



The Co-Creation of Trust and Distrust: Do Public Servants' Political Activities Impact Organizational Trust?

Public Service- Development and Evolutions

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This paper explores whether the political activities of public servants during the 42nd Canadian Parliamentary Election, and the re-integration of those public servants into the government workplace post-election, impacts trust within the organization. In addition, it considers whether the reintegration of failed candidates (with clearly partisan views) into the neutral public service triggers a co-creation of trust or distrust among public servants in the organization.

In a Westminster Parliamentary system like Canada's, public servants are expected to be neutral, fearlessly providing non-partisan advice to the elected officials making public policy decisions. Public servants are also expected to loyally implement the decisions made by elected officials. In the 42nd Parliamentary election (October 19, 2015), an unprecedented number of federal public servants took leaves of absence in order to run in nomination races or as candidates. How does this choice to run – and to express a partisan affiliation – affect the level and nature of trust within their home organizations when they return post-election? Can their colleagues and elected officials trust them to do their work neutrally and trustworthily, while supporting a government that they may have run against? As Bouckhaert (2012) defines it, can they co-create T3 trust – trust within public administration?

In order to answer these research questions, the researcher has analysed national and local media coverage of key races; publications produced by public sector unions; and interviews with three groups of people: 1) public servants who ran in the election, 2) those who oversee and manage public servants' political activities, and 3) union officials intervening between the government and impacted public servants. Research results should provide a better understanding of what motivates public servants to participate in prominent political activities (knowing that they risk organizational trust) and how they re-integrate into the public service and co-create trust (or distrust) post-election.