcome variables.

N = 501	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Timing	2.42	0.636	1	3
Less than 2 years (proportion)	0.08			
About 2 years (proportion)	0.42			
More than 2 years (proportion)	0.50			
Impact	3.37	0.711	1	4
Credit-claiming	5.00	1.558	1	7

randomly exposed to either the health clinic or the recreation center. As far as the health clinic is concerned, we also observe that participants expect longer times for the project to be completed under a hybrid mode of delivery, compared to other modes. However, this is only marginally significant when correcting for multiple comparisons (adjusted p -value = 0.09).

We were also interested in exploring whether partisanship has an impact on propensity to claim credit. To do that, in Table 6, we separately analyze participants self-identifying as Democrats from those self-identifying as Republicans. Whereas Republicans report no differences in mentioning the project depending on mode of delivery, Democrats are more likely to mention the project when the government is involved, even more so under a fully public mode of delivery, in line with extant literature on aggregate patterns, showing that left-wing local governments are more likely to prefer public-not-for-profit procurement arrangements (Alonso et al. 2016). Importantly, whereas Republicans do not have different performance expectations under different modes of delivery, Democrats are more likely to expect a beneficial impact of the

project when the public is involved in the delivery of the project, either as a partner of a private entity (public-private) or as the only organization involved in the delivery (public-public). However, the coefficient on the hybrid form (public-private) becomes insignificant when correcting for multiple comparisons (adjusted p -value = 0.14).

Our experimental design allows us to test how incumbents can strategically use infrastructure projects as part of electoral campaigns. Our findings suggest that elected policymakers are more likely to credit claim for projects in which the government has some degree of involvement, compared to projects whose mode of delivery includes only private actors. This appears to be true even if the policymakers do not have different expectations about the performance of the projects. In other words, elected policymakers are sensitive to the credit-claim potential of the *means* of public service delivery and their preferences over these means seem to be independent of their considerations about how well projects will perform in terms of their likelihood of being delivered on time and the benefits they bring to the local population.

TABLE 5 | Average treatment effects, by outcome and by project.

Outcome Type of project	Timing		Impact		Credit-claiming	
	Health C	Recreation C	Health C	Recreation C	Health C	Recreation C
<i>N</i>	248	253	248	253	248	253
Public-private	0.20*	−0.12	−0.06	0.11	0.34	0.53*
	(0.102)	(0.096)	(0.117)	(0.103)	(0.264)	(0.211)
Public-public	0.07	−0.09	0.04	0.21	0.63*	0.42*
	(0.100)	(0.093)	(0.114)	(0.100)	(0.259)	(0.206)
Constant	2.36***	2.46***	3.29***	3.34***	4.48***	4.90***
	(0.070)	(0.065)	(0.080)	(0.070)	(0.182)	(0.143)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 6 | Average treatment effects, by outcome, and by political party.

Outcome Political party	Timing		Impact		Credit-claiming	
	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem
<i>N</i>	237	168	237	168	237	168
Public-private	0.06	−0.07	−0.11	0.22 [^]	0.26	0.67**
	(0.106)	(0.114)	(0.118)	(0.120)	(0.261)	(0.247)
Public-public	0.01	−0.04	−0.04	0.36**	0.12	1.14***
	(0.108)	(0.111)	(0.121)	(0.117)	(0.266)	(0.240)
Constant	2.35***	2.53***	3.31***	3.31***	4.56***	4.76***
	(0.075)	(0.080)	(0.084)	(0.084)	(0.185)	(0.173)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

[^] $p < 0.10$.

4.2 | Open-Ended Responses

In order to shed further light on our findings, as part of our survey we ask respondents to explain their choice regarding their likelihood of claiming credit for the project and, more generally, the considerations that would lead them to favor more or less involvement from the private sector in the delivery of public goods and services. These open-ended responses can help to illuminate the thought processes of the policymaker-respondents and bolster our theoretical claims regarding *why* they may react differently to the same public good or service being delivered in different forms.

We independently coded the open-ended responses to assess the degree to which respondents effectively engaged with the two open-ended questions. Noneffective engagement was classified as responses that did not make sense or were missing or were so brief as to be unintelligible. 75% of participants effectively engaged with at least one of the two questions—74% for the question on credit-claiming strategy and 70% for the one on private sector involvement in the infrastructure.¹¹ The very high engagement rate with the questions may also be due to the longstanding, positive relationships that CivicPulse maintain with their sample of policymaker-respondents. For the engaged responses, we independently identified emerging themes and agreed on two main areas of reflection from the respondents: (i) *attributability*, meaning the extent to which policymakers can be considered the cause of the project's outcomes and (ii) *ideology* and underlying preferences regarding private/public involvement in service delivery. Here we report quotes that we consider representative of the emerging themes.

4.3 | Attributability/Optics Versus Performance

Perhaps the most salient finding to emerge from our analysis of the open-ended answers, is that the *attributability* of projects is very important for many policymakers. That is, they are concerned with the degree to which they can be considered directly responsible for the project by citizens. For example, common responses to our question about why policymakers would (not) choose to claim credit were of this nature: “I was not involved with the decision to construct it, and not even sure what type of recreation center it is. Cannot take credit if not mine,” “May mention it as an addition to the community; may not mention it because it was a private development,” “I do not have anything to do with making it happen. Why would I mention?,” “Depends on how responsible I was in helping it becomes a reality,” “I probably would not have been a key person involved with this, so would not take credit.” In some senses, these responses and rationale regarding the decision to claim credit for a good or service give reason for optimism in that policymakers appear to feel a sense of responsibility to the voter to claim credit only for the work that they *really* do. This suggests that an important segment of the population of policymakers would not feel comfortable claiming credit for services they are not responsible for, contrary to some extant literature to this effect (e.g., Cruz and Schneider 2017).

However, the fact that policymakers seem to prefer some public involvement in delivery regardless of their views about the

performance of the project slightly qualifies this optimism. Homing in on those respondents that declare themselves to be very or extremely likely to credit claim for a project, despite only believing that a project is somewhat or not very beneficial in terms of its impact can shed some light on this phenomenon. One respondent faced with a public-public project (very likely to claim credit, despite seeing the project as not very beneficial) observed that “It would depend on the communities [sic] needs for the center. If there is a high need than [sic] yes it would be mentioned as a means to point out the positives I have accomplished while in office.” Another respondent faced with a public-public project (very likely to claim credit, despite seeing the project as not very beneficial) stated “People like projects even when they are doomed to fail.” Other respondents are upfront about the fact that a particular policy issue (healthcare or recreation) is important to their constituents and that, therefore, regardless of the need for such services, they would claim credit for such projects—for example, one respondent says “[r]ural healthcare is an important topic to my constituents” and, thus, would be very likely to claim credit for the project, despite seeing it as only somewhat beneficial. This implies that some policymakers place greater emphasis on the degree to which they can successfully be attributed credit for a project than on the effective expected impact of a project in terms of how it might benefit their constituents.

Another group of policymakers focus on the optics of projects in a slightly different way, but still weight *attributability* more heavily than the benefit of the project—for example, one respondent states that “improvement in local facilities is always good” and that “[p]rivate sector involvement means more facilities with less budget impact” making them very likely to claim credit for the project, despite considering it only somewhat beneficial. Others take a more Machiavellian perspective: “[p]eople like projects even when they are doomed to fail” (making them very likely to claim credit despite seeing the project as not very beneficial) or “I would mention everything positive occurring during my term. I also would not hesitate to mention things not accomplished that I want to see completed” or “I would prefer to keep my accomplishments on [sic] the minds of the voter.” The optics of projects, thus, seem to be very salient to policymakers, with many mentioning the fact that *seeming* like an example of good governance would influence their decision to claim credit (“[s]eems like it could be a good example of good governance and follow through on commitments”) regardless of the expected impact of the project in their district.

It appears, then, that policymakers are very much attuned to the way that the means of public goods or service delivery affects their image as an effective policymaker and that this frequently takes precedence over whether they think that a particular way of undertaking delivery is optimal in terms of its performance. In an ideal world, citizens might prefer policymakers to weigh the benefits of the means of service delivery (in terms of its *attributability* to the policymaker) against the performance of said means, but this is not a reality that seems to be reflected in our data. No respondents in our sample appear to have engaged in reflections on the balance between their personal gain in terms of being able to claim credit (credibly) for a project and the effective performance or expected performance of the project.

4.4 | Ideological Preferences

Across all three treatment conditions policymakers' own ideological preferences—and the preferences of their constituents—feature prominently. For example, “[p]eople want less government here,” “[h]ealthcare is not a function of small-town local government, nor should it be for larger government [...] Should be 100% private sector,” “I would emphasize the fact that government got out of the way and let private sector do its job.” Democrats tend to express greater skepticism about the role of the private sector and to place a greater premium on public sector involvement (which is reflected in our estimates showing that Democrats perceive higher performance under public involvement): “I favor partnerships with private sector if there are controls and agreements in place [...] understanding who will have access and how we can meet the needs of the most vulnerable in our community is essential,” “In general, for-profit models in healthcare offer the wrong incentives to corporations; they are beholden to their shareholders, not their customers. Healthcare should be a service-oriented business,” “I have some concern regarding a private company in charge of operating a health clinic. Experience shows that for profit entities may cut some programming in exchange for profit, e.g., privately run corrections facilities.” Whereas Republicans tend to mention more readily the fiscal cost of projects and the benefits that private involvement can bring: “I feel the current taxpayer is more concerned about infrastructure And would prefer their money going to improve their roads and things, such as this to benefit their every day lives,” “The use of tax dollars is always controversial CB if private funds are available that would be helpful,” “I am big support [sic] of more recreational options in our community. That said, I feel a private entity would be more likely to be more effective and efficient to operate,” “Private entity [sic] are far better to act quickly and swiftly when decisions need to be made.” As the quotations above show, despite their ideological differences, both Democrat and Republican policymakers are attuned to the performance of particular contracting arrangements, even if their political ideologies may color how they view such arrangements.

Many policymakers—both Democrats and Republicans—are very open to private involvement in government and are attuned to the practicalities of managing to finance projects. For example, “It’s vital in every municipality to have public and private partnerships. Being that we’re a small municipality and with the economy the way it is, private partnerships are necessary and beneficial for both parties” (Democrat: public-private), “We have really good support from the businesses in our community and I feel they will be willing to support us in this project” (Democrat: public-private), “We need private development because there’s just not enough tax dollars to go around” (Democrat: private-private), “I would lead more to it if it offered payment plans, coverage for those who cannot have health insurance. Also, if they had low prescription prices for those of low income” (Republican: private-private), “Depends on the model. I am not in favor of the fear mongering I see in media today in an effort to provide higher profits for the medical industry and less freedom for Americans” (Republican: public-private).

4.5 | Blame-Shifting

We would like to note that while blame-shifting is certainly a relevant phenomenon for politicians' electoral strategies in the real world¹² and can shape their actions in numerous, meaningful ways in response to voters' negativity bias (Weaver 1986), we do not think that it is at work in our experimental setting. As has been pointed out elsewhere in the literature, the long duration of PPPs (an average contract lasts for 20–30 years) means that many of the negative side-effects of these contracts (e.g., cost overruns, scandals involving private sector management of public services) come *after* politicians have left office (e.g., Woodhouse 2024). Whilst other work finds, for example, that politicians can successfully avoid blame by delegating to a unit within government (James et al. 2016) or contracting out the service,¹³ such work directly focuses on situations in which public services *fail* (e.g., politicians attempting to avoid blame for poor street maintenance). Our experiment, on the other hand, focuses on a procurement situation in which policymakers are able to bring a project into their constituency and do not have to make trade-offs against other projects, for example. As such, we do not have reason to believe that respondents are thinking in terms of blame avoidance.

Leaning on our open-ended responses, respondents did not seem to be thinking about blame avoidance when deciding whether to mention the project as part of their re-election campaigns. For example, no mention was made in any of the open-ended responses of “blame” and the concept of “responsibility” only comes up in one response, where the policymaker in question is asking him/herself “who’s responsible for any problems?” when faced with a public-private scenario (presumably preempting a common issue with public-private collaborations: when contracts fail, companies go bankrupt, and the public sector is left to foot the bill regardless of private sector legal responsibility for the failure).

5 | Discussion

We show that elected policymakers are more likely to credit claim for projects in which the government has some degree of involvement, compared to projects whose means of delivery includes only private actors (Bertelli 2019). This seems to be true even if the policymakers do not have different expectations about the performance of the projects. Put differently, elected policymakers are sensitive to the credit-claim potential of the *means* of public service delivery, and their preferences over these means seem to be independent of their performance expectations about the projects.

Our findings have some potentially important implications for democracies in the long term. As alluded to in the results section, in an ideal world, citizens might hope to elect politicians who balance the value of being clearly responsible for the delivery of a good or service (its attributability) against the value of choosing the means of delivery that is going to be most performant (best as measured against some performance metric, whether that’s on-time delivery or benefit to the community). This is because we might hope to achieve a

balance between the democratic principle of accountability (the degree to which it is easy for citizens to understand who has made certain decisions in government and thus who they should reward/punish at the ballot box) and the management principle of efficiency (whereby the optimal means of delivery is chosen). However, our findings suggest that this may not be the case, with credit-claiming considerations being shaped only by the means of delivery and apparently not the expected performance of the project (not independently randomized). This raises practical concerns for (nonelected) procurement officials who may find themselves needing to buffer politically motivated distortions in procurement choices. Prior work has shown that political control and ideology influence make-or-buy decisions and may override considerations about performance (Alonso et al. 2016; Bel and Fageda 2017), whilst our findings suggest credit-claiming introduces an additional mechanism through which politics shapes procurement. To this end, strengthening transparency requirements, relying on performance-based contracting, and engaging independent review bodies could help insulate procurement from short-term political incentives. Likewise, the use of robust technical evaluation criteria and stakeholder participation mechanisms could make it more costly for politicians to privilege credit-claim potential over efficiency. In this direction, procurement professionals could play a critical role in ensuring that decisions remain aligned with long-term public value rather than short-term electoral gain.

Our work opens numerous important avenues for future research. For example, we hope that scholars will investigate whether the findings we uncover here pertaining to incumbent policymakers replicate amongst a population of political *candidates*. Theoretically, challenger candidates may be expected to have different preferences over the means of public service delivery as they have not (yet) been exposed to the realities of policymaking and may, thus, have “purer” preferences informed by ideology alone, rather than considerations about the feasibility of particular modes of delivery. They may be free of certain “path dependency”-type rationales regarding public goods and service delivery, being less exposed to the idea that their “own kind” (i.e., those (already) working in the public sector) deliver better public goods and services. Further, there is important research to be done in understanding why it is, for example, that policymakers do *not* see the private sector as more performant than the public sector (as we find here) whereas the public do (as found in Woodhouse et al. 2022). Is this due to greater exposure to how the private sector works on government projects in reality or a greater appreciation of the work that the public sector does once experienced “from the inside” (both informational effects) or to feeling more personally invested in the public sector, once elected, and therefore seeing it as ‘better’ than was previously the case (more of a bias effect)?

Finally, there is exciting work to be done disentangling the channels at work behind the effects we uncover here. For example, policymakers may be more predisposed to mentioning public-public projects in future election campaigns as they see this as a valuable way of communicating to voters that public sector jobs will be created (and controlled by them) as a result of the project (Bueno 2023, Angelov and Brunjes 2023). Establishing what it is about different forms of public service

delivery that appeals to policymakers is essential if we want to understand how to encourage the adoption of optimal forms of public service delivery.

While we shed light on an understudied phenomenon and open several important avenues for future work, there are also limitations to our study. First, our experiment was fielded in only one country, the United States, with all the caveats that come with single country studies in terms of generalizability. External validity is ultimately best addressed by comparing the results of several internally valid studies conducted in different contexts. More single-country investigations of how policymakers make decisions over procurement options are needed for a comparison with our results.

Second, we analyze policymakers’ responses to public–public, public–private, or private–private procurement options which abstracts away from some of the detail that real-world contracting arrangements contain. This is necessary to be sure that respondents understand the correct dimension (public–private involvement) of variation in procurement options, but we recognize that this comes at the cost of some of the complexity involved in real-life procurement decision making. For example, in practice, there can be some blurring across the types of contracting arrangements we refer to with PPPs in some ways resembling more our “private–private” treatment than the “public–private” treatment in that a private company funds and builds public infrastructure and then manages it on the public sector’s behalf before leasing it back to the public sector. To ensure conceptual clarity as well as experimental feasibility we chose to maintain these simplified procurement options,¹⁴ depending on both the elected officials knowledge of various procurement options and their ability to respond to the prompt that consists of varying the levels of private/public involvement in delivering the project, regardless of what the exact contracting arrangement they had in mind happened to be.

Third, our research design presents policymakers with a choice about credit-claiming, but not about which type of procurement to use. Our vignette presents policymakers with a decision that has already been made about how the public good will be delivered, which they were not involved with authorizing. As such, the policymakers must decide whether to credit claim for the project based on a *fait accompli* and not something that they were part of deciding. We recognize that this is a simplification of how things work in reality and, in an ideal world, we would have had a more elaborate research design that allowed us to separate the authorization decision from the credit-claiming decision, but this was not possible (as we note in Section 3). That being said, often policymakers are presented either with procurement decisions that were made by previous administrations or are constrained by procurement rules that give them little room for maneuver when it comes to working out how to deliver a good or service, and they must decide whether they want to claim credit for such a project.

Fourth, our analysis is experimental in nature, but does not capture behavioral outcomes. As such, whilst we can rely on treatment randomization to reassure us of the internal validity of our findings, the usual limitations apply in terms of survey results. We do not know whether the preferences expressed in our

survey would translate into real-world behaviors. Nonetheless, our sample of policymakers is a hard-to-reach population that is understudied because of this and yet is of critical importance in understanding how and why policies are implemented as they are. As such, we would defend our survey design as an important first step in understanding how individual decision-making shapes how procurement is enacted, even if it does not capture behavioral outcomes.

Fifth, our findings arise in a local government context where lines of accountability are comparatively direct and electoral incentives more immediate. Whether similar patterns emerge at national or transnational levels—where responsibility is more diffuse and credit-claim opportunities less clear—remains an open empirical question. Policymakers' attitudes may vary across different levels of government and future research with larger and more diverse samples could explore these dynamics. Nonetheless, the mechanism we document may operate wherever officials can personally claim ownership of visible projects.

6 | Conclusion

In this paper, we seek to understand a little-understood phenomenon: namely, how procurement contracts affect politicians' preferences over credit claiming for projects. We argue that this is important to better understand due to a combination of the prevalence of credit-claiming behaviors documented across the globe, the cost of public procurement worldwide, and the fiscal implications of procurement choices for citizens. If policymakers are prioritizing certain types of procurement over others not due to their technical criteria, but due to their own political exigencies, this could cast a long shadow in terms of costs for taxpayers. Through our survey experiment on a sample of 500 US elected local policymakers, we are able to test how incumbents can strategically use infrastructure projects as part of their electoral campaigns when seeking re-election.

We present evidence that, to some degree, policymakers seem to prioritize their own political exigencies over their performance expectations about projects when deciding how to engage in credit claiming activities. Our findings show that expectations about the beneficial impact of the project or its likelihood of being delivered on time do not influence policymakers' credit-claiming behaviors, whereas the *means* of service delivery do: projects with public involvement are more likely to be chosen by policymakers than those without.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank University College London and Indiana University for funding which made this work possible. We also thank participants at APSA 2023, EPSA 2023, and IRSPM 2023 for their insightful and constructive comments on early versions of this manuscript.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was obtained (before data collection) on March 28, 2023, from the Indiana University Human Research Protection Program.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹ UK: "During 2014-15 [the UK government] spent £242 billion (31% of total government spending) on external suppliers, compared with £194 billion on staff costs" (UK National Audit Office 2016, 3). USA: "the government spent about \$200 billion to compensate federal workers in the fiscal year [2011]" (Washington; O'Keefe and Yoder 2011), compared with the \$500 billion spent on contracts in the same fiscal year (US Budget 2011, 41). Contracting out, in particular, has become more common over the past decades (cf. Angelov and Brunjes 2023).

² We note that while PPPs come with a plethora of credit-claiming advantages (cf. Woodhouse 2024), their implementation has been associated with an array of serious risks for policymakers and citizens alike. Cost overruns, severe delays, corruption scandals, and costly re-negotiation processes are some of the most common issues with PPPs (e.g., Teisman and Klijn 2002; Guasch et al. 2007; Angulo Amaya et al. 2020). Such problems have reached extreme levels in cases such as the Carillion (Neate and Davies 2020) and Odebrecht (Reuters 2017) scandals where billions of dollars of taxpayers' money were lost to private sector malfeasance. As such, while PPPs' credit-claiming attributes are significant, their long-run costs should not be understated.

³ One of the only studies to date that examines individual policymakers' preferences over procurement decisions is Lerusse and Van de Walle (2022). This study, however, examines whether "politicians' preferences for price and non-price criteria in the contract awarding stage are associated with politicians' ideological reasoning [...] [or] strategic reasoning" Lerusse and Van de Walle (2022, 680). It finds that "politicians' preferences for secondary policy objectives are associated with political ideology" Lerusse and Van de Walle (2022, 694), and limited support that political strategies (pandering to the median voter) influence politicians' preferences in this area. As such, the focus of the study is squarely on policymakers' decisions over the *criteria* to be considered when awarding contracts and does not speak to how policymakers think about credit-claiming or make choices over different hybrid forms of public service delivery.

⁴ We note that in our preanalysis plan (available here: https://osf.io/g7nwp/?view_only=bf461c473c604b44841ed12e76fa5c4e), we did not formulate directional hypotheses as we were agnostic on the direction in which the effect might go. Here, we formulate competing hypotheses merely to demonstrate how the existing literature would predict policymaker decision-making over procurement choices.

⁵ This is laid out in our preanalysis plan: <https://osf.io/m82zj/overview>.

⁶ Ethical approval was obtained (prior to data collection) on March 28, 2023, from the University of Indiana Human Research Protection Program. See Appendix A for a write-up of the survey text.

⁷ "General district" governments are responsible for a wide array of public services and policymaking functions. By contrast, "special district" governments are single-function entities—such as utilities, transportation authorities, or school districts—tasked with delivering a specific service independent of broader local government structures.

⁸ Our main models report results without control variables for parsimony's sake as our treatment is randomized. Table A3 reports results with control variables, more details below.

⁹ Table A3 explores whether controlling for expectations about timing and/or benefit changes respondents' likelihood to claim credit for the

project: neither variable changes our main results. In these analyses we also control for a series of other variables that could reasonably be related to propensity to claim credit. For example, policymakers in smaller municipalities (proxied by population size) might be better able to claim credit for a recreation center or health clinic than those in larger municipalities. As can be seen in Table A3, our results remain unchanged by adding these controls.

- ¹⁰ We applied the correction within each regression model, as our statistical tests were theoretically driven and preregistered. For each coefficient, the *p*-value was multiplied by the number of independent variables (two) in the model, in accordance with the Bonferroni method.
- ¹¹ In Section A.3, we comment on the reliability and representativeness of these responses. If one compares the main sample and the subsample of 'effectively engaged' respondents, their observable characteristics are extremely similar (see Table A4).
- ¹² Survey experimental evidence shows that citizens attribute blame for service failure according to who directly provides a given service if they are informed about the context and delivery set-up (Piatak et al. 2017).
- ¹³ We note, however, that such findings are context specific and may not travel well, as shown by Jilke et al. (2017) in their replication of James et al. (2016) in the Netherlands or by Marvel and Girth (2016) in the United States.
- ¹⁴ Following other studies which have used similar simplified characterizations of contracting arrangements (e.g., Hvidman and Andersen 2016; Woodhouse et al. 2022; Lee and Kim 2024).

References

- Alonso, J. M., R. Andrews, and I. R. Hodgkinson. 2016. "Institutional, Ideological and Political Influences on Local Government Contracting: Evidence From England." *Public Administration* 94, no. 1: 244–262.
- Alt, J., and D. Lassen. 2006. "Transparency, Political Polarization, and Political Budget Cycles in OECD Countries." *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3: 530–550.
- Andrews, R. 2022. "Organizational Publicness and Mortality: Explaining the Dissolution of Local Authority Companies." *Public Management Review* 24, no. 3: 350–371.
- Andrews, R., G. Boyne, and R. Walker. 2011. "Dimensions of Publicness and Organizational Performance: A Review of the Evidence." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21: i301–i319.
- Angelov, L. G., and B. M. Brunjes. 2023. "A Replication of 'Contracting Out: For what? With whom?'" *Public Administration* 101, no. 3: 1163–1197.
- Angulo Amaya, M., A. Bertelli, and E. Woodhouse. 2020. "The Political Cost of Public–Private Partnerships: Theory and Evidence From Colombian Infrastructure Development." *Governance* 33, no. 4: 771–788.
- Ball, R., M. Heafey, and D. King. 2001. "Private Finance Initiative—a Good Deal for the Public Purse or a Drain on Future Generations?" *Policy & Politics* 29, no. 1: 95–108.
- Bel, G., and X. Fageda. 2017. "What Have We Learned From the Last Three Decades of Empirical Studies on Factors Driving Local Privatisation?" *Local Government Studies* 43, no. 4: 503–511.
- Bertelli, A. 2019. "Public Goods, Private Partnerships, and Political Institutions." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 29, no. 1: 67–83.
- Boardman, A., and A. Vining. 2012. "The Political Economy of Public–Private Partnerships and Analysis of Their Social Value." *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 83, no. 2: 117–141.
- Boix, C. 1997. "Privatizing the Public Business Sector in the Eighties: Economic Performance, Partisan Responses and Divided Governments." *British Journal of Political Science* 27, no. 4: 473–496.
- Bortolotti, B., and D. Siniscalco. 2004. *The Challenges of Privatization: An International Analysis*. Oxford University Press.
- Bozeman, B. 1987. *All Organizations Are Public: Bridging Public and Private Organizational Theories*. Jossey-Bass.
- Bozeman, B., and S. Moulton. 2011. "Integrative Publicness: A Framework for Public Management Strategy and Performance." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21: i363–i380.
- Breslawski, J. 2023. "Can Insurgents Capture Aid Through Credit Claiming? Evidence From Afghanistan." *Journal of Global Security Studies* 8, no. 4: 1–10.
- Bueno, N. S. 2023. "The Timing of Public Policies: Political Budget Cycles and Credit Claiming." *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 4: 996–1011.
- Cain, B., J. Ferejohn, and M. Fiorina. 1987. *The Personal Vote: Constituency Service and Electoral Independence*. Harvard University Press.
- Cruz, C., and C. Schneider. 2017. "Foreign Aid and Undeserved Credit Claiming." *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2: 396–408.
- Dawkins, R. 2021. "Private Contracting and Citizen Attitudes Toward Local Government." *Urban Affairs Review* 57, no. 5: 1286–1311.
- DeBell, M., and J. Krosnick. 2009. "Computing Weights for American National Election Study Survey Data." ANES Technical Report Series.
- Desmidt, S., and K. Meyfroodt. 2021. "How Does Public Disclosure of Performance Information Affect Politicians' Attitudes Towards Effort Allocation? Evidence From a Survey Experiment." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 31, no. 4: 756–772.
- Dimitri, N., G. Piga, and G. Spagnolo. 2006. *Handbook of Procurement*. Cambridge University Press.
- Eckersley, P., A. Flynn, L. Ferry, and K. Lakoma. 2023. "Austerity, Political Control and Supplier Selection in English Local Government: Implications for Autonomy in Multi-Level Systems." *Public Management Review* 25, no. 1: 1–21.
- Fazekas, M., R. Ferrali, and J. Wachs. 2023. "Agency Independence, Campaign Contributions, and Favoritism in US Federal Government Contracting." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 33, no. 2: 262–278.
- Ferejohn, J. 1974. *Pork Barrel Politics: Rivers and Harbors Legislation, 1947–1968*. Stanford University Press.
- Flinders, M. 2005. "The Politics of Public–Private Partnerships." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 7, no. 2: 215–239.
- Geddes, M. 2005. *Making Public Private Partnerships Work: Building Relationships and Understanding Cultures*. Gower Publishing, Ltd.
- Grimmer, J., S. Messing, and S. Westwood. 2012. "How Words and Money Cultivate a Personal Vote: The Effect of Legislator Credit Claiming on Constituent Credit Allocation." *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 4: 703–719.
- Guasch, L., J.-J. Laffont, and S. Straub. 2007. "Concessions of Infrastructure in Latin America: Government-Led Renegotiation." *Journal of Applied Econometrics* 22, no. 7: 1267–1294.
- Hacker, J. 2004. "Privatizing Risk Without Privatizing the Welfare State: The Hidden Politics of Social Policy Retrenchment in the United States." *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2: 243–260.
- Heinrich, C., and E. Fournier. 2004. "Dimensions of Publicness and Performance in Substance Abuse Treatment Organizations." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 23, no. 1: 49–70.
- Henisz, W., B. Zelner, and M. Guillén. 2005. "The Worldwide Diffusion of Market-Oriented Infrastructure Reform, 1977–1999." *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 6: 871–897.

- Hicks, T. 2016. "Acting Right? Privatization, Encompassing Interests, and the Left." *Political Science Research and Methods* 4, no. 2: 427–448.
- Hodge, G., and C. Greve. 2017. "On Public–Private Partnership Performance: A Contemporary Review." *Public Works Management & Policy* 22, no. 1: 55–78.
- Hodge, G., C. Greve, and A. Boardman. 2010. "Introduction: The PPP Phenomenon and Its Evaluation." In *International Handbook on Public–Private Partnerships*, edited by G. A. Hodge, C. Greve, and A. E. Boardman. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Hvidman, U., and S. C. Andersen. 2016. "Perceptions of Public and Private Performance: Evidence From a Survey Experiment." *Public Administration Review* 76, no. 1: 111–120.
- James, O., S. Jilke, C. Petersen, and S. Van de Walle. 2016. "Citizens' Blame of Politicians for Public Service Failure: Experimental Evidence About Blame Reduction Through Delegation and Contracting." *Public Administration Review* 76, no. 1: 83–93.
- Jilke, S., N. Petrovsky, B. Meuleman, and O. James. 2017. "Measurement Equivalence in Replications of Experiments: When and Why It Matters and Guidance on How to Determine Equivalence." *Public Management Review* 19, no. 9: 1293–1310.
- Johnston, J. M., and A. M. Girth. 2012. "Government Contracts and 'Managing the Market': Exploring the Costs of Strategic Management Responses to Weak Vendor Performance." *Administration and Society* 44, no. 1: 3–29.
- Kim, C., and T. Choi. 2023. "Contracting Out and the Fiscal Sustainability of Public Services." *Public Performance & Management Review* 46, no. 4: 890–919.
- Kramon, E., and D. Posner. 2013. "Who Benefits From Distributive Politics? How the Outcome One Studies Affects the Answer One Gets." *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 2: 461–474.
- Kriner, D. L., and A. Reeves. 2015. "Presidential Particularism and Divide-The-Dollar Politics." *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 1: 155–171.
- Lazarus, J., and S. Reiley. 2010. "The Electoral Benefits of Distributive Spending." *Political Research Quarterly* 63, no. 2: 343–355.
- Lee, S., and S. Kim. 2024. "Where Do Citizens Place Blame for Service Delivery Failure? A Closer Look at Public-Private Partnerships." *Public Performance & Management Review* 47, no. 6: 1482–1511.
- Lerman, A. 2019. *Good Enough for Government Work: The Public Reputation Crisis in America (and What We Can Do to Fix It)*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lerman, A., and D. Acland. 2020. "United in States of Dissatisfaction: Confirmation Bias Across the Partisan Divide." *American Politics Research* 48, no. 2: 227–237.
- Lerusse, A., and S. Van de Walle. 2022. "Local Politicians' Preferences in Public Procurement: Ideological or Strategic Reasoning?" *Local Government Studies* 48, no. 4: 680–703.
- Levitt, S., and J. Snyder. 1997. "The Impact of Federal Spending on House Election Outcomes." *Journal of Political Economy* 105, no. 1: 30–53.
- Marvel, J., and A. Girth. 2016. "Citizen Attributions of Blame in Third-Party Governance." *Public Administration Review* 76, no. 1: 96–108.
- Mayhew, D. 1974. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. Yale University Press.
- McCrudden, C. 2007. *Buying Social Justice: Equality, Government Procurement, and Legal Change*. Oxford University Press.
- Neate, R., and R. Davies. 2020. "Carillion Collapse: Two Years on, 'government Has Learned Nothing'." *The Guardian*.
- Obinger, H., C. Schmitt, and R. Zohlnhöfer. 2014. "Partisan Politics and Privatization in OECD Countries." *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 9: 1294–1323.
- O'Keefe, E., and E. Yoder. 2011. "How Much Money Is Spent on Federal Workers?" *Washington Post*.
- Oliveros, V., R. Weitz-Shapiro, and M. Winters. 2023. "Credit Claiming by Labeling." *Comparative Political Studies* 56, no. 13: 2099–2127.
- Petersen, O. H., U. Hjelm, and K. Vrangbæk. 2018. "Is Contracting Out of Public Services Still the Great Panacea? A Systematic Review of Studies on Economic and Quality Effects From 2000 to 2014." *Social Policy & Administration* 52, no. 1: 130–157.
- Piatak, J., Z. Mohr, and S. Leland. 2017. "Bureaucratic Accountability in Third-Party Governance: Experimental Evidence of Blame Attribution During Times of Budgetary Crisis." *Public Administration* 95, no. 4: 976–989.
- Post, A. 2014. *Foreign and Domestic Investment in Argentina: The Politics of Privatized Infrastructure*. Cambridge University Press.
- Poutvaara, P., and H. Jordahl. 2020. *Public Sector Outsourcing*. IZA World of Labor.
- Reuters. 2017. Brazil's Odebrecht Paid \$3.3 Billion in Bribes Over a Decade—Reports.
- Salamon, L. M. 2002. *The Tools of Government: A Guide to the New Governance*. Oxford University Press.
- Schneider, V., S. Fink, and M. Tenbucken. 2005. "Buying Out the State: A Comparative Perspective on the Privatization of Infrastructures." *Comparative Political Studies* 38, no. 6: 704–727.
- Siqueira, M., G. Reyes-Tagle, C. L. Gomez, Y. Park, K. E. Heo, and J. Marquez. 2018. *Bringing PPPs Into the Sunlight: Synergies Now and Pitfalls Later*. Inter-American Development Bank.
- Teisman, G. R., and E.-H. Klijn. 2002. "Partnership Arrangements: Governmental Rhetoric or Governance Scheme?" *Public Administration Review* 62, no. 2: 197–205.
- Thai, K. V. 2001. "Public Procurement Re-Examined." *Journal of Public Procurement* 1, no. 1: 9–50.
- UK National Audit Office. 2016. "Commercial and Contract Management: Insights and Emerging Best Practice. Technical Report, National Audit Office." The Stationery Office.
- US Budget. 2011. *Budget of the US Government: Fiscal Year 2011*. Office of Management and Budget.
- Van Slyke, D., and C. Roch. 2004. "What Do They Know, and Whom Do They Hold Accountable? Citizens in the Government–Nonprofit Contracting Relationship." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 14, no. 2: 191–209.
- Weaver, K. 1986. "The Politics of Blame Avoidance." *Journal of Public Policy* 6, no. 4: 371–398.
- Wei, W., and X. Chen. 2024. "Service Outsourcing and Government Fiscal Conditions: Do Market Competition, Bureaucrat Support, and Management Capacity Matter?" *American Review of Public Administration* 54, no. 6: 568–589.
- Woodhouse, E. 2024. "The Distributive Politics of Privately Financed Infrastructure Agreements." *Governance* 7, no. 4: 1081–1100.
- Woodhouse, E., P. Belardinelli, and A. Bertelli. 2022. "Hybrid Governance and the Attribution of Political Responsibility: Experimental Evidence From the United States." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 32, no. 1: 150–165.
- World Bank. 2020. "How Large Is Public Procurement?" Accessed March 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/mnrjxay7>.
- Yehoue, E., M. Hammami, and J.-F. Ruhashyankiko. 2006. *Determinants of Public-Private Partnerships in Infrastructure. Number 6-99*. International Monetary Fund.
- Zohlnhöfer, R., H. Obinger, and F. Wolf. 2008. "Partisan Politics, Globalization, and the Determinants of Privatization Proceeds in Advanced Democracies (1990–2000)." *Governance* 21, no. 1: 95–121.

Appendix A

Survey Text

You are about to participate in a national survey of local government policymakers conducted by CivicPulse. We are conducting a study to better understand how public officials like yourself think about building infrastructure to provide public services, issues related to police reform, and local economic development.

The survey should take approximately 10 min to complete. This survey is confidential, and the data will be deidentified before being released. We will follow up with you within three months with a preview of some of the findings.

Suppose municipal and county officials have just approved the development of a new (recreation center/health clinic) in your area that should be ready for use in two years.

Random assignment to one of the following:

- It has been decided that a private company will be in charge of both the construction of the (recreation center/health clinic) as well as its management for at least the first 10 years of operations.
- It has been decided that local government authorities will be in charge of both the construction of the (recreation center/health clinic) as well as its management for at least the first 10 years of operations.
- It has been decided that local government authorities will be in charge of the construction of the (recreation center/health clinic), while a private company will be in charge of its management for at least the first 10 years of operations.

The (local government authorities/private company) committed to having the (recreation center/health clinic) up and running after 2 years. When do you think it will actually be finished?

- Less than 2 years
- About 2 years
- More than 2 years

Once constructed, how beneficial do you think this (recreation center/health clinic) would be in your area?

- Very beneficial
- Somewhat beneficial
- Not very beneficial
- Not at all beneficial

Imagine you were going to run for re-election after your current mandate. How likely would you be to mention this project as part of your re-election campaign?

- Extremely likely
- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Neither likely nor unlikely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Very unlikely
- Extremely unlikely

Please tell us more about why you would or would not mention the project as part of your re-election campaign?

More generally, what considerations would lead you to favor more or less involvement from the private sector in the development of a project like a (recreation center/health clinic) in your community?

Additional Data Information and Tables

Control variables

1. *Ideology*—"In general, do you think of yourself as: Very conservative, Somewhat conservative, Moderate, Middle of the road, Somewhat liberal, Very liberal, Not sure"
2. *Party*—"Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a: Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other party (Please specify.)"
3. *Party_indep* (if Party = "Independent" or "Other")—"Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party?": Democratic Party, Republican Party, Neither
4. *Gender*—"What is your gender?": Man, woman, prefer to self-describe (Conditional display short text box)
5. *Age*—"When were you born?": 5-year interval dropdown
6. *Education*—"What is the highest level of education you have completed?": Less than high school, High school graduate, Technical/trade school, Some college, College graduate, Some graduate school, Graduate degree
7. *Race/ethnicity*—"Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity? Please check all that apply": White, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, Middle Eastern, Mixed Race, Prefer to self-describe (Conditional display of short text box)
8. *Population tercile of the municipality*—This is the total number of residents living in the given geographic unit. This data is from the 2015–2019 Five Year Data from the US Census American Community Survey, as compiled by IPUMS NHGIS. The terciles are: (i) first tercile: 0–2422, (ii) second tercile: 2422–8774, and (iii) third tercile: 8774+.

TABLE A1 | Descriptive statistics of demographic variables.

<i>N</i> =501	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Female (proportion)	0.33			
Year of birth				
Before 1951 (proportion)	0.17			
1951–1960 (proportion)	0.36			
1961–1970 (proportion)	0.26			
1971–1980 (proportion)	0.13			
After 1980 (proportion)	0.09			
Graduate (proportion)	0.60			
White (proportion)	0.85			
Democrat (proportion)	0.41			
Ideology	1.76	1.127	0	4
Population tercile of the municipality	2.18	0.784	1	3

TABLE A2 | Average treatment effects with control variables, by outcome.

Outcome	Timing	Impact	Credit-claiming
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
N	384	384	384
Public-private	-0.00 (0.081)	0.04 (0.088)	0.41* (0.192)
Public-public	-0.04 (0.081)	0.11 (0.088)	0.46* (0.191)
Female	0.04 (0.075)	0.15 (0.081)	0.34 (0.177)
Age	0.00 (0.012)	0.02 (0.013)	0.03 (0.029)
Ethnicity	-0.06 (0.098)	-0.03 (0.106)	-0.12 (0.230)
Education	0.02 (0.015)	0.02 (0.017)	0.02 (0.036)
Ideology	-0.02 (0.019)	-0.01 (0.021)	0.02 (0.045)
Democrat	0.14* (0.070)	0.17* (0.076)	0.55*** (0.165)
Population tercile	-0.05 (0.043)	0.06 (0.047)	0.21* (0.102)
Constant	2.43*** (0.153)	2.90*** (0.166)	3.57*** (0.362)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE A3 | Average treatment effects on credit-claiming, controlling for timing and impact.

Outcome	Credit-claiming	Credit-claiming	Credit-claiming
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
N	501	501	501
Public-private	0.44** (0.169)	0.40** (0.145)	0.40** (0.146)
Public-public	0.52** (0.165)	0.37** (0.143)	0.37** (0.143)
Timing	-0.25* (0.108)		0.00 (0.095)
Impact		1.13*** (0.083)	1.13*** (0.085)
Constant	5.30*** (0.285)	0.96*** (0.294)	0.96** (0.410)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE A4 | Demographic characteristics of respondents engaging with our open-ended questions, compared to overall sample.

	Overall, N = 501		Engaged, N = 376	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Female (proportion)	0.33		0.34	
Year of birth				
Before 1951 (proportion)	0.17		0.16	
1951-1960 (proportion)	0.36		0.37	
1961-1970 (proportion)	0.26		0.26	
1971-1980 (proportion)	0.13		0.13	
After 1980 (proportion)	0.09		0.09	
Graduate (proportion)	0.60		0.62	
White (proportion)	0.85		0.83	
Democrat (proportion)	0.41		0.43	
Ideology	1.76	1.127	1.80	1.150
Population tercile of the municipality	2.18	0.784	2.22	0.787

Note: We define engaged respondents as those who articulated a sensible response to at least one of the two open-ended questions.

Additional Insights From the Open-Ended Responses

The authors independently coded the open-ended responses to assess the degree to which respondents effectively engaged with the questions they had been posed. Two authors were involved in coding the responses. To ensure intercoder reliability, the process began with each author independently coding approximately 10% of the responses. The codes for this subset were then compared, and any inconsistencies were discussed to reach consensus on how to proceed. After that, the two authors divided the remaining responses and discussed the few ambiguous cases at the end of the coding process to achieve final consensus.

The most conservative measure of effective engagement was 74% for “Please tell us more about why you would or wouldn’t mention the project as part of your re-election campaign” and 70% for “More generally, what considerations would lead you to favor more or less involvement from the private sector in the development of a project like a health clinic/recreation center in your community?” The authors classified as noneffective engagement any responses that did not make sense or were missing or were so brief as to be unintelligible. That means that the vast majority of the sample effectively engaged with both of the open-ended responses. The very high engagement rate with the question we believe is due to the longstanding, positive relationships that CivicPulse maintains with their sample of policymaker-respondents. Some respondents even went as far as to write several paragraphs of well-articulated arguments in response to these two questions, which we found very encouraging. When we compare (see Table A4) those individuals who engage effectively with the open-ended questions and our full sample, there are inconsequential differences between the two groups.

The open-ended responses also provided some additional insights into how the respondents perceived our experiment and its vignettes. Several respondents noted the realism and pertinence of the scenarios we presented to them. For example, “I would mention it because that is exactly what I did in our community with a 2018 election and a facility that opened in early 2020” or “Funny enough—we recently opened a clinic like this in our community. We did it through a partnership (sic) between our school and a regional nonprofit. It did not require a building this way, and was done WAY LET (sic) THAN TWO YEARS! We need to think outside the box—use what we have and do something NOW rather than plan things years out in the future.” This reassures us that the policymaker-respondents generally considered the vignettes

to be realistic, pertinent to their roles as policymakers, and pertinent to how they campaign.

When concentrating on respondents' choices according to the treatment status they were allocated to (public–public, public–private, private–private), some interesting themes come to the fore. When exposed to public–public projects, policymakers quite frequently engage in nuanced criticism of private involvement in government; for example, “I feel the private sector is works best where innovation is required, and competition pushes for good value to the customer. Public health is an example of basic services where the private sector model fails without strong regulation. In fact, outcomes that drive higher use of services (profit) are actually bad the for the public good. I would not support a PPP for public health,” or “[p]roviding health facilities has historically been a private sector function in our capitalistic economy. Government has stepped in only to assist our poorest and most needy citizens who can not afford private health care.”

Under the private–private treatment condition too, some respondents express skepticism about private involvement in the delivery of public goods and services. For example, “I am very cautious in private organizations s partnering to oversee city property. The people loose [sic] say so in whole or in part,” “I think privatization is bad [...] Generally, I think public health is best done by public employees who are subject to FOIA and other transparency measures.” However, others are very comfortable with private involvement in government and state so explicitly. For example, “Some Mayors talk a lot and no action, others take action and get things done [...] Private sector contractor will get the project done on time if not quicker so that they can get paid for the project” or “a private sector may be able to keep the cost down and keep it on schedule to be built.” Under the public–private treatment condition—perhaps because it grants the respondent a little of both worlds—less emphasis is placed on private involvement per se and respondents seem to focus on local considerations. For example, “[i]t's always great to have positive things to talk about during a campaign. I would highlight the city's involvement in the development and encourage neighbors to take advantage of the facility [...] By involving the private sector, we get more community involvement. I would strongly encourage using local businesses, contractors, architects, etc. Anything that will stimulate the local economy.” The emphasis on the involvement of the private sector stimulating the local economy is in line with other work that finds that politicians engage in discourse about efficiency gains and economic stimulation when they credit claim for PPPs (Woodhouse 2024).