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# Accountability as a function of power relationships in public governance networks

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**Abstract**

In public governance, power and accountability are inextricably linked. However, although an integrated exploration of these concepts could enhance our understanding of how governance operates, few studies have examined them together. Drawing on resource dependency theory, we suggest that power relationships within networks shape accountability and have a concomitant impact on the prevailing governance paradigm. Specifically, where principals possess important resources that enable them to exercise power *over* agents and hold them to account through hierarchical mechanisms, Traditional Public Administration approaches predominate. Where resources are diffused within elite networks in New Public Management contexts, individual actors can exercise greater power *to* achieve their objectives, and accountability arrangements become increasingly multidirectional and complex. Finally, if resources are shared across society as in the New Public Governance paradigm, actors generate power *with* each other to achieve shared goals, and accountability relationships are more horizontal with a focus on learning.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Public accountability is inextricably linked with political power. The need to "speak truth to power" (Wildavsky, 1979) has become something of a cliché, and accountability is often framed as the need to "hold power to account" (Mulgan, 2003). However, those who wish to exercise accountability also need access to the appropriate resources and arenas that enable them to do so. Clearly, therefore, the distribution of power and resources within governance networks plays a key role in accountability processes. Yet, despite extensive literature in public administration, political science, and public accounting on these related concepts, they are rarely considered together in detail or explored in the context of different governance models or paradigms. This may be due to the contested nature of both power and accountability, and the fact that studies often interpret and apply them differently. In this paper, we suggest that a closer examination of them in different governance contexts can improve our understanding of both concepts.

We bring the literatures on governance paradigms, accountability, resource interdependence, and power together to extend our understanding of their conceptual links and help organize future empirical studies in this field. We present accountability and power as concepts that are inextricably connected (but not always inversely proportionate) in relationships between actors in governance networks. We do not seek to advance a normative argument about the efficacy or appropriateness of different power and/or accountability relationships in public services. Instead, we aim to show how the distribution of resources between actors shapes how power and accountability are exercised within different governance paradigms (Traditional Public Administration [TPA], New Public Management [NPM], and New Public Governance [NPG]), and—ultimately—correspond to different conceptualizations of democracy. To that end, we draw on theories of resource interdependence; the concepts of power *over*, power *to* and power *with*; and principal–agent, multidirectional, retrospective, and prospective understandings of accountability. Given that many public management reforms in recent decades appear to form part of an endless quest for greater accountability (Dubnick & Yang, 2015; Gibson et al., 2023), our argument has relevance for both scholars and practitioners engaged in this endeavor.

Taking a deductive approach and drawing on a purposive literature review and our own prior knowledge of these concepts, we begin by providing an overview of the three prevailing governance paradigms codified by Osborne (2006): TPA, NPM, and NPG. While we acknowledge that public services are organized and delivered according to principles that fit with a mixture of all three paradigms, in our conceptualization we treat them as ideal types that are underpinned by distinct understandings of how public services should be provided.[1] We outline the key understandings of democracy that underpin these paradigms, which leads into a discussion of the rationale for and operationalization of accountability within different governance contexts. We then highlight how these accountability relationships are a function of how resources are distributed between governance actors, and how this corresponds to how power (*over*, *to*, and *with*) can be exercised within public administration. Finally, we present a framework and a set of hypotheses to direct future studies that seek to connect these different concepts.

## 2 | GOVERNANCE PARADIGMS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

In a much-cited article, Osborne (2006) identified three overarching governance "paradigms" that have characterized advanced Western democracies over the last 150 years: TPA, NPM, and NPG. Osborne's typology has provided a useful heuristic for public management scholars, many of whom have suggested that countries are shifting along a trajectory toward greater NPG-type arrangements (Bryson et al., 2014; Dickinson, 2016). Although the main elements of TPA, NPM, and NPG will be familiar to readers of *Public Administration*, our focus on the nature of accountability and power within these different contexts means they are worth reiterating here to set the context for the rest of the paper, and to help illustrate how relationships between governance actors often operate in practice.

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Following Osborne (2006), we present them as ideal types, since we suspect all countries exhibit elements of each paradigm, albeit to varying extents (see Hyndman and Liguori (2016) for an empirical example of how they overlap in practice). We focus at a conceptual level on how each model underpins different approaches to public service delivery, rather than examining specific policies or reforms that individual governments may have introduced that could be categorized as being paradigmatic of TPA, NPM, NPG, or otherwise. Additionally, while we acknowledge that specific internal management techniques are often attributed to different governance paradigms, extending our analysis to other such phenomena was beyond the scope of our article.

## 2.1 | Traditional public administration

First, the TPA paradigm of Weberian bureaucracy was dominant in industrialized democracies until the late 1970s. Underpinning TPA is the idea that politics and public administration are separate functions within government, and that bureaucracies assume a central role in policy-making and implementation (Wilson, 1887). Elected politicians direct government ministries to achieve policy objectives, and assume overall responsibility for departmental activities. Based on the principle of representative democracy, bureaucracies act in the public interest on behalf of elected representatives and ultimately citizens, who express their approval of the government at the ballot box. Professionals within public organizations are granted a high degree of respect and discretion, on the assumption that they operate according to a logic of public service that promotes or protects the public interest. State–societal relations are characterized by paternalism, and the belief that government bureaucracies are best placed to address public problems.

## 2.2 | New public management

Beginning in the 1970s, many Western governments adopted market-orientated reforms to the governance of public services, which formed part of what became known as the NPM paradigm (Hood, 1991). Alongside a perception that traditional democracies were becoming "overloaded" and unable to address societal problems effectively (King, 1975), critics of the TPA model argued that citizens should be able to exercise greater choice in public services, and that exposure to market or quasi-market conditions would facilitate greater economy, efficiency and effectiveness in how they are delivered (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). This view held that public bureaucracies were inefficient, wasteful, and not necessarily the most appropriate organizations for delivering services, and that monopoly provision of some public services meant that self-interested public officials were not sufficiently accountable for their actions.

To address these concerns, governments outsourced, privatized, and "agencified" various functions that were previously under the direct control of ministers and officials. Many of those functions that remained within the public sphere were subjected to external inspections, performance management frameworks and benchmarking, ostensibly to drive improvement through market-type mechanisms and by giving managers greater knowledge about front-line activities (Hood, 2006). Under NPM, therefore, democracy is not understood solely in terms of voting for a party or candidate at periodical elections. Instead, it extends to enabling citizens to choose which organizations deliver their public services on a daily basis, and using market or quasi-market conditions to hold the providers of services accountable, on the basis that "customers" could access services from other organizations if they were dissatisfied. The relationship between citizens and government is therefore more transactional, with a focus on the extent to which public services provide "value for money."

However, NPM attracted criticism almost from its inception (Pollitt, 1986)—partly on accountability grounds, because private service providers ultimately report to shareholders rather than voters and may be contracted to act on a government's behalf for a period that spans election cycles (Funnell, 2000; Rhodes, 1997). In addition, privatization, outsourcing, and agencification, which had led to the fragmentation of the public service landscape (Elliott

et al., 2022), made it more difficult for policymakers to address apparently intractable long-term social, economic, and environmental "wicked" issues that cut across traditional departmental boundaries (Head & Alford, 2015).

## 2.3 | New public governance

In response, Western governments sought to encourage interagency partnership collaborations across public organizations (Ling, 2002) and closer working with citizens (Macdonald, 2023). This formed a key part of the "post-NPM" approach, which stresses the importance of networks and societal engagement to coordinate public service activity and codesign, cocreate, and coproduce public services (Bovaird, 2007; Dudau et al., 2019; McMullin, 2023). Although scholars may have adopted different terms to describe this paradigm (e.g., "the new public service" (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000), or "collaborative governance" (Ansell & Gash, 2008)), they all stress the importance of state actors working more closely with citizens to build "consensus among stakeholders on a formal set of policies designed and implemented to generate public value" (Bianchi et al., 2021, p. 1582). For the purposes of simplicity, we follow Osborne (2006) and group them together under the heading of NPG. NPG emphasizes participative and deliberative democracy, based on the idea that involving citizens more closely in policy-making and implementation can address concerns around democratic accountability that exist in both NPM and TPA (Stoker, 2006). In NPG contexts, the state has a more mutually supportive, fraternal relationship with citizens, instead of the paternal or transactional association that characterizes TPA and NPM, respectively.

There is some debate as to whether NPG is sufficiently distinguishable from NPM to represent a genuine paradigmatic change (Hyndman & Liguori, 2016; Torfing et al., 2020). Indeed, NPG has come in for similar criticisms to NPM, namely, that involving a greater number of actors in decision-making harms accountability, because nobody is entirely sure who is responsible for what (Hansen et al., 2024). Additionally, since relationships between citizens and service providers tend to be more horizontal and informal, decision-makers are not subject to the same level of control, oversight, and coercion as in other paradigms (Lewis & Triantafillou, 2012). Moreover, many have questioned whether participative governance can be genuinely representative or legitimate, since more disadvantaged residents are often marginalized and exert less influence than their wealthier neighbors in decision-making processes (Levine, 2017). As with TPA and NPM, therefore, we can see how concerns about the accountability of public services also bedevil the NPG model.

## 3 | ACCOUNTABILITY

As the above discussion suggests, different governance paradigms have raised different concerns around the accountability of public services, and various reforms have sought to address these concerns (Dubnick & Yang, 2015; Gibson et al., 2023). In parallel, the idea of accountability has become more popular in both policy and academic literature (Aleksovska et al., 2019)—yet scholars have interpreted it in different ways (Sinclair, 1995), and developed and applied multiple definitions of the concept (Mulgan, 2000). The next section traces the evolution of public accountability theory and how it reflects prevailing governance paradigms.

## 3.1 | Vertical accountability and TPA

In classically hierarchical TPA contexts, definitions of accountability center around the presence of a principal–agent relationship, in which principals have the power to act on the information they receive (Barlow & Paun, 2013) and can hold agents to account for their actions (Mayston, 1993; Mulgan, 2000). This usually involves three stages: the obligation to inform; the right to interrogate/investigate and pass judgment; and the introduction of some kind of

sanction (Bovens, 2005; Mulgan, 1997). Principals and agents are often characterized as being in conflict, with a one-dimensional focus on formal control and enforcement (Willems & Van Dooren, 2011). Agency theory maintains that the objectives of agents often differ from those of their principals, and therefore they may stray from the path that principals want them to follow if they are left unmonitored and uncontrolled. In such contexts, accountability operates *vertically* between principals and agents, and its primary purpose is to prevent agency drift through managing information asymmetry and moral hazards between the two parties (Schillemans & Busuioc, 2014).

In traditional bureaucracies, policy is established at the top and carried out through a series of offices (bureaux), with each manager and worker reporting hierarchically to a superior and held to account by that person. As such, principals and agents operate at various levels, often performing different roles in their interactions with different actors. In reality, therefore, accountability is not based on a single principle–agent relationship but rather on a series of relationships of both delegation and accountability (Piatak et al., 2018). This makes the concept more challenging and the process of holding people to account more complex. Furthermore, in parliamentary systems, the democratic state is made up of a series of accountability relationships between voters and legislatures, and between legislatures and government. Within government, there is a relationship between the Head of Government and their Cabinets (which varies depending on the model of executive power in operation), between Cabinet Ministers and junior ministers, and between each of those and a cohort of civil servants (as well as executive agencies). As such, multiple different strands form a web of accountability rather than a single line of delegation—although this web is nonetheless made up of multiple principal–agent relationships.

## 3.2 | Multidirectional accountability and NPM

Ostensibly, NPM increased the focus on accountability for operational performance through market mechanisms, professionalization, decentralization, target-setting and measurement, as opposed to TPA's reliance on bureaucratic hierarchy and ministerial responsibility (Ferry & Eckersley, 2015; Murphy et al., 2019). However, because NPM encourages the proliferation of different public service delivery models, it results in a more fragmented governance landscape. This contributes to greater uncertainty, complexity, and confusion in public services accountability (Haveri, 2006), particularly in terms of performance measurement and management (Moynihan et al., 2011). As a result, attention shifted from hierarchical parliamentary control toward an increased focus on managerial accountability (Stone, 1995) which resulted, in some instances, in the counterproductive and/or unintended effect of creating accountability "overloads" on service's performance (Halachmi, 2014) and in others, the creation of accountability "deficits" (Mulgan, 2014; Schillemans, 2011). In addition, outsourcing and privatization initiatives can make it much more difficult for voters and elected representatives to hold external providers to account for poor performance or financial mismanagement, because public officials no longer exercise direct control over operations (Funnell, 2000).

NPM's reliance on performance reporting and inspections, often overseen by external inspectorates or audit institutions that operate at arms-length from ministers, further expanded the ways in which public bodies are held accountable. Such bodies are often characterized as having a "diagonal" accountability relationship with public bodies, because they have no formal powers of sanction but their assessments can nonetheless have significant implications (Schillemans, 2008). Their presence exacerbates the fragmented and cluttered nature of the accountability landscape and means that public administrators have to manage combinations of multiple, different, changing, and often conflicting expectations within and outside their organizations (Acar et al., 2008). As such, principal–agent theory cannot capture all of the complex behaviors and interrelationships that characterize the NPM paradigm (Steccolini, 2019). Instead of a simple one-way relationship, the same principal might seek to hold different agents accountable through multiple relationships, have multiple expectations, exert claims through multiple mechanisms, and use multiple incentives to shape behavior (Page, 2006).

In response, scholars argued that we should supplement hierarchical arrangements based on the principal–agent theory with "horizontal" forms of accountability (Michels & Meijer, 2008; Schillemans, 2011). Where public services are outsourced, and/or clear service level agreements exist between different actors, we can see how accountability mechanisms such as regular reporting and the ultimate ability to terminate an agreement may be embedded within contractual relationships (Bovens, 2005). Given that external providers often have distinct objectives (e.g., the need to generate a financial profit) that differ from those of public bodies, such contracts are often central to client-provider relationships. However, the costs of early exit, and the difficulties associated with finding another provider that possesses sufficient knowledge about how a service operates (as well as the willingness and capacity to assume responsibility for delivering it) can make it difficult to enforce the accountability mechanisms within these agreements.

Overall, the shift from a TPA to an NPM paradigm affected how accountability is conceptualized. In TPA, the executive is the major or sole actor responsible for both the creation and implementation of public policy, but NPM reforms result in a proliferation of these responsible actors (Frahm & Martin, 2009). For instance, "agencification" initiatives that resulted in the creation of non-departmental public bodies, arms-length organizations and quangos to implement public policy blurred the lines of ministerial accountability within government departments, and also changed the relationship between government and the legislature (Maggetti & Papadopoulos, 2023). The outsourcing and privatization of public services have a similar effect, because they make it easier for ministers to refuse to accept responsibility for errors by civil servants and other public sector workers—or indeed for problems caused by external providers—even if constitutional precedents and principles suggest that they should be held accountable for them (Moynihan, 2006). This interpretation of ministerial responsibility is referred to as the Maxwell Fyffe doctrine: it suggests that while a minister would be accountable to the legislature in terms of explaining what has happened, they are not necessarily accepting responsibility for it (Bennister & Larkin, 2018). In these contexts, it becomes increasingly challenging to establish who should be accountable to whom and for what, because decision-making is shared among multiple actors (Bevir, 2009) who are not always in hierarchical relationships with each other. Overall, therefore, despite its stated intention to improve accountability, NPM reforms have muddied the waters substantially, because they mean public bodies have to rely on vertical, horizontal, and diagonal mechanisms, when often none are appropriately tailored to their requirements (Behn, 1998).

## 3.3 | Horizontal accountability and NPG

Given the greater reliance on collaboration between governance actors within NPG, we can see how horizontal accountability is also relevant in these contexts (Lægreid & Rykkja, 2022). However, because the theoretical underpinnings of the NPG paradigm suggest that society should be involved in a common endeavor to create public value (as agreed through dialogue and collaboration with citizens), it tries to sidestep the problem of different governance actors pursuing conflicting objectives. Instead, the focus is on mobilizing the collective to cooperate and pursue shared goals (Moynihan et al., 2011), without the need for a clear hierarchical definition of authority or quasi-contractual relationships involving citizens, the state, and public service providers. These principles reduce the importance of formal accountability mechanisms along both vertical and horizontal dimensions, and also the need for diagonal accountability through inspectorates. By seeking to ensure that public bodies work more closely with citizens, it also seeks to address concerns about public control over policy implementation and service delivery.

The accountability literature has evolved in parallel with these governance developments. Specifically, scholars and practitioners have moved on from understanding accountability purely in retrospective and controlling terms (where it focuses on investigating mistakes, nonadherence to standards, or abuses of power (Behn, 2001; Haveri, 2006)) to argue that it should also facilitate learning (Aucoin & Heintzman, 2000; Bovens et al., 2008; Visser, 2016). As a consequence, backwards-looking *retrospective* measures of control have been complemented by more forward-looking *prospective* measures and recommendations for how organizations could improve (Ansell &

**TABLE 1** Accountability dynamics in different governance contexts.

| Accountability dynamics | | | Governance context | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Direction | Rationale | Focus | Conceptualization of democracy | State-societal relations | Dominant paradigm |
| Predominantly vertical (principal–agent) | Enhance democracy | Retrospective and controlling | Representative | Paternal | TPA |
| Multi–directional | Public sector efficiency | Bureaucratic and contractual | Market-based | Transactional | NPM |
| Predominantly horizontal | Generate public value | Prospective and constructive | Participative | Fraternal | NPG |

Abbreviations: NPG, New Public Governance; NPM, New Public Management; TPA, Traditional Public Administration.
*Source*: Authors' interpretation.

Torfing, 2021). These studies have emphasized that accountability processes such as external inspections ought to be more reflective, constructive, and forward-looking, emphasizing the importance of self-evaluation and learning from previous experiences rather than merely highlighting mistakes and inadequacies (Murphy et al., 2019). In many cases, accountability relationships may not even be formalized in any way, and instead rely on personal connections, friendly discussions, debates, and feedback between governance actors, all of whom are ostensibly seeking to improve outcomes for the public (French et al., 2021). Such a perspective fits with the idea that "hard" enforcement mechanisms might be unnecessary in cases where all actors within the network are pursuing shared goals. This is because their various activities are unlikely to be in conflict, and individuals feel accountable to each other by default (see Overman et al. (2021) for a discussion of how "felt accountability" can be a powerful and pervasive mechanism).

As with TPA and NPM, however, this conceptualization of accountability has come in for criticism, on the basis that independent oversight and evaluation of public officials and public services—in other words, more hierarchical and retrospective mechanisms of holding to account—remain important (Lewis & Triantafillou, 2012). Indeed, because we might expect the threat of potential sanctions to be the most important driver of prioritization (Aleksovska et al., 2022), relying too heavily on "softer" mechanisms such as informal feedback and discussions is perhaps somewhat naïve and unlikely to influence behavior. Furthermore, as Lee (2022) cautions, because collaborative governance involves a greater number of actors and relationships in decision-making, it could introduce excessive demands and increase the risk of tensions or clashes between different accountability mechanisms. There is also a substantial risk that the state only engages with the "usual suspects" in coproduction and cocreation activities (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2018). This would leave the vast majority of citizens disenfranchised and—in an echo of the accountability critique of NPM—mean that elites exclude other members of society from decision-making processes.

With this in mind, we can see how the quest for greater public accountability continues within the NPG paradigm. We suggest that this reflects accountability's "chameleon" nature (Sinclair, 1995), and the fact that it means different things to different actors. Indeed, as Table 1 illustrates, the pursuit of accountability is operationalized in different ways, depending on how democracy and state–societal relations are understood in different governance contexts.

We now expand on Table 1 to incorporate power into our conceptualization. The next section sets out how different actors within governance networks are able to mobilize resources to operationalize accountability, and how different understandings of power correspond to the three paradigms.

# 4 | RESOURCE INTERDEPENDENCE, POWER, AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN GOVERNANCE PARADIGMS

In democratic political contexts, accountability is often framed in terms of "speaking truth to power" (Wildavsky, 1979), or seeking to "hold power to account" (Mulgan, 2003). However, given that those who seek to

hold the powerful to account also need to possess the power to do precisely this (Sørensen, 2002), it is somewhat puzzling that power and accountability are only rarely addressed together in academic literature (McGee, 2019).

Although power—like accountability—is notoriously difficult to measure, previous studies have stressed that actors who possess important resources are better placed to exercise it (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). These resources may be financial, but they could equally be associated with specific knowledge, personnel, political or leadership qualities, or legal or constitutional rights and obligations. Governance theory is based on the idea that individual actors within networks would struggle to develop and implement policy alone, and therefore they pool their resources and rely on each other to help achieve objectives collectively (Klijn, 2008). In his analysis of central–local relations in the UK, Rhodes (1981) argued that the distribution of resources within these networks, along with the importance that individual actors attach to them, shapes the nature of these interdependent relationships. Following this logic, actors who possess scarce and/or crucial resources can exercise more power than other members of the network. Therefore, if we can identify the resources that each actor seeks to acquire, and which other organizations might be able to provide those resources, we can arrive at a better understanding of how power may be distributed between different governance actors.

In a further development, Eckersley (2017) expanded Rhodes' conceptualization to cover horizontal relationships between actors in local governance. Based on their resource requirements, and the availability of these resources within the network, he suggested that municipalities can operate on a spectrum in which they range from acting *in*dependently *of*, through operating *inter*dependently *with* and toward being *de*pendent *on* other organizations when seeking to achieve their objectives. By implication, if important resources are distributed asymmetrically within the network, some actors are able to exercise more power than others.

## 4.1 | Power "over," vertical accountability and TPA

The political science literature has a long history of understanding power in relational and coercive terms. In a much-cited contribution, Dahl (1957) characterized power in terms of one actor ("A") being able to coerce another actor ("B") into doing something that B would not otherwise do. Following on from Dahl, Bachrach and Baratz (1963) argued that some actors are also able to exercise power over others by deciding which issues come up for consideration and debate. Lukes (1974) presented a third dimension in his hugely influential book "Power: A Radical View," by positing that actors may acquiesce to power subconsciously because they subscribe to the structures that shape social relations and thus become subjects of their own domination.

We can see how the resource dependence perspective makes the idea of power *over* relevant in vertical accountability relationships. Indeed, we would go as far as saying that principals are only able to undertake their accountability functions effectively if they can exercise power *over* agents. Following Dahl, principals in public bureaucracies need to possess the necessary legal resources to ensure that agents undertake certain activities or are subjected to scrutiny and sanctions, even in cases where the agents may be reluctant to do so. Through hierarchical administrative systems, executives direct more junior officials to act in particular ways and can deploy various techniques to monitor and enforce their compliance. In line with Bachrach and Baratz (1963), principals also require the resources to identify issues of concern and the ability to raise them in appropriate fora. Finally, Lukes' third dimension may be applicable in cases where principals are reluctant to speak truth to powerful agents, perhaps because they are overawed by the political or social context.

These dynamics do not just operate within public bureaucracies; they also extend to state–societal relations. For example, although citizens can exercise power over public officials through elections and other democratic processes, they do need to possess the relevant resources—the *power*—to do so. This is not just restricted to voting at elections: it also includes informing themselves of wrongdoing or poor performance, mobilizing awareness and activity, and accessing relevant platforms and opportunities through which decision-makers are required to answer questions and undergo scrutiny. Such understandings are consistent with vertical accountability and the democratic

principle that citizens should be able to hold their elected representatives to account for their actions and exercise the ultimate power over them through removal if necessary.

With this in mind, we characterize the relationship between principal and agent primarily in terms of power *over* in TPA contexts. Through hierarchical bureaucratic structures, scrutiny mechanisms, and democratic elections, principals possess most of the resources that pertain to accountability. As a result, agents are largely dependent on principals and the relations between these actors are highly asymmetric; the latter is well-placed to exercise power over the former. Although this may not necessarily be the case in reality, it nonetheless fits within the ideal TPA paradigm of vertical accountability.

## 4.2 | Power to, multidirectional accountability, and NPM

However, we need not understand power and accountability purely in terms of coercion or domination. Power is not a finite concept, and actors can obtain and exercise it purely for their own purposes, without affecting others. This idea of power *to* refers to an organization or individual having the resources to achieve their objectives and "get things done" (Parsons, 1963, p. 232). Various scholars (Dowding, 1996, 2006; Haugaard, 2018; Pansardi & Bindi, 2021) identify overlaps between power *to* and power *over*. For example, some degree of power *to* is necessary to effect power *over*, and realizing power *to* might result in some actors exercising power *over* others. Nonetheless, the concepts are analytically distinct: power *to*—being *em*powered with the ability to act according to one's own desires, independently of other actors—does not necessarily result in hierarchical social interactions (Morriss, 2002; Pitkin, 1972). As such, it can increase the capabilities of marginalized actors and enable them to subvert traditional hierarchical structures (Pansardi & Bindi, 2021; Partzsch, 2017). At the same time, however, access to the necessary resources that would enable actors to pursue their objectives remains a crucial prerequisite for exercising this type of power.

We can see how power *to* has greater relevance in situations where governance arrangements are more fragmented and horizontal. Specifically, where accountability relationships are more complex and principals are less able to exercise power *over* agents through hierarchical mechanisms, actors within governance networks have more power *to* operate according to their own interests. This is particularly the case where resources are diffused across the network (e.g., between government bodies, agencies, and contractors), and where actors have greater freedom to operate independently of each other. In NPM contexts, this chimes with the idea that the state should focus on its "core activities" (Broadbent & Laughlin, 1998), while external actors perform "noncore" functions and (in the case of private providers) seek to generate profit. Coupled with the logic that underpins the NPM ideal, which stresses the importance of individual agency and "freeing up" managers and service providers to achieve performance objectives within agreed budgetary parameters, we can see how power *to* becomes more influential within such governance contexts.

Moreover, where external providers are not heavily reliant on public sector clients for contracts, and/or possess important resources (such as scarce knowledge about how a service is provided), they occupy a position of greater power within the network. Interestingly, we can see how they could exercise this power to strengthen their own position *vis à vis* other governance actors (power *over*), perhaps as a precursor to furthering their own objectives (i.e., by increasing profit margins, power *to*, cf. Dowding (2006)). Although public bodies might seek to hold suppliers to account through contracts, service-level agreements and reporting mechanisms, their ability to do so relies on having access to key resources such as information about how the service operates, expert staff, and the availability of feasible alternatives (Eckersley & Ferry, 2020). Indeed, where few alternative providers exist, or the public service in question is a "natural monopoly," the idea of horizontal accountability through market forces is exposed as an illusion, because suppliers are unlikely to lose business (see Bakker (2003) for an example from the water sector).

Notably, experience of NPM in some contexts suggests that governments become increasingly reliant on a small number of large suppliers (and vice versa, Greasley (2019)). As such, elite governance actors actually become

increasingly interdependent within the network, thereby blurring principal–agent relationships, because longer-term engagements between clients and contractors represent a better way for both actors to achieve their objectives than greater independence. However, these increasingly symbiotic relationships merely reflect the fact that market-based principles cannot apply in many public services contexts (see, e.g., Hefetz & Warner, 2012), rather than illustrate that competition between providers ensures dynamic markets, lower costs, and higher performance, in line with neoliberal theory. In ideal-type NPM contexts, resources are diffused between governance actors, which contributes toward a situation in which different organizations pursue their own objectives and operate more independently of each other. However, such environments often become increasingly dysfunctional because greater interdependence between clients and contractors blurs the principal–agent relationship.

## 4.3 | Power "with," horizontal accountability, and NPG

This interdependence between governance actors is a key element in NPG contexts and connects to a third conceptualization of power: the idea of power *with*. Although this dates back to Mary Parker Follett in the early 20th century (Metcalf & Urwick, 1941) and the work of Hannah Arendt (1970), scholars have only recently begun to think about applying it empirically (Partzsch, 2017). Power *with* relates to the idea that actors seek to achieve shared goals together and can be empowered to do so (Arendt, 1970). As with power *to*, the concept is not viewed in zero-sum terms, nor as a mechanism for social control, domination, or coercion. However, it differs from power *to* in focusing on collective action and the pursuit of shared goals rather than the empowerment of individuals. There are no "winners" and "losers," but rather power is an enabler than can help to achieve a common objective. It is, therefore, perhaps increasingly important in the Anthropocene era of wicked issues, polycrises, and dispersed agency across society (Macdonald, 2023). Such challenges require actors to cooperate, share knowledge, and learn from each other (Partzsch, 2017) on the assumption that mobilizing the whole can be more effective than relying on the sum of its parts in trying to achieve mutual objectives (Abizadeh, 2023; Partzsch & Fuchs, 2012). Outside the realm of public services, we can see how power *with* operates within professional networks, communities of practice, and trade unions—plus also (as the progress of this manuscript since its submission illustrates) the academic peer review system (Hesselgreaves et al., 2021). Within a public services context, coproduction (Ostrom, 1996), "quadruple helix" (Vallance et al., 2020) and cocreation (Bovaird, 2007) approaches illustrate the relevance of power *with*, as public bodies collaborate with nonstate actors and private citizens in policymaking and implementation. Central to this conceptualization is the principle that resources (and, by extension, power) are shared across society (Chen et al., 2024).

The diffusion of power and responsibilities across these more horizontal arrangements makes it very difficult to introduce vertical accountability mechanisms. However, where governance actors emphasize power *with* rather than power *to*, we can see how accountability may be much more prospective and forward-looking. By working together, actors can increase their collective ability to learn from experience and achieve shared objectives around public service outcomes. Such conceptualizations are relevant to debates about NPG and the creation of public value (Lindgreen et al., 2019; Moore, 1995; Wylie, 2020) rather than the focus on assessment and control that characterizes TPA and NPM contexts (French et al., 2021).

## 5 | DISCUSSION

We began with an overview of the three governance paradigms and the accountability relationships that operate within them, before examining the power dynamics that characterize these different contexts. Despite this structure, however, we contend that the causal relationship between these concepts runs in the opposite direction. In other words, we did not set out to describe the accountability and power relationships that predominate within different governance contexts. Instead, we suggest that the distribution of resources within networks shapes power dynamics,

which then affect accountability relationships in ways that are often associated with different governance paradigms (see Table 2, which expands on Table 1). The specific characteristics of each paradigm can help to illustrate how governance actors exercise power and accountability, but they only describe the outputs of these relationships—they do not act as explanatory tools in their own right. For accountability purposes, therefore, the granular details of specific public service reforms are probably less important than the ways in which key resources are distributed between governance actors, and the strategies that these actors adopt to exercise power.

We should also stress that governing elites sit at the apex of this pyramid: ministers take decisions around the availability of and access to resources that contribute to decision-making, policy implementation, and public oversight. Therefore, as the gatekeepers to the governance process, they retain the ability to share resources among actors as they see fit. Through this process, they can change how power and accountability are exercised and—ultimately—shape the dominant governance paradigm.

On that basis, we suggest the following propositions to direct future research into these concepts:

- Where principals possess most of the available resources, agents depend on them for legitimacy, funding, and the legal framework that underpins their activity. This enables principals to exercise substantial power *over* agents and hold them to account hierarchically through *ex post* monitoring, scrutiny, and sanctioning mechanisms. These mechanisms seek to ensure that agents are acting in line with the principal's objectives, which are mobilized through representative democratic institutions and implemented on the basis that public organizations exist to serve the public. Where such conditions predominate, they are more characteristic of the TPA model of governance.
- Where resources are distributed among a select group of governance actors, these actors operate relatively independently of each other and possess substantial power *to* pursue their own objectives (such as serving the public or generating profit). Accountability relationships operate in multiple directions, for example, through hierarchical monitoring and reporting, diagonal inspections, and horizontal contractual arrangements and market dynamics. These arrangements aim to give citizens greater "choice" and "voice," thereby extending democratic principles into the way in which public services are provided. Where such conditions predominate, they are more associated with the NPM model of governance.
- Where resources are shared across society, governance actors recognize the need to collaborate and work interdependently, in order to generate power *with* each other that can help achieve common goals. This leads to more *ex-ante* horizontal and informal accountability relationships, which focus on knowledge sharing and how organizations and individuals can learn and improve. By involving societal actors in identifying and creating public value in this way, democracy is more participative and in line with the principles of NPG.

With this in mind, we suggest that bringing conceptualizations of resource distribution, power, accountability, and public service paradigms together can generate a better understanding of public governance and also raise additional normative questions around democracy, social justice, and inclusion. In particular, we stress that public accountability relationships are a function of how governance actors (are able to) exercise power within networks. Additionally, by analyzing power and accountability relationships in the context of Osborne's three governance paradigms, we can provide greater explanatory power (pun intended) to clarify and distinguish between these different models in practice. We treat TPA, NPM, and NPG as ideal types and acknowledge that they overlap in the real world. By extension, we suggest that the different accountability and power relationships discussed in this article are also ideal types, and that they also overlap in the real world. With this in mind, we can see how empirical studies into the distribution of resources within governance networks could reveal useful and important insights into how actors might exercise power and hold each other to account, and what these relationships reveal about the dominant governance paradigm.

We did not seek to advance a normative argument around which type of power and accountability relationship (nor, by extension, which public governance paradigm) might be most appropriate or efficacious. Nonetheless, we

**TABLE 2** Power and accountability dynamics in different governance contexts.

| Power dynamics | | | Accountability dynamics | | | Governance context | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Distribution of resources | Resource (inter)dependency | Power relationships | Direction | Rationale | Focus | Conceptualization of democracy | State-societal relations | Dominant paradigm |
| Concentrated in principal | Agents largely dependent on principals | Principal has power over the agent | Predominantly vertical (principal–agent) | Enhance democracy | Retrospective and controlling | Representative | Paternal | TPA |
| Diffused among government and contractors | Actors operate largely independently of each other | Actors seek power to achieve individual objectives; principals and agents seek power over each other | Multidirectional | Public sector efficiency | Bureaucratic and contractual | Market-based | Transactional | NPM |
| Shared across society | Actors collaborate interdependently | Actors work together to generate power with | Predominantly horizontal | Generate public value | Prospective and constructive | Participative | Fraternal | NPG |

Abbreviations: NPG, New Public Governance; NPM, New Public Management; TPA, Traditional Public Administration.

*Source:* Authors' interpretation.

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suggest that analyzing the ways in which power is exercised within the different paradigms can help to explain the accountability critiques that are often associated with each of them. For example, relying too much on power *over* in TPA contexts can result in excessive bureaucratic control that restricts public officials' autonomy and ability to respond to citizens' individual needs. In the NPM paradigm, too much emphasis on power *to* fragments the public services landscape and limits the extent to which actors can control policy delivery. Finally, NPG's preference for power *with* assumes, perhaps too naïvely, that everyone will pull in the same direction and that some form of hierarchical oversight of potentially powerful actors is unnecessary. Indeed, perhaps we should not be surprised that "real-world" public services contexts comprise elements of all three paradigms because a mixed approach might help to nullify the different accountability concerns that are associated with each one individually.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

In recent decades, industrialized democracies have introduced a seemingly endless stream of public management reforms in a quest for greater public accountability, enhanced public value, and more empowered citizens. Yet, given that power is necessary to exercise accountability, and accountability is viewed as a key mechanism to restrain excessive power, it is surprising that these concepts are rarely examined together in the academic literature. At the same time, both concepts are notoriously difficult to measure and often mean different things to different people.

We have sought to make sense of this landscape by setting out how accountability is a function of power and the distribution of resources within networks, and also how both concepts are conceptualized and exercised in various ways that are often characteristic of different governance paradigms. We would welcome future empirical studies that seek to apply these ideas, and the connections between them, to examine how these theoretical links between power, accountability, and governance play out in practice. Empirical studies have shown how elements of TPA, NPM and NPG exist in most Western governance systems, and we neither seek to claim that any country is representative of any single paradigm nor advance a normative argument as to which is most appropriate or effective. Nonetheless, we suggest that our conceptualization of the predominant types of power and accountability that characterize each different context can frame future studies of how these ideas may be operationalized in governance arrangements.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest to declare.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

There is no dataset associated with this manuscript.

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### ENDNOTE

[1] We recognize that other disciplines (including anthropology, sociology, and philosophy) have often taken a broad, societal approach to accountability. For the purposes of this article, however, we restrict our focus to governance and the delivery of public services.

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