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BACKGROUNDER No. 1

The Taxpayer Is the Customer

Who Is the Government's Customer?

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I. The Question with Two Answers

Ask anyone on the street who the government's customer is, and the answer arrives before the question fully lands. Me. The taxpayer. Us. The people who pay for it. The certainty is total and it is instant. Now carry the same question through the doors of a federal building and put it to the people who spend the money. Watch the pause. Watch the reach for the mission statement, the stakeholder, the org chart, the careful word that names everyone except the person who funds the whole arrangement.

That pause is the subject of this paper.

It would be convenient to treat the question as unsettled, a matter of philosophy or political taste. It is not unsettled. The federal government has answered it in writing, in plain language, under presidents of both parties, for more than thirty years. Executive Order 12862 directed agencies in 1993 to set customer service standards equal to the best in business. The Government Performance and Results Act of that same year required them to measure what they delivered and to heed the people they delivered it to. The pattern repeated under later administrations, hardened into statute in the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act of 2018, and reached its fullest expression in Executive Order 14058. The Office of Management and Budget keeps the operating manual, Circular A-11, Section 280, which instructs agencies to weigh the citizen's experience as heavily as their own internal numbers.

So, the record is clear. The customer is the citizen. The government has said so, repeatedly, and built machinery to prove it meant the words.

And yet the citizen who reads that record will not recognize his own life in it. He knows the fourteen-month permit, the benefit that arrived after the need had passed, the morning surrendered at a counter. He has been called the customer by every administration of his adult life and treated as one by almost none of them.

The founders fixed the principle at the start: government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed.[1] The owner was named in 1776. The trouble has never been ownership on paper. The trouble is that the owner has become a notional figure, sure of his standing and unable to exercise it. This paper traces how that happened, and what it would take to make the answer true.

II. The Answer Already on the Record

The claim that the citizen is the customer is not a reform proposal. It is a matter of record, declared in federal law and policy across three decades. The record deserves to be read in full, because its weight is the argument.

It begins in 1993. In September of that year President Clinton signed Executive Order 12862, “Setting Customer Service Standards,” which opened with a sentence the modern reader should sit with: the federal government would provide service to the public that matched or exceeded the best service available in the private sector.[2] Agencies were ordered to identify the customers they served, to survey them, to post standards, and to measure results against those standards. The word “customer” was not metaphor. It was instruction.

The same year produced the Government Performance and Results Act, which moved the idea from executive preference into the architecture of the budget.[3] Agencies were required to set goals, measure performance against them, and report the results to Congress and the public. The 2010 Modernization Act sharpened the cadence and added regular review. Performance was no longer a courtesy. It was a duty owed to someone.

The pattern held across the partisan divide. President Obama’s Executive Order 13571 in 2011 ordered agencies to streamline service and cut the time citizens spent waiting on their own government.[4] In 2018 Congress wrote the principle into permanent law through the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act, which required that federal websites and digital services be modern, accessible, and built around the user.[5] A statute does not expire with an administration. The customer standard now had a home that no election could vacate.

Then came the most complete statement of all. Executive Order 14058, signed in 2021, recommitted the government to being “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” and named dozens of High Impact Service Providers responsible for the experiences that touch the most Americans at the hardest moments of their lives.[6] Beneath all of it sits the Office of Management and Budget’s Circular A-11, Section 280, the working manual that tells agencies how to do this in practice, and that instructs them to treat the customer’s experience as no less important than their own operational counts.[7]

Read together, these documents leave no room for doubt. Two parties, thirty years, one answer. The customer is the citizen. The question is settled in every place a question can be settled, except the one that matters.

III. Why the Word Goes Hollow

If the answer is written everywhere, why does no one feel it? The reply is structural, and it has little to do with the character of the people who serve. Most of them would treat a citizen well if the system gave them a reason to. The system does not.

A word like “customer” carries force in the private sector for a single reason. The customer can leave. That power of exit is the quiet engine behind every courtesy a business has ever shown. A firm that fails its customer loses the customer, and the loss lands in the one organ a firm cannot ignore, its revenue. Strip away the power to leave and the word goes soft. What remains is a designation with no consequence attached.

Government has stripped it away on every side. There is no exit. A citizen cannot take his citizenship to a competitor when the agency disappoints him. There is no price signal. Taxes are collected whether the service pleased or not, never renewed by a satisfied customer the way a subscription is. And there is no reward at the counter. The employee who treats a citizen with care and the employee who treats him as a case number draw the same pay and answer to the same incentives. Kindness in such a place is an act of private virtue, never a response to any signal the institution sends.

Consider how the field itself draws the picture. The policy cycle, taught in every school of public administration, runs in six stages: agenda setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, evaluation, and support. It is an elegant diagram, and the citizen is nearly absent from it. He appears once, at the center, as an abstraction labeled “the public,” and as an actor at none of the six stages. The person the entire cycle exists to serve is not drawn into the cycle.

One arrow on that diagram was meant to carry his voice. The line that runs from evaluation back to agenda setting is the feedback loop, the path by which a citizen’s experience is supposed to reshape what government does next. In practice it is the faintest line on the page, the part most easily skipped, least often funded, and most dependent on the will of whoever holds power. This is why the strongest customer mandates have lived in executive orders, the most fragile instrument in American government, revoked or rewritten with each change of administration. The promise is renewed every few years precisely because it keeps lapsing. A promise that must be reissued every few years has not yet become a guarantee. It is still only a mood, and moods pass with the people who hold them.

IV. The Sovereign and the Customer

The strongest objection to this paper does not come from those who think the citizen deserves less. It comes from those who think the word “customer” asks for too little. The citizen, they argue, is not a customer at all but a sovereign, the source of the government’s authority rather than a buyer of its services. To call him a customer is to shrink a constitutional relationship down to a commercial one, and to invite the state to treat citizenship as a transaction.

The objection is right about the stakes, and it deserves a full answer rather than a dismissal. The citizen is indeed sovereign. The Declaration settled that, and nothing here unsettles it. But sovereignty and service are not rivals for the same ground. Sovereignty is the citizen’s standing. Service is how that standing is honored on an ordinary Tuesday, at a counter, in a queue, on a website that does or does not work. A sovereign who cannot get a passport renewed in reasonable time is being failed in both capacities at once. The customer standard takes nothing away from the citizen’s sovereign rank. What it adds is the daily, measurable proof that the rank means something in practice. The two ideas guard different doors, and the citizen needs both doors guarded.

Press the objection to its hardest case, and the argument grows sharper still. Not every encounter with government is a service. When the tax collector audits, the regulator inspects, or the court sentences, the citizen has not walked in as a willing buyer, and it would be dishonest to pretend the customer frame fits cleanly there. These are functions of compulsion, and the person on the receiving end is a party under law, not a patron choosing a vendor.

Yet even here the standard does not vanish. The audited citizen is owed accuracy, timeliness, plain explanation, and respect, and the absence of choice raises that obligation rather than lowering it. The power to compel is the very power that most needs a standard of conduct attached to it. And these coercive functions, real as they are, make up a small share of the daily traffic between citizen and state. The overwhelming majority of contacts are services in the ordinary sense: the benefit claim, the renewed license, the veteran's appointment, the small-business loan, the disaster application filed on the worst day of someone's life. The objection narrows the claim at its edges. It does not touch the center.

V. Making the Answer True

The task this paper sets is narrow, and it is achievable. The answer to the question is already on the books. What is missing is the machinery that would make the answer felt, and machinery can be built. Four changes would close the distance between the principle and the counter.

First, service standards that bind. Standards exist on paper at most agencies and command little. A standard with no published target and no consequence for missing it is a wish. Targets should be public, specific, and reported on a schedule the citizen can find, so that performance becomes visible to the people who pay for it.

Second, a way for the citizen to grade what he funds. A taxpayer who can rate a program he has financed gains the one thing the structure has always denied him, a signal the institution must register. JCPLI develops this instrument in a companion study, the Taxpayer Value Score, which turns diffuse frustration into a measurement an agency cannot file away unread.

Third, a feedback loop that survives elections. The faint arrow from evaluation back to agenda setting must be drawn in permanent ink. Anchored in statute rather than executive order, a standing channel for citizen feedback would stop lapsing every time the White House changes hands. A companion study on a continuous federal feedback instrument takes up that design directly.

Fourth, reward for service well rendered. As long as the employee who serves with care and the one who does not are treated the same, care will remain a private gift. Recognition at the counter, visible and real, gives the individual a reason to extend the courtesy the law already promises in his name.

None of this requires reimagining the state or borrowing the logic of the marketplace wholesale. It requires the government to keep a promise it has already made, in writing, under both parties, for thirty years. The citizen does not need to be persuaded that he is the customer. He has been told so his entire adult life. He needs the institution to act as though it believed its own words.

So the paper ends where it began, with a man on a sidewalk who answered the question without hesitation, and a building full of people who could not. The man was right. The answer is him. The work that remains is the simplest and the hardest kind. It is to make true the thing that is already written.

Notes

1. The Declaration of Independence para. 2 (U.S. 1776).
2. Exec. Order No. 12862, Setting Customer Service Standards, 58 Fed. Reg. 48257 (Sept. 14, 1993).
3. Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285; GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866.
4. Exec. Order No. 13571, Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service, 76 Fed. Reg. 24339 (Apr. 27, 2011).
5. 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act, Pub. L. No. 115-336, 132 Stat. 5025 (2018).
6. Exec. Order No. 14058, Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery To Rebuild Trust in Government, 86 Fed. Reg. 71357 (Dec. 16, 2021).
7. Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Circular No. A-11, § 280, Managing Customer Experience and Improving Service Delivery.

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