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Gaming the system: Responses to dissatisfaction with public services beyond exit and voice

Rik Peeters[1] | Anat Gofen[2] | Oliver Meza[1]

[1]Department of Public Administration, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), Mexico City, Mexico

[2]Federmann School of Public Policy, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

Correspondence
Rik Peeters, Department of Public Administration, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), Carretera México-Toluca 3655, Mexico City, Mexico.
Email: rik.peeters@cide.edu

Abstract

Citizens' responses to dissatisfaction with public services are often portrayed as following one of four distinct patterns, each consistent with current provision structures: exit, voice, loyalty or neglect (EVLN). Citizens may also initiate efforts to access public services through more subversive supply mechanisms. This study focuses on 'gaming' as an additional, understudied response pattern, within which individuals aim at improving the personal outcome of public service delivery by exploiting, manipulating or working around current rules and arrangements. Survey analysis of citizens' responses to dissatisfaction in Mexico indicates that gaming is indeed a distinct response, which is positively related to the unavailability of exit and, to some extent, to low trust in government. As a response pattern that encompasses behaviours inconsistent with current policy arrangements, gaming emphasizes the need to distinguish service improvement as a public good as opposed to a private good and further unfolds 'grey areas' in citizen–government relationships.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Based on Hirschman's (1970) seminal Exit, Voice and Loyalty typology, citizens' responses to dissatisfaction with public services have been characterized mainly in terms of exit, an economic action, and voice, a political act, which are moderated by loyalty that serves as a mechanism to suppress exit and encourage voice (EVL; see also Dowding and John 2008). Later, this typology was extended to EVLN, which added two passive responses by referring to loyalty as an optional response and by adding neglect (Rusbult et al. 1982). The EVLN framework was further refined by more nuanced distinctions between types of exit and types of voice (e.g., Dowding and John 2012; Gofen 2012;

James and Moseley 2014; Van de Walle 2016). By and large, these four well-documented responses are conventionally considered to be consistent with existing policy arrangements.

Nevertheless, at times, citizens respond to dissatisfaction by exercising a behaviour inconsistent with current policy arrangements, for example, through bypassing formal supply, that is, starting (or turning to) alternative, nongovernmental, informal supply channels, known as 'quasi-exit' (Lehman-Wilzig 1991; Mizrahi and Meydani 2003; Cohen 2012) or entrepreneurial exit (Gofen 2012). Behaviour inconsistent with current policy arrangements may also take place within current arrangements through responses that involve illegitimate actions, such as calling in personal favours (e.g., Van de Walle 2018) and unofficial payments for officials (Mizrahi et al. 2014). Such responses point towards an additional, distinct, yet understudied, pattern of response to dissatisfaction with public services, distinguished in this study as 'gaming' and defined as a strategic act within which citizens exploit, manipulate, or work around the rules and current provision arrangements with the objective to improve the personal outcome of a public service delivery.

Unlike forms of exit, gaming does not seek to establish or turn to an alternative service provision. Rather, gaming entails informal and subversive mechanisms to access an existing public service. Gaming follows citizens' actual experience with, or expectation of, public service delivery as unlikely to achieve a satisfying outcome if they play 'by the book'. Moreover, gaming strategies encompass a category of behaviours that ranges from direct, straightforward rule breaking, such as offering bribes (Castillo 2001), to subtle rule bending, such as individuals who present themselves as an emergency case in order to obtain access to a social benefit (Jeffers and Hoggett 1995). Hence, gaming complements our understanding of strategic behaviour by public service clients inconsistent with existing policy arrangements (Castillo 2001; Cohen 2012; Bartholdson and Porro 2018; Marquette and Peiffer 2018). Terming this pattern of response 'gaming' draws on well-known notions of bureaucratic gaming behaviour (March 1978; Bevan and Hood 2006; Moynihan 2010; Moynihan and Pandey 2010; Triantafillou 2015) and on gaming as compliance posture (McBarnet 2003; Braithwaite 2009).

To convey that gaming is understudied as a distinct, additional response pattern to dissatisfaction with public services, the following review first discusses EVLN as the central framework employed to consider citizens' responses to dissatisfaction. After identifying gaming as a response category, the differences between gaming and each of the EVLN responses are elaborated and juxtaposed in relation to forms of alternative politics, and the conditions under which gaming is more likely are hypothesized. Next, to provide empirical evidence for gaming and to examine the conditions under which citizens are more likely to respond by gaming, survey results of citizens' responses to dissatisfaction with public services in Mexico are presented. The concluding section summarizes the contributions of gaming for both theory and practice, mainly with regard to two significant lacunae: between the improvement of public services as a public good as opposed to a private good, and between the structure of service provision in as-designed and as-practised arrangements.

2 | CITIZENS' RESPONSES TO DISSATISFACTION WITH PUBLIC SERVICES

Public service provision is intrinsically valuable for facilitating citizen–government interaction that promotes democracy, community building, and social equity (Potapchuck et al. 1998; Denhardt and Denhardt 2007). Indeed, both citizens' trust in government (Kampen et al. 2003; Van Ryzin et al. 2004) and citizens' perceptions of life quality (Michalos and Zumbo 1999) are linked to their satisfaction with public services, which is commonly defined as an evaluative attitude towards one's experience with public services (James 2009). Thus, satisfying citizens' needs, wants and expectations plays a key role in successful public management (Weimer and Vining 2005; Denhardt and Denhardt 2007; Löffler et al. 2008) and citizens' satisfaction is considered a central indicator for service quality (Kelly and Swindell 2002; Osborne 2010), although satisfaction judgements are not 'consistently related to performance' (Andersen and Hjortskov 2016, p. 647 see also Orr and West 2007; Van Ryzin and Immerwahr 2007; Van de Walle

and Ryzin 2011). Moreover, many initiatives for administrative reform 'have explicitly made a connection between the need to reform public services, improve citizen satisfaction with public services, and maintain or restore the public trust in government' (Van de Walle 2018, p. 227). Multiple governmental practices further demonstrate the centrality of citizens' satisfaction, including the widespread introduction of citizen surveys and the establishment of formal complaint mechanisms (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2003; Van de Walle 2018), as well as the usage of satisfaction measures in evaluating services and in informing managerial decision-making (James 2009).

It is now well accepted that citizens' (dis)satisfaction is influenced by the (dis)confirmation of their expectations regarding what will or should happen as a result of the consumption of the service prior to service delivery experience, namely, the expectancy-disinformation model (James 2009; Poister and Thomas 2011; Morgeson 2012). Moreover, in contrast to citizens' satisfaction, which is approached mostly as an attitude, citizens' response to dissatisfaction is considered an attitude that translates into action (Tiebout 1956; Orbell and Uno 1972; Lyons and Lowery 1989; Lyons et al. 1992; Dowding and John 1996, 2008, 2012; James and John 2007; Van de Walle 2016). Specifically, based on Hirschman's (1970) seminal typology, exit, voice, and loyalty (EVL), citizens' responses to dissatisfaction with public services have been characterized mainly in terms of exit, an economic action, and voice, a political act, which are moderated by loyalty that serves as a mechanism to suppress exit and encourage voice (Hirschman 1970; see also Dowding and John 2008). Both exit and voice are active responses: exit mostly refers to replacing one service provider with another and thus presupposes the availability of alternatives, whereas voice denotes an attempt to improve the existing service through direct expressions of dissatisfaction, such as through dialogue or a complaint. Later, this typology was refined and extended (Gofen 2012). One well-established extension of the model suggests two additional passive responses to dissatisfaction by referring to loyalty as a behavioural response and introducing neglect (the EVLNmodel) (Rusbult et al. 1982; Lyons and Lowery 1989). Whereas voice and loyalty reflect optimistic anticipation and a belief that improvement is possible, exit and neglect imply no such belief (Rusbult et al. 1982; Lyons and Lowery 1989).

Responses that entail passive behaviours, that is, loyalty and neglect, essentially denote 'do nothing', and as such are less observable (Drigotas et al. 1995). In contrast, exit and voice are both observable behaviours that reflect revealed preferences and not merely stated preferences (Van de Walle 2016). Voice distinctions refer to who is exercising voice, mostly distinguishing between individual action, such as filing a complaint, and collective action, such as organizing a protest or launching a class action suit (James and Moseley 2014; Van de Walle 2016). Voice responses can also differ in terms of medium (such as via social media), in terms of style (ranging from polite to aggressive), and in terms of who is the recipient of the message, such as service providers, managers or those who are politically responsible (Van de Walle 2018).

Exit response is considered a common strategy exercised by dissatisfied citizens to counteract service failure (Colgate and Norris 2001; Jilke et al. 2016), which depends on the specific provision arrangements and feasibility in the context of public services' marketization that facilitates citizens' choice (Dowding and John 2011, 2012; Pierre and Røiseland 2016). Exit entails switching between alternative service providers and may take one of three forms: an internal exit (switching between public providers), private exit (shifting from public to private provision), or geographical exit (leaving the jurisdiction, referred to as a 'Tiebout' exit when the reason for moving is to change provider; see Dowding and John 2012 for a full discussion).

While often approached as a panacea, exit generally comes with some kind of cost, including material sunk cost of investment in the relationship with the previous provider and the material cost of replacement of one service alternative with another (Van de Walle 2018), as well as the emotional and cognitive costs of searching for an alternative and establishing a relationship with a new provider (Jilke et al. 2016; Van de Walle 2018). When provision arrangements do not facilitate choice, exit might entail giving up on a service and thus losing the benefits from its usage, while often continuing to pay for it through taxes (Van de Walle 2016). To suggest that exit does not always depend upon availability of existing alternatives, additional forms of exit were suggested, within which citizens take 'matters into their own hands and find other means of satisfying their needs' (Cohen 2012, p. 286). Examples include entrepreneurial exit, within which citizens initiate an alternative form of service delivery for self-provision

(Gofen 2012, 2015a, 2015b), and quasi-exit, within which dissatisfied citizens 'create an alternative supply of a certain public good' (Mizrahi and Meydani 2003, p. 118).

It is also well accepted that exit and voice are interrelated. First, exit and voice are not mutually exclusive options, but may be exercised simultaneously, namely the 'noisy exit' or 'alert citizen' (Barry 1974; Laver 1976). Exit may also follow unmet voice activity (Dowding and John 2008). Hence, the choice whether to exit, to voice, or to do both, depends on costs and upon belief in possible improvement (Gofen 2012). Introducing quasi-exit as a response of dissatisfied citizens who 'are unable to conduct, or have no faith in the efficiency of democratic forms of protest such as petitions, demonstrations and strikes' (Mizrahi and Meydani 2003, p. 118) further emphasizes exit influenced by actual or expected experience with voice. Second, Hirschman (1970) referred to the possibility of exit as decreasing the probability for voice, so that, under some circumstances, exit may even prove less expensive than voice (Gofen 2012). However, dissatisfied individuals may increase their bargaining power by using voice to state their exit intention (Gehlbach 2006). Moreover, official provision arrangements signal a preferred response, so that the establishment of formal complaint mechanisms signals the importance of voice (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2003; Van de Walle 2018), whereas marketization of public services signals the importance of exit by reducing the cost of exit through choice mechanisms that allow citizens to increasingly act as customers and to vote with their feet (Tummers et al. 2013).

3 | GAMING RESPONSE TO DISSATISFACTION WITH PUBLIC SERVICES

3.1 | Gaming as a distinct response pattern

Three insights emerge from the above review. First, exit and voice are often linked to expressions of citizenship (Lyons et al. 1992), and, in general, the current literature tends to approach the four optional EVLN responses to dissatisfaction as legitimate and consistent with existing provision arrangements. Second, responses to dissatisfaction that exemplify inconsistency with current provision arrangements often refer to the creation and establishment of an alternative supply, which takes place outside the formal supply of the service (Lehman-Wilzig 1991), and only rarely to behaviours that manipulate existing arrangements (e.g., Cohen and Filc 2017). Third, gaming has been identified as a behaviour of bureaucrats and of targets of regulation; however, it has not been systematically identified as a behaviour of public service clients. An exception is a study that shows clients presenting themselves as an emergency case in order to obtain access to scarce social housing: '[p]eople face a choice in such conditions, either to do the "respectable thing", sit tight and not make a fuss, or actively to deploy their knowledge and skill to play the game and maximise their own outcomes' (Jeffers and Hoggett 1995, p. 334).

This study proposes shifting attention to an additional, understudied response pattern, termed here gaming, and defined as a strategic act within which citizens exploit, manipulate, or work around the current rules and provision arrangements with the objective to improve the personal outcome of a public service delivery. In contrast to the common portrayal of each EVLN response, gaming is a subversive and informal response to dissatisfaction. Furthermore, unlike organizing or turning to an alternative supply, such as in entrepreneurial exit or quasi-exit, gaming takes place within the official delivery system. Even though developing a full typology goes beyond the scope of this article, well-documented citizen behaviour that falls within our definition of gaming includes misreporting (Jeffers and Hoggett 1995; Martinelli and Parker 2009), informal payments (Castillo 2001; Cohen 2012), exchanging personal favours (Zalpa et al. 2014; Arellano and Castillo 2019) and use of brokers (Bartholdson and Porro 2018). Gaming might be hidden from individual frontline workers or other civil servants (as in the case of misreporting), or might happen in cooperation with them (as in the case of informal payments), albeit differing from co-production or co-creation in the sense that citizens are not invested in the design or the delivery of a service as a public good (Voorberg et al. 2015; Osborne 2018). Rather, gaming reflects an interest in obtaining a service as a private good and an

approach in which citizens consider their role merely as customers whereas government is responsible for the supply.

Terming this response pattern gaming is inspired by the well-established notion of gaming in public administration literature, which is often portrayed as 'creative compliance' (McBarnet 2003; Hood 2006), although considered combative in showing little respect for the spirit of a law, and also considered destructive for the system (Bevan and Hood 2006). Gaming distinguishes 'response to' or 'compliance with' rules that entail self-motivated behaviours which manipulate current formal arrangements. One well-known example is gaming as a form of bureaucratic behaviour, which refers to the extent to which public servants 'act in relation to each other intelligently to pursue individual objectives by means of individual calculations of self-interest' (March 1978, p. 592). Bureaucratic gaming depends on 'a mixture of motive and opportunity' (Bevan and Hood 2006, p. 522) and includes, for example, creaming (Triantafillou 2015), opportunism (Moynihan 2010) or a strategic use of performance indicators that exemplify 'reactive subversion' intended to 'hit the target and miss the point' (Bevan and Hood 2006). Another example is the use of gaming to denote a coping mechanism of street-level bureaucrats, including rule bending, rule breaking, routinizing, rationing and using personal resources to help clients during street-level implementation interactions (Musheno and Maynard-Moody 2015; Tummers et al. 2015). Lastly, in the context of compliance with regulation, gaming is used to denote a 'motivational posture' of policy targets, which denotes a form of 'dismissive defiance' (Braithwaite 2009) and aims 'to outsmart the authority and assert independence over the authority while technically playing within the rules' (Braithwaite 2014, p. 917).

In the following, the three aforementioned conclusions from the literature review are discussed in more detail to convey gaming as a distinct response to dissatisfaction with public services.

3.2 | Gaming and EVLN responses

Gaming is distinguished from the other EVLN responses by drawing on the two well-documented analytic dimensions of the EVLN framework (Rusbult et al. 1982). First, a response pattern is either active or passive: exit and voice are active responses within which citizens take an action to try and change the level of provided service, in contrast to loyalty and neglect, within which citizens passively accept the given service provision. Second, a response can be either constructive or destructive: loyalty and voice denote constructive feedback that reinforces anticipation for, and a belief in, possible improvement in the service provision. Moreover, voice constructs 'interest articulation' (Hirschman 1970, p. 30) in the form of petitions, appeals and protests (Hirschman 1970), either individually or collectively (Dowding and John 2008), which are assumed to be followed by improvement efforts (Laver 1976). Notably, such improvement is expected to benefit not only those who exercised the voice but the public served in general. In contrast, neglect and exit denote destructive or negative feedback that implies no belief in the ability of the organization to provide a satisfactory delivery of the service (Farrell 1983).

In terms of these analytical dimensions, gaming denotes an active and destructive response: active for involving an action and destructive for reflecting a belief that improvement is possible only if not 'playing by the book'. Moreover, improvement is expected to benefit only the ones that exercise gaming, which might deepen unequal provision. Considering gaming as an additional response suggests the framework of citizens' responses to dissatisfaction as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Responses to dissatisfaction with public services (extension of EVLN model, Dowding & John 2008)

	Constructive response	Destructive response
Passive response	Loyalty	Neglect
Active response	Voice	*Gaming* | Exit

To further clarify gaming as a distinct response pattern, gaming is distinguished from each of the four well-known EVLN responses:

Gaming versus exit: Switching providers depends on either the existing or created availability of alternatives, whereas gaming does not depend on the availability of alternatives but rather on the personal skills and resources required to 'game' the existing public service provision. Furthermore, exit responses imply the expectation that an alternative provider will provide improvement, whereas a gaming response looks for improvement within the current service provision arrangement. Moreover, when available, exit is often a transparent action that is expected to signal a need for improvement in service delivery as a public good. In contrast, gaming is often exercised as covertly as possible, while aiming only for improvement as a personal benefit.

Gaming versus voice: Voice is commonly referred to as a constructive response that implies a positive anticipation of improvement in public service quality, whereas gaming is a destructive response that implies no anticipation of responsiveness or satisfying outcome if playing by the rules. Furthermore, voice depends on the availability of voice options such as complaints and (public) protests, whereas gaming entails more subversive tactics. Moreover, gaming is expected to benefit only the gamer, whereas voice, and especially collective voice, is often considered a means to bring about a change in current service provision arrangements that will improve service provision for the public.

Gaming versus neglect: Neglect is a form of reluctant acceptance and of apathy in the face of dissatisfaction, while significantly decreasing resource investment and developing a negative stance. In contrast, gaming is an active response that involves investing resources to receive an improved and satisfying delivery of the service.

Gaming versus loyalty: Loyalty denotes a passive response that reflects constructive anticipation for service improvement within current arrangements. In contrast, gaming entails a proactive and destructive response that attempts to change current provision of the service while reflecting no anticipation of improvement under current rules.

3.3 | Gaming and alternative politics

As a response pattern inconsistent with current provision arrangements, gaming echoes the broad notion of 'alternative politics' (Mizrahi et al. 2014), in which public services are being provided according to informal rules to highlight the possibility that dissatisfied citizens may 'adopt extra-legal, and often illegal, strategies to improve the services provided by the government, often in a less than satisfactory manner' (Mizrahi et al. 2014, p. 852). Nevertheless, gaming differs from alternative politics in three ways. First, alternative politics often takes a macro perspective and identifies a setting of public service provision, in which dissatisfied clients may resort to 'quasi-exit' through non-governmental organizations (Lehman-Wilzig 1991; Mizrahi et al. 2014). In contrast, gaming takes a micro perspective and identifies a response pattern of dissatisfied clients. Second, alternative politics refers both to manipulation of current suppliers and to the establishment of alternative supply mechanisms by citizens or by civil society organizations, which 'exist side by side with the official one' (Lehman-Wilzig 1991, p. 101). Gaming, however, refers only to the manipulation of current provision options. Third, like entrepreneurial exit (Gofen 2012), alternative politics is often a privilege of higher socioeconomic populations, whereas gaming is associated with individual strategies that can also be deployed by the less well-off.

One prominent example in which gaming and alternative politics overlap is the well-documented phenomenon of informal payments in healthcare, where alternative politics takes the form of 'payments to individuals and institutional providers, in kind or in cash, that are made outside official payment channels and purchases that are meant to be covered by the healthcare system' (Cohen 2012, p. 287, see also Cohen and Filc 2017). Such payments aim at improving the outcome of a healthcare service through, for instance, earlier appointments, obtaining medication unofficially or the ability to choose a doctor.

3.4 | Gaming conditions

Although rarely identified as a response of dissatisfied public service clients, gaming does bear similarities with well-known forms of strategic behaviour in developmental and low-trust contexts (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Peeters et al. 2018). When faced with scarce or unreliable services, people develop informal strategies to obtain access to those services, commonly understood in terms of corruption rather than a response to dissatisfaction in developmental contexts. Indeed, using personal contacts (Zalpa et al. 2014), misreporting (Martinelli and Parker 2009), and informal payments to speed up or improve service delivery (Castillo 2001; Cohen and Filc 2017) have been documented as responses to structural corruption in public services (Marquette and Peiffer 2018; Persson et al. 2019) and exercised by people who feel like their back is against the wall, thus portrayed as a 'weapon of the weak' (Bartholdson and Porro 2018).

Accordingly, three hypotheses are presented for the conditions under which gaming is a more likely response:

Hypothesis 1: Gaming is more likely if exit is unavailable. Individuals are expected to resort to gaming when feeling 'pushed against the wall' implying that an active response to dissatisfaction is needed, but a government monopoly prevents alternative service provision or people lack the resources to access or organize alternative service provision.

Hypothesis 2: Gaming is more likely if people have low trust in government. Citizens might feel forced to engage in gaming in low-trust contexts such as developing countries, because this may be the only way to secure access to otherwise unreliable or scarce public services (Bauhr 2017; Marquette and Peiffer 2018). Moreover, in such contexts, gaming may even be considered a justifiable response, that is, simply a part of the 'rules of the game' (Persson et al. 2019, p. 803).

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between gaming and resources may take one of two forms. Consistent with the notion that gaming is a 'weapon of the weak' (Bartholdson and Porro 2018), it can be assumed that people with fewer financial means will tend to resort to gaming. Nevertheless, when gaming requires resources (e.g., unofficial payments), gaming will be more likely to occur among more affluent people.

4 | GAMING IN PRACTICE

4.1 | The survey

To provide empirical evidence for gaming as a distinct response pattern and to examine the conditions under which citizens are more likely to resort to gaming, a survey was conducted using a representative sample, randomly sorting 1,500 citizens of Cancún, the largest city in Mexico's Quintana Roo state. Quintana Roo was rated as the second most distrusted state in the country, with 41 per cent of the state's inhabitants having 'a lot of distrust' in government, and another 31 per cent having 'some distrust' (INEGI 2017). In our survey, gaming was operationalized as citizens using their personal contacts in an attempt to improve the personal outcome of public service delivery. Survey questions focused on the proclivity to resort to gaming behaviour at three different levels of exit availability (easy, complicated and unavailable). In an attempt to provide respondents with the highest level of verisimilitude when asked about hypothetical situations (Baekgaard et al. 2015), the three levels of exit were presented through three different hypothetical circumstances that represent realistic situations for citizens of Cancún. Specifically, three policy domains were selected, namely, health services, which represents a universalistic policy, and housing programmes and building permits, both of which are in high demand following fast urban development accompanied by high population growth rates (Román 2019). Because gaming was operationalized as asking for personal favours, the selection of the services also aimed to present situations in which gaining access to the service requires a direct interaction between citizen and public official.

The three hypothetical situations of service provision are:

1 Easy and available exit was presented through a situation of unsatisfactory care of the respondent's child in a pub-
   lic health facility, a service which is at least available in private health clinics as well.
2 Complicated exit was presented through a situation of an unsuccessful application to a housing-credit programme,
   which may be available at other levels of government, or at private sector market rates.
3 Unavailable exit was presented through a situation of a building permit denial after an initial investment had
   already been made. Building permits are the exclusive prerogative of the municipal government, with no alterna-
   tive provider available.

For each of the three situations, respondents were asked to select the most likely response: exit, voice, loyalty, neglect, or gaming, both regarding their own behaviour (self-reported) and what they think others would do in a similar situation (tertiarization), acknowledging that gaming might be considered a controversial response (Arellano and Castillo 2019). See Table 2 for an overview of the questions in the survey and the online appendix for specifications.

4.2 | Data and analysis

A panel dataset was constructed (N = 4,620) consisting of the responses given at the three above-mentioned scenarios of exit (easy, complicated, unavailable) for each of the informants (N = 1,540). Logistic regression models were used following the binary nature of the dependent variable ('gaming' or 'not gaming'). Specifically, a logistic fixed effect regression model was used to test Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 were tested using a mixed effect logistic (melogit) regression model, following the nature of the dataset, within which three responses were provided at three different moments in the survey by one informant (melogit accounts for individual fixed and random effects while enabling the assessment of additional covariates of interest to test the two other hypotheses). Self-reported and tertiarized responses were tested separately. Independent variables include:

1 *Exit availability* (Hypothesis 1), representing three categories of exit for the various situations (1 denotes an easy
   exit, 2 denotes a complicated exit, and 3 denotes unavailable exit).
2 *Level of trust in government* (Hypothesis 2), a continuous variable α was constructed (1,5) as the individual-level
   mean of responses to four questions regarding trust in local government (see online appendix), drawing on
   Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies' (2017) validated scale of citizen trust. Following the well-documented low trust in

TABLE 2 Overview of questions in the survey

Exit conditions	Situation description	Question	Available options (only one answer)
Easy	Your child is in a public hospital but is not being properly taken care of	*Self-reported*: What would you do? *Tertiarization*: What would someone else do?	*Exit*: Would turn to the private sector. *Voice*: Would file a complaint. *Loyalty*: Readjust expectations/apply again at next opportunity. *Neglect*: There is nothing to be done. *Gaming*: Pulling strings.
Complicated	You have applied for housing credit but failed to obtain access		
Unavailable	You have purchased land, but the building permit has been denied		

government among Cancún citizens (INEGI 2017), the high non-response rate for all questions evaluating trust in the local government (26 per cent) was interpreted as an indication of a low level of trust. This interpretation draws on additional analysis (see appendix for details), which indicates that the missing value for trust grouped three possible answers ('survey abandonment', 'no answer' and 'don't know', the last one representing around 49 per cent). Furthermore, when comparing informants with missing values to the rest of the informants, low trust correlates with a higher corruption perception regarding both public officials and politicians (see Rose-Ackerman 2001; Graeff and Svendsen 2013; Barnes et al. 2018; Gillanders and Neselevska 2018; Obydenkova and Arpino 2018). A t-test of the mean differences between informants with missing values for trust and informants that did state their level of trust was statistically significant (< .000, see appendix for specification). Interpreting the missing value as low trust allowed constructing an alternative, discrete (0,2) measure of trust, as follows:

$$\text{Trust}(0,2) = \begin{pmatrix} 0 \text{ if respondents avoided trust questions} & (n = 401) \\ 1 \text{ if } \chi < \text{the mean of } \alpha & (n = 581) \\ 2 \text{ if } \chi > \text{ or } = \text{the mean of } \alpha & (n = 558) \end{pmatrix}$$

3 *Resources* (Hypothesis 3): Two income measures were utilized: an income level out of a range of 16 classes (1–16), and a dichotomous measure (0,1), where 0 denotes respondent income level below the mean, and 1 for income equal to or above the mean in the survey. Resource measures also included education level according to an eight scale discrete variable which measures the level of formal education attained.

4 *Control variables*: gender and age (see appendix for descriptive statistics).

5 | RESULTS

On average, opting for gaming (14 per cent) is less frequent than opting for voice (43 per cent) or for exit (32 per cent, when available), similar to opting for neglect (14 per cent) and more frequent than opting for loyalty (8 per cent) (see Table 3). However, when referring to others' expected response, informants indicate a much higher gaming frequency (32 per cent), which emerges as the most frequent response compared to the other four EVLN

TABLE 3 Survey responses

	Easy exit	Complicated exit	Unavailable exit	Total
	Auto-reported (%)			Average (%)
Exit	48.59	16.1	NA	32.35
Voice	36.51	31.86	60.4	42.92
Loyalty	3.91	13.55	7.57	8.34
Neglect	5.28	25.09	10.32	13.56
Gaming	5.7	13.41	21.66	13.59
	Tertiarization (%)			
Exit	23.22	10.37	NA	16.80
Voice	26.66	20.81	29.7	25.72
Loyalty	6.57	10.44	11.05	9.35
Neglect	18.14	27.75	20.14	22.01
Gaming	25.41	30.63	39.11	31.72

TABLE 4 Regression analysis

Variables	1	Self-reported			Tertiarized	
		2	3	4	5	6
Gaming (dependent variable)						
Exit = 2, exit difficult	1.113***	1.226***		0.533***	0.540***	
	(0.152)	(0.173)		(0.128)	(0.137)	
Exit = 3, exit impossible	1.871***	1.877***		1.256***	1.271***	
	(0.151)	(0.165)		(0.130)	(0.148)	
Trust = 1		−0.256	−0.192		−0.430*	−0.449*
		(0.183)	(0.191)		(0.235)	(0.243)
Trust = 2		−0.209	−0.124		−0.343	−0.323
		(0.190)	(0.199)		(0.255)	(0.253)
Income (1,16)		0.0415			−0.0423	
		(0.0525)			(0.0675)	
Income (0,1)			0.206			−0.771***
			(0.161)			(0.199)
Education level		−0.0913	−0.0946		−0.0766	−0.0673
		(0.0600)	(0.0653)		(0.0801)	(0.0834)
Female		−0.194	0.00287		−0.0935	−0.308
		(0.155)	(0.167)		(0.193)	(0.202)
Age		−0.000425	0.00252		−0.0209***	−0.0324***
		(0.00529)	(0.00555)		(0.00673)	(0.00705)
Constant		−3.199***	−2.342***		−0.971*	−0.816
		(0.450)	(0.456)		(0.532)	(0.561)
Individual constant variation		2.230***	0.834**		6.306***	10.41***
		(0.371)	(0.397)		(0.839)	(2.591)
Observations	1,289	3,687	2,458	1,281	3,232	3,031
Number of groups		1,265	1,262		1,137	1,298

Individually clustered standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

responses (see Table 3). A quick view at the survey responses in Table 3 shows that gaming responses increase as exit becomes more difficult both when reporting self-response (from 6 per cent when exit is easy to 22 per cent when exit is not available) as well as when reporting others' response to dissatisfaction (from 25 per cent when exit is easy to 39 per cent when exit is not available). Regression analysis provides more robust results regarding this relationship.

Regression analysis results (see Table 4) are organized so that the first three columns refer to self-reported measurements, and the other three columns to the tertiarized measures. Fixed effect models presented in column 1 and column 4 refer to Hypothesis 1, showing that gaming is more likely to occur as exit becomes less available. Melogit results that include additional covariates and controls are presented in column 2 and column 5, which refer to Hypothesis 2, showing that gaming is more likely to occur under conditions of low trust in government. Melogit analysis on the two available exit situations, presented in column 3 and column 6, refer to Hypothesis 3, showing mixed results for the relationship between resources and gaming.
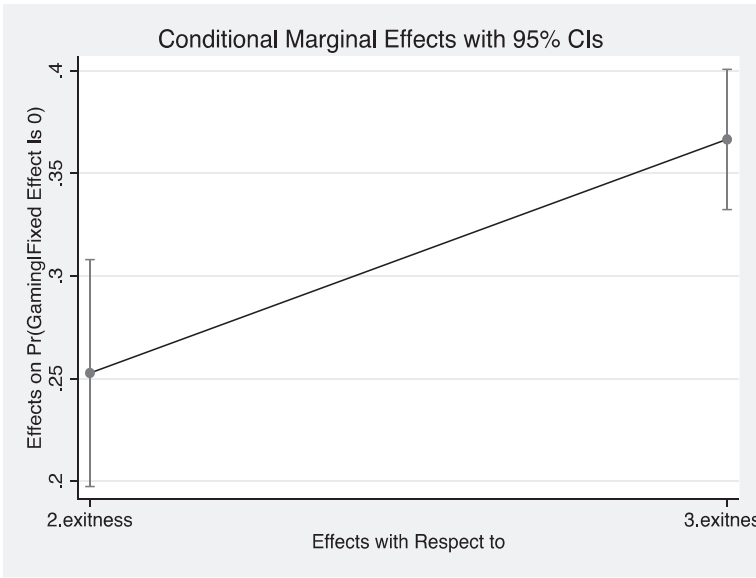
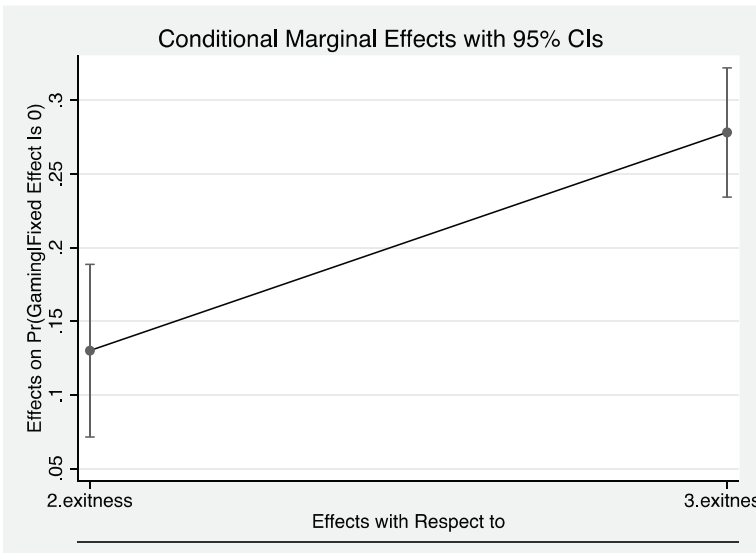**FIGURE 1** Conditional marginal effects tertiarized data

FIGURE 2 Conditional marginal effects self-reported data

Hypothesis 1: Findings indicate that gaming is strongly associated with levels of exit availability (see column 1 and column 4: logistic fixed effect model). The probability of gaming increases when exit becomes less available, as compared to the baseline measurement (easy exit). Note that coefficients increase as exit becomes more difficult. Furthermore, the difference between exit conditions 2 and 3 is statistically significant according to the conditional marginal effects assessment. Both self-reported and tertiarized datasets show consistent results, as the graphical representations of the conditional marginal effects in Figures 1 and 2 also demonstrate.

Hypothesis 2: Findings regarding the relationship between trust and gaming are not fully conclusive (see columns 2 and 5: mixed effect logistic model). Table 4 indicates the associated coefficients between gaming and medium (trust = 1) and high levels (trust = 2) of trust compared to a baseline of no trust (trust = 0). In all models, higher levels of trust are associated with less gaming, as expected according to H2; however, the relationship is only statistically significant in the tertiarized dataset at a moderate level of trust (trust = 1). A possible explanation for this is that, in the context of Cancún, gaming is not seen as socially acceptable behaviour (Arellano and Castillo 2019). More research, therefore, is required to confirm H2.

Hypothesis 3: Mixed results were found for the association between income and gaming (see columns 3 and 6: mixed effect logistic model). Positive coefficients were found in the self-reported dataset for income (1,16) and (0,1), but negative coefficients were seen in the tertiarized dataset, with only the latter showing significant results (statistically significant < .01). There is no clear theoretical explanation except to assume that informants perceive gaming as a 'weapon of the weak', but tend to game more themselves when having more resources.

Control variables: Females reported a lower tendency to opt for gaming, which is consistent with corruption studies (Gatti et al. 2003; Banuri and Eckel 2012; Fišar et al. 2016). Also, self-reporting measures of gaming underestimate gaming behaviour in comparison to tertiarization responses, which refer to what people think will be others' response. One possible explanation is a tendency of informants to provide socially acceptable answers (cf. Arellano and Castillo 2019). Finally, age and education are negatively associated with gaming; nevertheless, the coefficients tend to be small, which is consistent with other studies on misbehaviour (e.g., Gatti et al. 2003).

In sum, gaming was found to be a viable, distinct response pattern to dissatisfaction with public services, which is more likely to occur as exit availability decreases and tends to be more common among people with lower levels of trust in government. No conclusive results were found for the association between gaming and a person's level of resources. Finally, people self-report lower levels of gaming compared to how they think others in the same situation would behave.

6 | CONCLUSION

Citizens' responses to dissatisfaction with public services are often considered within the well-established EVLN model, which focuses on behaviours consistent with provision arrangements. To explain why at times responses reflect inconsistency with existing formal arrangements, it has been suggested that citizens may take 'matters into their own hands and find other means of satisfying their needs' (Cohen 2012, p. 286), for example, through entrepreneurial exit (Gofen 2012, 2015a) and through quasi-exit, which is facilitated through alternative politics (Lehman-Wilzig 1991; Mizrahi and Meydani 2003; Cohen 2012; Mizrahi et al. 2014). Shifting the focus to 'gaming' as a distinct response pattern allows a broader and more nuanced understanding of the scope of interactions between citizens and government in public service delivery and suggests a fourfold contribution.

First, current approaches to responses inconsistent with existing formal arrangements do not distinguish between efforts to introduce alternative service providers and efforts to manipulate existing suppliers. By distinguishing responses that aim at manipulating existing service provision, gaming contributes to a more nuanced conceptualization of responses inconsistent with existing formal arrangements.

Second, responses to dissatisfaction that reflect consistency with provision arrangements and responses that reflect inconsistency are, by and large, discussed separately. The former, often studied by employing EVLN, refer to the designed structure of public service provision—for example, whether, how and at what cost exit is allowed, and which voice options are available to dissatisfied citizens (Gofen 2012; Van de Walle 2018). The latter, often studied through quasi-exit and entrepreneurial exit, refer to public service provision as practised. Distinguishing gaming as a distinct response pattern within EVLN provides a preliminary bridge to link these two types of responses and to explore the inter-relations between provision-as-designed and provision-as-practised.

Third, the current portrayal of responses inconsistent with formal arrangements implies that these responses are a privilege of higher socioeconomic populations. In contrast, gaming demonstrates a form of citizen agency that is within reach of disadvantaged populations as well.

Lastly, responses to dissatisfaction are usually seen in the literature as part of a quest for public service improvement for all (Hirschman 1970; Van de Walle 2018). Indeed, in Hirschman's (1970) original EVL model, the central concern is whether improvement of public services is more likely in provision structures that allow choice through exit or when dissatisfied citizens exercise voice. Shifting the focus to gaming emphasizes the need to more explicitly distinguish when improvement is approached as a private good as opposed to a public good. This moves us beyond the assumption that individual response choices lead to improvement for the public in general; instead, as in the case of gaming, they might also erode such improvement possibilities.

Practical insights that emerge from shifting the focus to gaming further emphasize the importance of the effectiveness of voice mechanisms. If such mechanisms are considered unhelpful, citizens might turn to gaming as a last resort to be provided with satisfactory service provision. This is especially the case for a citizen whose back is against the wall, and is not limited to the context of developing countries, even though gaming practices are likely more prevalent there. Dismissing gaming as a form of corruption unjustly disqualifies the legitimate objectives people might have and the lack of alternatives they may face. Gaming also emphasizes that provision arrangements should take into account what gaming responses are facilitated through the design of the provision.

The main limitations of this study include focusing on one form of gaming (using personal contacts) and focusing on a country with low levels of trust in government. To better understand gaming as a response to dissatisfaction with public services and its relation with trust and the use of private resources, more research is required. Specifically, future studies should explore gaming in additional countries to further study the role of political trust in opting for gaming. Future research should also explore other forms of gaming, both legal and illegal, as well as the required levels of financial and social resources.

ORCID

Rik Peeters https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9013-6192
Anat Gofen https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4438-8655
Oliver Meza https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0342-3423

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