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Exploring Government-Citizen Interaction in Public Service Performance Assessment: Trade-Offs, Synergies, and Critical Issues

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ABSTRACT

Citizens' participation and direct initiatives are on the rise, including in assessing public service performance. Performance measurement and government-citizen interactions have been traditionally studied separately in public administration scholarship. To bridge this gap, this article integrates these two bodies of literature, proposing a typology of approaches to government-citizen interactions in public service performance assessment and highlighting their features. It also discusses the possible synergies and trade-offs emerging at the intersection between “interaction” and “assessment.” In particular, the article focuses on how relevance, reliability, and understandability shape and are shaped by the interaction between governments and citizens in both government-led and citizen-led initiatives of performance assessment. Finally, the paper puts forward a research agenda for the study of interactive forms of public service performance measurement.

ABSTRACT (ITALIAN)

La partecipazione più diretta dei cittadini all'erogazione dei servizi pubblici è in aumento, anche rispetto alla valutazione delle prestazioni. I temi della misurazione della performance e le interazioni tra pubblica amministrazione (PA) e cittadini sono stati tradizionalmente studiati separatamente nella letteratura di PA. Per colmare tale lacuna, questo articolo integra le due letterature, proponendo una tipologia di approcci alle interazioni tra PA e cittadini nella valutazione delle performance dei servizi pubblici e mettendone in evidenza le caratteristiche. Vengono, inoltre, discusse le potenziali sinergie e i compromessi che emergono all'intersezione tra “interazione” e “valutazione.” In particolare, l'articolo si concentra su come la rilevanza, l'affidabilità e la comprensibilità delle informazioni influenzino e siano influenzate dall'interazione tra PA e cittadini, sia nelle iniziative di valutazione guidate dalla PA che in quelle promosse dai cittadini. Infine, il contributo propone un'agenda di ricerca per lo studio delle forme interattive di misurazione della performance dei servizi pubblici.

1 | Introduction

Performance measurement systems have been increasingly adopted and refined over the past few decades (Garengo and

Sardi 2021; Steccolini et al. 2020). Underlying these developments is a vision of such systems as fundamental tools for public organizations to strengthen accountability and decision-making, support managers, and bring about managerial ways

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of thinking (Van Dooren et al. 2015; Vogel and Hattke 2018). To be implemented, these systems require the competencies of accountants, controllers, and other experts. However, over the years, performance measurement systems and related information and reporting have been criticized for their scant use (Nitzl et al. 2019; van Helden 2016) and possible biases (Arnaboldi et al. 2015; Choi and Park 2023). Moreover, these systems were expected to improve services to citizens and account for their performance, even though, in general, no direct, active involvement of citizens in data collection, analysis, and reporting was required.

To overcome these shortcomings, increasing attention has recently been paid to engaging citizens in co-assessment exercises—that is, interactive forms of public service performance measurement—in line with the general trend toward the spread of participatory democracy and co-production (Bovaird 2007; Fung 2015; Nabatchi et al. 2017), to take into consideration, and account for, societal plural values and interests (Bracci et al. 2021; Steccolini 2019; van Helden and Steccolini 2024). Accordingly, public sector organizations have increasingly involved citizens and other stakeholders in performance measurement through initiatives such as responding to opinion surveys, contributing to the development of performance measures (Ammons and Madej 2018; Ho and Coates 2004), taking part in local consultations (Ferry et al. 2019), and similar schemes. Furthermore, there has been a rise in citizen initiatives to hold governments and public sector entities to account (Barbera et al. 2024; Ponti and Craglia 2020), which is part of a more general trend toward citizens taking direct initiative in the public sphere (Edelenbos et al. 2018; Igalla et al. 2019).

Underlying these government-led and citizen-led activities is the idea that enhanced government-citizen interaction allows for achieving stronger accountability and service improvement. Along these lines, citizens can be involved in, or even self-organize for, the planning, design, and delivery of services and policies, as well as their evaluation (Martinez and Himick 2023).

The experiences where governments involve citizens directly or citizens take direct initiative in the measurement of public service performance are located at the intersection of performance measurement and government-citizen interaction. Interestingly, these two phenomena, while highly topical in the past few decades, have been mostly investigated separately in the public administration literature. Few scholars have explored the interactions between citizens and governments in performance measurement, with the focus being mostly on documenting emerging experiences (e.g., Meijer and Potjer 2018). Indeed, after conducting an initial search of public administration, public management, and public sector accounting journals, we found very few articles dealing with co-assessment or citizen initiatives aimed at evaluating public service performance. We, thus, embarked on a conceptual study (Cropanzano 2009; Gilson and Goldberg 2015) to reflect on the emerging types of government-citizen interactions aimed at measuring public sector performance and how performance measurement systems and forms of participation shape each other. In doing so, this contribution provides a basis for future research. By considering relevant

literature and initiatives, we develop an integrative understanding of emerging, interactive forms of performance measurement; we also highlight the implications of combining measurement with interaction for future inquiry. From a scholarly perspective, this article develops a typology of interactive measurement experiences by jointly considering models of measurement and government-citizen interaction. Moreover, it discusses how measurement systems are impacted by and impact the features of government-citizen interactions by pointing to the synergies, trade-offs, and critical issues that emerge at the intersection of measurement and interaction. Several relationships and topics that have not been sufficiently studied in the literature are identified, and a guide for future research on interactive forms of public service performance measurement is offered.

2 | Method

This conceptual paper integrates the strands of public administration scholarship on performance measurement, participation, and government-citizen interaction, which have so far been developed separately.

Conceptual articles have been widely published in public administration and management studies. The topics covered by these articles include work motivation in the public sector (Wright 2001), co-creation (Osborne et al. 2021; Torfing and Ansell 2021), public-service design in a digital world (Trischler and Westman Trischler 2022), collaborative governance (Emerson et al. 2012), co-production (Nabatchi et al. 2017), social equity budgeting (Martínez Guzmán et al. 2024), interpretive research on public administration (Elías 2024), and nodality for democratic governance (Margetts and John 2024).

In line with the aims of conceptual papers, this contribution summarizes extant knowledge and offers an integrated framework; it also provides “value added and highlight[s] directions for future inquiry” (Gilson and Goldberg 2015, 127). Conceptual articles are not based on primary data; rather, they propose “new relationships among constructs” to “broaden the scope of our thinking” (Gilson and Goldberg 2015, 127). Compared to systematic reviews, which examine all the works on a topic based on a very detailed process to answer the research question, conceptual papers focus on integrating concepts from the literature and suggesting new research avenues based on the relationships between the concepts. Systematic reviews are suitable when there is a considerable amount of literature on a topic and the attention is on what has been produced. Conceptual articles are useful to bridge disciplines and theories and focus attention on possible avenues for future research. Therefore, a conceptual contribution relies on both the literature and the capacity of researchers to integrate ideas within it. As such, it requires critical and engaged thinking, as well as deep knowledge of the field. A conceptual paper will present the key elements of a theoretical contribution. These include the factors to be considered for explaining the phenomenon of interest (the “what”), the relationships among these factors (the “how”), and the assumptions behind the selection of the factors and their suggested relationships (the “why”), supported by logical explanation based on past knowledge and evidence (Dubin 1978; Whetten 1989).

In line with these requirements, this article starts by highlighting the emergence of a phenomenon—the increasing involvement of citizens in public sector performance assessment—that appears to be at the intersection of two more established scholarly areas—performance measurement and government-citizen interaction. Given the relative paucity of studies at this intersection, we offer an overview of the public administration literature on these two areas. Then, we connect them through an integrative conceptualization. This provides a contribution to extant literature as each element of our integrated framework is discussed against the merits and limits of the literature and supported by concrete examples. Moreover, this leads us to put forward a research agenda on the synergies and challenges that could be addressed. This way, our article provides an alternative way to address the phenomenon in question and the identification of new connections among existing concepts. We offer suggestions on practices of interactive performance measurement and the key challenges they pose, thus advancing the field both theoretically and practically. Among other things, this conceptual paper allows us to address the “lack of one or more foundational conceptual articles about citizen-state interactions” and the “degree of fragmentation among relevant articles” lamented by Jakobsen et al. (2019, e9) in their editorial for a virtual issue on citizen-state interactions.

3 | Public Service Performance Measurement and Government-Citizen Interaction: From Separate to Interconnected Issues?

Performance measurement and government-citizen interaction are highly topical themes in the literature on public administration. Interestingly, they have often been addressed separately, with only a few contributions reflecting on their connections; also, the focus of this research has been predominantly empirical (e.g., Ammons and Madej 2018; Barbera et al. 2023; Halachmi and Holzer 2010; Heikkila and Isett 2007; Woolum 2011). This section provides the conceptual basis for identifying the main features of these phenomena and achieving an integrative conceptualization of them.

3.1 | Public Service Performance Measurement

Performance measurement refers to the process of defining and observing measures or indicators. In the past few decades, systems of performance measurement have been implemented worldwide with the expectation that they would support decision-making procedures and enhance transparency (Steccolini et al. 2020). These systems can serve different purposes; hence, they possess a plurality of features (Bouckaert and Van Dooren 2016). Still, the following steps (Van Dooren et al. 2015) will generally be present: choosing the object to measure, selecting adequate indicators, collecting and analyzing data, and reporting information.

Scholars of performance measurement systems have typically suggested that they work well to the extent that information is relevant, reliable, and understandable (Anthony and Young 2003; Jones and Pendlebury 2010; Van Dooren et al. 2015). Information is *relevant* when it makes a difference in decisions (Mättö and

Sippola 2016; Mättö et al. 2020; Spiceland et al. 2007), which implies that users would make different decisions in the absence of that information. According to previous accounting studies and standards, information is *reliable* when it is unbiased and free of error and when it can be independently verified (Christensen and Demski 2003, 427; Maines and Wahlen 2006). Information is *understandable* when its meaning can be comprehended by users (Jones and Pendlebury 2010, 28).

Traditional performance measurement systems have often been criticized (e.g., Barbera et al. 2024). Researchers have shown a scant use of and interest in performance information from potential users, be they internal or external (Nitzl et al. 2019; van Helden 2016). Moreover, performance measurement systems have been criticized for their prioritization of a limited set of values, such as efficiency, economy, and productivity, which neglects other relevant values, such as resilience, collaboration, sustainability, and social equity (Bracci et al. 2021; van Helden and Steccolini 2024). Finally, reforms of public sector accounting systems, while reflecting different logics (Stewart and Connolly 2024, 2025), have tended to mirror the representative democracy model, despite forms of direct citizen participation having emerged in response to the increasing dissatisfaction with and loss of trust in government (Jacobs and Kaufmann 2021; Nabatchi 2012; Nguyen et al. 2024).

3.2 | Government-Citizen Interaction and Citizen Participation

Interaction between citizens and governments is seen as key to democracy (Jakobsen et al. 2019). It may take different forms. In a traditional representative democracy, citizens delegate decision-making to elected political representatives, and they express their participation mostly through voting. In the past few decades, in many Western countries, the demand for more direct and interactive forms of government has grown. These forms are referred to in the literature with labels bearing different meanings, including “co-production” (Bovaird 2007; Nabatchi et al. 2017), “interactive governance” (Edelenbos et al. 2018), and “public governance” (Osborne 2006). These phenomena can be initiated by governments (government-led interactive governance) or citizens (citizen-led interactive governance) (Barbera et al. 2024; Edelenbos et al. 2018; van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2016).

The distinctive feature of government-led initiatives is that the government is the owner of the process and decides who is involved, when, and how, as well as to what extent this impacts decisions and public service delivery (Edelenbos et al. 2018; King and Cruickshank 2012). Government-led initiatives have often been studied in the literature on participatory governance (Arnstein 1969; Fung 2015; Fung and Wright 2001) and co-production (Alford 2014; Bovaird 2007; Nabatchi et al. 2017; Pestoff et al. 2012; Sicilia et al. 2016). Within the latter, different phases have been identified—co-commission, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment—during which lay actors and the government can co-produce state services. The co-assessment phase, which concerns measurement and evaluation, has been seldom investigated thus far (but see Ammons and Madej 2018; Berman 1997; Loeffler and Bovaird 2021; Callahan 2004;

TABLE 1 | Government-citizen interaction in public service performance assessment: An integrative conceptualization.

Initiator of the performance measurement process			
		Government-led performance co-assessment	Citizen-led performance assessment
Performance measurement cycle: • Targeting and indicator selection • Data collection • Analysis and reporting	Purpose and underlying values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogic approach • From “ceremonial” participation to citizen empowerment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spanning from collaborative to confrontational or counter-accounting • Holding to account • Bottom-up interaction
	Role of citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens are asked by the government to participate in one or more phases of the performance assessment cycle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens (individually or in organized forms) take on a proactive role, activating and/or managing one or more phases of the performance measurement cycle
	Role of government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating the conditions and defining the rules for a closer interaction with citizens to monitor and evaluate public services • Defining the extent and ways in which citizen involvement translates into government actions and decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making data and information available to citizens • Providing technical support, including making physical and virtual infrastructures available to citizens • Providing feedback on reports • Defining the extent and ways in which citizen involvement translates into government actions and decisions

Source: The authors.

Clark 2021; Heikkila and Isett 2007; Ho 2007; Holzer and Kloby 2005; Levitt et al. 2010; McKenna 2021; Rivenbark et al. 2019; Woolum 2011).

The literature on government-citizen interaction has typically focused on the conditions that ensure citizens' participation and engagement, and it has highlighted that high-quality interactive processes must ensure the full involvement of citizens, with inclusiveness and representativeness considered important conditions of legitimacy (Barbera et al. 2016; Escobar 2021). *Inclusiveness* refers to the extent to which processes are perceived as open and conveying a sense of belonging; inclusive processes do not exclude and value diversity and uniqueness (Hong 2015; Shah 2007). *Representativeness* requires that “[e]verybody who might be affected by the decision or is interested in the process should be involved” (Scolobig and Gallagher 2021, 628). This condition refers to how much voice different interests, views, and power positions have in decision-making (Barbera et al. 2016; Lee et al. 2023; Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2020). So far, however, research has shown little evidence on how to encourage engagement that truly fosters plural, inclusive and representative citizens' interests (Licsandru et al. 2025). This type of engagement aims to ensure that different views, feelings of belonging, and identities are reflected in participatory initiatives, especially co-assessment ones.

In the citizen-led model, citizens take the lead, shaping prioritization, design, delivery, and assessment of public services and policies, especially when the government is found lacking in this regard.¹

Citizen-led initiatives have been on the rise (Bang 2009; Dalton 2008; Edelenbos and van Meerkerk 2016), particularly in

response to dissatisfaction with governmental action and policy, the low impact of some government-led participatory initiatives, state withdrawal and retrenchment in the provision of several welfare services (Bang 2009; Dalton 2008; Edelenbos and van Meerkerk 2016; King and Cruickshank 2012), and increasing demand for higher accountability (Almén and Burell 2018).

Scholars have noted that citizen-led initiatives bring to the fore long-standing issues with citizen actions: accountability, engagement with, and representation of those for whom these initiatives are purportedly set up, and the democratic nature of their internal organization (Connelly et al. 2020, 392; Wagenaar et al. 2015).

3.3 | Government-Citizen Interactions in Public Service Assessment: An Integrative Conceptualization

By jointly considering the different stages of the performance measurement cycle and the forms of government-citizen interactions, it is possible to identify four ideal types: traditional (government-centered) performance assessment, government-led performance co-assessment, citizen-led performance assessment, and self-organized community assessment. Actual instances of assessment combine the features of these ideal types. Among these four types, only the second and third imply interactions between citizens and government; their main characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

In *traditional performance assessment systems*, citizens are mostly seen as recipients of the information on public service performance that is collected and made available by

governments. In this non-interactive model, citizens are not directly involved in deciding what counts as performance and how it is measured. This approach reflects the representative model of democracy where politicians and public officials are expected to interpret citizens' needs, translate them into priorities and program goals (Ho 2007), and select relevant measurement targets and indicators. As a result, public sector organizations decide autonomously (or based on regulations as well as requests from and negotiations with the authorities and upper levels of government) their measurement targets and indicators; they collect data via their statistical and information systems and analyze them; finally, they publish reports and communicate their results to citizens and the media.

In *government-led performance co-assessment* (usually called co-assessment), governments create the conditions for closer interactions with citizens to monitor and evaluate public services (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Cepiku et al. 2020; McKenna 2021). Citizens' participation is central to co-assessment schemes, yet it is governments that take the initiative to start the process and define the concrete forms of engagement and how they translate into actions and decisions. Governments choose when citizens are involved in the performance measurement cycle. For example, in the Iowa Citizen-Assisted Performance Measurement (CAPM) project discussed by Ammons and Madej (2018) and Ho and Coates (2002), citizens from nine US cities were involved in identifying services to be measured and the related measures. A wider engagement was ensured in the Participatory Evaluation of the Degree of Humanization in Italian Health Care project, in which citizens were involved in assessing the degree of health-care humanization throughout the performance measurement cycle (Cardinali et al. 2021). With regard to *targeting the measurement effort and selecting indicators*, citizens may be involved in providing input on where to direct the measurement activity (Ammons and Madej 2018; Ho and Coates 2002, 2004; Sicilia et al. 2016). In the data collection phase, government-citizen interaction typically implies that governments ask citizens for feedback on the services they receive (Kroll et al. 2019; So 2014). Interaction in data analysis and reporting involves negotiation or deliberation aimed at converging on a common understanding of how services perform. In the abovementioned Italian health-care project, a team composed of citizens and health professionals identified the most important areas and key indicators to be used to assess health-care services. Local teams of citizens and professionals connected to hospitals gathered data based on a checklist; then, they used this information to draft reports and improvement plans containing solutions to the problems encountered.

In *citizen-led performance assessment*, the forms of interaction between citizens and governments are decided upon and guided by citizens (Gascó-Hernández et al. 2018; Ostling 2017; Reggi et al. 2022; Shkabatur 2012; Suttles 2013). This is often facilitated by new media, including social media (Agostino et al. 2022). In these cases, citizens seek to redefine their relationship with the state and bring about change in public services, looking for more direct ways to collaborate and influence policy (Meijer and Potjer 2018) as well as provide alternative perspectives and

accounts (Brummel 2021; Mann 2004; Mann and Ferenbok 2013; Ojala et al. 2019; Vanhommerig and Karré 2014).

In citizen-led assessment, citizens initiate and/or manage the public service assessment either individually or (more often) collectively, covering some of or all the phases of the performance measurement cycle. In terms of targeting the measurement effort and identifying indicators, citizens define what counts as performance with some government involvement; they play a central role in the identification of the project, program, or activity that will be measured, and they select the necessary indicators. With respect to data collection, some citizen-led initiatives rely on existing databases, such as those linked to open-government initiatives. Other schemes involve citizens directly in the gathering of data and the generation of performance measures, for example, through ad hoc platforms that collect input from citizens and interviews with public officials. In this context, citizens can analyze data and produce reports and other narrative and visual accounts; these may be distributed physically, made available via online platforms and social media, and discussed in public meetings where representatives of public sector organizations can be invited. For instance, Monithon² provides a platform to help citizens monitor projects financed with EU funds (directly or indirectly) by using existing data and/or conducting interviews with key informants from the government and community. The collected data are employed to write reports according to the standards created by Monithon (i.e., a description of the project; its main advantages, disadvantages, and risks; and the opinions of other citizens), which are then shared and discussed with governments.

In *self-organized community assessment*, citizens autonomously define what counts as performance, identify indicators, collect and analyze data, and prepare reports—with no government involvement. In some cases, they also provide counter-accounts of government actions (Apostol 2015; Gómez-Villegas and Ariza-Buenaventura 2024; Laine and Vinnari 2017), or they organize protests and “sousveillance” against government actions (Mann 2004; Mann and Ferenbok 2013).

4 | When Measurement Becomes Interactive: A Possible Research Agenda for Exploring Synergies and Challenges

This section focuses on government-led and citizen-led performance assessment models (i.e., interactive models), and it discusses the implications of the intersection between measurement and interaction dimensions. Scholars have highlighted the expectations, problems, and success conditions of performance measurement systems and government-citizen interactions. What is missing from this literature is an understanding of how these dimensions shape each other and affect the outcomes of interactive performance measurement exercises. As discussed above, performance measurement systems are expected to provide information that is reliable, understandable, and relevant. Furthermore, it is important to ensure the proper engagement of citizens so that a plurality of voices is represented, and nobody feels excluded by such systems. However, not much is known about how the features of performance measurement systems

TABLE 2 | Summary of the synergies and trade-offs emerging at the intersection of performance measurement and government-citizen interaction.

	General engagement	Inclusive and representative engagement
Relevance	<p>Government-led performance co-assessment</p> <p>Engagement claimed to enhance (especially technical) relevance (+). The measurement exercise may be skewed toward the interests of those specifically involved (–).</p> <p>Citizens-led performance assessment</p> <p>New perspectives and voices come to the fore (+). Representation may converge on very specific interests (–). For the citizens leading the initiative, it is important to gain legitimacy in the eyes of other stakeholders by showing the ability to represent and include those on whose behalf they want to speak (–).</p>	<p>Representativeness and inclusiveness may remedy the risk of representing only the views of a few, thus enhancing not only technical but also political relevance (+). Relevant information may encourage engagement (+).</p>
Reliability	<p>Government-led performance co-assessment</p> <p>Reliable data can foster trust and citizens' participation (+). When only specific categories of citizens are involved, information may be biased (–). Governments can face significant challenges due to citizens' lack of resources (–).</p>	<p>Representativeness and inclusiveness may foster less biased and more faithful assessments; they may also enhance intersubjective reliability (+). A more plural engagement can raise the risk that citizens who lack adequate resources are involved, which may harm information reliability and accuracy (–).</p>
Understandability	<p>Citizens-led performance assessment</p> <p>Citizens' lack of skills regarding data collection and analysis may produce poor-quality data (–). Citizen sources of information tend to be less trusted than government sources (–).</p> <p>Government-led performance co-assessment</p> <p>When citizens participate in performance measurement, it is likely that the information produced is simpler and thus more understandable (+). A higher understandability of information may contribute to stronger citizen involvement in performance assessment (+). A lower understandability of information may lead citizens to activate assessment initiatives aimed at boosting enhanced accountability (+).</p> <p>Citizens-led performance assessment</p>	

Source: The authors.

influence interactive exercises and how, in turn, the characteristics of these exercises affect the quality of the information generated.

In what follows, we examine these reciprocal influences and the resulting synergies and trade-offs, highlighting relevant areas for future research. A synthesis of this discussion is provided in Table 2. This shows how, under certain circumstances, higher engagement can lead to better technical features of performance measurement (or vice versa); this synergy is identified with a plus sign in the table. In contrast, under different circumstances, this may not happen, and trade-offs and challenges are generated, which are identified with a minus sign in the table.

4.1 | Relevance and Engagement

As mentioned above, traditional performance measurement and accounting systems have been criticized for not being sufficiently used or not responding to the needs of users (Nitzl et al. 2019; van Helden 2016). This has led to calls for such systems to be made more relevant for users and adhere to stakeholder requests (Dillard and Vinnari 2019; Hood 2010). Enhanced interactions between government and citizens may be expected to generate potential benefits in terms of the relevance of the information produced. Yang and Holzer (2006, 123) observed that “[i]deally, performance measurement is a social-learning process involving the evaluators and the evaluated. Participation, interaction, and communication are essential characteristics of such a process.” However, this may also create significant challenges depending on the specific features of the interactions and the phases of the performance measurement cycle. In principle, wider engagement in selecting targets and performance measures allows citizens to contribute to the definition of what is relevant and highlight which objects and dimensions of performance are important from a citizen's perspective. For example, in some cases, the focus of the measurement may be specific public services, but in other cases, it may be organizational behavior or the government's wider performance (Andersen et al. 2016).

Wider engagement in the phases of data collection, analysis, and reporting may help gather richer data and make sense of them with the insights of those who are directly affected by services and policies. This can offer better input for decision-making to internal and external users. When citizens drive interactive assessment, they may take into greater consideration perspectives and voices that would be excluded in top-down approaches. Scholars have emphasized that counter-accounts can produce positive effects by creating social dialogue and problematizing key societal issues in novel ways (e.g., Apostol 2015).

While engagement in all phases of the performance measurement cycle appears to enhance relevance, it should be noted that during target selection, relevance has more to do with defining what “counts” and should thus be measured, which is an issue of political nature. In the subsequent phases, engagement can contribute to strengthening the richness and availability of data, which is an issue of technical nature.

In both cases, engagement may also pose challenges to relevance. Scholars of government-led exercises have often shown that minorities tend not to be sufficiently represented (Allegretti 2021; Bobbio 2019; Fishkin 2018) and that participatory schemes do not ensure that citizens feel included (Barbera et al. 2016). Thus, while generic engagement may be seen to enhance relevance in principle, in practice, only the satisfactory representation and/or inclusion of citizens may achieve stronger relevance. Participation that does not guarantee representativeness and inclusiveness can skew the measurement exercise toward the interests of those involved and the targets and measures that express their views and expectations, which are not necessarily those of all the stakeholders or minorities. Therefore, we should distinguish between generic claims of relevance versus relevance that is also qualified by representativeness of interests and inclusivity of citizens. Important examples of this issue come from studies of participatory efforts that have shown that public officials are less willing to use citizens' input when a small number of people participate or when those who participate are not representative of the communities they belong to (Yang and Callahan 2007; Yang and Pandey 2011).

The methods and processes employed can affect the representativeness and inclusivity of interactive performance assessment initiatives. It has been shown that when governments collect data via administrative or digital tools, such information “might be incomplete, outdated, and inaccurate, resulting in underrepresentation and invisibility of vulnerable groups that lack access to the technology that collects the data” (Ruijter et al. 2023, 322). It should also be noted that no solution exists to define an ideal system. For instance, some schemes may prioritize the inclusion of a plurality of views and interests, while others may aim to reach a certain number of individuals for relevant categories of citizens as a criterion for sufficient representation. The decisions regarding these aspects shape the types of measures adopted and used, as well as the data collection procedures, and thus their relevance for political, managerial, and policy choices.

In some cases, citizen initiatives may emerge as a result of specific stakeholders coming together to represent specific interests (e.g., environmentalists, animal rights activists, pro-choice/pro-life individuals, Denedo et al. 2017; George et al. 2023; Laine and Vinnari 2017). This phenomenon may lead scholars to reflect on the relationship between populism and elites (Táiwò 2022) and institutional (Chesterley and Roberti 2018)³ capture. In the case of interactive performance measurement initiatives, it may generate two risks: high engagement with low representation or inclusion of vulnerable categories, or the representation of very specific interests. For citizen-led initiatives, it becomes thus relevant to convince the public and the government of the salience of the issues at stake, as well as the importance of the related performance information, to support citizens' actions by building their legitimacy. This may also have implications for the administrative burden on citizens (Herd and Moynihan 2019; Moynihan et al. 2015), suggesting the need to more explicitly consider and explore this aspect when studying and implementing interactive performance management initiatives.⁴

To summarize, it is important to study how the specific features of interactive processes, in terms of both generic engagement and representation and inclusion, influence the relevance of the

performance measurement, and how this creates different challenges based on whether the initiative is led by governments or citizens. Relevance can be an elusive concept, as it may be highly dependent on who considers the information relevant and for which purposes. Hence, the practical definition of relevance adopted in the performance assessment is likely to considerably shape the engagement tools employed and how representativeness and inclusiveness are interpreted on the ground.

4.2 | Reliability and Engagement

As previously explained, information is reliable to the extent that it is independently verifiable and trustworthy. Citizens, managers, and other users are more likely to trust information that reflects integrity (i.e., adherence to a common set of objectives and principles), is produced competently (i.e., those producing it are technically capable), appears to be unbiased and free of error, and whose source seems neutral⁵ (Ferry and Midgley 2024; Ferry et al. 2024; Hirst 1994; Mueller et al. 2015). With reference to participation, reliable information is essential to foster dialogue between governments and citizens (Evans and Campos 2013), while unreliable data may undermine interaction. The specific conditions under which the reciprocal impacts between reliability and interaction occur deserve further investigation. For example, it is unclear how the active engagement of citizens shapes information reliability. First, strong participation only by specific categories of citizens and a lack of engagement from minority groups may bias the data collection and reporting and thus hamper reliability. Citizens may also be guided by partial interests, values, and beliefs; they may lack integrity and have cognitive biases (Aucoin and Heintzman 2000; Carpini et al. 2004; Heikkila and Isett 2007; Jewell and Bero 2006).⁶ Therefore, it is necessary to qualify engagement in terms of representativeness and inclusiveness, create the space for less biased and unfaithful measurements, enhance intersubjective reliability, and build trust between citizens and governments. This should be done not only on the basis of technical relevance and data accuracy but also of integrity and benevolence (Mayer et al. 1995). Second, citizens may lack the skills and tools to ensure high-quality measurement and foster trust in the performance information they contribute to collecting and elaborating (Ferry and Midgley 2024; Verschuere et al. 2018). When this is the case, the search for inclusiveness and representativeness may increase the likelihood that less competent sources of information are included, ultimately negatively affecting reliability and accuracy.

These issues are relevant to government-led initiatives, which have been shown to face significant challenges due to citizens' lack of resources, including competencies, time, and money (Ammons and Madej 2018; Jo and Nabatchi 2016; van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2016), and the absence of representativeness/inclusivity in participatory efforts. For example, in their study of participatory budgeting in Chicago, Stewart et al. (2014) found that this practice had not been successful in engaging underrepresented groups.

The issue of reliability becomes even more critical when the measurement system and related data are autonomously designed

and generated by citizens. In this case, in addition to citizens not having the skills to analyze data, the tools and methods of data collection may be of poor quality (Ponti and Craglia 2020). For example, key informants may be missed. Auditing and monitoring may be absent, making the reliability of the initiatives uncertain (Ponti and Craglia 2020). Previous researchers have found that citizen sources of information tend to be less trusted than government sources by other citizens, which implies that citizen-led initiatives may suffer in terms of reputation (Schmidhuber et al. 2023). For these reasons, citizens need to prove the reliability of their data to enhance the legitimacy of the initiatives in the eyes of other citizens and for governments to use their information in decision-making (Agostino et al. 2022). Doing so is particularly important to bring issues to the attention of government, in the absence of other sources of reliable data. Less accurate data may highlight issues that are inherently difficult to measure, or for which information is not available, but that may be relevant to citizens, policymakers, and managers. This suggests potential trade-offs between (low) reliability and (high) relevance (Apostol 2015), which become critical when citizens offer counter-accounts that question government actions. This is an interesting area for future research. The conditions under which such trade-offs emerge and how they are managed in practice should be investigated.

Given what has been said so far, the effects of different forms of interaction on information reliability deserve to be further examined empirically. For instance, the inherent trade-offs in performance assessment between inclusivity or representativeness and information reliability should be explored.

A response to the abovementioned complexities, including trade-offs, has been the emergence of data intermediaries (Agostino et al. 2022; Meijer and Potjer 2018). These intermediaries, also called information brokers (Heald 2003) or intermediate users (Rutherford 1992), are actors who help disseminate government data and information, making them available to individual users; they also dispute official accounts of government performance. When citizens play an active role in the assessment of public services and policies, data intermediaries can also encourage and facilitate the collection and reporting of data by citizens by providing tools, technical skills, and methodologies. This creates a technical infrastructure and educates citizens on the gathering and analysis of data. However, data intermediaries' capacity to increase the reliability of data is dependent on their neutrality and willingness to generate trustworthy data for public governance (Meijer and Potjer 2018, 614).

There is contradictory evidence on the extent to which data intermediaries act to represent the general public or specific interests (see Mazzei et al. 2020). Therefore, their role is another area for future research (Haug 2023). Scholars should investigate the constructive or destructive function of data intermediaries in fostering inclusive, representative, and interactive performance measurement. For example, it would be interesting to explore the expertise they rely on, the methods and processes they use in their discussions with governments and citizens, how they mobilize critical resources, and the extent to which, as well as the conditions under which, they are able to affect public policy and play their role over time.

4.3 | Understandability and Engagement

For performance measures to be useful, they must be understandable by users (Snively 1967). The level of understandability of this information depends on the skills of users and the characteristics of the document that contains it. In this last respect, information is usually more understandable if it is simple and comparable to similar data. The involvement of citizens in performance measurement systems may make their reports simpler and, thus, more understandable for the external stakeholders of public organizations. Citizens may provide useful feedback for producing clearer documents—for instance, by indicating when explanations are needed to clarify obscure jargon. To the best of our knowledge, there is little literature on the extent to which information becomes more understandable when collected, analyzed, and presented in an interactive way and, especially, in an inclusive and representative one. There is also a lack of evidence on the key determinants of understandability (e.g., the language used, the report's design and visual content, etc.) and its impacts on internal and external users. In one study, Ho (2007) found that after a brainstorming initiative that asked citizens in nine cities in Iowa to rank measures based on criteria including understandability, poorly ranked measures were eliminated, which made it easier for public officials to manage data collection and reporting. It may be suggested that information produced through the involvement of a variety of stakeholders can enrich the interpretation of an issue, but it can also lead to contestation and excessive complexity.

Furthermore, information that is more understandable may ensure stronger citizen participation in performance assessment. The few existing studies of the link between the understandability of information and the willingness of citizens to be involved in coproduction initiatives have shown that the comprehension of performance data increases coproduction engagement intentions (Langella et al. 2023; Porumbescu et al. 2021). However, if citizens feel that information is unclear, they may decide to activate to contribute to build information that is more understandable. This may require conducting more empirical or experimental research on whether higher interaction is associated with higher perceived understandability.

5 | Conclusions

The measurement of public service performance and government-citizen interaction is profoundly intertwined with the functioning of public administrations. In the past few decades, they have attracted increasing scholarly attention. Surprisingly, though, the two bodies of literature on these phenomena have proceeded almost separately. Instances of government-citizen interaction in the assessment of public service performance are becoming more frequent, but they are still in need of in-depth conceptualization and more theoretically informed, evidence-based explorations. To address this gap, drawing on and combining extant, separate conceptual and empirical literatures on performance measurement and government-citizen interaction, we first proposed a typology of approaches to government-citizen interactions in the assessment of performance and highlighted their features. This typology constitutes a reference point for future

scholars as well as policymakers, public managers, and citizens interested in designing interactive forms of performance measurement.

Second, we developed an integrative conceptualization of the synergies and trade-offs emerging at the intersection of assessment and interaction. We focused on how relevance, reliability, and understandability shape and are shaped by the exchanges between governments and citizens in both government-led and citizen-led initiatives of performance co-assessment, highlighting several avenues for future empirical research. Scholars should investigate the multiple ways in which, as well as the conditions under which, citizens play a part in assessing public service performance. These phenomena would benefit from critical testing through case studies aimed at examining the proposed conceptualization and the relationships among its key dimensions, as well as enriching it by adding further trade-offs and synergies.

We believe that our integrative conceptualization can be used to investigate different settings, government levels, and policy areas, embracing a plurality of theoretical perspectives and methods and promoting further integration with other areas of scholarship. These may include the role of citizen engagement in performance measurement to strengthen transparency (Cucciniello et al. 2017; Ferry et al. 2015; Hood 2010; Porumbescu et al. 2022) and accountability, in its dual meaning of virtue and mechanism (Bovens 2010). Another possible area of integration is the literature on counter-accounts and dialogic accounting (Brown and Dillard 2013; Brown et al. 2015; Dillard and Vinnari 2019; Gallhofer et al. 2015; Vinnari and Dillard 2016), which can illuminate the effects and implications of measurement and data contestation. Also, future scholars may wish to explore if and how governments and citizens should interact in situations of risk, such as crises and emergencies, or when privacy and safety must be secured (Barbera et al. 2020; Ferry et al. 2024).⁷ Future research may also look at the outcomes and consequences of the shift toward interactive assessment of public services, focusing not only on the new representations thus created but also on how such assessment shapes the behaviors and decisions of individuals and organizations (Vosselman 2014). For instance, the adoption of interactive performance assessment may facilitate the implementation of more formal systems of engagement, increase trust in governments, and foster feelings of belonging. Relatedly, future scholars may investigate in detail the processes through which interactive performance measurement systems are designed, adopted, implemented, and revised (van Helden et al. 2012), thereby identifying their expected and unexpected effects. They may also explore how citizens come to be involved not only in assessment processes but also in their continuous definition and implementation.⁸

In terms of methods, future scholars could conduct qualitative studies, including action-based ones, and studies of existing initiatives based on interviews, focus groups, and ethnography. They could carry out experiments or use mixed-methods approaches; for example, Q methods might be employed to investigate the perceptions of citizens and public managers.

From a practical point of view, this article recognizes the benefits of ensuring that citizens' voices are heard, either through

citizens taking the initiative or through governments engaging with them to decide what counts, measure it, and report it in order to enhance decision-making and accountability (Harkness et al. 2023; Roy 2023). The article also shows that to ensure the success of interactive forms of performance measurement, public managers, policymakers, and citizens must be aware that these forms of assessment gain their legitimacy from both technical and relational features, with relevance, reliability, and understandability, as well as engagement, representativeness, and inclusion, requiring joint consideration.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹The meaning we assign to citizen-led initiatives differs from other approaches, especially those of Callahan (2004) and Woolum (2011). Callahan (2004) defines “citizen-driven” performance measurement as “the use of measures or indicators that are socially relevant to citizens” (p. 33). Her classification distinguishes between managerial-driven and citizen-driven performance measurement processes, which reflect a condition where performance is evaluated only by managers and one where it is appraised by managers with the involvement of citizens (i.e., co-assessment), respectively. Both Callahan and Woolum refer to processes where citizens are invited by the government, which remains the main actor responsible for interactive initiatives.

²See <https://www.monithon.eu/en/>.

³We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this point.

⁴We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this aspect.

⁵Of course, performance assessment is subjective to a certain extent. Here, we are referring to the fact that it is generally expected that assessment is based on accurate data and processes that minimize errors as much as possible.

⁶Previous researchers have emphasized that data reliability may depend on several additional factors, including the methods and processes used. As mentioned above, when governments collect data via administrative or digital tools, the information “might be incomplete, outdated, and inaccurate” (Ruijter et al. 2023, 323).

⁷We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting these additional areas for future research.

⁸We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out these areas for future investigation.

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