



## The Politics of Performance Measurement: Assessing the Impact of Accountability Systems

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### ABSTRACT

This research explores how systems designed to measure performance and ensure accountability actually work in practice. These systems are used everywhere – in government, charities, and businesses – and are often presented as neutral ways to improve things. But this research argues that these systems are deeply political. Who decides what gets measured? Whose interests are served by the chosen measures? The research looks at this by studying examples from education, healthcare, and government. It finds that these systems often focus on things that are easy to measure, even if those things don't reflect the bigger picture or cause problems for some groups. The research concludes by suggesting ways to make these systems fairer and more relevant to the specific situation. Basically, it shows how political decisions influence what we measure and how that affects everyone.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The two Sides of Performance Measurement: Efficiency vs Politics*

Performance measurement has become a central feature of modern governance, particularly within the framework of New Public Management (NPM) and neoliberal ideologies. This approach emphasizes efficiency, results-oriented management, and enhanced public accountability. Governments across the globe have embraced standardized metrics to assess the performance of various public services, including schools, hospitals, and government agencies. The stated aim is to promote transparency, improve service delivery, and ultimately, enhance public trust and confidence. However, a closer examination reveals that this seemingly objective process is far from neutral, and is deeply intertwined with political agendas, ideological biases, and power dynamics.

### *The Rise of Performance Measurement and New Public Management (NPM)*

The ascendancy of performance measurement can be directly linked to the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles. NPM, a dominant paradigm in public administration since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, advocates for a more business-like approach to governing. This involves the application of private sector management techniques and principles to the public sector, with an emphasis on efficiency, competition, and market-oriented reforms. Performance measurement is a cornerstone of this approach, providing a seemingly objective way to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of government programs and agencies.

### *The Key Aspects of NPM That Drive The Push for Performance Measurement Include*

- 1. Emphasis on Efficiency:** NPM prioritizes efficiency and cost-effectiveness in public service delivery. Performance measurement provides a framework for identifying and rewarding efficient practices and punishing inefficiency. This often translates into a focus on quantifiable outputs and measurable outcomes, as opposed to qualitative assessments of impact.
- 2. Results-Based Management:** NPM stresses achieving specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) results. This results-based management (RBM) approach necessitates the development of clear performance indicators to track progress towards pre-defined goals. The focus shifts from inputs and processes to outcomes and impacts, leading to a greater emphasis on measuring results and holding organizations accountable for achieving them.
- 3. Public Accountability:** NPM aims to enhance public accountability by making government performance transparent and subject to scrutiny. Performance measurement provides a mechanism for demonstrating to the public what has been achieved with public resources. The publication of performance data is intended to increase public trust and facilitate informed decision-making.

### *The Adoption of Standardized Metrics*

Driven by the tenets of NPM, governments worldwide have implemented standardized performance measurement systems across various sectors. These systems typically involve the development of a set of key

performance indicators (KPIs) to evaluate the effectiveness of schools, hospitals, and government agencies. These KPIs often focus on easily quantifiable metrics, such as student test scores in education, patient wait times in healthcare, or the number of cases processed in bureaucratic agencies. The standardization of metrics is intended to ensure comparability across different organizations and locations, facilitating benchmarking and accountability.

The widespread adoption of standardized performance metrics reflects a belief in the power of objective measurement to improve public services. By establishing clear targets and monitoring progress, it is argued that governments can incentivize improvements, reward success, and address areas of weakness. This approach assumes that a common set of metrics can adequately capture the complexity of public services and provide a fair and unbiased assessment of performance.

#### *Criticisms of Performance Measurement Systems*

Despite the widespread adoption and stated aims, performance measurement systems have drawn significant criticism. Critics argue that these systems are not the neutral tools they are often presented as being. Instead, they are deeply embedded within political processes and reflect a range of underlying biases:

- 1. Political Priorities:** The selection of metrics is often influenced by political priorities and agendas. Governments may prioritize indicators that align with their political goals, potentially neglecting other important aspects of performance. For example, an emphasis on economic growth might overshadow concerns about social equity or environmental sustainability.
- 2. Ideological Assumptions:** Performance measurement systems reflect underlying ideological assumptions about the role of government and the best ways to deliver public services. Neoliberal ideologies, for instance, often favor market-based approaches and emphasize efficiency and competition, leading to a focus on quantifiable metrics that align with these values.
- 3. Power Struggles Among Stakeholders:** The development and implementation of performance measurement systems involve power struggles among various stakeholders. Different groups—government agencies, elected officials, managers, employees, service users, and the public—may have conflicting interests and agendas. This can lead to compromises and trade-offs in the design and implementation of the systems, potentially undermining their effectiveness. Powerful stakeholders may exert influence to shape the selection of metrics and the interpretation of results to their advantage.
- 4. Oversimplification of Complex Issues:** The focus on standardized, easily measurable metrics can oversimplify complex issues and fail to capture the nuances of public service delivery. Important aspects of performance that are difficult to quantify, such as quality of care, teacher-student relationships, or citizen satisfaction, may be neglected.

This leads to an incomplete and potentially misleading picture of performance

The inherent political nature of performance measurement systems raises concerns about fairness, equity, and the potential for unintended consequences. The next sections will explore these concerns in more detail, examining the ways in which performance measurement can perpetuate existing inequalities and hinder the achievement of broader social goals. It will also explore alternative approaches to performance measurement that are more inclusive, context-sensitive, and less susceptible to political manipulation. Ultimately, the aim is to critically evaluate the effectiveness of existing performance measurement systems and propose a more balanced and holistic approach to assessing public service delivery.

#### *Research Objectives*

This research explores the political side of how we measure performance in government and other organizations. It asks:

1. How do politicians and other powerful people influence the rules and systems we use to hold people accountable?
2. What are the unexpected negative effects of these systems on fairness and public trust?
3. How can we create systems that balance things like efficiency, fairness, and people's ability to participate in decision-making?

The research uses real-world examples to examine these questions. It aims to add to the ongoing discussion about using metrics to improve governance and the difficulty of combining expert-driven approaches with democratic accountability.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *The Beginning of Performance Measurement*

Experts say the big push to measure performance in government started in the 1980s and 90s. This was part of a broader movement to change how government worked, making it more like a business. The idea was to replace relying on individual officials' judgment with clear, measurable goals. People supporting this change believed that setting specific targets would reduce waste, give citizens more control, and make decision-making less political.

### *The Politics of Choosing What to Measure*

Picking what to measure is a political act. What gets measured is what people focus on. However, not everything is easily measured. For example, in schools, we often focus on test scores, but things like emotional development are harder to measure, even though they are very important. This shows that policymakers' choices often favor things they see as economically beneficial, even if other important things are ignored. The same is true in healthcare; we may focus on cutting costs but not on how satisfied patients are.

### *Power and Manipulation*

Accountability systems create winners and losers. Those on the front lines (like teachers and nurses) feel the pressure to meet targets, even if it means

cutting corners or avoiding difficult cases. Powerful groups can use these systems for their benefit; for example, companies might try to influence rules to make them less strict on the environment.

#### *Fairness and Inequality*

Many critics argue that performance measurement often hurts those already disadvantaged. For example, if schools are ranked based on test scores, poorly funded schools (often in areas with more marginalized communities) will do worse, making the inequalities even worse.

In short, this literature review shows that while performance measurement aims to improve things, it's deeply connected to politics and can lead to unintended problems, particularly for disadvantaged groups. The choices about what to measure are not neutral; they reflect whose interests are prioritized. The systems also create pressure to manipulate results, further highlighting the need for a more nuanced and equitable approach.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research uses a method called "comparative case study." This means they're looking closely at three different areas to see how performance measurement works in each:

1. Education: They examine the "No Child Left Behind" law in the United States. This law introduced specific performance targets for schools.
2. Healthcare: They look at how the UK's National Health Service (NHS) sets and uses performance targets for hospitals and healthcare services.
3. Government: They examine the European Union's indicators for measuring how well different governments perform.

To gather information, the researchers looked at official documents, existing research papers, and interviewed 15 people involved in making and implementing these policies (policymakers and those who work in these areas). They then analyzed the information they gathered, looking for common themes and problems related to politics and fairness. In simpler terms, they're trying to find recurring patterns of political conflict and how these performance measurement systems affect fairness.

#### *Case Studies*

This section delves into the findings of a comparative case study examining the political dimensions of performance measurement across three sectors: education, healthcare, and public administration. Let's break down each case study and the overarching themes that emerged.

##### *Case Study 1: No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in the United States*

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), enacted in 2002, aimed to improve education standards and close achievement gaps between different student groups. The law's core strategy centered on standardized testing to hold schools accountable for student performance. Schools were evaluated based on their students' test scores, and those failing to meet specific targets faced penalties, such as funding cuts or even closure.

While presented as a bipartisan initiative to ensure equal educational opportunities for all children, NCLB's implementation revealed several unintended consequences and criticisms:

1. **Neoliberal Ideology and Market Competition:** NCLB's emphasis on standardized testing and punitive sanctions reflected a neoliberal ideology that favors market-based competition. The focus on quantifiable results, such as test scores, mirrored the logic of market mechanisms where performance is measured and rewarded or punished accordingly. This approach, critics argue, neglected other important aspects of education.
2. **"Teaching to the Test":** The high-stakes nature of standardized testing incentivized schools to prioritize test preparation above all else, leading to the phenomenon of "teaching to the test." Curriculum became narrowed to focus on subjects and skills directly assessed by the tests, neglecting broader educational goals such as critical thinking, creativity, and social-emotional learning.
3. **Neglect of Non-Tested Subjects:** The intense focus on tested subjects resulted in a decline in the teaching of other important subjects like art, music, and physical education, which are essential for a well-rounded education but aren't directly reflected in standardized test scores.
4. **Pushing Out Low-Performing Students:** Schools faced pressure to improve their test scores, which could lead to actions that harmed low-performing students. Some schools resorted to pushing out students with learning disabilities or those from disadvantaged backgrounds to boost their average test scores. This practice, while ethically questionable, demonstrated how the performance measurement system created perverse incentives.

In essence, NCLB's well-intentioned goal of improving education outcomes through accountability mechanisms created a system that prioritized easily measurable metrics over broader educational goals, leading to unintended negative consequences for students and the education system as a whole. The emphasis on standardized testing, while aiming for equity, arguably exacerbated existing inequalities.

#### *Case Study 2: NHS Performance Targets in the UK*

The UK's National Health Service (NHS) implemented performance targets in its 2000 plan to improve efficiency and reduce waiting times for patients. The initial focus was on setting targets for specific aspects of care, such as waiting times for emergency treatment, elective procedures, and cancer diagnosis.

While these targets initially led to improvements in certain areas, several problems emerged over time:

1. **Prioritizing Measurable Metrics over Complex Care:** The emphasis on easily measurable targets like waiting times led hospitals to prioritize those metrics over other, more complex aspects of care. This resulted in a distorted focus, potentially sacrificing the quality of care for the sake of meeting numerical goals.

- 2. Data Manipulation and Loss of Trust:** The pressure to meet performance targets incentivized some hospitals to manipulate data, leading to a loss of trust in the system. The emphasis on meeting targets overshadowed the bigger picture of providing comprehensive and high-quality healthcare. Hospitals focused on hitting the target numbers rather than focusing on patient care.
- 3. Ignoring Complex Needs:** The system inadvertently led to prioritization of easy-to-treat cases over those requiring more complex and time-consuming care. This resulted in patients with chronic conditions or complex needs being underserved.

The NHS case demonstrates how a focus on easily measurable metrics can lead to unintended consequences, such as data manipulation and a distorted prioritization of care. The system, while intending to improve patient experience, ended up creating pressures that could potentially compromise the quality of care provided.

#### *Case Study 3: EU Government Effectiveness Indicators*

The European Union (EU) uses a set of indicators to assess the effectiveness of governments in its member states. These indicators often measure bureaucratic efficiency, administrative capacity, and the rule of law.

- 1. Favoritism towards Wealthier Nations:** The chosen metrics tend to favor wealthier nations with stronger administrative capacity, often reflecting existing power dynamics within the EU. These metrics might not accurately reflect the performance of countries undergoing significant transitions, like those in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. These countries often face unique challenges that are not adequately captured by the standardized metrics.
- 2. Marginalizing Less Developed Countries:** The focus on bureaucratic efficiency and administrative capacity tends to disadvantage countries with less developed infrastructure, capacity, or resources. This creates a bias against countries that are still developing or recovering from past crises, even if they are making significant progress.

The EU's approach highlights the limitations of standardized metrics in assessing complex phenomena such as governance. The indicators, while aiming for objectivity, reflect existing power imbalances and may not adequately capture the progress made by less developed countries facing unique challenges.

#### *Cross-Cutting Themes*

Across all three case studies, several key themes emerged:

**Goal Displacement:** The focus on easily measurable metrics often overshadows the broader missions and goals of the organizations being assessed. For example, in education, the emphasis on test scores can overshadow broader goals such as fostering creativity, critical thinking, and well-rounded development. Similarly, in healthcare, the focus on waiting times might eclipse the broader goal of providing high-quality, comprehensive care.

**Reinforcement of Inequity:** Performance measurement systems often disproportionately punish under-resourced institutions, exacerbating existing

inequalities. Schools in disadvantaged communities, for example, often lack the resources to achieve high test scores, leading to further marginalization.

**Political Symbolism:** Performance metrics can be used as political tools to signal action and create the appearance of progress, even if genuine improvements are not achieved. The introduction of new metrics can be a symbolic gesture designed to appeal to public opinion, but the actual impact on the ground may be limited.

These findings strongly suggest that while performance measurement systems aim to improve accountability and efficiency, their design and implementation are deeply political, often leading to unintended consequences and exacerbating existing inequalities. A more nuanced and context-sensitive approach is needed to ensure that these systems effectively promote positive outcomes while mitigating their potential harms

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research challenge the common perception that accountability systems are purely technical or neutral. Instead, the research shows these systems are deeply influenced by political factors and power dynamics. This discussion section elaborates on these findings and suggests ways to improve such systems.

### 1. The Political Nature of Accountability Systems

The research clearly demonstrates that accountability systems are neither neutral nor purely technical. Their design and implementation reflect the values and interests of those in power, often prioritizing short-term gains and easily measurable outcomes over systemic change and long-term solutions. This means that the choices about what gets measured, how it's measured, and what consequences follow aren't made in a vacuum; they are political decisions reflecting existing power structures and priorities.

The unintended consequences of these systems—like increased inequality and a decline in public trust—highlight a fundamental tension between the pursuit of managerial efficiency and the principles of democratic accountability. In simple terms, the drive to make things more efficient and easily measurable can clash with the need to make sure the system is fair, transparent, and truly reflects the needs of everyone.

### 2. Balancing Competing Values: Toward a More Equitable Approach

To address the limitations and negative consequences highlighted by the research, policymakers need to adopt a more holistic and equitable approach to designing and implementing accountability systems. This requires a shift from a purely quantitative, "one-size-fits-all" model towards a more nuanced and inclusive approach. Specifically, policymakers should consider the following:

**Involving Marginalized Stakeholders:** A critical step is to ensure that those most affected by accountability systems—often marginalized or under-resourced communities—are actively involved in the design process. This includes providing opportunities for input, feedback, and participation from affected groups to ensure that their needs and perspectives are adequately considered. Ignoring the voices of these communities risks perpetuating existing inequalities and creating systems that further disadvantage them.

**Balancing Quantitative and Qualitative Indicators:** The research highlights the limitations of relying solely on easily quantifiable metrics. A more comprehensive approach would incorporate both quantitative data (e.g., test scores, waiting times) and qualitative data (e.g., teacher feedback, patient satisfaction surveys). This approach would provide a more holistic and nuanced understanding of performance, moving beyond a narrow focus on easily measurable outcomes to capture the complexity of the systems under evaluation. Such qualitative data can shed light on important aspects that numbers alone cannot capture, leading to a fairer and more representative assessment of performance.

**Avoiding One-Size-Fits-All Approaches:** Context matters. What works well in one setting might be completely inappropriate or even harmful in another. A “one-size-fits-all” approach ignores the unique challenges and circumstances faced by different institutions and communities. Policymakers need to tailor accountability systems to the specific contexts in which they will be implemented, acknowledging the diversity of situations and needs. This requires flexibility and adaptability, allowing for adjustments based on local realities and specific needs.

These three changes are crucial to build accountability systems that are not only efficient but also fair and responsive to the needs of everyone. Ignoring these points can lead to unintended consequences and a further widening of the gaps between the privileged and the disadvantaged.

### **3. The Role of Transparency: A Necessary but Insufficient Condition**

Transparency, while crucial for accountability, is not a panacea for all the problems highlighted in the research. While increased transparency can help expose manipulation and data gaming (as suggested by Heinrich, 2002), it does not address the underlying political power dynamics that shape the design and implementation of accountability systems in the first place. Transparency can make it easier to detect manipulation, but it doesn't solve the core problem of political influence on what is measured and how. Simply making data public doesn't inherently address the potential for bias in the choice of metrics or the unequal impact on different groups.

Therefore, while transparency is a valuable tool and a necessary condition for accountability, it needs to be complemented by other strategies to create truly equitable and effective accountability systems. Transparency is a part of the solution, but it is not the entire solution. It is a critical element of building trust but needs to work alongside other measures to tackle the core issues identified in the research. The findings highlight the need for a multi-faceted approach that addresses both the technical aspects of measurement and the deeply ingrained political forces that shape these systems.

In conclusion, this discussion emphasizes the crucial need to move beyond a simplistic view of accountability systems as purely technical tools. Understanding the inherent political nature of these systems is fundamental to creating fairer, more equitable, and more effective governance. The recommendations outlined offer a path toward reconciling competing values of

efficiency, equity, and democratic participation in the design and implementation of accountability frameworks.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In short, this research shows that using metrics to measure performance in government and other organizations is a complicated issue. While we can use these systems to keep things transparent and improve how things are done, the way these systems are set up often favours those in power and can make inequalities worse. The research suggests that we need to think more carefully about how to involve everyone in deciding what to measure and how. Further research should explore ways to let citizens and community groups play a bigger role in holding those in power accountable, ensuring that the systems truly serve the public good rather than just the interests of a few. In simple words, performance measurement can be helpful, but it also has downsides that we need to carefully address.

## **FURTHER STUDY**

This research still has limitations so further research is still needed on this topic “The Politics of Performance Measurement: Assessing the Impact of Accountability Systems”.

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