

# What Sector Do Consumers Prefer for the Delivery of ‘Public’ Services? A Comparative Analysis of the US and China

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Although we have literature on the advantages and disadvantages of delivering public services via public, nonprofit, or for-profit organizations, there is little research on who the public prefers to deliver such services. This study uses a least similar systems design to present an exploratory analysis of such preferences in the US and China for twelve different service areas. Based on two internet surveys, we find that general sector preferences for services are similar across the countries, but there are differences in emphasis for some of the individual services that reflect the country’s historical, cultural, and political traditions. The reasons for such similarities, however, appear to be different in the two countries.

**Keywords:** Citizen Preferences for Service Delivery, Sector Differences, Comparative Analysis, China, United States

Governments frequently deliver public services by proxy using private nonprofit and for-profit organizations (Van Slyke, 2003). International movements such as the New Public Management stress these alternative delivery systems and advocate their potential benefits (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). Although existing literature offers explanations as to why public services should be delivered either directly by government, the private sector, or nonprofit organizations (Hansmann, 1980; Savas, 2000), as well as of the existence of such services (AbouAssi et al., 2019), little research has examined the public’s attitudes about how they prefer to have public services delivered (see Handy et al., 2010). This gap is surprising given that there is a literature that shows that the public has preferences about whether the federal, state, or local governments should deliver services in a specific policy area (Leland et al., 2021a, 2021b; Maestas et al., 2020; Schneider et al., 2010; Schneider & Jacoby, 2003). This article seeks to add to the discussion on the delivery of services moving from questions currently focused on efficiency and effectiveness (see Hodge, 2018) to incorporating how the public prefers to have these services delivered, using comparable surveys of individuals in the US and China.

First, we present an argument that how the public prefers public services to be delivered is important both in terms of the normative idea that governments should be responsive to the public and how such preferences might influence the effectiveness of the services themselves. Second, given that this research is one of the first to address this issue from a comparative lens, its advantages in terms of generalizability and setting a research agenda will be discussed.

Third, we will compare the distribution of public preferences for service delivery in the US and China by focusing on individual services as well as the structure and determinants of these preferences. In the analysis, we find that the basic structure of preferences is similar in the US and China, but there are individual differences in degree (but not kind) that reflect the differences in each country's political economy. Finally, we will discuss the contributions of the research and its limitations.

### **Why Study Preferences for How Public Services Are Delivered?**

Public preferences for service delivery are important for four reasons related to the overall governance of a polity. First, existing theories of political economy and nonprofits rely on the assumption that government should respond to the needs of the public and frame normative arguments in terms of sector failure. The normative theory of government regulation (Stigler, 1971) promotes the principle that government should act when markets fail due to monopoly, externalities, or information asymmetry. In short, government delivers services because the market cannot deliver the quality or quantity of services that citizens demand. Similarly, the nonprofit literature suggests that nonprofits arise to deliver services because either the government or the private sector, or both, fail to provide such services (Blomqvist & Winblad, 2019; Matsunaga et al., 2010; Salamon, 1987).

Second, the public might have preferences for who delivers services because they recognize that service delivery bureaucracies are not neutral but rather reflect the values of the bureaucrats (for example, see Aaker et al., 2010; Xu, 2020). Substantial evidence indicates that the values held by individuals vary by sector of employment, either because individuals self-select into public, private, and nonprofit jobs (Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2012) or because organizations engage in substantial socialization (Barnard, 1938). Logically one might expect that individuals working in each of the three sectors differ on how much they valued efficiency, equity, altruism, public service, or a variety of other criteria that might affect how they perform their job (Korac et al., 2019; Lewis & Frank, 2002; Ng & Johnson, 2020). These values could then affect the type and quality of services that individuals receive.

Third, the match between values held by the public and values held by bureaucrats has implications for the effective delivery of public services. Many public services rely on coproduction (Brudney & England, 1983), the willingness of individuals to participate in delivery of their own services from minor efforts such as garbage collection rules, to more major efforts such as parental participation in their children's education (Vinopal, 2018), or situations where public participation is required for decisions about what services to deliver (e.g., participatory budgeting; Ganuza & Baiocchi, 2012) is important. Even when active coproduction is not required, all public policies require cooperation from citizens including paying taxes (Scholz & Lubell, 1998), interacting with police (McCluskey et al., 1999), recycling or other environmental activities (Hanks & Hanks, 1969), and enrolling for social services (Soss, 2005) among others. Public preferences for who delivers public services could affect whether or not individuals are willing to participate in the coproduction of services.

Fourth, citizens could have general preferences for limited government and link these directly to their views of government and sector preferences. Some individuals might see the failure of the private sector to provide basic services for all as a need for direct government delivery of those services. Others might view it as government overstepping its bounds in delivering services that the private sector could provide in practice or in theory. Preferences for who delivers public services, therefore, might be linked to fundamental questions about the scope of government or an individual's interest in less intrusion in their lives.

## **Why a Comparative Perspective?**

This study asks the following questions: *Do consumers prefer nonprofit, for-profit, or government organizations to deliver public services? And does this preference vary by the nature of the service being provided and by national context?* In an exploratory study investigating a new area, a comparative approach can be valuable in assessing how broadly a topic might be applicable. Using a least similar systems design (King et al., 1994), our objective was to find two contexts that differ from each other in terms of reliance on direct government delivery of services versus using other sectors for service delivery, the ability of bureaucratic values to be influential, the need for cooperation and coproduction by citizens, and concerns for intrusion in the daily lives of individuals. The United States and China provide contrasting expectations on each of these dimensions. Finding similarities in results across such different contexts may, therefore, suggest that those results could be generalized to other contexts. To the extent that differences exist, it suggests the need for additional comparative work to identify the specific national context factors that are determinative (see, for example, Fu & Schumate, 2020).

## **Literature Review: Related Theories on Sector Delivery of Services**

The public administration and nonprofit literatures contain multiple theories on whether government, nonprofits, or for-profits would better deliver certain kinds of services, but these are not framed in terms of the preferences of the general public. Rather they are normative arguments about the effectiveness of different forms of service delivery or the failure to deliver services. In terms of the policy choice about who should deliver services, Moe (1987) discusses the movement towards privatization in the US and concludes that the choice of public services to privatize will depend on factors such as national security, public safety, and the level of accountability felt by the leaders of a service. Specific to nonprofit organizations, Hansmann (1980) posits contract failure theory, where nonprofits play a supplementary role and exist to fill gaps in service provision left by government organizations. He further highlights factors such as price discrimination and complex personal services where the adequacy of the service delivery is difficult to determine as factors influencing whether nonprofits should provide a service or not. Salamon (1987), on the other hand, theorizes that nonprofits play a more complementary role in service areas where they can minimize costs, provide expertise, and improve the quality of, as well as citizen confidence in, service delivery.

Ferris and Graddy (1986) take this literature further by proposing formal models on whether and in what policy contexts services should be contracted out to private entities. Their Production Choice and Sector Choice models group public services into four distinct categories (Public Works, Public Safety, Health and Human Services, and Recreation and Arts) and hypothesize differing levels of private sector involvement in each group based on output tangibility, ease of performance measurement, level of moral hazard, and labor intensity, among other factors. They further differentiate between nonprofit and for-profit involvement based on the need for efficiency, the need to reach certain target populations, and the preferences of the constituency (Ferris & Graddy, 1986). These studies, however, are primarily concerned with the effectiveness of service delivery and the decision to deliver services. There is little discussion of constituency preferences or when and how citizens across national contexts might prefer to have public services delivered by different sectors.

Some studies in the area of privatization touch on citizen preferences for how services might be delivered (Battaglio, 2009; Battaglio & Legge, 2008; Breznau, 2010; Pew Research, 1998; Poister & Henry, 1994). Poister and Henry (1994) found no difference in citizen attitudes towards public and private services in the US. Battaglio and Legge (2008), however, revealed cross-national differences in attitudes towards privatization of electricity in developed markets versus transition economies indicating that the theories discussed in the previous

section may manifest differently based on national context and that public preferences for who delivers services might also vary cross-nationally.

To date only two studies specifically examine sector preferences across different service areas. Thompson and Elling (2000) conducted phone interviews in Michigan on whether respondents prefer government, for-profit, or nonprofit delivery across 14 different services. They find support for for-profit delivery consistent with the factors outlined by Moe (1987) and that support for non-governmental delivery differs based on respondents' demographic characteristics although generally the public prefers government delivery of traditional government services. Handy et al. (2010) studied Canadian university students and focused on preferences for government, for-profit, and nonprofit delivery of services from hospitals, university education, museums, and fitness clubs. They found that nonprofits were perceived more favorably for university education and museums but not for hospitals and sports clubs, but the differences were modest. Our literature search found no studies that attempted to understand preferences for for-profit vs. nonprofit vs. government service delivery across the US or in cross-national contexts. The difference in preferences in Handy et al. (2010) and Thompson and Elling (2000) highlights the need for more research, not only to understand how and why sector preferences differ based on the service being provided, but also to explore cross-national differences in these preferences.

### **Why Is Knowing Consumer Preferences Important?**

In addition to the empirical gaps in the literature, there are theoretical and practical reasons for examining public preferences on the form of service delivery. Both are likely linked to public participation and feedback processes, something that is important for both public sector and nonprofit sector organizations. Feedback helps with the relationship between nonprofit organizations and their stakeholders on fund accountability, improvement, strategy development, capacity building, civic engagement, and societal education (Campbell, 2010). Citizens' feedback can help nonprofit organizations better understand the external environment of the organization and provide guidance for how the organization might enhance its effectiveness (Campbell, 2010; Kiryttopoulou, 2008). If the public prefers that services in a given policy area be provided either by government or by for-profit firms, nonprofit organizations are likely to face significant barriers to building an organization that can grow and flourish in the long run. From the perspective of government organizations, knowing such preferences can be used in making decisions about whether to contract out for service delivery and how to do so.

Public preferences might also be related to the willingness to engage in coproduction. Citizens coproduce by voicing their concerns and evaluating services (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Nabatchi et al., 2017; Pestoff et al., 2012), and both governments and nonprofit organizations rely on client coproduction for the delivery of many services (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012).

Finally, public preferences for who delivers services is likely to influence the ability to procure resources so that services can be delivered. Just as governments rely on the willingness of individuals to pay taxes, many nonprofits rely in part or in whole on the donations of money, and in-kind goods and services, including volunteers (Einolf, 2018; Handy et al., 2008), to support their operations (Frumkin & Kim, 2001; McKeever & Pettijohn, 2014). Sector preferences in terms of service delivery are likely to influence both individuals' willingness to support nonprofits (and governments) as well the willingness of governments to contract with nonprofit or for-profit firms (for example, see Xu, 2020). Such attitudes as a result might even be relevant for entrepreneurs who are deciding within which sector to locate a new organization (Witesman et al., 2019).

## **Theoretical Framework and Research Design**

We opted for a two-country study with a least similar systems design as the most promising type of exploratory analysis to study differences across different services areas and across government, for-profit, and nonprofit sectors. As its name implies, a least similar systems design seeks out cases for analysis that are as different as possible (King et al., 1994). The logic of such designs is that the independent variables differ substantially between the cases, and this factor provides leverage on determining what might influence the dependent variables. That is, an independent variable that varies substantially in the two cases is unlikely to be a determinant of a dependent variable that does not vary between the two countries. Similarly, consistent findings across two least similar systems in relationships suggests a higher level of generalizability than if these commonalities do not exist. The subjective language in this discussion is meant to underscore that this project should be considered only the first step in a comparative study of public preferences for which sector should deliver public services.

The US and China are good, perhaps ideal, candidates for a least similar systems study of public services preferences. The two countries differ dramatically in terms of the political system, the cultural heritage that informs the political system, and the general orientation toward the public versus the private sector: each merit brief discussion.

First, the degree of political centralization influences how much local governments can craft services to fit local needs (Ostrom, 2008), and the countries are radically different in this regard. As a one-party ruled country, China has a highly centralized political system where major decisions and policies are made from the top and political power is highly unified. This contrasts with the US, where the separation of powers diffuses political power among the branches of government and the federal system allows state governments to have concurrent powers. The two-party competitive electoral system also distinguishes the US political system from that of China. Although China has eight democratic parties besides the ruling Communist Party of China, those democratic parties only have token presence in the legislature.

The political differences also translate to differences in the political role of the citizens. Compared to US citizens, citizens of China face additional difficulties in participating in politics; for example, they face greater barriers of access and higher political risk (Tsai & Xu, 2018). Citizens in non-democratic countries may fear undertaking political action or engage less in the policy process (Lieberman et al., 2014). US citizens in contrast appear to be willing to express political opinions with little fear. As an example, the suggestion that Texas be allowed to secede from the United States was met with amused tolerance (Wood, 2019); one would not expect a similar reaction in China regarding Tibet. These limits, however, do not mean that citizens of China do not express their concerns and preferences for service delivery. A survey conducted in China shows that a large proportion of the respondents, both in the cities and in rural areas, indicate that they have made civic complaints to local authorities regarding the government provision of public goods (Tsai & Xu, 2018).

Second, political differences between the countries are reinforced by differences in cultural heritages. China has a long Confucian political tradition with a strong bureaucratic state and communitarian values whereas the US features a liberal state focused on limited government and individual rights. Such differences logically then should be reflected in political values about the legitimacy of government and the willingness of citizens to accept the government providing a wider array of services. These political differences are then reflected in how politics is framed in the two countries. The size of government, and thus, how many public services there should be as well as what institutions should deliver them have been major political issues in the United States since at least 1896. This means that US citizens are actually asked to vote for candidates who have different views on this question, something that does not occur in China.

Third, the different political and historical factors have created an institutional path dependence in terms of the size of the government and for-profit sectors. The current regime in China evolved from a Communist system that did not accept the idea of an independent for-profit private sector; as a result, the private sector developed late in China and likely led to expectations that public services would be delivered by government. The US, in contrast, has an extensive for-profit sector that some analysts (see Vogel, 1983) contend dominates government decision making with the result being that many public services in such areas as health care are delivered by for-profit or nonprofit organizations. This means that the US private sector is highly involved in many service areas, from education to prisons. In China by contrast, many larger enterprises are government-owned; and they control entire sectors, such as the railroads, oil, and telecommunications (van Montfort et al., 2018).

These three differences do not mean that China lacks a private sector or nonprofit organizations. In many cases as privatization emerged in China, the private sector entered in many industries by partnering with the public sector (van Montfort et al., 2018). Starting in 2010, private investments were allowed in previously state-owned enterprises such as in social welfare. Private sector efforts also started to increase in the areas of education and health services in China (Ministry of Education of China, 2019; National Health Commission of China, 2020).

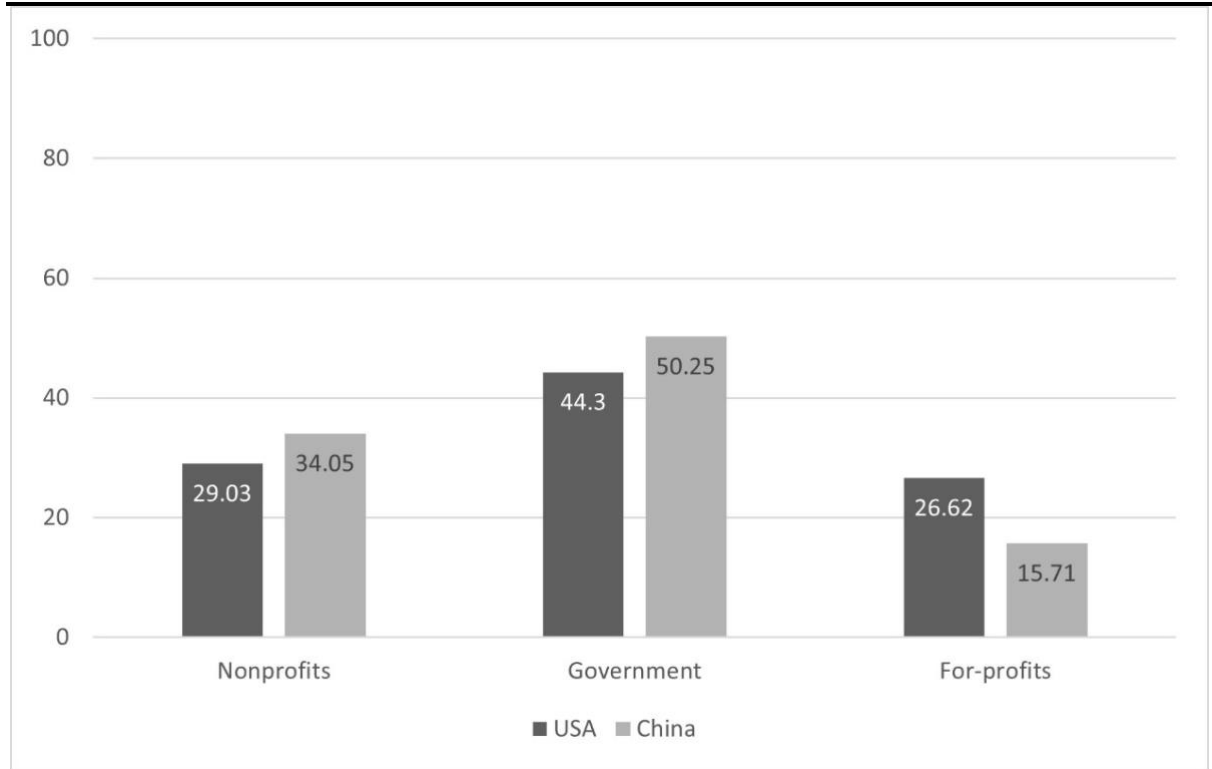
Within each country, the following questions will be studied: 1) How do public preferences in China and the US compare to each other, 2) Do the sector preferences of individuals cluster in predictable ways, and 3) What determines an individual's sector preference(s), e.g., partisanship, demographic factors (ethnicity, age, gender, etc.)? China and the US differ dramatically in government structure and ideology. Two informal hypotheses will guide the research. First, we assume that political and cultural traditions along with path analysis will predict that people will prefer public services to be delivered by the institutions that currently are delivering those services. This suggests that preferences for public services to be delivered by government will be higher in China than in the US; and in the US more individuals will prefer public services to be delivered by for-profit and nonprofit organizations. Second, the greater political attention to the size of government and the political salience it currently has would suggest that preferences in the US are likely to be stronger and more consistent than they are in China where these public debates are lacking.

## **Data Collection and Methodology**

We collected data for our study using online closed-ended surveys. Separate surveys were run for each country between October and November of 2019. The surveys asked whether respondents preferred for-profit, nonprofit, or local government service delivery across 12 different service areas falling in three of the four categories noted by Ferris and Graddy (1986): health and human services, utilities, and arts and recreation.<sup>1</sup> We also collected basic demographic characteristics and used a measure of general pro-private sector preferences as a non-policy specific attitude index (refer to Appendix A for the main questionnaire). Appropriate attention check questions were included in each survey.<sup>2</sup> The surveys were created using Qualtrics and run using two separate platforms in each country, with IRB approval obtained separately for each national context. To test the usability of the questions, we ran a pilot round in each country with around 100 respondents.

For China, we used the survey platform Wenjuanxing, which has more than 2.6 million members from 33 provinces and regions. Our sample, conducted in Chinese, has 1,048 responses and is nationally representative by location, with respondents from 31 provinces and autonomous regions (excluding Hong Kong and Macau). The gender composition of the sample is similar to the actual gender ratio of China (about 48.87% of the population is female

**Figure 1.** Respondent Preferences for Service Provision by Sector



in 2018). The majority of the sample (97.7%) is of Han ethnicity which over-represents the actual Han population (91% in 2010; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021).

Regarding the political affiliation, about 32% of the respondents are members of the Communist Party, a substantial over-representation (approximately 6.5% in 2018, see ‘China Communist Party,’ 2019). We also have 1.32% of the sample who are members of other democratic parties in China.

For the US, we used Amazon Mechanical Turk to collect 1037 survey responses. The sample is roughly representative of the US population by gender, White and Black respondents, income groups, and persons in a household. As is common with the Mechanical Turk platform, it over-represents people with a Democratic party affiliation and with higher levels of education. It also has a lower percentage of Hispanic respondents and a higher percentage of Asians (see Appendix C for more demographic details of the survey sample).

Although each survey reflects the common biases of internet surveys (and access to computers and Wi-Fi), our objective is to describe how individuals prefer public services to be delivered in the two countries. The analysis should be considered exploratory and an effort to determine if future research on this topic might yield valuable insights. The focus is on how individuals decide which sectors to favor rather than an attempt to generate a precise estimate of what the national population of each country favors.

## Findings

Comparing the US and China sector preferences at both the macro level and for individual services shows some broad similarities along with specific variation from those similarities that reflect unique country influences. In terms of overall averages for all twelve services, Figure 1 shows that the Chinese respondents are more likely than the US respondents to favor

government delivery of services (50.3% v. 44.3%), more likely to favor nonprofit delivery of services (34.1% v. 29.0%) and less likely to endorse service delivery by for-profit organizations (15.1% v. 25.4%). Although these differences clearly correspond with the long-standing market orientation of the US economy and are statistically significant, the differences are not polar opposites. Both sets of respondents rank order their preferences in the same way: government, nonprofit, for-profit.

The responses for the individual services in Table 1 illustrate this general pattern of similarity with a few stark differences that reflect each country's historical pattern of delivering public services. In health and human services overall, both countries on average rank order government first, nonprofits second, and for-profit organizations third. Individual services, however, show some clear differences. Chinese respondents have a clear preference for government run hospitals (80.8%) whereas the US respondents split relatively equally among the three sectors. While this reflects how hospital services are actually delivered in China, it does not reflect the nonprofit dominance of the US hospital industry (62% of the total). In terms of nursing homes, an industry that is two-thirds for-profit in the US, a majority of respondents prefer either nonprofit or government ownership. Chinese respondents have similar but stronger preferences for either government or nonprofit nursing homes. For education services, a majority of respondents in both countries favor government delivery of K-12 education. Early childhood education in China is the only service, however, where a larger percentage of Chinese respondents favor for-profit delivery than US respondents. This preference likely reflects the relative absence of government from early childhood education and the existence of a for-profit sector that services this area.

For utilities, the US respondents generally reflect how services have traditionally been delivered. For both trash collection (60.5%) and postal services (78.1%) US respondents prefer government delivery (see Thompson & Elling, 2000). Given the general anti-government bias regarding postal services in the US (see Marvel, 2015), it is unexpected to see this service with the greatest support for government delivery. Tree planting and maintenance is less a US government function, and the public provides a plurality of support (45.6%) for for-profit delivery unlike China where for-profits have only modest support (16.7%); Chinese respondents favor nonprofit delivery of these services. While a plurality of Chinese respondents also favors government services in trash collection and postal delivery, the percentages in China are substantially lower than in the US.

With one exception (sports facilities), the patterns for arts and recreation are relatively similar across the two countries with majorities in both countries favoring government parks and libraries, and pluralities favoring nonprofit provision of arts and culture centers and community centers. In the case of sports facilities, a majority in China favor government provision with little support for for-profit provision while in the US a majority favors for-profit provision and the fewest respondents favor government delivery. The difference likely reflects the controversial nature of funding for major sports stadiums in the US where private for-profit firms press for government subsidies. While it is rare for a major sports stadium in the United States to be fully funded (including infrastructure) by a private for-profit firm, most respondents oppose government ownership of sports stadiums.

Overall, the pattern in Table 1 also suggests that this is a three-dimensional (public, for-profit, nonprofit) rather than a two-dimensional (public, private) choice. In only two cases do less than 20% of US respondents favor service provision by nonprofits (postal services and trash collection), and in only three cases do less than 20% of the Chinese respondents favor such delivery (hospitals, K-12 education, and postal services). This pattern suggests that examining overall sector preferences and their determinants would be informative.

Another way to check if the preference differences for the US and China are differences in degree not kind is to see how those preferences cluster. To convert what are essentially



**Table 1.** Respondent Preferences for Service Provision by Service Area and Sector

Service Area	Nonprofit		Government		For-Profit	
	USA	China	USA	China	USA	China
<i>Health and Human Services</i>						
Hospital	34.1%	15.2%	32.2%	80.8%	33.7%	4.1%
Nursing Home	41.4%	40.9%	21.9%	44.9%	36.7%	14.1%
Early Childhood Education	30.9%	29.1%	43.5%	22.0%	25.6%	49.0%
K-12 Education	20.9%	16.9%	62.5%	68.3%	16.5%	14.8%
<i>Utilities</i>						
Tree Planting/Maintenance	26.4%	47.1%	28.0%	36.2%	45.6%	16.7%
Trash Collection	9.1%	34.2%	60.5%	28.5%	30.4%	37.3%
Postal Services	6.8%	18.9%	78.1%	64.5%	15.1%	16.6%
<i>Arts and Recreation</i>						
Sports Facilities	25.4%	38.0%	22.0%	54.0%	52.6%	8.0%
Local Parks	23.2%	35.6%	65.9%	61.6%	10.8%	2.8%
Libraries	31.4%	33.2%	55.8%	61.6%	12.9%	5.2%
Arts and Culture Center	54.4%	47.2%	21.7%	38.5%	23.9%	14.3%
Community Center	44.4%	52.2%	39.5%	42.1%	16.1%	5.7%

trichotomies into clusterable groupings, three new variables were created. The public preference variable for each service was coded 1 if the respondent felt the service should be provided by government or otherwise assigned a value of zero; similar dummy variables were created for for-profit preferences and nonprofit preferences. Each of these three sets of twelve variables (one for each service) were then subjected to a principal components analysis to create a single factor of overall support for: 1) nonprofit provision, 2) government provision, and (3) for-profit provision.

The factor loadings showing the correlation of the individual items with the overall factor score in both countries are shown in Table 2. Examining the preferences for nonprofit delivery in columns 1 and 2 of Table 2 indicates a general commonality in the structure of nonprofit provision preferences across the two countries. All loadings are positive indicating that if respondents favor nonprofit delivery for one service, they are likely to favor it for others. The loadings fall in a relatively narrow range (0.44 to 0.60 in the US and 0.24 to 0.57 in China) indicating that clusters are not overly influenced by preference on one or two services. The loadings are generally stronger in the US than in China (eigenvalue 3.53 v. 1.99) which indicates that the clustering of attitudes is more consistent in the US than in China. This likely reflects the difference in political context in the US where the size of government (and thus the role of the nonprofit and for-profit sectors) is a long-time political issue, and such salience is likely to crystallize attitudes. The higher loadings indicate US attitudes are more consistent in favor of one sector over the other for an individual service. The presentation of a set of generally consistent factors, however, should not be taken as an indication that there are no deviations across the countries. Substantial variance is not accounted for, and many respondents have preferences that are not characterized by a single dimension. In China in particular, individuals are less likely to favor a consistent pattern of nonprofit service delivery.

Columns 3–6 in Table 2 illustrate the analogous factors for government and for-profit preferences. In both cases the general conclusions hold. There is a structural similarity of preferences in the US and China with uniform positive loadings. Preferences in the US are more consistent with the underlying dimension than are those in China as evinced by the larger eigenvalues. The consistency of the for-profit factor in China is especially modest again probably reflecting the political economy context of China with the relatively recent

**Table 2.** Factor Loadings of Preference for Delivery of Services by Each Sector

Service Area	Nonprofit Preference		Government Preference		For-Profit Preference	
	(1) USA	(2) China	(3) USA	(4) China	(5) USA	(6) China
Hospitals	0.50	0.28	0.53	0.35	0.56	0.36
Nursing Homes	0.49	0.31	0.45	0.31	0.50	0.41
Early Childhood Education	0.57	0.24	0.61	0.26	0.59	0.33
K-12 Education	0.60	0.37	0.65	0.38	0.63	0.47
Tree Planting	0.49	0.31	0.48	0.35	0.38	0.32
Trash Collection	0.57	0.34	0.55	0.40	0.47	0.18
Postal Services	0.58	0.40	0.55	0.41	0.56	0.41
Sports Facilities	0.53	0.54	0.53	0.55	0.44	0.50
Local Parks	0.59	0.56	0.61	0.58	0.55	0.42
Libraries	0.60	0.49	0.64	0.54	0.61	0.40
Arts/ Culture Center	0.44	0.40	0.54	0.46	0.51	0.49
Community Center	0.51	0.49	0.57	0.52	0.52	0.45
Eigenvalue	3.53	1.99	3.78	2.27	3.40	1.95
Cronbach's Alpha	0.77	0.53	0.80	0.60	0.76	0.52

development its for-profit sector. These six variables will be used as dependent variables in a regression to examine whether these general preferences have similar correlates in the two countries.

Comparing the determinants of sector preferences for service delivery across two countries as different as the US and China is complicated by the variance in meaning for some variables (e.g., race, partisanship), the significantly different distributions of some variables (e.g., education, household size), or even the different political influences on age cohorts (e.g., the US has no equivalent of the Cultural Revolution). The most comparable independent variables are female gender, age (three categories: 35 and under [designated younger in the regression], 36 to 55 [the excluded category in the regression], and over 55 [designated older in the regression]<sup>3</sup>; education (high school and less, college, master's degree or more; middle category excluded), high income (a dummy variable indicating an income of \$70,000 in the US and the equivalent of an income in the top third in China, 96,000 yuan), and size of household (dummy variable for 3 or more). In addition, a factor measure for pro-private sector attitudes developed by Hvidman and Andersen (2016) in Denmark was constructed in both countries (see Appendix B).

Two other independent variables while potentially important—race and partisanship—are not directly comparable across the countries. In the US race is clearly an important cleavage on many issues and dummy variables were included for Black and Hispanic respondents. In China, which has little racial diversity, a single dummy variable was included for the Han majority. In terms of partisanship, dummy variables were included for Democrats and Republicans (Independents as the excluded category) and in China dummy variables were included for non-Communist party members and other democratic party members with Communist Party members as the excluded category.

These differences in the independent variables or what those variables might mean within a country should be kept in mind when examining the regression results, presented in Table 3. In general, the regression equations in the US predict better than those in China which likely

**Table 3.** Regression Analysis of Preference for Delivery of Services, by Sector

Variables	Nonprofit Preference		Government Preference		For-Profit Preference	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	USA	China	USA	China	USA	China
Female	0.18*** (0.06)	0.11* (0.06)	-0.11* (0.06)	-0.11* (0.06)	-0.09^ (0.06)	0.07 (0.06)
Black	0.03 (0.11)		-0.08 (0.10)		0.15 (0.10)	
Hispanic	0.03 (0.13)		0.13 (0.13)		-0.18 (0.13)	
Han Ethnicity		0.24 (0.20)		-0.14 (0.20)		-0.15 (0.20)
Youngest Age Group	-0.13* (0.07)	0.11 (0.08)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.17** (0.07)	0.21*** (0.07)	0.15** (0.07)
Oldest Age Group	-0.06 (0.09)	0.47 (0.36)	0.03 (0.09)	-0.004 (0.36)	-0.03 (0.09)	-0.63* (0.36)
High School Diploma	0.09 (0.07)	-0.11 (0.17)	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.16 (0.17)	-0.05 (0.07)	0.50*** (0.16)
Master's Degree	-0.19** (0.09)	0.03 (0.10)	0.01 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.10)	0.20** (0.08)	0.13 (0.10)
High Income	-0.08 (0.08)	-0.18*** (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)	0.18*** (0.07)	0.0004 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.07)
Democrat/Dem-Leaning	-0.15* (0.08)		0.31*** (0.08)		-0.21*** (0.08)	
Republican/Rep-Leaning	-0.23** (0.09)		-0.01 (0.09)		0.25*** (0.09)	
Non-Communist Party Member		-0.06 (0.07)		0.08 (0.07)		-0.08 (0.07)
Other Democratic Party Member		0.48* (0.28)		-0.49* (0.28)		0.10 (0.28)
Household of 3 or More	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.10 (0.15)	-0.02 (0.06)	0.02 (0.15)	0.12** (0.06)	0.07 (0.15)
Pro-Private Sector Attitudes	0.18*** (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)	-0.35*** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.03)	0.23*** (0.03)	0.14*** (0.03)
Constant	0.16* (0.09)	-0.18 (0.26)	-0.10 (0.08)	0.22 (0.26)	-0.05 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.25)
Observations	1,017	1,048	1,017	1,048	1,017	1,048
R-Squared	0.06	0.02	0.19	0.04	0.15	0.04

reflects both the more consistent grouping of the factors (that is, higher eigenvalues) in the US as well as the greater attention to such issues in the US political system.

Columns 1 and 2 in Table 3 present the results for nonprofit provision of services. In both countries the ability to predict support for nonprofit delivery generates the lowest level of prediction for any of the three sectors. Two variables, pro-private sector attitudes and gender, generate relationships that are statistically significant in the same directions in both equations. In both cases those respondents who have a general bias in favor of the private

sector favor greater provision of public services by nonprofits although the relationship appears to be much stronger in the US than in China (when this variable is omitted from the analysis, the patterns are generally similar but predict less well). Similarly, female respondents tend to prefer nonprofit delivery with a stronger relationship in the US than in China. In the US, greater nonprofit provision of public services is opposed by younger respondents, better educated respondents, and Republicans. In China, high income individuals are less likely to support nonprofit delivery of services while other democratic party members favor such provision.

Although the pattern for government delivery of public services (Columns 3 and 4 in Table 3) is better predicted in both countries, again there is little consistency across the two countries. Only the generic pro-private sector factor and the gender variable are consistent among two countries. The pro-private sector factor has negative relationships with government delivery of public services although again the relationship is much stronger in the US than in China. Both female respondents in US and China are less likely to support government delivery. The US respondents who identify themselves as Democrats are more likely to favor government service delivery option. In China, other democratic party members are less likely to favor government provision as are young people, but high-income individuals support government delivery.

Support for for-profit delivery of public services generates patterns with both commonalities and unique aspects across the two countries (Columns 5 and 6 in Table 3). In both countries, younger respondents and those with pro-private sector attitudes favor for-profit delivery of services. The differences, however, are greater than the similarities. Education provides opposing results; the for-profit sector has greater support from people with lower levels of formal education (high school and below) in China but from those with more formal education in the US (graduate degrees). The only other significant relationship in China is a negative coefficient for older individuals. In the US, partisan differences play a major role with greater support by Republicans and less support from Democrats; women also are less in favor of for-profit provision of services, but larger households are more in favor.

In combination, the results of Tables 2 and 3 indicate that while the structure of sector preferences appears similar across the countries (as indicated by the factor loadings), the responses are less consistent in China, and the reasons why individuals favor public service delivery by one sector or another vary across the two countries. This suggests that it is possible to do comparative work on the question of sector preference, but that attention needs to be paid to specific contextual factors in the individual country.

## **Conclusion**

This article makes several contributions to the literature on cross-sector delivery of public services, by focusing on understanding public preferences for whether government, nonprofits or for-profits should deliver different services. This knowledge is important to both policymakers, in terms of being responsive to the public's views, and bureaucrats who implement the policies, given its implications on effective service delivery. Citizens' feedback has been shown to enhance the effectiveness of organizations and improve the services provided (Campbell, 2010). Through this study, therefore, we hope to underscore the importance of considering public service delivery preferences as an integral part of privatization debates and implementation decision-making.

We also take a comparative approach to exploring sector preferences using a least similar systems design and surveying respondents in the US and China. A comparative analysis helps us understand whether and how national context factors such as bureaucratic values, reliance on government, and development of nonprofit and for-profit sectors, affect sector preferences.

Choosing two 'least similar' cases in terms of these contextual factors, helps us identify whether the need to understand public preferences is generalizable and suitable for future comparative work.

Our empirical analysis points to the theoretical importance of including national context in the study of sector preferences. The general responses in the US and China are similar enough to indicate that future comparative work in this area would be valuable. Although they have fundamentally different political and economic systems, respondents in both countries all rank order the government sector first, the nonprofit sector second, and the for-profit third in terms of preference. For individual services, the rank orders are generally similar across countries although there are clear differences for some individual services that reflect historical patterns of service delivery in the country. The comparative approach indicates that choice of sector often follows what has been the practice in the country, but these choices are colored particularly in the US by partisan-related attitudes about the role of government. We also find that national contexts and demographic characteristics play different roles in predicting preferences, highlighting the need for more in-depth studies on how citizen attitudes and beliefs shape their preferences for the delivery of services. The attitudes are also more consistent and more predictable with demographic factors in the US than in China.

The findings from this study are generally consistent with Handy et al.'s (2010) study of Canadian college students and their preferences for nonprofit provision of arts and for-profit provision of sports facilities as well as the relatively equal preferences for government and nonprofit hospital provision. The findings differ from Thompson and Elling's (2000) study of Michigan which found majority support for for-profit provision of garbage collection/disposal but was consistent with their findings on elementary and secondary schools.

This study is an exploratory step towards studying citizen sector preferences and, therefore, has its limitations. While the use of online survey-taking platforms allowed us to quickly reach a broad group of respondents in two countries, the non-representative sample means that our results may not be a true representation of the entire population in the US and China. The results do suggest, however, that a fully representative national sample in both countries would provide valuable information. Additionally, the demographic comparability between the two countries, especially in terms of income, education, and age may suffer because of their different social and political development arcs, thereby requiring more specific interpretations of their relationship with sector preferences. Our survey design was also influenced by the exploratory nature of the project, with questions framed broadly and for a certain range of public services (see Handy et al., 2010; Thompson & Elling, 2000). This prevents a more in-depth analysis of the drivers and consequences of different citizen preferences and the generalizability of the findings to all public services provided by each country. The general nature of the survey may also be the reason why we find modest levels of prediction for the link between demographics and delivery preferences.

Another limitation of the study is we know little at this time about how the public forms these preferences and what they are based on. Van Slyke and Roch (2004) indicate that the US public does not have a great deal of knowledge about whether existing services are delivered by public, nonprofit, or for-profit organizations. Surveys that incorporate citizen knowledge would be informative. The forced choice nature of the survey might have artificially induced some subjects to select an option when they were ambivalent about how the services were delivered. More in-depth methods such as focus groups or extended surveys would be valuable to determine why individuals selected the choices that they did and how strong these preferences are.

The findings and limitations point to the need for further research on the role played by public preferences for service delivery in a range of public policy sub-fields. Future research using more representative samples can identify how public preferences differ based on a wider range

of service areas, the actual provision of services, their prior use-levels of services, and their exposure to/trust in nonprofit and for-profit service providers. Exploring the implications of these relationships on citizen coproduction, satisfaction, and performance evaluation will be useful both in the theoretical development of cross-sector research and for implementation decision-making. Additionally, future research can explore the differences and similarities in other country contexts that have different sector compositions for public service delivery and varied citizen demographics. This will help further our understanding of the factors shaping public preferences and its implications on service delivery, which in turn will help inform public decisions on privatization, contract management, and implementation.

## Notes

1. We did not ask questions about public safety functions because such services are rarely directly provided by nonprofits (see Ferris & Graddy, 1986). Public safety functions that are contracted out such as vehicle towing are usually contracted with for-profit firms or in the case of police services to other units of government. An exception is that many US volunteer fire departments are actually nonprofit organizations (Henderson & Sowa, 2019).
2. Authenticity checks included meeting certain quality control checks put in place by each internet platform, preventing respondents from retaking the survey, and removing responses that took less than one minute. Attention check questions included asking respondents to answer the same question twice, to type out an answer to a question, and to self-report the usability of their responses. Overall, the checks led to 2% of responses being dropped in the US survey and 7.7% in the China survey.
3. The age categories do not exactly match up. In the US, the cut points are ages 30 and 50.

## Disclosure Statement

The author(s) declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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**Appendix A1. Survey Questions to Collect Respondent Preferences in English**

Which type of organizations would you prefer to deliver the following services to you?

	Government	For-Profit	Nonprofit
Nursing Home	0	0	0
Adoption Agency	0	0	0
Trash Collection	0	0	0
Early Childhood Education Service	0	0	0
Postal Service	0	0	0
Sports Facilities	0	0	0
Hospital	0	0	0
Roads/Highways	0	0	0
Electricity	0	0	0
Tree Planting and Maintenance	0	0	0
Local Parks	0	0	0
K-12 School	0	0	0
Community Center	0	0	0
Arts and Culture Center	0	0	0
Library	0	0	0

**Appendix A2. Survey Questions to Collect Respondent Preferences in Chinese**

您会更倾向于以下哪种机构来提供如下服务？			
	公有	私有	非盈利组织
养老院	0	0	0
医院	0	0	0
小学至高中	0	0	0
幼儿园	0	0	0
早教班	0	0	0
课后兴趣辅导班	0	0	0
大学	0	0	0
图书馆	0	0	0
公园	0	0	0
体育馆/体育场	0	0	0
社区活动中心	0	0	0
艺术文化中心	0	0	0
博物馆	0	0	0
植树及养护	0	0	0
废品回收	0	0	0
垃圾回收	0	0	0
环境卫生维护	0	0	0
邮政服务	0	0	0

**Appendix B.** Survey Questions to Calculate Citizen For-Profit Bias Factor Using PCA

Many government activities could be produced better and cheaper by private providers.  
由政府提供的很多社会服务，如果由私人企业提供的话，质量会更好，价格更优惠。

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

We should, for the most part, contract out government services (such as child care, elderly care, hospital treatments).

我们应该把很大一部分的政府服务外包出去（比如托儿所，医疗服务，养老服务等）。

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strong Disagree

The government is best at providing public services.

公共社会服务的最好提供者是政府部门。

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

**Appendix B1.** Factor Loadings Sector Bias

	US	China
Q1	0.83	0.87
Q2	0.70	0.88
Q3 (flipped)	0.66	0.34
Eigenvalue	1.62	1.64
Cronbach's Alpha	0.57	0.54

**Appendix C. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

USA (n=1,017)		China (n=1,048)	
Variables	Percent	Variables	Percent
<i>Gender</i>		<i>Gender</i>	
Female	53.1	Female	45.9
Male	45.3	Male	54.1
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	
White	71.9	Han Ethnicity	97.5
Black/African American	9.4	All Other Ethnicities	2.5
Hispanic	5.6		
<i>Age Group</i>		<i>Age Group</i>	
Younger Age Group: 18-30 years	33.5	Younger Age Group: 18-35 years	77.9
Middle Age Group: 31-50 years	50.1	Middle Age Group: 36-55 years	21.4
Older Age Group: 51+ years	15.1	Older Age Group: 56+ years	0.8
<i>Education Level</i>		<i>Education Level</i>	
High School	25.4	High School	3.7
Associate's/Bachelor's Degree	55.4	Associate's/Bachelor's Degree	86.7
Master's Degree or Above	16.5	Master's Degree or Above	10.2
<i>Annual Income</i>		<i>Annual Income</i>	
High Income	22.9	High Income	34.4
<i>Political Affiliation</i>		<i>Political Affiliation</i>	
Democratic/Democratic Leaning	53.6	Communist Party Member	31.6
Republican/Republican Leaning	25.9	No Political Affiliation	67.2
Other	20.6	Other Democratic Party Member	1.2
<i>Number of Persons in Household</i>		<i>Number of Persons in Household</i>	
1 Person in Household	22.4	1 Person in Household	0.9
2 Persons in Household	29.0	2 Persons in Household	3.7
3 or More Persons in Household	47.9	3 or More Persons in Household	95.4