

A Mediation of Political Factors on Leadership, Work Ethics, and Perceived Performance: Comparing Central and Local Civil Servants

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Abstract

A large amount of research has recently emerged about how work-related behaviors (or attitudes) contribute to performance or service quality. However, previous efforts lacked study of how political factors mediate their casual relationship. In addition, no research intends to compare their similarity and difference of work attitudes and work behaviors across government levels. We need more empirical evidences to tell how and why they work differently. This research analyzes how political factors mediate the relationship of leadership, work ethics, and accountability on perceived performance, or perceived service quality, made up of our theoretical framework.

Using 2008 Taiwan Government Bureaucrat Survey (TGBS) data, 1027(central government) and 935 (local government) career civil servants were analyzed with multiple-group structural equation modeling (SEM). This research found political factors significantly mediate the relationships among leadership, work ethics, and perceived performance, or perceived service quality. As well, this research also found the significant difference of career civil servants between central - and local government in terms of our theoretical framework. This research indeed advances the knowledge, especially to the mediation of political factors, and the influences of government levels. Some research limitations and future research also were discussed in this research.

Introduction

There is a great deal of general literature on work-related behavior and perceived performance (Meier, Mastracci, and Wilson, 2006), and perceived service quality (Guy and Newman, 2004; Mastracci, Newman, and Guy, 2006). Although these issues have been extensively investigated, few existing studies so far have attempted to account for the intervening role of political factors. In government practices, political factors always play an important factor between them. Hence, in order to help fill this gap in our knowledge, this study investigated the probable existence of political factors intervene their relationship. However, one problem with this area of research is that most studies were only conducted with participants who worked in federal public employees, or state, and local public employees. We did not find any publications that reported HRM research project on the comparison between federal and local public employees. This problem makes it difficult to apply the results to other situations in which public employees from different government levels face different complexities and caseworks. There was a noticeable absence of research projects dealing with this issue. Using the data of 2008 Taiwan Government Bureaucrat Survey (TGBS) data as an example, this study aims to examine how political factors mediate the relationship between work-related behaviors (or attitudes) and perceived performance or perceived service quality. In terms of work-related behaviors, this research chooses the leadership, work ethics, and accountability as the observed variables, which were commonly explored in public HRM area. The answer to such questions will not only have important implications on public management research, but may also shed light on political factors and government levels involved in the public employees' behaviors. The specific aims in this study are to identify the mediating effects of political factors, and to elucidate the similarity and difference of public employees' behaviors between central- and local government about our theoretical model.

To address the issues already outlined and to begin to fill the gaps in the previous research, the present study was designed to address the following sections. Firstly, this research briefly outlines research backgrounds and concepts which help to understand the following statement. Secondly, this study provides the theoretical framework which helps answer the research question. Thirdly, this research describes the research design in this research including data collection and sampling, variables measurement, and analytical method. Fourthly, this study provides the findings with multiple group structural equation modeling. Fifthly, this study will discuss how the findings support the evidences to the theoretical framework and the previous research. Finally, this research concludes with our important implication and theoretical contribution to public management. As well, this research also discusses our theoretical limitation and future research.

The Similarity and Differences between Central and Local Public Employees

Research Bases

Perceived Performance

Perceived Service Quality

Political Factors

Theoretical Framework

Leadership

H1: High levels of leadership positively promote perceived performance

H2: High levels of leadership positively promote perceived service quality

H3: High levels of leadership are positively related with political factors

Work Ethics

H4: High levels of work ethics positively promote perceived performance

H5: High levels of work ethics are negatively related with political factors

H6: High levels of work ethics positively promote perceived service quality

Accountability

H7: High levels of accountability are negatively related with Political Factors

H8: High levels of Accountability positively promote Perceived Performance

H9: High levels of Accountability positively promote perceived service quality

After making the above hypotheses probable, figure 1 depicts these hypothesized relationships. First, we correlate each formative variable to perceived performance (e.g., H1, H4, H8), and perceived service quality (e.g., H2, H6, H9). Then, we draw line between each formative variable and political factors (e.g., H3, H5, H7); political factors and perceived performance (H10), or perceived service quality (H11).

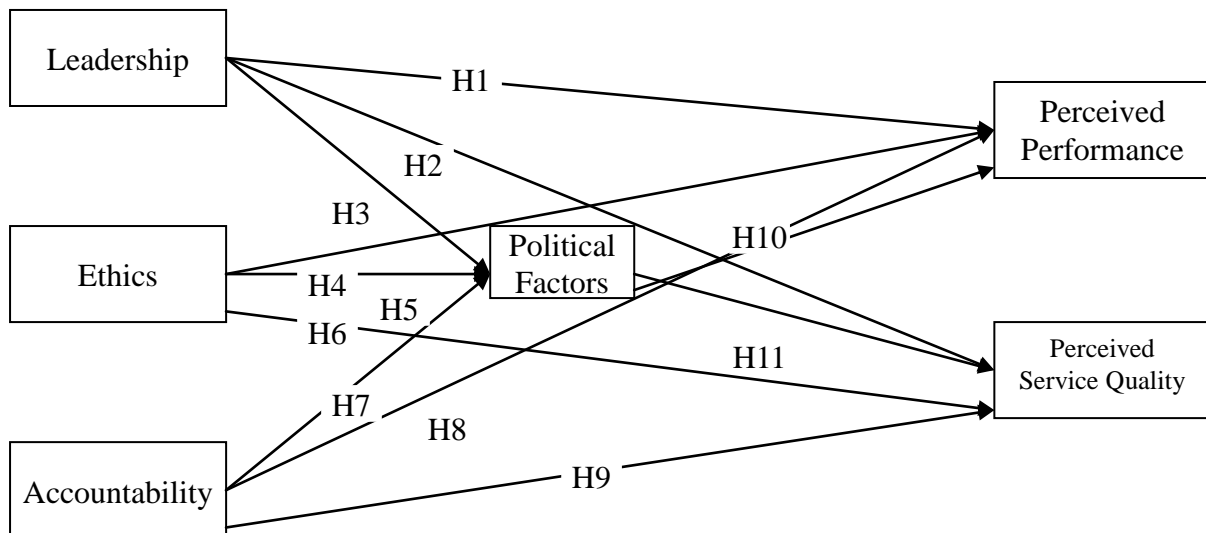


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Data and Sampling

This study uses 2008 Taiwan Government Bureaucrat Survey (TGBS) data¹. Data collection took place in career civil servants for Taiwan central and local governments. The stratified samples classified by government levels (i.e., central, local) and position levels (senior, middle, junior) were surveyed from January, 2008 to March, 2008. Before surveying, three focus group meetings with the members of professions and practitioners were conducted to plan the sampling, and refine the questionnaire. For example, they suggest using 6-point scale rather than 7-point scales in some survey items because Chinese respondents often respond “Neither agree nor disagree”. In doing so, the survey can increase the variation of the research. Before finalizing the questionnaire, we also do the pretest to correct the words of survey items. Personal interview survey is conducted to gather data. This is because this method can elicit the benefits such as: response rates are very good; respondents have the ability to see, and with this method. Finally, 1,962 valid responses were returned, yielding a response rate of 64.5%.

Among the final 1027 responses in central government and 935 responses in local government, the data shows that 1. Central government: (1) 66.4 percent are male and 39.6 percent are female; (2) 19.0 percent of them are managers and 80.09 percent of them are employees; (3) 9.6 percent of them are senior-level position, 55.8 percent of them are middle-level position and 34.6 percent of them are junior-level position. (4) Their average age and civil service tenure are 44.238 years and 16.406 years. 2. Local government: (1) 51.9 percent are male and 48.1 percent are female; (2) 21.5 percent of them are managers and 78.5 percent of them are employees; (3) 2.1 percent of them are senior-level position, 52.1 percent

¹ The data is developed by the faculty for Department of Public Administration, National Chengchi University, and Department of Political Science, Soochow University, Taiwan. The data is available at <http://srda.sinica.edu.tw/>

of them are middle-level position and 45.8 percent of them are junior-level position. (4) Their average age and civil service tenure are 44.230 years and 15.349 years.

The comparison between our sample and the population in central – and local government revealed no significant differences in the demographic information of gender, age, work role, civil service tenure, and position.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics for Career Civil Servants between Central Government and Local Government

Demographics		Central Government(N=1027)		Local Government(N=935)	
		Mean	Percentage	Mean	Percentage
Gender	Male		66.4%(620)		51.9%(485)
	Female		39.6%(407)		48.1%(450)
Age		44.238(1023)		44.230(935)	
Work Role	Manager		19.0% (195)		21.5%(201)
	Employee		80.9% (831)		78.5%(734)
Civil Service Tenure		16.406(1025)		15.349(933)	
Position Level	Senior		9.6%(99)		2.1%(20)
	Middle		55.8%(573)		52.1%(487)
	Junior		34.6%(355)		45.8%(428)

() Parentheses is samples.

Variable Measurement

This research employs item parcels to construct the endogenous and exogenous variables². Composite item parcels are more reliable indicators of the measured constructs than single item and also facilitate convergence of the solution within the multivariate function (Hagtvet and Nasser, 2004)³. In order to ensure the substance of each factor representative of content of the property being measures (i.e., content validity), we ask two academic colleagues, and three participants from central- and local governments to evaluate

² Kishton and Widaman (1994) described an item parcel as “a simple sum of several items assessing the same construct. Several parcels are developed from items constituting a scale; no item is assigned to more that one parcel and all scale items are used in constructing the parcels”(p.757).

³ The item parcels of each construct consisting of one common attribute have content validity as measures of the construct (Hagtvet and Nasser, 2004).

the content of each factor; in addition to the authors’ approval for the items consisting of each construct (i.e., professional validity) (Kerlinger and Lee, 2000). However, caution should be taken in interpreting results based on that scale. Then we reverse the coding of perceived performance and perceived service quality (see appendix 1), in order to conform to the direction and strength of each factor and then to make correct conclusions. Mean, standard deviation, item scales, item ranges, skewness and kurtosis of endogenous and exogenous variables for central- and local governments are reported separately in table 2, and table 3. The evidences show that each variable follow the normal distribution, so we did not do data transformation.

A. Leadership: The sample survey questions made up of leadership variable was “My manager helps my job without incurring other problems,” “My manager understands his job responsibility,” and so on, as shown in appendix 1. The responding scale used in this item is “Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree.” The Cronbach α of this variable is 0.916 for central government, and 0.917 for local government.

B. Work Ethics: The variable of work ethics includes the sample questions such as “My agency sees public service ethics as the most value for the organization,” “My agency can quickly solve the disputes for public service ethics,” and so on. The responding scales in this study were “Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree,” as shown in appendix 1. The Cronbach α of this variable is 0.935 for central government, and 0.928 for local government.

C. Political Factors: the sample items for political factors were “While I propose the suggestions to my manager is under the influence of my political position,” “While I propose the suggestions to my manager is under the influence of my manager’s political position,” and so on. The responding scales for this variable were “Always, Usually, Seldom, Never,

Never Encountered This Situation,’ as shown in appendix 1. The Cronbach α of this variable is 0.818 for central government, and 0.807 for local government.

D. Accountability: the variable of “accountability” includes the following survey items, such as “I will try for more discussions in my responsibility for my job,” “I will take accountable for the policy (or job),” and so on. The responding scales for this variable were “Always, Usually, Seldom, Never, Never encountered this situation,” shown in appendix 1. The Cronbach α of this variable is 0.818 for central government, and 0.807 for local government.

E. Perceived Performance: the global measure of perceived performance was “The degree of my agency’s performance over the past year is” The responding scales were “ Improve Very Much, Improve Much, Improve Somewhat, Regress Somewhat, Regress Much, Regress Very Much.” We reversed the scales to conform the direction and the strength for this survey item.

F. Perceived Service Quality: the global measure of perceived performance was “I think the current service quality that I work for is.” The responding scales were “Very Good, Good, Somewhat good, Somewhat bad, Bad, Very Bad.” The scales were reversed in order to follow the direction and the strength for this survey item.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Assessment of Normality for Variables – Central Government

Variable	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max	Skew	Kurtosis
Leadership	4	9.778	3.931	4.00	24.00	1.105	1.528
Work Ethics	4	10.678	3.712	4.00	24.00	.940	1.002
Political Factors	4	16.918	2.234	4.00	20.00	-.624	1.438
Accountability	3	8.410	3.519	3.00	15.00	.690	-.659
Perceived Performance	1	4.523	.824	1.00	6.00	-.878	2.538
Perceived Service Quality	1	4.838	.834	1.00	6.00	-1.326	3.603

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Assessment of Normality for Variables – Local Government

Variable	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max	Skew	Kurtosis
Leadership	4	9.996	3.962	4.00	24.00	1.084	1.357
Work Ethics	4	10.987	3.958	4.00	24.00	.828	.708
Political Factors	4	16.490	2.456	4.00	20.00	-.687	1.261
Accountability	3	7.963	3.233	3.00	15.00	.824	-.077
Perceived Performance	1	4.463	.845	1.00	6.00	-.658	1.670
Perceived Service Quality	1	4.839	.783	1.00	6.00	-1.036	2.435

Analytical Method

Multiple-Group structural equation modeling (SEM) technique allows contrasting the inequality or equality across three sectors which to test our theoretical hypotheses (Hair, 2006; Kline, 2005)⁴. Through the specification of cross-group equality constraints, government-level differences on any individual parameter can be tested. The fit of the constrained model can be compared with that of the unrestricted model without the equality constraints with the chi-square difference statistic (Kline, 2005). In multiple-group SEM using maximum likelihood estimation (MLE), we test for the significant differences of the

⁴ Structural equation modeling (SEM) technique composes the measurement model and the structural model. The measurement model provides an assessment of convergent and discriminant validity, and the structural model provides an assessment of nomological validity (Schumacker and Lomax, 2010).

parameters across sectors by setting the parameters of interest equal. Because all parameters are potentially unequal across government levels, model from each sample can be compared through the specification of cross-group equality unconstrained. Then we could estimate the same model within three sectors' samples and then compare the “unstandardized” solutions across three samples (Kline, 2005:289-311).

A chi-square value of zero indicates a perfect fit or no difference between values in the sample covariance matrix S and the reproduced implied covariance matrix Σ that was created, based on the specified theoretical model. Obviously, a theoretical model in SEM with all paths specified is a saturated model (Schumacker and Lomax, 2010)⁵.

Findings

A. Model Fit

We firstly run the SEM according to the research framework. The model fit indices shown in table 4 suggest that the sample data have an acceptable fit to the SEM in the unconstrained model, and in the constrained model ($\chi^2 = 72.158$, $df=27$, $NC(\chi^2/df)=2.673$; $NFI=.971$; $TLI=.971$, $GFI=.976$; $CFI=.981$; $RMSEA=.029$). All goodness-of-fit indices point to consistent model validation. Then we conclude that the model represents a reasonable approximation to the data. They indicate that the overall fit of SEM model is satisfactory.

We use chi-square difference test to estimate whether group differences exist between central and local government. Chi-square difference test suggests that the constrained model (hypothesize two models are equal) is significantly worse than the unconstrained model. The unconstrained model fits well more than the constrained model. As shown in table 4, the unconstrained model provides a better fit than the constrained model because of its smaller χ^2

⁵ The goal in SEM is to achieve a parsimonious model with a few substantive meaningful paths and a nonsignificant model with a few substantive meaningful paths and a nonsignificant chi-square value close to the saturated model value of zero, thus indicating little difference between the sample covariance matrix and the reproduced implied covariance matrix (Schumacker and Lomax, 2010:75).

values. Table 4 shows the change of 72.158 in χ^2 exceeds the critical value of chi-square (55.476) with 27 degrees of freedom, the difference in the χ^2 is statistically significant ($P < .001$)⁶. This informs that there is significantly different between central career civil servants and local career personnel towards our theoretical components as expected. We can conclude that the parameters may not be equal between them. The unconstrained model is therefore preferred model to present our findings show as follows.

Table 4: Goodness-of-Fit Indices for Unconstrained Model and Constrained Model

Criteria	χ^2 (df)	χ^2 (df) difference	χ^2/df	NFI	TLI	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
Unconstrained	0 (54)	72.158 (df=27)	-	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	-
Constrained	72.158 (27)	P<.001	2.673	.971	.971	.976	.981	.029
Threshold Value			2-5	$\geq .90$	≥ 0.90	≥ 0.90	$\geq .95$	$\leq .08$

Note: NFI= Normed Fit Index; TLI= Tucker-Lewis Fit; GFI= Good Fit Index; CFI= Comparative Fit Index

B. Path Analysis

As indicated in table 4, the unconstrained model is a more appropriate description. The following section therefore focuses on unconstrained model results in career civil servants in central government and local government. The squared multiple correlations (R^2) of the endogenous variables provide additional support for the explanatory effects of the exogenous variables on individual factors (i.e., political factors, perceived performance, and perceived service quality). As indicated in table 5, among career civil servants in central government, the exogenous variables reflect only 3.1% of ‘political factors’, 24.7% of ‘perceived

⁶ Unconstrained model and constrained model are hierarchical so that chi-square difference test can be applied to assess their relative fit. Unconstrained model: $\chi^2 = 0$, df=54. Constrained model: $\chi^2 = 72.158$, df=27. Chi-square difference: $\chi^2_{diff} = 72.128$, df=27, $p=0.000 < 0.001$. Chi-square difference test suggests that the constrained model is significantly worse than the unconstrained model. The unconstrained model fits well more than the constrained model.

performance’, and 26.6% of “perceived service quality”. Among career civil servants in local government shown in table 5, the exogenous variables reveal 1.7% of “political factors”, 26.7% of “perceived performance”, and 24.5% of “perceived service quality”. Thus, influencing factors have a much greater impact on political factors and perceived service quality within the central government’s sub-samples more than with the local government’s ones, but influencing factors have on more perceived performance for local government than central government.

In Central Government Model, seven of the path parameters are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$; see Table 5). Within this model, leadership positively influence perceived performance (H1) (standardized coefficient= .125, $p < 0.001$) and perceived service quality (H2) (standardized coefficient= .164, $p < 0.001$), but it has adverse influence on political factors (H3) (standardized coefficient= -.102, $p < 0.01$). As well, work ethics positively benefits perceived performance (standardized coefficient= .408, $p < 0.001$) (H4), and perceived service quality (standardized coefficient= .392, $p < 0.001$) (H6). Although Table 7 also indicates high levels of accountability positively influence political factors (H7) (standardized coefficient= .134, $p < .001$), whereas more political factors is detrimental to perceived performance (H10) (standardized coefficient= -.077, $p < .01$) and perceived service quality (H11) (standardized coefficient= -.104, $p < .001$).

In Local Government Model, table 5 reveals that the parameter estimate for the path linking leadership and perceived performance was .164 (H1) ($p < .001$), and that for the path linking leadership and perceived service quality was .105 (H2) ($p < .001$). Work ethics has significant influences on perceived performance (H4) (standardized coefficient= .393, $p < .001$) and perceived service quality (H6) (standardized coefficient= .408, $p < .001$), as two effects are also stronger in the central government sub-sample. However, the path coefficient linking

political factors and perceived performance indicated a negative relationship (H10) (standardized *coefficient* = -.60, $p < .001$), as did the parameter estimate for the path linking political factors and perceived service quality (standardized *coefficient* = -.086, $p < .01$).

The variable of political factors has a significant moderator of the structural effect on perceived performance and perceived service quality. For central government, leadership, and accountability have negatively significant mediating influences on perceived performance, mediated by political factors, -.008, -.010 (i.e., $-[(.102) \times (.077)]$; $.134 \times -.077$). Political factors also negatively mediated the relationship between leadership and perceived service quality, between accountability and perceived service quality. For local government, political factors have no mediating effect between our interest variables. In the present study, the evidences show that political factors have a certain degree of the negative mediated effects on our theoretical model in central government but not in local government.

Table 5: Maximum Likelihood Estimates of SEM Estimating Model: Central Government and Local Government

Path Relationship		Central Government(N=1027)		Local Government(N=935)	
		Standardized Estimate	Unstandardized Estimate	Standardized Estimate	Unstandardized Estimate
Leadership	→Perceived Performance(H1)	.125***	.026*** (.007)	.164***	.035*** (.007)
	→Perceived Service Quality (H2)	.164***	.035*** (.007)	.105***	.021** (.007)
	→Political Factors (H3)	-.102**	-.058** (.020)	-.070	-.043 (.025)
Work Ethics	→Perceived Performance(H4)	.408***	.091*** (.007)	.393***	.084*** (.007)
	→Political Factors(H5)	-.031	-.018 (.022)	-.024	-.015 (.025)
	→Perceived Service Quality(H6)	.392***	.088*** (.007)	.408***	.081*** (.007)
Accountability	→Political Factors(H7)	.134***	.085*** (.020)	.099	.075 (.025)
	→Perceived Performance(H8)	-.002	-0.001 (.006)	.041	.011 (.007)
	→Perceived Service Quality(H9)	-.032	-.008 (.006)	.052	.013 (.007)
Political Factors	→Perceived Performance(H10)	-.077**	-.028** (.010)	-.060***	-.021* (.010)
	→Perceived Service Quality(H11)	-.104***	-.039*** (.010)	-.086***	-.027** (.009)
R ² – Political Factors		.031		.017	
R ² – Perceived Performance		.247		.267	
R ² - Perceived Service Quality		.266		.245	
Correlation					
Leadership <--> Ethics		.510		.574	
Ethics<-->Accountability		.072		.070	
Leadership <--> Accountability		.029		.027	
Perceived Performance <--> Perceived Service Quality		.517		.500	

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

a. Standard Error is calculated from unstandardized estimate.

The findings suggest that the mediation of political factors were disadvantageous to performance or service quality – contrary to other findings. Why did political factors significantly mediate the relationship on our theoretical framework for central government’s career civil servants? One possible reason for there being statistical significance may lie in the central government always depends on political factors driving government operations. Moreover, another possible reason may be that local politics commonly appeared in local governance. Local career civil servants thought that it actually have little to do with

government operation. Our findings are not in contradiction with those of the empirical studies discussed above. With regard to leadership and work ethics, our findings confirm the previous evidence that they positively contribute performance or service quality. The finding also suggests that there are important differences regarding our theoretical framework between central – and local governments. These results lend some credence to be indicative of the fact that there exists the gape between them.

Discussion and Conclusion

To conclude, the present study is preliminary research on how political factors mediate leadership, work ethics, accountability, and perceived performance, or perceived service quality. Its relevant research on individual concept can be commonly seen in several journals and books. A major finding is that political factors play the key roles for the public employees for central government. This study has demonstrated that political factors is considered and should be stressed in public management practices. It follows that political factors may reverse the advantageous process to performance or service quality. The present findings also contribute to the field’s understanding of our theoretical framework contrasts different government levels. Such force may impact government practices that we need to further consider. Although it is not necessarily improve their generalization, it indeed accumulates the evidences and enlarges their theoretical models to different areas.

Despite having these advantages, it does have some limitations. First, the existing data set limits we include more variable into this research. However, the problem may be compounded by the tradeoff between complexity of practice and parsimony of model, making it difficult for adding more variables. In general, this study uses some important variables which will be useful to enhance the understanding of government practices, particularly to the mediating effect of political factors and the influence of government level.

However, whether this study will also apply to in other areas depends on different situation. Further research is therefore warranted in different contexts. This study should provide a basis for additional research on this issue. There is a continuing need for an adequate theoretical basis for the practical application of this theoretical model. Finally, we hope that is will throw some light on several issue or at least pave the way to new research projects which will help consolidate the study of public management.

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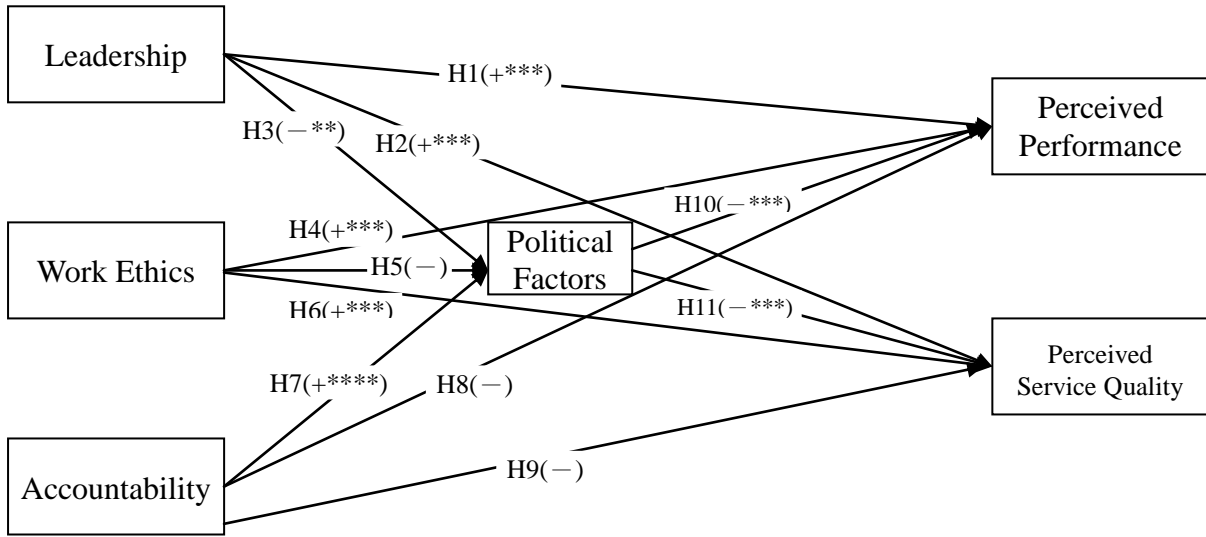


Figure 2: Research Results – Career Civil Servants in Central Government

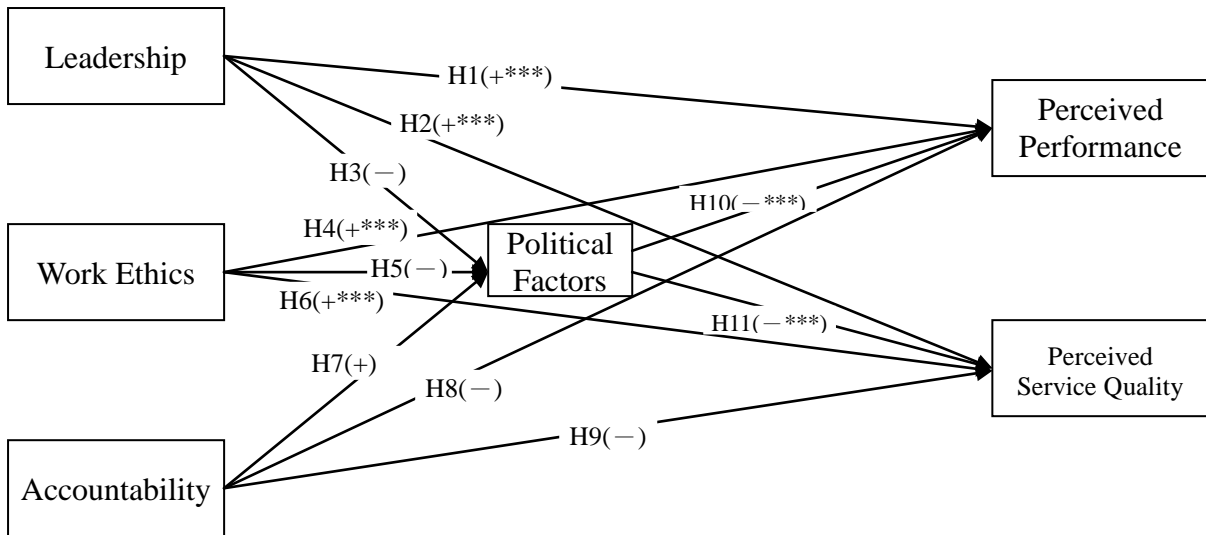


Figure 3: Research Results – Career Civil Servants in Local Government

Appendix 1: The Surveyed Items Composing Variables and Its Internal Consistency Between Central Government and Local Government

Variable	Survey Items	Cronbach α	
		Central Government	Local Government
Leadership	My manager helps my job without incurring other problems	0.916	0.917
	My manager understands his job responsibility		
	My manager qualified for his job		
	My manager will support me at a crucial juncture		
Work Ethics	My agency sees public service ethics as the most value for the organization.	0.935	0.928
	My agency can quickly solve the disputes for public service ethics.		
	My agency can timely provide the assistance for public service ethics.		
	My agency makes continuous efforts to fit decision into public service ethics.		
Political Factors	While I propose the suggestions to my manager is under the influence of my political position.	0.818	0.807
	While I propose the suggestions to my manager is under the influence of my manager’s political position.		
	While I deliver the service to the customers will vary the political position of the person concerned.		
	While I make decisions for internal management will consider the political position of the person concerned.		
Accountability	I will try for more discussions in my responsibility for my job.	0.818	0.803
	I will take accountable for the policy (or job).		
	I will take accountable for the policy(or job) process.		
Perceived Performance	The degree of my agency’s performance over the past year is		
Perceived Service Quality	I think the current service quality that I work for is		

() parentheses is Cronbath α