

## Accountability in Public Administration: Consistent Challenges and New Terrain

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This virtual issue of the *Journal of Public Administration Research & Theory* focuses on accountability, a central concern in the field of public administration. The nine articles address three central accountability questions: Who is accountable to whom? For what? And how is this best ensured? The articles highlight enduring challenges that surface in public accountability processes, including: the limited capacity of government to exercise effective oversight, the multiple expectations governing public accountability relationships, and the effectiveness of different approaches to ensuring accountability in the public sector. The articles call for an expanded theory of public accountability, one that incorporates the insights from principal agent theory, a common starting point in this literature, but that can accommodate the accumulating evidence about how accountability works in public governance.

To select these articles, we conducted a search identifying articles with 'accountability' in title, subject and abstract. We reviewed 68 abstracts and eliminated articles that were not centrally addressing accountability concerns. We reviewed the remaining 38 articles to identify articles that captured key themes in the literature and represented diverse methodological approaches. The final set of articles include both classics as well as recent pieces showcasing emerging issues.

Two articles challenge what we might expect in accountability relationships based on principal-agent theory. Schillemans and Busiouc (2015), through a systematic review of the evidence, provide countless examples that principals' failure to act in ways that we should expect, suggesting they do not actually care about the accountability of agents and that the actions of agents show they care a great deal about being accountable to the principal for their delegated task. Benjamin and Posner (2018) pick up on this theme about uneager principals as they consider U.S. federal government's oversight of tax expenditures. They show despite the

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increasing use of tax expenditures to achieve public policy goals and their performance shortfalls; the federal government has not instituted stronger accountability controls.

Three articles help us better understand the world of agents. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) show that existing narratives about street level bureaucrats—that they exercise their discretion in order to make their work manageable—is an incomplete picture of these agents. Street level bureaucrats are often willing to make their work more difficult and more unpleasant for citizen clients. Romzek (2000) as well as Dunn and Legge (2000) focuses on the multiple accountability expectations that face agents in their everyday work. Romzek (2000) examines congressional staff, and through a set of revealing qualitative interviews, details how staff decide which standards are appropriate in which settings. Dunn and Legge (2000) look at local government managers and how they prioritize professional standards when defining their responsibilities and elected officials when they consider new policy options.

Four articles shed light on using performance data for accountability. Dubnick and Fredrickson (2010) consider the accountability challenges that emerge when governments rely on third parties for achieving public policy goals. Although there is variation in the ability of these agencies to ensure effective accountability, they find that there is little empirical support that performance targets enhances democratic outcomes. Yang (2009) investigate the conditions supporting the honest reporting of performance data. Using survey data from municipalities in Taiwan, the author finds that an organizational culture which supports risk taking and encourages stakeholder engagement in performance measurement encourages honest reporting, whereas hostile internal politics undermines it.

Two recent articles look at how citizens respond to the performance data about local governments. Both articles use Hirschman's Exit, Voice and Loyalty to consider how citizens, as ultimate principals, hold local governments to account by expressing their concern and preferences at the ballot box or by moving out of the jurisdiction. Shinohara (2018) examines the response of Japanese citizens to a fiscal crisis and reform effort and shows how most citizens sought to exit rather than voice concerns. Holbein and Hassel (2019) use existing data to examine differential responses by African Americans and whites to school performance data. They find that both respond to school failure by voting in school board elections (voice) but blacks are less likely to exit in response to poor school performance.

Together these nine articles, by focusing on different levels of analysis, help us understand accountability and public governance. Some are concerned by the micro expressions of accountability in relationships and daily practices (Romzek 2000, Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2000), others look at the meso-level, focusing on institutions, their norms and rules, and subsequent effect on the mission of the organization and the effect of policies on its citizenry (Benjamin & Posner 2018; Dubnick & Frederickson 2010, Yang 2008, Holbein & Hassell 2018, Shinohara 2017), while others are concerned with the macro-dimensions of accountability questions and their implications for democratic governance at large (Dunn & Legge 2001, Schillemans & Busuioc 2015).

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