



## *Manufacturing Political Trust*

Performance measurement and targets have been widely criticised as distorting policy and engendering gaming – yet they continue to be widely used in government. This book offers an original new account explaining the persistent appeal of performance measurement. It argues that targets have been adopted to address a crisis of trust in politics, through creating more robust mechanisms of accountability and monitoring.

The book shows that such tools rarely have their intended effect. Through an indepth analysis of UK targets on immigration and asylum since 2000, it shows that far from shoring up trust, targets have engendered cynicism and distrust in government. Moreover, they have encouraged intrusive forms of monitoring and reform in public administration, with damaging consequences for trust between politicians and civil servants.

Despite these problems, performance measurement has now become embedded in techniques of public management. It has also become normalised as a way of framing policy problems and responses. Thus despite their acknowledge problems, targets are likely to retain their allure as techniques of political communication and governance.

CHRISTINA BOSWELL is Professor of Politics at the University of Edinburgh. She is author of *The Political Uses of Expert Knowledge: Immigration Policy and Social Research* (Cambridge, 2009). Christina is currently leading a major ESRC project entitled *Seeing Illegal Immigrants: State Monitoring and Political Rationality*, which explores how public authorities in France, Germany and the UK have constructed and monitored irregular migrants since the 1960s.

# Manufacturing Political Trust

Targets and Performance Measurement in  
Public Policy

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## Preface

This book is essentially about the relationship between information and governance. It engages with a long-standing interest of mine in how governments and international organisations produce and deploy different forms of knowledge to ground their legitimacy. In this sense, it is a sequel to my 2009 book *The Political Uses of Expert Knowledge: Immigration Policy and Social Research* (Cambridge University Press). But while that book focused on the (largely symbolic) uses of research, this one explores the deployment of more technocratic public management tools in the form of targets and performance measurement. My central argument is that we need to understand performance measurement not just as a tool for enhancing government capacity and accountability, but more broadly as a response to a crisis in political trust – at both the level of public trust in politics and of trust relations between politics and public administration. Performance measurement represents an attempt to reground trust through establishing precise and authoritative modes of signalling and monitoring government performance.

This book thus focuses on how governments – and the UK Government in particular – has used tools of performance measurement to produce or manufacture political trust. The verb ‘to manufacture’ has two meanings: to make something on a large scale using machinery, and to invent or fabricate. The classic contributions by Walter Lippmann, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky on ‘manufacturing consent’ clearly build on elements of the second meaning: consent is secured through propaganda and manipulation.<sup>1</sup> My usage of the word is intended to be somewhat closer to the first meaning. I understand performance measurement as an attempt to

<sup>1</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt); Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economic of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books).

produce trust through the use of a complex array of management tools. But of course, we can also read such attempts as instances of duplicity or spin, so the second meaning is not irrelevant. One of the main insights of this book, however, is that governments are rarely successful in securing the trust they aim to enlist. Thus, the form of the present participle ‘manufacturing’ implies a work in progress: an attempt that does not generally result in success, but that nonetheless is something for which governments continually strive.

By focusing on the question of political trust, this book engages with a wider set of issues around political disaffection and mistrust of politics in democratic countries – questions that have become especially critical over the course of writing this book in 2015–17. I struggled with the question of how to deal with this development: does the rise of populism imply the need to radically rethink the role of performance measurement, or is this a temporary blip in patterns of political mobilisation that will settle down in the coming years? The compromise I settled on was to briefly explore a number of different scenarios linked to the rise of populist movements in part of the final chapter; but I am aware of the risks in forecasting political trends, and hope future readers do not judge me too severely on this.

The core of this book is the product of a three-year project on ‘The Politics of Monitoring: Information, Indicators and Targets in Climate Change, Defence and Immigration Policy’, generously funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. The idea of focusing on targets initially emerged from discussions with my Edinburgh University colleagues working in Science, Technology and Innovation Studies – Eugénia Rodrigues, Graham Spinardi and Steve Yearley. Through our collaboration on the project, these three colleagues helped me develop and clarify many of these ideas in this book. Hilary Cornish, Colin Fleming, Laura Martin and Ewen McIntosh provided valuable research assistance at different stages of the project. Colin Fleming in particular made an important contribution to the analysis in Chapter 4 of this book. Hilary Cornish carried out a number of the interviews. Ewen McIntosh assisted with the quantitative analysis of press coverage. And Laura Martin provided valuable assistance with editing the final draft.

Other colleagues at Edinburgh have been a fantastic source of feedback and support. Within Politics and International Relations, Philip Cook, Marc Geddes, Iain Hardie, James Mitchell and Mathias

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Beyond Edinburgh, many colleagues and friends commented on various iterations of chapters, provided valuable feedback at seminars or paper presentations, or talked through the concepts. My thanks in particular to Frank Baumgartner, Clare Dunlop, Jennifer Elrick, Kijan Espahangizi, Wendy Espeland, Matthew Flinders, Shaun Gallagher, James Hampshire, Marc Mölders, Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, PerOla Oberg, Regine Paul, Claudio Radaelli, Jill Rutter, Rudolf Stichweh, Colin Talbot and Jan-Peter Voss. Matt Cavanagh was enormously helpful in sharing insights into the Ministry of Defence and Home Office, and in helping broker interviews. As ever, my sister Julia Gallagher offered excellent comments and encouragement throughout.

Most of all, thank you to my children, Imogen and Ben, for tolerating a mother who is too often distracted in the service of projects whose worth remains obscure. And to Alex, for bearing with me in so many ways.