

Article

Pursuing Alignment: A Comparison of Public Officials and Citizen Perception of Mine Development

Gregory Poelzer 

Political Science Unit, Luleå University of Technology, 971 87 Luleå, Sweden; gregory.poelzer@ltu.se

Abstract: Maintaining legitimacy is a crucial objective for public officials to ensure effectiveness. Without legitimacy, political costs rise as the trust in government decreases and policy implementation is delayed; thus, officials handling resource development are encouraged to improve the acceptability of their processes. Therefore, it is essential for the government to understand the values and expectations of the citizens affected by resource development. Such an understanding assists the government in accomplishing its goals. This paper examines two cases, Norrbotten, Sweden, and Saskatchewan, Canada, both of which have established mining operations and similar regulatory frameworks and, during the commodities boom, experienced increased foreign investment and applications for new mines. While most mining projects in Saskatchewan faced little public opposition, some Norrbotten mines met contestation and protest. This paper utilizes survey data that focus on the perspectives of the residents close to the proposed mining operations, as well as interview data from public officials responsible for mine permitting, to examine the relationship between stakeholder influence and trust in government on the acceptability of mining.

Keywords: sustainable development; resource governance; policy support



Citation: Poelzer, G. Pursuing Alignment: A Comparison of Public Officials and Citizen Perception of Mine Development. *Resources* **2023**, *12*, 134. <https://doi.org/10.3390/resources12110134>

Academic Editor: Benjamin McLellan

Received: 8 September 2023

Revised: 24 October 2023

Accepted: 7 November 2023

Published: 13 November 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

For democratic governments to enjoy legitimacy, they must be cognizant of the interests of their citizens. The laws created by the government and its actions enforcing them should be reflective of the norms, values, and beliefs of society [1]. When the government, or anyone in a position of authority, loses their ability to assess and act upon the interests of the groups they govern, their capacity to accomplish their goals diminishes and the costs increase for future policy implementation, both politically [2,3] and economically [4,5]. However, legitimacy in a democracy is complex.

While elections serve as one indicator of the legitimacy of a regime [6], they alone may not be sufficient to assess legitimacy [7]. Democracy is built on the assumption that disagreements and discontent will arise on different issues. Therefore, the link from policy sectors to affected actors is crucial, particularly at the local level where individuals living in proximity seek opportunities to influence outcomes [8]. Concerning mining, a process largely controlled by the government, the recognition of societal values plays a significant role in understanding the attitudes towards planned projects, including which actors should have an influence on the outcome. For countries focused on generating revenue through natural resources, it is paramount to establish policy processes that reduce associated costs (political, economic, and social).

Mining presents an interesting case regarding the distribution of benefits and the long-term change to the land and environment—bringing multiple interests into focus. Governments now encourage stakeholders representing different interests to directly participate in policy processes to identify and address conflicts [9] to ultimately reduce conflict [10–12]. Consequently, debate emerges regarding the level of influence these stakeholders should wield.

The process of mine development includes several stages—permission to explore, concession application, environmental assessment, and approval of building plans—that offer the opportunity for stakeholder input and influence. Citizens and governments have their own perspectives on where influence should lie. However, when their perspectives diverge, legitimacy deficits emerge. To look at this relationship, this paper addresses the question: How do the differences between the views of citizens and bureaucrats on actor influence affect the acceptability of mining?

To address this question, this study utilizes survey and interview data. The survey consisted of a random sample of residents from two mining municipalities in Saskatchewan, Canada, and two mining municipalities in Norrbotten, Sweden. The interviews were conducted with state officials from Saskatchewan and Norrbotten, all with responsibility for the mine development process. Both the survey and interviews looked at views on actor influence in the policy process. Norrbotten and Saskatchewan both use policy processes that include two key components: the mineral concession and the environmental permit. Importantly, these two cases experienced many of the same trends during the mining boom. Mining in Norrbotten is primarily for iron, along with zinc, copper, and lead, while Saskatchewan mining mostly focuses on uranium and potash. Established mining companies, like LKAB and Boliden in Norrbotten and the Cameco and Potash Corporation in Saskatchewan, were looking to expand operations. At the same time, foreign companies were looking at developing new projects. In Saskatchewan, BHP Billiton and K+S received permits and began construction on potash mines with very few concerns from the general public. While in Norrbotten, Northland Resources operated an iron mine with strong community support but, in stark contrast, Beowulf Mining experienced strong protest and demonstrations which effectively halted the permitting process and spurred broader conversations regarding the legitimacy of the current legislation and the mine exploration and development processes. These cases provided a contextual environment in which the issues beyond the benefits for the community were addressed and how citizens expect stakeholder influence in decisions on mining.

2. Theory

Legitimacy connects the government to its citizens. When the public perceives the actions of the government as lacking legitimacy, various responses may emerge, ranging from peaceful to violent. Therefore, governments must focus on garnering support for their decisions to reinforce their legitimacy [13,14]. The costs associated with maintaining power are inversely related to the legitimacy of the government, i.e., when the values and expectations of citizens align with the operations of the government, the costs of asserting authority are reduced [4,15–17]. In addition, in the context of mineral extraction, the challenges faced by the government outstrip political considerations. Project delays, from planning to production, create financial burdens the government must also consider, compounding the need for legitimacy.

Mining projects involve the consideration of a complex network of interests, such as economic factors, environmental concerns, property and land rights, labor and business, and Indigenous rights [18]. While mining offers an appealing prospect to promote economic growth, it also introduces environmental and social challenges. Heightened awareness of the environmental impact caused by mining, combined with its effects on the socioeconomic status of communities, intensifies scrutiny and calls for broader involvement in decision-making [19].

The benefit of enhancing public participation in democratic processes has emerged, in part, due to the connection between the increased involvement in decision-making and input and output legitimacy. Input legitimacy refers to the government being receptive to citizens' concerns [20]. Proponents of participatory practices suggest that decision-making that allows for stakeholder involvement is generally perceived as more legitimate due to enhanced procedural fairness [21]. Output legitimacy is conceptualized as the outcomes that align with citizens' ideals and values [22]. Improving the conditions for participation in

decision-making is perceived as bolstering legitimacy, as it strengthens individual influence and a sense of personal autonomy [23].

Within the mining sector, the government assumes a pivotal role as a coordinator throughout the developmental process, overseeing the approval of both concession permits and environmental assessments. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that decisions on permits, and the reasons behind them, are not interpreted as being impartial. Instead, certain interests tend to receive greater consideration than others in the delicate tradeoffs that ultimately shape the outcome. To help validate their decisions, governments use stakeholder participation to provide actors the space in which the promotion of their interests contributes to finding solutions [24]. Although governments may facilitate consultation to foster a more inclusive approach, the legitimacy of mine development hinges upon the government's responsiveness to various stakeholders, as demonstrated by the outcomes achieved and the interests they represent.

Given that legitimacy remains a central means of achieving acceptance and compliance [25], the question arises as to whether bureaucrats perceive the process in the same way as the citizens they serve. In other words, do the views of the general population regarding how the process ought to work align with the views of bureaucrats regarding how the process functions in practice? In theory, congruence between these views leads to legitimacy.

The first set of values employed in this study compares which stakeholders participate in mineral development and the ability of these stakeholders to influence the process. Stakeholder participation refers to the active involvement of individuals, groups, or organizations in the decision-making processes that impact them [26]. On the other hand, public participation is a broader concept that encompasses the involvement of citizens in setting the policy agenda and policy creation, in collaboration with institutions responsible for policy development. In this study, the latter understanding of public participation, which considers the perception of which arena important decisions are made, is adopted [27]. The survey and interview questions focus on identifying which actors (government, industry, communities, and interest groups) should have influence over the policy process.

The second set of values utilized to assess the public's perception of the mine development process is trust. Trust serves as an indicator of legitimacy due to the similarities in the benefits it bestows upon authority. Trust, accompanied by the perception of fairness, facilitates the implementation of public policy by the government [28,29]. For citizens to trust the government, they need to believe that it will operate in accordance with the established principles of related institutions. However, the connection between citizens and the government goes beyond the expectation that the government acts fairly; it must also demonstrate effectiveness [30]. In the case of mining, when governments demonstrate these competencies, they elicit positive attitudes toward mineral development [31]. Trust encompasses both the nature of relationships and their outcomes. Evaluating the government's intentions, quality, and competence are all integral to assessing trust [5,32]. Using these two sets of values, two research questions are addressed:

1. How does the alignment between the public and government perceptions of influence relate to the legitimacy of mine development?
2. What is the relationship between trust in government and alignment in perceptions of influence?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Cases

This paper investigates these questions through the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data consist of a random sample in mining communities in Saskatchewan, Canada, and Norrbotten, Sweden. In Canada, the survey was distributed to two northern mining municipalities of the Northern Administration District and Prince Albert. In Sweden, the survey went to the northern mining municipalities of Jokkmokk and Kiruna. The qualitative data are comprised of interviews conducted with state officials from

Saskatchewan and Norrbotten, all having responsibility in the mine development process. A similar system design is used in this study where the cases are both located in northern and sparsely populated regions, require mineral concession and environmental permitting, include Indigenous communities, and have existing and novel mineral development; however, they exhibit different legitimacy outcomes. The selected methods are chosen to investigate the relationship between influence, trust, and acceptance.

In Canada, mining occurs across the entire nation, but uranium is extracted primarily in northern Saskatchewan. The Northern Administration District (NAD) of Saskatchewan encompasses the northern half of the province and serves as a significant contributor to Canada's uranium production, accounting for nearly 17% of global output. It ranks as the second-largest uranium-producing region worldwide. The NAD is home to major uranium companies like Cameco and Areva, which employ a workforce consisting of 50% local and Indigenous individuals. With a population of nearly 40,000 people, the NAD has a northern climate with a significant Indigenous population and a strong reliance on resource economies. To reduce the socio-economic and environmental risks of mining operations, negotiated agreements between companies and Indigenous communities play a significant role in fostering stable relationships [33]. Prince Albert, the most populous city in the region with around 41,000 residents, is the central hub for the region. While Prince Albert is not situated near a mine (approximately 400 km away), it provides services to resource development companies and a significant portion of the NAD population migrated to Prince Albert for employment. Therefore, Prince Albert is intricately connected to the economic and social development of northern Saskatchewan.

Sweden has a rich history of mining that spans over a millennium. Today, it stands as the largest producer of iron ore in the EU and is a significant producer of base and precious metals, along with innovative critical mineral deposits. The mining activities in Sweden are primarily concentrated in Norrbotten. However, despite the relatively low population density in this region, the establishment of new mines in the area faces challenges due to conflicting land uses such as natural conservation, tourism, and recreation. Additionally, mining in northern Sweden encounters ethical and cultural complexities as it intersects with the land use of the Indigenous Sámi population, particularly reindeer herding. Although Sweden boasts low corruption levels and high trust in government agencies, disputes and disagreements frequently arise during the development of new mining projects [34]. For instance, proposed mines in these municipalities often overlap with reindeer grazing areas which are vital to the practice of reindeer husbandry.

3.2. Methodology

This paper looks at the perceptions of citizens and public officials involved in the development of new mines, a policy process that offers stakeholder participation, and thus, the ability for the government to address the interests of its constituents. Ensuring legitimacy, in these cases, takes the form of stakeholder influence in the policy process. To compare the attitudes of citizens to the views of public officials, two separate datasets were developed.

The first is survey data collected in both jurisdictions. In Sweden, a mail-out survey was distributed to a representative sample of residents in the municipalities of Jokkmokk and Kiruna, both located in northern Sweden. The survey reached about 5300 people between the ages of 18 and 75. The sample was provided by Statens personadressregister (SPAR), a public register of all persons who are registered as residents in Sweden as confirmed by the Swedish Tax Agency to coincide with data from the Swedish Population Register. The overall response rate was 32%, which is expected for a mail-out survey of this size. However, the sample was not exactly representative of the population, with respondents slightly older and more educated than average in the municipalities.

In Canada, the survey first received ethics approval from the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board and the University of Saskatchewan's Social Sciences Research Laboratories (SSRL) carried out the administration of the survey. Using WinCATI software

(Sawtooth Technologies, Northbrook, IL, USA), telephone surveys were conducted from 1 December to 14 December 2015. A total of 755 survey interviews were completed among randomly selected residents 18 years of age or older, half from the Northern Administration District and half from Prince Albert. The response rate was 25%, making the results generalizable to the population of the two locations $\pm 5.0\%$ at a 95% confidence interval (19 times out of 20).

Three Likert Scales were used for different items within the survey, based on the structure of the responses. The five-point scale included text in each possible response (for example: no influence, little influence, some influence, much influence, and high influence. Seven- and ten-point scales only used text at the poles of the scale (for example: completely disagree and completely agree). The overall demographics of respondents in the dataset, comprising both Swedish and Canadian respondents, are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of respondents.

Sex		Indigenous Status		Level of Education		Age		Proximity to Existing/Potential Mining Development	
Male	52%	Indigenous (First Nations, Metis, and Sami)	23%	Primary education	11%	Median	55	Less than 100 km	16.5%
Female	48%	Non-Indigenous	78%	Secondary education	44%			100–250 km	44.5%
				Postsecondary education or above	44%			Further than 250 km	39%

Between July 2016 and January 2017, nine interviews were conducted with public officials from Saskatchewan and Norrbotten. The selection of officials was based on the legislative and regulatory duties in each jurisdiction; government bodies that have decision-making authority and/or an advisory function in the mine development process. In Saskatchewan, these bodies consisted of the Mineral Policy Unit in the Ministry of the Economy (S1), the Environmental Assessment and Stewardship Unit in the Ministry of the Environment (S2), the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs (S3), the Licensing and Water Use Unit in the Water Security Agency (S4), and the Lands and Mineral Tenure Unit in the Ministry of Economy (S5). In Sweden, these are the Business Unit of the Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation (N1), the Mining Inspectorate (N2), the Environmental Unit of the Norrbotten County Administration Board (N3), and the Society, Economy, and Environment Unit of the Sami Parliament (N4).

Although the two mine development processes bear many similarities, particularly in the two pieces of legislation that govern each, the types of public officials involved in the process differ slightly. Part of the differences come from the unitary state in Sweden in contrast to the federal system in Canada, but most notable is the position that the Sami Parliament holds within the Swedish governance system. It is recognized as a government agency, not an autonomous body. Therefore, they provide advice and input on mine development in a similar manner to all the other agencies. The closest equivalent agency within the Saskatchewan government is the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. However, the scope of responsibility of these officials approximately mirrors each other. The interviews took roughly one and a half hours and consisted of themes that mirrored those in the citizen surveys. Interviews took place over the phone and in person, with the interview guide provided to the public officials beforehand.

To create comparable datasets, questions regarding influence and participation were posed in both the interviews with state officials and the survey to the residents. Although the questions were not precisely the same, due to the necessity of needing to adjust to the

data collection method, the primary goal of understanding the perceptions of influence and participation was achieved. Further, because of the different data, the analysis was kept at a more descriptive level to allow for more direct comparison. To complement the descriptive data, a linear regression was used to connect trust to attitudes toward mine development. This regression provides insight into the relationship between citizens and the government and, more importantly, whether the alignment between state officials and citizens affects the trust in the government to handle resource development. The themes of the questions asked are found in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Interview and survey themes.

	Interviews	Survey
Participation	Who is currently involved in mine development?	Who should be making decisions on mine development?
Influence	Who should have the most influence in mine development?	What level of influence do different stakeholders have in mine development?
Trust		Do you trust the regional/national government?

4. Results

The first part of the analysis looked at citizen attitudes towards decision-making, including stakeholder participation. The survey findings revealed that respondents exhibited a greater inclination towards endorsing the involvement of local interests in the mining development process, as indicated by a mean agreement score of 5.34 on a seven-point scale. Similarly, respondents expressed a preference for community-based decision-making in relation to mining development, with a mean agreement score of 5.00. However, as the decision-making process expanded to the regional and national levels, the mean agreement scores declined. When considering the inclusion of Indigenous peoples' interests in the mining development process, respondents moderately agreed, reflected by a mean score of 4.21. Regarding the decision-making role of provincial/county and national governments, respondents slightly supported the provincial/county government's involvement (mean = 4.31), while displaying a slight disagreement with the national government's role (mean = 3.77). Notably, two specific items in Table 3 garnered a higher level of disagreement among respondents. Firstly, 45.3% of respondents disagreed, compared to 38.6% who agreed, that local municipalities should possess the authority to permanently halt mining development (mean = 3.85). Similarly, the majority of respondents (56.3%) disagreed with the notion that affected Indigenous communities should have the power to permanently halt mining, although 33.2% expressed agreement (mean = 3.39).

In order to gauge the respondents' perceptions regarding the key actors involved in decision-making, they were prompted to evaluate the level of influence held by various individuals and groups. Upon reviewing Table 4, it becomes evident that respondents were more likely to attribute some degree of influence to the mining industry (mean = 3.52, on a four-point scale) and the provincial/county government (mean = 3.34) in the context of mining development. Moreover, respondents acknowledged that external organizations and activists from outside the region, as well as band governments/sameby, held some influence over mining development. Conversely, respondents perceived the municipality and local environmental organizations to possess limited to moderate influence in mining development decisions. Among the listed actors, affected resource users and local businesses were perceived as having the least amount of influence on mining development within their respective communities.

Table 3. Summary of the statistics on the public perception of decision-making in mine development.

Decisions should be made by the national government	Mean (S.D.)	3.77 (1.99)
	<i>n</i>	2347
Decisions should be made by the province/county	Mean (S.D.)	4.31 (1.87)
	<i>n</i>	2346
Decisions should be made by the community	Mean (S.D.)	5.00 (1.82)
	<i>n</i>	2371
Indigenous peoples should be given more say	Mean (S.D.)	4.21 (2.19)
	<i>n</i>	2366
Local interests should be given more say	Mean (S.D.)	5.34 (1.66)
	<i>n</i>	2370
Local municipalities should be able to stop mining	Mean (S.D.)	3.85 (2.20)
	<i>n</i>	2361
Indigenous communities should be able to stop mining	Mean (S.D.)	3.39 (2.29)
	<i>n</i>	2370

Items were asked on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. S.D. = standard deviation.

Table 4. Summary of the statistics on the public perception of influence.

The provincial/county government	Mean (S.D.)	3.34 (0.83)
	<i>n</i>	2182
The municipality	Mean (S.D.)	2.58 (0.98)
	<i>n</i>	2179
Band government/sameby	Mean (S.D.)	2.75 (0.97)
	<i>n</i>	2142
The mining industry	Mean (S.D.)	3.52 (0.74)
	<i>n</i>	2210
Resource users (trappers, fishermen, reindeer herders, etc.)	Mean (S.D.)	2.48 (0.94)
	<i>n</i>	2196
External organizations and activists (i.e., outside the North)	Mean (S.D.)	2.81 (0.92)
	<i>n</i>	2171
Local businesses	Mean (S.D.)	2.37 (0.90)
	<i>n</i>	2207
Local environmental organizations	Mean (S.D.)	2.55 (0.94)
	<i>n</i>	2190

Items were asked on a four-point Likert scale where 1 = no influence and 4 = much influence. S.D. = standard deviation.

The qualitative analysis focused on participation and the role different actors hold in the process, according to government officials, the amount of influence they are perceived to possess, and what state actors believe they should possess. Table 5 presents a compilation of responses obtained from the government informants. The table highlights four key aspects: the actors normally involved in the process, the actors deemed necessary in the process, and a comparison between expectations and the actual level of influence. The two regions, Saskatchewan (SASK) and Norrbotten (NORR) are juxtaposed within the table for comparison.

Table 5. State responses on participation.

Actors	Do These Actors Currently Hold a Significant Role in the Mine Development Process?		What Actors Are the Most Influential? 1 Being the Highest Level of Influence		What Actors Should Be the Most Influential? 1 Being the Highest Level of Influence	
	SASK	NORR	SASK	NORR	SASK	NORR
Mining Company	Yes, across the entire process	Yes, across the entire process	2 (S1, 2, 3, 4, 5)	2 (N1, 2, 4)/3 (N3)	2 (S1, 2, 3, 4, 5)	2 (N1, 2)/3 (N3, 4)
Government	Yes, different agencies at different stages	Yes, different agencies at different stages	1 (S1, 2, 3, 4, 5)	1 (N1, 2, 3, 4)	1 (S1, 2, 3, 4, 5)	1 (N1, 2, 3, 4)
Landowners	No	Yes		3 (N1, 2, 4)/2 (N3)		3 (N2, 4)/4 (N1, 3, 4)
Indigenous groups	No (sometimes)	No (sometimes)		4 (N1, 2, 3, 4)		4 (N2)/3 (N3)
Municipalities	No	No				
Others (anyone interested)	No	No				

The assessment of significant actors in the process revealed a similarity in perspective between officials from the two jurisdictions. Both Saskatchewan and Norrbotten identify the mining company and government as central actors due to their involvement throughout the entire process. However, a notable difference arose when considering influence. While Saskatchewan maintained consistency between the key actors and influence, Norrbotten exhibited significant deviations. Along with the recognition of more actors with influence, variations among informants' views also emerged. While the government remained at the top of the hierarchy, discrepancies existed regarding the influence of other actors. Additionally, state officials in Norrbotten displayed differing opinions on who holds influence and who should hold influence.

In Saskatchewan, informants emphasized the significant involvement of the mining company, or project proponent, in the mine development process. This was attributed to both legislative requirements and practical considerations. As the applicant for the mining concession, the mining company must engage in various aspects of the process, bearing the responsibility of covering the associated costs and ensuring the necessary assessments are conducted. In essence, without a mining company, the process cannot proceed.

Government officials are responsible for ensuring mining companies comply with legislation and regulations, particularly in terms of their practices and adherence to legal requirements based on third-party assessments. After the mining company and government, other actors are consulted as defined by the legislation. This includes landowners, Indigenous groups, and local communities (municipalities), with participation varying depending on the project. Interestingly, despite acknowledging the central role of the project proponent, government officials unanimously regarded the government as the most influential actor, a structure they believed should be maintained. References to the decision-making authority of the responsible minister were made in multiple interviews,

indicating that the minister holds the ultimate decision-making power while agencies provide recommendations.

The interviews also revealed a notable trend: the view that major participation gaps do not exist. Consensus existed on which actors should participate in the process due to legal definitions. While contextual factors such as the location of the site (Crown, private, or Indigenous land) may impact participation, these differences stem from the distinct legal requirements governing participation.

In Sweden, the responses on participation demonstrated some variance. While all interviewees acknowledged the significant role of government throughout the development process, different ministries and agencies assumed responsibility for different stages. However, opinions diverged regarding the role of actors outside of government. The Mining Inspectorate (Bergsstaten) was highlighted as a prominent actor in the process, with one respondent suggesting that their influence may be overly strong. Like the Saskatchewan responses, participation, and timing were predominantly defined by legislation, allowing limited room for variation between projects.

Table 6 displays the summary of the statistics on the variables measuring the respondents' self-reported level of confidence. These include trust in provincial/county government, federal/national government, and their general level of trust. Summary statistics for the dependent variable are also presented. Independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to identify the differences between the two sets of respondents.

Table 6. Summary of the statistics on the trust in government.

	Northern Saskatchewan		Norrbotten		<i>t</i> -Test
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Trust in provincial/county government (5-point Scale)	3.14	1.08	2.89	1.04	5.42 ***
Trust in federal/national government (5-point Scale)	2.97	1.01	3.09	1.04	−2.61 **
Interpersonal trust (10-point Scale)	6.9	2.38	7.12	2.29	−2.17 *
How acceptable is mining development in your community? (7-point Scale)	4.89	1.92	4.13	2.28	8.40 ***

*** < 0.001; ** < 0.01; and * < 0.05. Items on the trust in government were asked on a five-point Likert scale where 1 = very low confidence to 5 = very high confidence; items on interpersonal trust were asked on an eleven-point Likert scale where 0 = you do not trust people to 10 = you trust people; and the question on the acceptability of mining development was asked on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = not at all acceptable to 7 = very acceptable. S.D. = standard deviation.

In terms of confidence in government, respondents from Saskatchewan displayed a moderate level of confidence in their provincial government ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.08$), while respondents from Norrbotten exhibited slightly less confidence in their county government ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.04$). A significant difference was observed between the two groups, with respondents from Saskatchewan displaying a higher confidence in their provincial government compared to respondents from Norrbotten ($t(1372) = 5.42$, $p < 0.001$).

In contrast, respondents from Saskatchewan reported a slightly lower confidence in the federal government compared to their confidence in the provincial government ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.01$). On the other hand, respondents from Norrbotten expressed slightly higher confidence in the national government than in the municipal government ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.04$). Comparatively, respondents from Norrbotten displayed significantly higher confidence in the national government compared to respondents from Saskatchewan ($t(2344) = -2.61$, $p < 0.01$).

For the general level of trust, both groups displayed a moderately high level of trust. Respondents from Saskatchewan reported trust at 6.90 out of 10, while respondents from Norrbotten reported trust at 7.12 out of 10. The level of self-reported trust among

respondents from Norrbotten was found to be statistically higher than that among the respondents from Saskatchewan ($t(2378) = -2.17, p < 0.05$).

Furthermore, an analysis of Table 4 revealed that Saskatchewan respondents displayed a higher level of acceptance towards potential mining development in their community ($M = 4.89, SD = 1.92$) compared to respondents from Norrbotten ($M = 4.13, SD = 2.28$). The difference between the two groups was statistically significant at the 0.001 level ($t(1683) = 8.40, p < 0.001$).

To gain a better understanding of the predictor variables' effects on the dependent variable, regression models were constructed. Different models were developed to ascertain the explanatory power of different sets of variables. In this case, the models were developed to assess demographics first, then add variables related to trust—each separated by case. Models A and B displayed the results for respondents from Saskatchewan, with Model A including only demographic variables and Model B including both demographic and predictor variables. Similarly, Models C and D showed the same results for respondents from Norrbotten. By examining the effects of predictor variables within each group, a more meaningful comparison of their impact can be made. The results of the regression models are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Ordinary least squares regression.

	Saskatchewan		Norrbotten	
	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D
Female	−0.726 ***	−0.713 ***	−0.534 ***	−0.320 ***
	0.138	0.135	0.109	0.085
Age	−0.001	−0.001	−0.005	−0.008 **
	0.005	0.005	0.004	0.003
Level of education	−0.126	−0.018	−0.601 ***	−0.380 ***
	0.122	0.123	0.083	0.066
Indigenous identity	−1.13 ***	−0.693 ***	−1.46 ***	−0.247
	0.157	0.162	0.148	0.118
Trust		0.108 ***		0.032
		0.030		0.020
Confidence in your provincial/county government		0.306 ***		0.756 ***
		0.069		0.047
Confidence in your federal/national government		0.013		0.045
		0.069		0.044
Constant	6.781 ***	4.10 ***	6.78 ***	4.22 ***
R ² (adj.)	0.115 ***	0.233 ***	0.105 ***	0.501 ***
n	695	613	1581	1482

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$.

In the analysis of Model A, the demographic predictors for the respondents in Saskatchewan, it was observed that females and Indigenous individuals were significantly less likely to accept potential mining development. Age and education level did not emerge as significant predictors. The model achieved statistical significance at the 0.001 level, and the adjusted R² indicated a relatively weak explanatory power of 0.115.

When additional predictor variables were introduced in Model B, it was found that respondents who reported higher levels of general trust had confidence in their provincial government, were male, non-Indigenous, and were more likely to accept mining development. However, age, level of education, and confidence in the federal government did

not exhibit significant predictive effects. The model remained statistically significant at the 0.001 level, and the adjusted R² improved to 0.233, suggesting a better fit compared to the demographic variables-only model, with some remaining limitations, although the model's explanatory capacity remains limited.

Moving to Model C, which focused on the demographic variables-only regression for respondents in Norrbotten, the results revealed that female, Indigenous, and highly educated respondents were also less likely to accept potential mining development in their community. The model achieved statistical significance at the 0.001 level, and the adjusted R² showed a similar predictive effect as observed in the Saskatchewan sample, with a value of 0.105.

In Model D, which included additional predictor variables for Norrbotten respondents, it was found that those who expressed confidence in their county government were male, had a lower level of education, and were significantly more likely to accept mining development in their community. Interestingly, although age did not demonstrate significance in Model C, it emerged as a significant predictor at the 0.01 level in Model D. On the other hand, confidence in the national government, the general level of trust, and Indigenous identity did not show significant predictive effects for respondents in Norrbotten. Overall, Model D achieved statistical significance at the 0.001 level, and the adjusted R² substantially improved to 0.501, indicating a notable enhancement compared to the demographic variables-only model.

5. Discussion

The findings from the survey and interview data underscore the importance of understanding the participatory and influencing values that drive attitudes toward policy processes. This paper aimed to elucidate the values of stakeholder participation [28,29,35] and the perceived trust in government [5,30,32] in relation to attitudes towards mining projects. For the government, working in line with the attitude of the public makes governing much easier, and, therefore, public officials should be keen to understand the expectations the public holds around involvement in policy decisions.

First, the findings produced interesting results on the question of the alignment between the public and government perceptions of influence on mine development processes. Unsurprisingly, surveyed citizens desire local participation in the decision-making processes related to mining development; local interests and community were ranked highest in terms of the actors that should possess the most decision-making power. However, state officials in both cases view the process as government- and company-dominant. The similarity in this misalignment requires looking at other differences. In Saskatchewan, no other actors were identified as being important or having influence in the process, while in Norrbotten, Sami communities and landowners were acknowledged as having tertiary and quaternary status in terms of influence. The disconnect between the preferences of citizens and government officials suggests that the representation of interests in the mining process in Saskatchewan should result in lower legitimacy. However, the opposite is true.

Saskatchewan faced relatively few legitimacy issues when compared to Norrbotten, even though government officials acknowledged a wider range of stakeholder influence. This runs counter to the assumption that increased participation in the policy process leads to more legitimate outcomes [24]. Here, there are two possible explanations. One, citizens may have perceived a high degree of influence compared to the perception of state officials. In part, this is due to the opportunities for input that citizens have compared to the work of public officials, which is much more comprehensive. Two, these findings may reflect the structure of permitting in Norrbotten. Greater autonomy for officials led to differences of opinion between government officials on who should have influence, leading to a deterioration of legitimacy in the policy process.

Second, the question regarding trust in relation to the alignment of perceptions of influence also produced interesting results, displaying a key role in the attitudes towards the mine. Both cases showed similar levels of trust in both sub-national and national

governments, with Saskatchewan residents slightly more favorable to mining. These results are expected, reflecting the similarities in the cases with different legitimacy outcomes. Differences, however, emerged in the relationship between trust and the acceptance of mining. Individuals who trusted sub-national officials in Norrbotten were significantly more likely to accept mine development, whereas in Saskatchewan, which showed less alignment in perceptions of influence, trust in its officials was not as strong of a predictor.

These findings indicate that when alignment between the expectations of residents in Norrbotten was met and officials held public trust, mine development was perceived as positive. Conversely, the residents who did not trust officials in their management of stakeholder input perceived mine development negatively. This raises the issue of stakeholder involvement producing a double-edged sword. If performed in a manner that aligns with most of the population, decision-making is legitimate. However, as with the case of Norrbotten, where there were divisions amongst public officials on how stakeholder influence should be implemented, the result was a lack of legitimacy in the system. In Saskatchewan, avoiding conflicting views between officials created less opportunity for polarization in the perception of their decision-making processes, lowering the ceiling for both trust and discontent.

6. Conclusions

Differences in the public and state official perceptions of mine development are not indicative of legitimacy alone but should be considered in combination with trust. In neither case did the residents align with the view of the government on who should carry influence in mine development, but officials in Norrbotten were more open to additional influence than Saskatchewan. These findings are particularly interesting because a less open system in Saskatchewan contends with fewer legitimacy problems than Norrbotten. Allowing for more influence by stakeholders can be productive for generating a higher level of trust, but only if there is agreement between officials on how this should be implemented. Further research should look at the legitimacy of different ministries and agencies to compare their views on stakeholder influence with the public. For governments, and their respective ministries and agencies, understanding the value and risk of stakeholder involvement is critical. Therefore, democratic governments that place focus on building trust with the public, via stakeholder involvement and influence, to legitimize their decision-making processes must do so with a coherent approach. In the case of Norrbotten, recognizing greater participation did not engender greater legitimacy, compared to the centralized decision-making in Saskatchewan, due to the ambiguity amongst public officials. The government, therefore, must find alignment in its implementation of stakeholder participation to elicit trust and gain legitimacy in its decision-making.

Funding: This work was partially supported by funding from the Hjalmar Lundbohm Research Centre (HLRC).

Institutional Review Board Statement: All research activities were conducted on the guidelines within the guidelines of the Swedish Research Council's Good Research Practice.

Data Availability Statement: All data is stored within LTU's data storage infrastructure according to the GDPR guidelines.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Suchman, M.C. Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* **1995**, *20*, 571–610. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
2. Wallner, J. Legitimacy and Public Policy: Seeing Beyond Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Performance. *Policy Stud. J.* **2008**, *36*, 421–443. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
3. Bäckstrand, K. Multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development: Rethinking legitimacy, accountability and effectiveness. *Eur. Environ.* **2006**, *16*, 290–306. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
4. North, D.C. Institutions. *J. Econ. Perspect.* **1991**, *5*, 97–112. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
5. Rothstein, B.; Uslaner, E. All for All: Equality, Corruption, and Social Trust. *World Politics* **2005**, *58*, 41–72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

6. Dahl, R.A. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*; Yale University Press: Yale, CT, USA, 1971.
7. Budge, I. *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy*; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.: Oxford, UK, 1996.
8. Kooiman, J. *Modern Governance: New Government-Society Interactions*; Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 1993.
9. Dukes, E.F. Setting the stage for participatory policy making: A comparative study of citizen advisory committees. *J. Public Adm. Res. Theory* **1996**, *6*, 419–442.
10. Ethridge, M. *Public Policymaking: An Introduction*; Thomson Learning: London, UK, 1987.
11. Cupps, D.Y. Public participation: A new direction for public administration? *Public Adm. Rev.* **1977**, *37*, 308–314.
12. Rosenbaum, W.A. The role of citizen advisory committees in public administration. *Public Adm. Rev.* **1978**, *38*, 112–118.
13. Hanberger, A. Democratic Implications of Public Organizations. *Public Organ. Rev. A Glob. J.* **2003**, *3*, 29–54. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. Coicaud, J.-M. *Legitimacy and Politics: A Contribution to the Study of Political Right and Political Responsibility*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2002.
15. Ostrom, E. *Understanding Institutional Diversity*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, USA, 2006.
16. March, J.G.; Olsen, J.P. Elaborating the “New Institutionalism”. In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*; Binder, S.A., Rhodes, R.A.W., Rockman, B.A., Eds.; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2004.
17. Widegren, Ö. The new environmental paradigm and social norms. *Environ. Behav.* **1998**, *30*, 75–100. [[CrossRef](#)]
18. Hall, P.M.; McGinty, P.J.W. Policy as the Transformation of Intentions: Producing Program from Statute. *Sociol. Quartely* **1997**, *38*, 439–467. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. McMahon, G.; Remy, F. (Eds.) *Large Mines and the Community—Socioeconomic and Environmental Effects in Latin America, Canada, and Spain*; International Research Development Centre: Ottawa, ON, Canada, 2001.
20. Scharpf, F.W. *Governing in Europe: Effective and Democratic?* Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 1999.
21. Dryzek, J. Legitimacy and Economy in Deliberative Democracy. *Political Theory* **2001**, *29*, 651–669. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Boedeltje, M.; Cornips, J. Input and output legitimacy in interactive governance (No. NIG2-01). In Proceedings of the NIG Annual Work Conference 2004, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 13–14 October 2004.
23. Pateman, C. *Participation and Democratic Theory*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1970.
24. Que, S.; Liang, W.; Kwame, A.; Yao, C.; Wei, Y. The Status of the Local Community in Mining Sustainable Development beyond the Triple Bottom Line. *Sustainability* **2018**, *10*, 1749. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Beetham, D. *The Legitimation of Power*; Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire, UK, 2013.
26. Wandersman, A. Citizen participation in public decision making: Is it worth the effort? *Public Adm. Rev.* **1981**, *41*, 144–153.
27. Luyet, V.; Schlaepfer, R.; Parlange, M.B.; Buttler, A.; Bresch, D.N. A framework to implement stakeholder participation in environmental projects. *J. Environ. Manag.* **2012**, *111*, 213–219. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
28. Sandmo, A. The Theory of Tax Evasion: A Retrospective View. *Natl. Tax. J.* **2005**, *58*, 643–663. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Kallbekken, S.; Saelen, H. Public acceptance for environmental taxes: Self-interest, environmental and distributional concerns. *Energy Policy* **2011**, *39*, 2966–2973. [[CrossRef](#)]
30. Levi, M.; Stoker, L. Political Trust and Trustworthiness. *Annu. Rev. Political Sci.* **2000**, *3*, 475. [[CrossRef](#)]
31. Poelzer, G.A.; Yu, S. All trust is local: Sustainable development, trust in government and legitimacy in northern mining projects. *Resour. Policy* **2021**, *70*, 101888. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Cook, K.S.; Hardin, R.; Levi, M. *Cooperation Without Trust?* Russell Sage Foundation: New York, NY, USA, 2005.
33. Poelzer, G.A.; Frimpong, R.; Poelzer, G.; Noble, B. Community as Governor: Exploring the role of Community between Industry and Government in SLO. *Environ. Manag.* **2022**, *72*, 70–83. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. Poelzer, G.A. A View from the Top: State perspectives on legitimacy and the mine development process. *Environ. Sci. Policy* **2019**, *94*, 32–38. [[CrossRef](#)]
35. Dresner, S.; Dunne, L.; Clinch, P.; Beuermann, C. Social and political responses to ecological tax reform in Europe. An introduction to the special issue. *Energy Policy* **2006**, *34*, 895–904. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.