

How Compliance Demands Influence Procedural Fairness and Trust Among Citizens

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Abstract

Citizen trust in government institutions, including the public administration, is imperative for a well-functioning public sector. We know from previous literature that service experiences in specific encounters with the state shape citizen trust. In this relation, studies on administrative burden point out that compliance demands which welfare clients must overcome in such encounters might decrease individuals' trust in government. However, this article argues for a more complex relation between compliance demands and trust in government, as compliance demands – under certain circumstance - might increase trust in government institutions among the mass public (citizens). Research has shown that citizens are supportive and tolerant of compliance demands; particularly conservative citizens and when demands hit target groups that are perceived as undeserving. Building on this literature, we hypothesize that compliance demands increase perceptions of procedural fairness and trust in government to a higher degree if 1) the target group is undeserving (compared to deserving), 2) citizens have a high level of prior burden tolerance (compared to lower levels), and 3) citizens are not themselves users of the service. To test our hypotheses, we conducted a pre-registered vignette survey-experiment among a representative sample of 1,624 Danish citizens and a sample of 400 unemployed citizens. In the vignette, we manipulated the amount of compliance demands an unemployed individual encountered and whether the individual got unemployed because the company closed (deserving) or late working hours (undeserving). Even though the manipulations were successful, the findings show that the effect of information about a high level of compliance demands on trust and procedural fairness neither depend on perceptions of deservingness, prior level of burden tolerance, or whether respondents were unemployed (service users).

Keywords: trust, procedural fairness, administrative burden, burden tolerance

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This is a very early draft – all comments are appreciated!

Introduction

The public sector delivers many important services to citizens. To get access to public services, citizens need to know about services they are eligible for, and they must live up to state-enforced rules and demands. Here, administrative burden scholars distinguish between compliance demands, which are formal state actions that individuals must comply with to receive services, and subjective experiences of administrative burden (Baekgaard and Tankink 2022; Baekgaard et al. 2021). On the one hand, compliance demands might create barriers for potential welfare clients. That is, compliance demands might be experienced as burdensome which influence whether individuals in the end receive services, they are eligible for (Herd and Moynihan 2019; Daigneault and Macé 2020). Previous work has shown that negative service experiences can diminish citizen trust in government (Hansen 2022). At the same time, literature on administrative burden argues that burdensome encounters can have democratic implications such as lower trust (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015; Christensen et al. 2020). A recent study by Bell et al. (2024) also demonstrates that administrative burden lower trust among welfare clients. Compliance demands, on the other hand, are legitimate because they minimize the risk of fraud and might be perceived as necessary in the eyes of citizens in general. Citizens might not support policy programs where benefits are obtained too easily or illegitimately (Keiser and Miller 2020). Thus, the creation of compliance demands that might be experienced as burdensome by individuals applying for welfare services are often argued to be deliberately politically or administratively constructed (Herd and Moynihan 2019).

On this basis, a growing literature has begun to study under which conditions the mass public (citizens) accept that compliance demands might be experienced as burdensome by welfare recipients (Halling, Herd, and Moynihan 2023; Johnson and Kroll 2021; Keiser and Miller 2020; Nicholson-Crotty, Miller, and Keiser 2021). These studies have applied the concept of burden tolerance - defined as “the willingness of policymakers and people more generally to passively allow or actively impose state actions that result in others experiencing administrative burdens” (Baekgaard, Moynihan, and Thomsen 2021). Although there is variation across countries (Baekgaard, Halling, and Moynihan 2024), burden tolerance is generally correlated with factors such as conservatism, trust in politicians, personal experience with burdensome policies, and target group deservingness (Keiser and Miller 2020; Nicholson-Crotty, Miller, and Keiser 2021; Halling, Herd, and Moynihan 2023; Aarøe et al. 2021; Baekgaard, Moynihan, and Thomsen 2021). However, we know very little about whether such tolerance for and accept of administrative burden entail that compliance demands might increase trust among the mass public (citizens). To our knowledge, only one study has been conducted in this area where Sievert and Bruder (2024) in a survey experiment examined whether legitimacy perceptions and policy support among general citizens is influenced by exposure to state actions in terms of learning demands, compliance demands, or program sanctions. However, while related to legitimacy, we focus on trust and under which circumstances compliance demands lead to higher trust.

More specifically, this article contributes to the literature on burden tolerance by examining whether trust in government is strengthened among the general public if they are exposed to information that welfare applicants are required to meet rigorous compliance demands. We propose that

the relationship between compliance demands and trust is more complex than previously assumed in burden literature. While burdensome interactions may lower trust among welfare recipients, we argue that compliance demands could enhance trust among the general public when they view these requirements as necessary for program integrity. However, we are specifically interested in the circumstances under which compliance demands influence citizen trust. Following literature on burden tolerance and program support (Halling, Herd, and Moynihan 2023; Keiser and Miller 2020; Nicholson-Crotty, Miller, and Keiser 2021), we hypothesize that compliance demands have a stronger positive effect on citizen trust when compliance demands are targeted towards undeserving rather than deserving welfare applicants. This expectation also draws on policy feedback literature, which demonstrates that the design of public policies influences political attitudes (Mettler and Soss 2004; Moynihan and Soss 2014). Moreover, we recognize that burden tolerance varies individually, with greater trust effects expected among citizens initially exhibiting high burden tolerance. Finally, we expect that the positive effect on trust depends on whether individuals are service users or not.

To test these hypotheses, we conduct a pre-registered 2x2 factorial survey experiment in Denmark with a representative sample of 1,624 citizens and a sample of 400 unemployed individuals. In the experiment, participants are presented with a vignette describing an unemployed person, manipulated to either have lost a job due to company closure or personal resignation, alongside varying levels of compliance demands to receive public benefits. Contrary to expectations, while citizens view the unemployed person as more deserving when job loss was involuntary, compliance demands did not significantly increase trust, regardless of the recipient’s perceived deservingness or citizens individual level of burden tolerance.

Theory

TBD

Hypotheses

[Arguments for these hypotheses are to be added]

H1: The effect of information about a high level of compliance demands on trust and procedural fairness is stronger for citizens with high prior levels of burden tolerance.

H2: The effect of information about a high level of compliance demands on trust and procedural fairness depends on whether clients are perceived as deserving or undeserving. Information about a high level of compliance demands will increase trust and procedural fairness when clients are perceived as undeserving. Information about a high level of compliance demands will decrease trust and procedural fairness when clients are perceived as deserving.

H3: The effect of information about a high level of compliance demands on trust and procedural fairness depends on whether citizens are users of the service. Information about a high level of compliance demands will increase trust and procedural fairness when citizens are non-users of the

service. Information about a high level of compliance demands will decrease trust and procedural fairness if citizens are users of the service.

Research design

To test our hypotheses, we conduct a 2 x 2 vignette experiment. In the experiment, respondents are presented with a vignette describing an unemployed individual. We manipulate compliance demands by creating variation in how many rules and requirements the unemployed individual must live up to. In the high compliance demands conditions, the unemployed individual has to live up to additional requirements (see the text in the second bracket in Figure 1). Deservingness of the unemployed individual is manipulated by referring to that he lost his job due to company closure (deserving) or late working hours (undeserving).

Figure 1: Vignette

Jens er ufaglært, 41 år og arbejdsløs. Han sagde sit seneste job op, fordi **[arbejdet lå på skæve tidspunkter/virksomheden lukkede]**. Jens er ikke medlem af en A-kasse, så han ønsker at søge kontanthjælp.

For at få kontanthjælp kræver kommunen, at Jens:

- Ikke har mulighed for at få andre ydelser, der kan dække hans behov, fx dagpenge eller pension
- Har haft hvad der svarer til et fuldtidsjob i mindst 2 et halvt af de 10 seneste år
- Ikke har en formue (det samme gælder en eventuel ægtefælle), som kan dække det økonomiske behov

[Derudover kræver kommunen, at Jens:

- Står til rådighed for arbejdsmarkedet og aktivt søger job
- Melder sig ledig på Jobnet.dk
- Har et dækkende cv på Jobnet.dk
- Løbende registrerer sin jobsøgning i Joblog på Jobnet.dk
- Er klar til at tage et arbejde med en dags varsel og tager imod rimelige tilbud om aktivering
- Deltager i de møder, samtaler og aktiviteter, han indkaldes til. Han risikerer at få nedsat sin kontanthjælp eller at skulle tilbagebetale den, hvis ikke han deltager
- Tager en læse-skrivetest, hvis kommunen vurderer, at det er nødvendigt]

Data

Data was collected by YouGov's Online Denmark Panel from October 2 - October 24, 2023. The sample consists of a representative sample of 1,624 Danish citizens as well as 400 unemployed indi-

viduals.

Measures

The main outcome measure of this study is citizen trust, which we capture by two independent items. First, we ask respondents how much they "trust that the municipality makes the right decisions, when citizens as Jens apply for cash benefits" and second how much they "trust that the municipality makes decisions in a fair way, when citizens as Jens apply for cash benefits". These two measures reflect outcome-based trust and process-based trust, respectively (Kang and Van Ryzin 2019) and similar items have been employed in previous research on citizen trust (Hansen 2023; Grimmelikhuijsen, Piotrowski, and Van Ryzin 2020).

In addition, to also capture procedural fairness, we use the following survey question: "How fair are the rules that cash benefit recipients like Jens must comply with to receive cash benefits?". All items are measured on a 0-10 scale with higher scores indicating higher trust. All measures are rescaled to 0-1 in the analysis.

Burden tolerance is measured using a four-item scale (Baekgaard, Halling, and Moynihan 2024) including items such as "It is acceptable that people face some hassles when they are in contact with the government" and "It is acceptable that people sometimes feel that it is difficult and time-consuming to apply for government services and benefits". Response categories range from 1 (Completely disagree) to 5 (Completely agree), but recoded to 0-1 in the analysis. Whether individuals are service users or not is captured by whether they were unemployed at the time of answering the survey.

We also employ two manipulation checks. In the end of the survey, we asked respondents on a 7-point scale to indicate how much they agreed with the following two statements: 1) that the unemployed individual in the vignette is responsible for being unemployed and 2) that the individual in the vignette must live up to extensive demands to receive cash benefits.

Results

We perform ordinary least squares (OLS) regression as the main analytical strategy to test our hypotheses. First, the manipulation checks show that both the compliance demands and deservingness treatment were successful in manipulating respondents' perceptions of the amount of compliance demands and client deservingness, respectively (see Figure 2). Respondents in the high compliance demands treatment groups perceive that the compliance demands applicants for unemployment benefits must live up to are much more rigorous compared to individuals in the low compliance demands treatment groups (diff. = 2.52, $p < 0.001$). In the same way, respondents attribute much more responsibility to the unemployed individual for losing his job due to late working hours compared to the version where the company closed (diff. = 0.42, $p < 0.001$).

Figure 2: Manipulation checks

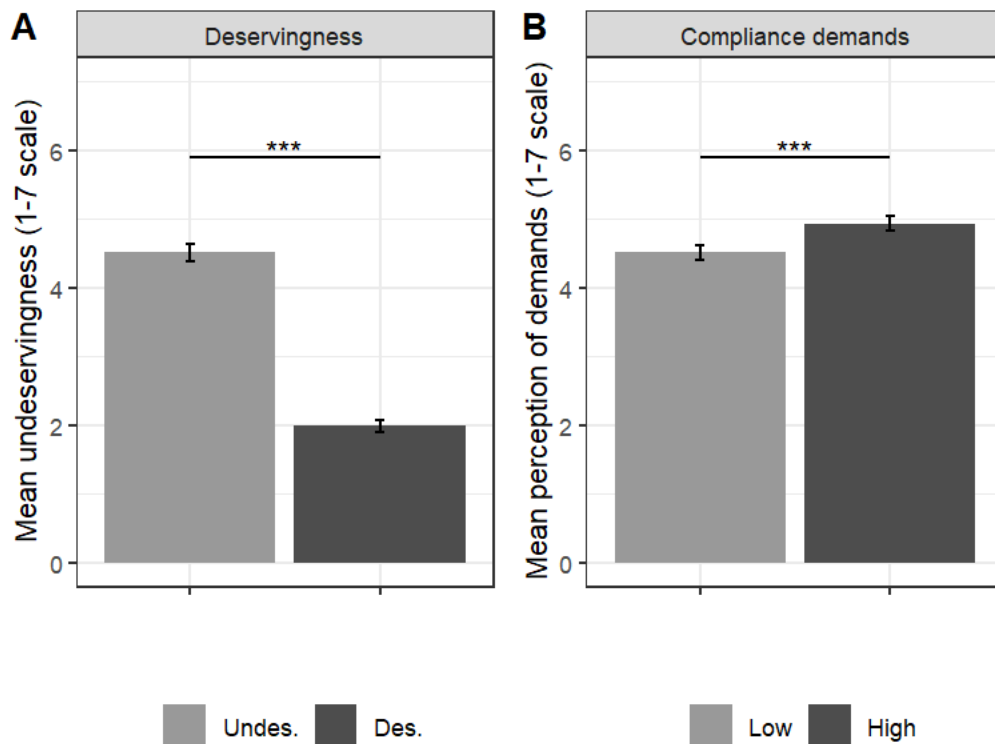
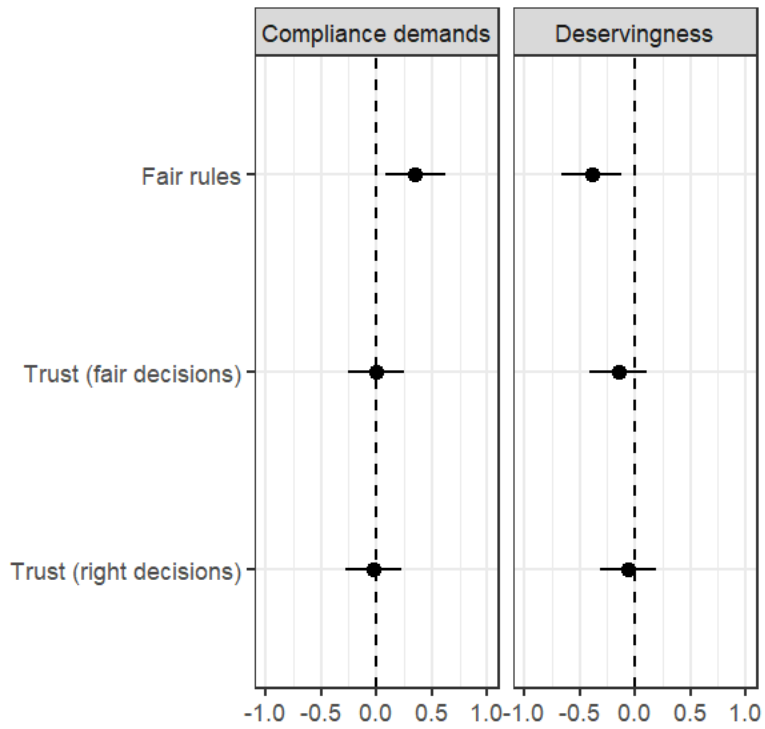


Figure 3 shows the direct effects of the two treatments (compliance demands and deservingness) on the outcome measures. Results reveal that when compliance demands are extensive, citizens perceive rules to be significantly more fair. When welfare clients are not responsible themselves for their situation (deserving), citizens perceive rules to be less fair.

Figure 3: Treatment effects



To test our first hypothesis stating that the positive effect of compliance demands is stronger for citizens with higher prior burden tolerance, we include an interaction term between the manipulation of compliance demands and burden tolerance in the regressions. We use both a linear interaction term and a binning estimator allowing for non-linearity (Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu 2019). The results provide no evidence in favor of the hypothesis as there is no sign of an interaction effect across all three measures of trust and fairness (see Figures 4-6).

Figure 4: Compliance demands conditioned by burden tolerance: right decisions

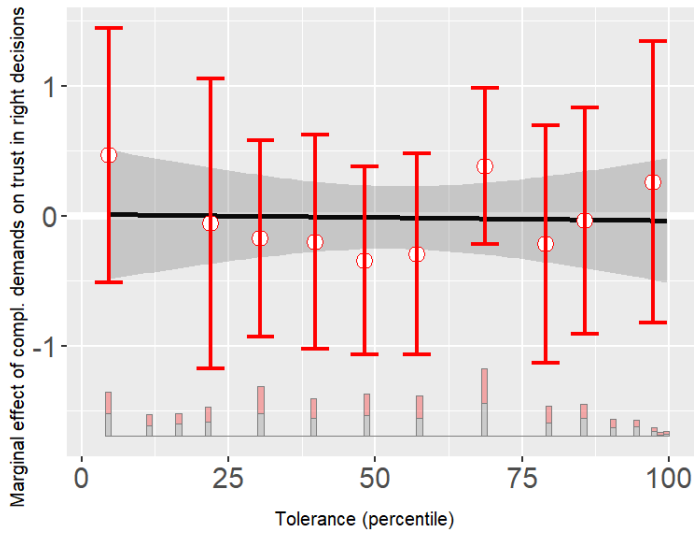


Figure 5: Compliance demands conditioned by burden tolerance: fair decisions

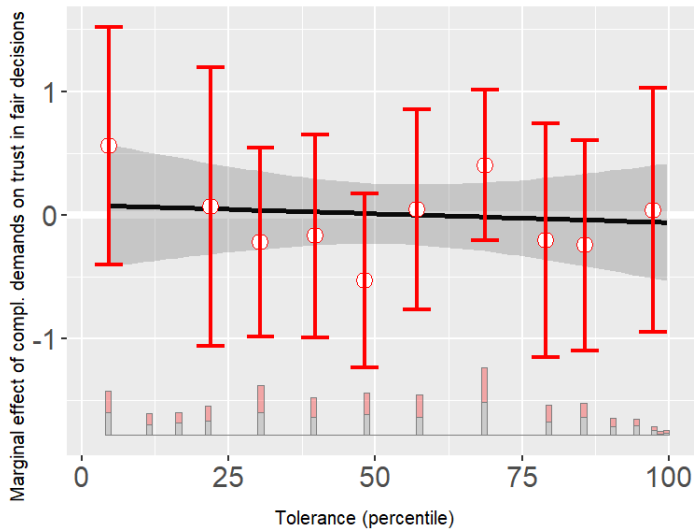


Figure 6: Compliance demands conditioned by burden tolerance: fair rules

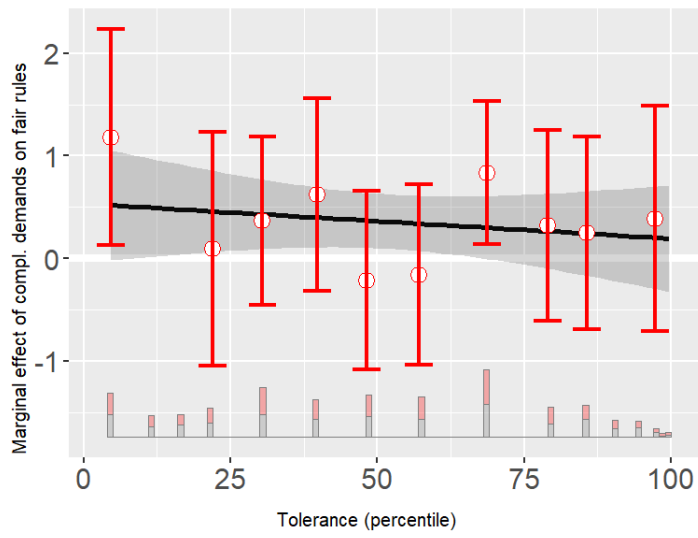


Figure 7 shows the marginal effect of exposure to high compliance demands for both deservingness groups across the three outcome measures. In the same way, Figure 8 shows the marginal effect of exposure to high compliance demands for employed and unemployed citizens, respectively, across the three measures of trust and fairness. In both cases, results provide no evidence in favor of our hypotheses as the effect of compliance demands do not depend on either target group deservingness or status as service user.

Figure 7: Compliance demands conditioned by deservingness

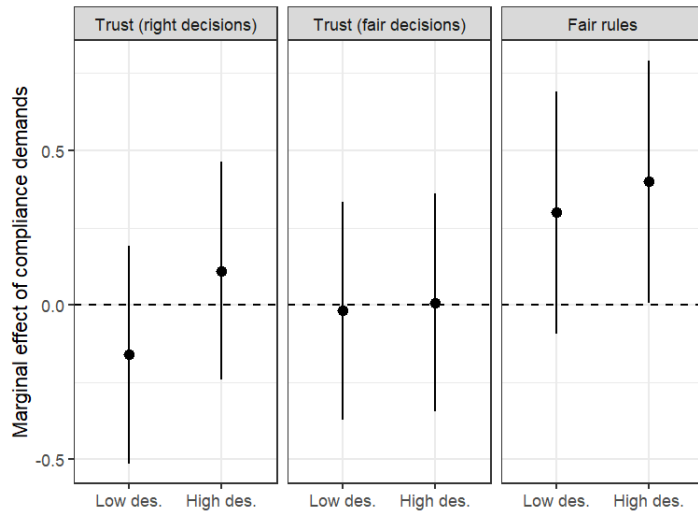
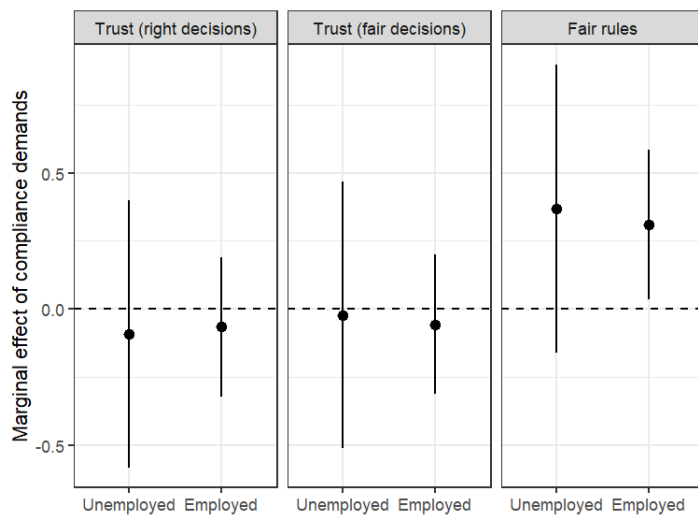


Figure 8: Compliance demands conditioned by employment status



Discussion

TBD

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