U.S. Local Government Managers and the Complexity of Responsibility and Accountability in Democratic Governance

Delmer D. Dunn and Jerome S. Legge Jr.
University of Georgia

ABSTRACT

This study examines accountability and responsibility as they apply to local government managers in the United States. The Friedrich-Finer debate defined contrasting views of accountability and responsibility, with Finer advancing elected officials and Friedrich advancing the profession and public sentiment for establishing responsibility and accountability for nonelected officials. More recent scholars also include the courts, media, and more precise definitions of public sentiment in addition to those identified earlier by Friedrich and Finer. This study surveyed local government managers, asking them to indicate the importance of these sources of accountability as they define their responsibilities, as they consider new policy options, and as they respond to routine matters related to their jobs. The 488 respondents assigned more importance to their professions than to other sources when they define their responsibilities, but they rated the governing body more important than others when they consider new policy options or when they respond to routine matters. They assessed court cases and the media last. The study concludes that both Friedrich and Finer provide too narrow a definition of accountability and responsibility. The accountability-responsibility relationship among elected officials, public administrators, and the public occurs in multiple and complex ways. The complexity of this relationship is marked by the need for administrators to be simultaneously empowered (by the definition of their responsibility, both objectively and subjectively) and constrained (through mechanisms of accountability, which then feed into definitions of responsibility). These contradictory, even paradoxical, concepts make it easy for scholars to divide by emphasizing one or the other (as did Friedrich and Finer) rather than to examine how they work together simultaneously to achieve responsiveness from administrative officials in a democratic polity.


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Responsibility and Accountability in Democratic Governance

The concepts and methods that define accountability and responsibility constitute fundamental issues in democratic theory because they determine how public policy and administration remain responsive to public preferences. This study explores responsibility and accountability by utilizing a survey of local government managers in the United States. In particular, it examines how contemporary public officials perceive various sources of accountability and responsibility as they perform their work.

The ultimate purpose of methods that impose accountability and provide definition of responsibility is to achieve responsiveness. This means acting in accordance with the preferences and expectations of the person or entity to which one is accountable or responsible. Accountability and responsibility contribute to the goal of responsiveness in several ways. Accountability at its most basic means answerability for one’s actions or behavior (Dwivedi 1985; Dwivedi and Jabra 1988, 5; Harmon 1995, 25-26; Kernaghan and Langford 1990, 157; Pennock 1979; Uhr 1993b, 2). Accountability is the obligation owed by all public officials to the public, the ultimate sovereign in a democracy, for explanation and justification of their use of public office and the delegated powers conferred on the government through constitutional processes. Accountability is the price citizens extract for conferring substantial administrative discretion and policy responsibility on both elected and appointed government personnel (Uhr 1992; Uhr 1993a; Banfield 1975, 587-88). An accountability plan refers to an arrangement of obligations owed by one set of officials to another and ultimately to the public (Uhr 1992 and 1993a). This study will focus on unelected officials because they inevitably exercise much influence in democratic governments.

Accountability and responsibility are often used either interchangeably or as an undistinguished entity during discussions of relationships among the people and elected and appointed officials in democratic governments. It is highly useful, however, to distinguish between the two and then to indicate how the two concepts are related. Responsibility refers to the charter of delegated powers that are entrusted to the government, to the grants of power conditionally made available to public officials to do the things that they have the capacity to take charge of, act on, or provide (Burke 1986, 10-15; Freund 1960, 37; Pennock 1960, 4, 27). The official can be relied on and left in charge (Lucas 1993, 11). Elected and appointed public officials act responsibly by showing policy and administrative initiative and leadership in the areas for which they are responsible.

Responsible public officials also possess internal characteristics that interact with the external charge of responsibility
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given to them. These officials have a sound concept of their duties and they act in accordance, with due deliberation, sound reasoning, and consideration of relevant facts and circumstances (Pennock 1979, 267). Responsibility may be based on “a course of action derived from some set of ideals” (Burke 1986, 9).

Mosher called this kind of responsibility subjective or psychological responsibility because it indicates “to whom or for what one feels responsible and behaves responsibly” (Mosher 1968, 8; see also Burke 1986, 8-13; Kernaghan and Langford 1990, 158; Marx 1957, 44-45). This sense of responsibility also builds energy into the important place of anticipation on the part of the public official, a process that extends the influence of the official or the public over the official.

Implicit but very important in the definition of responsibility is the requirement that public officials have sufficient definition of their duties, so that definition may guide their actions as well as provide a basis for those defining the duties or responsibilities of these officials to appraise their actions through accountability methods. Overall, responsibility suggests the empowerment of officials by those who have the authority to do so by assigning responsibility to them; acceptance by officials of that responsibility; and discretion by the officials who receive responsibility to act on that authority.

Responsibility and accountability interrelate in several ways. Uhr notes that accountability “defines the boundaries within which official responsibilities are acted out” (Uhr 1993b, 4). Accountability mechanisms thus require that officials consider the consequences of their actions as they exercise discretion. Responsibility thus empowers, but officials acting on that empowerment must accept accountability when initiatives do not work well or when they become publicly suspect (Freud 1960, 29-30; Friedrich 1960; Pennock 1979, 267; Uhr 1993b). Without accountability, their discretion would be unfettered and might lead to irresponsible actions. A final relationship focuses on defining responsibilities. If they are not well defined, then officials may not have sufficient guidance to inform discretion, and those to whom they are accountable may not have a sufficient basis upon which to judge their actions.

THE FRIEDRICH-FINE DEBATE

The ultimate aim of accountability and responsibility mechanisms in democratic policies is to assure responsiveness by government to citizens’ preferences and needs. How should responsibilities be defined and accountability be exercised in a democracy? Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999) indicate that

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“[t]he founders of representative government expected that the
formal arrangements they advocated would somehow induce
governments to act in the interests of the people, but they did not
know precisely why it would be so. Neither do we today, after
two hundred years.” This lack of certainty fueled an intense
debate about governance, of interest to both scholars of public
administration and democratic theory. The famous Friedrich-
Finer debate of the early 1940s laid out some alternatives, espe-
cially as these questions focused on unelected officials. The pre-
cursor of the Friedrich-Finer debate occurred in the mid-1930s.
Finer (1936, 571), in reviewing a Social Science Research Coun-
cil inquiry on public service personnel in the United States, stated
that Friedrich's contribution to the study was “very stimulating,
but one feels that many of the generalizations cannot be sup-
ported by either historical evidence or the facts of the contempo-
rary world.” Finer wrote that “[r]esponsibility . . . requires the
existence of a relationship of obedience on the part of the person
acting to an external controlling authority” (p. 580) He asserted
in the review that “political responsibility must be introduced as
the adamant monitor of the public services. For the first com-
mandment is Subservience” (p. 582). He then emphasized that
“nothing is more important . . . than the fundamentality of poli-
tical control . . .” (p. 583, emphasis in the original). Friedrich’s
position that elected officials constituted an inadequate basis for
assuring accountability of the public service particularly disturbed
Finer (p. 581).

Finer fully joined issue with Friedrich in the more famous
debate of the early 1940s, when he presented his position more
emphatically and comprehensively. Finer presented an expansive
view of accountability that had the effect of severely limiting the
discretion of bureaucrats. He asserted: “. . . the servants of the
public are not to decide their own course; they are to be re-
sponsible to the elected representatives of the public, and these are to
determine the course of action of the public servants to the most
minute degree that is technically feasible” (Finer [1941] 1978,
411-12). Finer believed that a democratic government required
that the preferences of citizens be expressed through an elected
institution that had the power to compel unelected officials to
“exact obedience to orders” (p. 413). Finer warned against
public administrators acting “. . . for the good of the public
outside the declared or clearly deducible intention of the repre-
sentative assembly” (p. 419). Although Finer focused on the
legislature as the mechanism through which administrators would
achieve accountability, the presidential system of government
also would include the elected executive. Additionally, hierarchy,
rules, and sanctions were important to Finer. He especially
emphasized the need for external control by elected authorities over public administrators.

Carl Friedrich, on the other hand, argued for a broader notion of administrative discretion. By the mid-1930s, Friedrich emphasized a "psychological factor which supplements 'objective' responsibility" (1935, 38). This psychological factor consisted of public administrators viewing government service as a career that would make them more attuned to the general interest than would be the case if they served as a result of patronage; thus they were directly accountable to elected officials (p. 37). In this article Friedrich presented somewhat contradictory views on the appropriate relationship between public administrators and elected officials. He stated, for example, that "political responsibility based upon the election of legislatures and chief executives [has not] succeeded in permeating a higher technical, differentiated government service . . . " (p. 31). Later, discussing the collaboration of administrators and elected officials, he noted that "[i] . . . all administrative departments are actively engaged in collaborating with the legislature, they must be admitted to occupy an important though a subordinate role in the process of legislation" (p. 58). Although he indicated that "only the specialist" is able to "adequately judge" the experiments that can bring improvement to government, Friedrich also offered the following observation: "Above all [the specialist] must know what are the inherent limitations which the American constitution imposes upon administrative work" (p. 74).

By the early 1940s, Friedrich had developed a more comprehensive position that linked public administration to democratic impulses. In this round of the debate he espoused a dual standard for guiding the actions of public administrators that included technical knowledge and popular sentiment (Friedrich [1940] 1978, 403). Mirroring his earlier position, Friedrich stated that the increasing complexity of public sector problems required technical competence, and that only one's fellow professionals could effectively judge the activities and policies of the public administrator. Many modern scholars view Friedrich primarily as one who espoused professional knowledge as a viable basis for guiding a public administrator's actions. He asserted that the actions of a public administrator are irresponsible if they have been " . . . adopted without proper regard to the existing sum of human knowledge concerning the technical issues involved . . . " (p. 403). But Friedrich also argued strongly that the public administrator should be guided by popular sentiment, although modern commentators sometimes neglect this part of his argument. Friedrich is clear on this point: " . . . we also have a right to call [a policy or action] irresponsible if it can be shown

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that it was adopted without proper regard for existing preferences in the community, and more particularly its prevailing majority" (p. 403).

Modern interpreters of Friedrich usually cast him as espousing internal controls, with the values and knowledge of the profession being internalized and constantly referenced by public administrators as a source of guidance for action. In the discussion above of accountability and responsibility derived from democratic theory, Friedrich can also be viewed as one who emphasizes the empowerment of public administrators through the assignment and definition of their responsibilities. Finer, with his externally imposed controls, can be viewed as one who emphasizes constraints, or the accountability side of these concepts.

In effect, Finer and Friedrich defined three important mechanisms through which to define responsibility and to exercise accountability. Finer emphasized the subordination of public administrators to elected officials, including legislators and, by inference, elected executives. Elected bodies, for example, provide direction to unelected officials and thus should play a major part in defining their responsibilities. Further, elected officials constitute a key element in accountability mechanisms in democratic governments. Several recent studies, for example, have examined ways that the U.S. Congress has imposed more intense accountability-responsibility requirements on the bureaucracy (Aberbach 1990; Gilmour and Halley 1994; Gormley 1989, 191-93; Khademian 1995; Rourke 1991, 116; Wilson 1989, 241-44). Thus accountability can involve two transactions: one set of officials, such as bureaucrats, gives an account of its activities to another, legislators. The legislators take due account and feed their own considered account back into the political system and, through that mechanism, to the people. In considering accountability-responsibility mechanisms in democratic governments, it is a given that elected officials act on what they believe to be the preferences of the people in defining their responsibilities and are answerable directly to the people. Further, nonelected officials take direction from and are answerable directly to elected officials. What is less clear is the extent to which nonelected officials also take direction from and are answerable directly to the people.

Friedrich provided a contrasting answer to this problem and identified two additional ways that accountability-responsibility mechanisms work for unelected officials in democratic governments. Friedrich believed that the actions of public administrators cannot be guided as minutely as Finer posits. To Friedrich,
public administrators must be guided through knowledge gained from their professions and also by interpreting public sentiment. Finer restricted the task of mediating public sentiment to elected officials. Scholars continue to disagree: Some indicate that there should be a direct link between bureaucrats and the public (Campbell and Halligan 1992, 194; King and Stivers 1998a and 1998b; Foley 1998; Wamsley 1990, 128; Zanetti 1998) while others disagree (Hyman 1950, 6; Kernaghan and Langford 1990, 167; Lowi 1993 and 1995; Rose 1987, 215-29). Others critique accountability through profession, with perhaps the strongest position taken by Barzelay (1992) who indicates that at the time when professional knowledge was just becoming essential in government, it was reasonable to equate professional standards with citizens’ collective needs and requirements. The problem, however, now is that “[g]overnment often fails to produce desired results . . . when each professional community in government is certain that its standards define the public interest” (p. 119).

The importance of the Friedrich-Finer debate is still relevant, as the mechanisms they defined for the accountability-responsibility relationship of elected and nonelected public officials continue to play an important role for contemporary scholars who examine this relationship. Further, Cooper (1998, 133), in discussing approaches to maintaining organizational conduct in the public administration setting, indicates that “... the debate between [Friedrich and Finer] is very much alive today among practitioners and scholars.”

OTHER SOURCES OF RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Scholars since Friedrich and Finer have continued to identify ways that responsibility-accountability occur in democratic governments. At times they have built directly upon Friedrich and Finer, and in some cases they have identified other responsibility-accountability methods. These include hierarchical, legal, professional, and political (Dwivedi and Jabra 1988, 5-8; Romzek and Dubnick 1987). The hierarchical mechanism focuses on organizationally imposed rules and sanctions. The legal method focuses on court actions, review of administrative actions by courts, and the imposition of judicially defined sanctions on administrators. The professional mechanism focuses on a deference to expertise and is similar to Friedrich’s emphasis on professional knowledge. Romzek and Dubnick (p. 229) posit a definition of political mechanisms associated with accountability-responsibility that includes potentially the “general public, elected officials, agency heads, agency clientele, other special interest
groups, and future generations." These include components from both Friedrich and Finer. Dwivedi and Jabra (p. 6) present a more restrictive definition of the political that focuses more on elected officials. Other scholars include the general public, but they emphasize more than do Romzek and Dubnick a consideration for the public interest in the accountability-responsibility relationship among public managers, elected officials, and citizens (Wamsley, 1990; Moore and Sparrow 1990, 151-61). These scholars warn against the particularistic interests represented by interest groups that may either directly or through elected officials exercise undue impact on unelected officials' policy decisions or actions (see also Schattschneider 1960, 20-46). Burke (1986) identifies internal and external sources of bureaucratic responsibility that focus heavily on the strands identified by Friedrich and Finer. Burke also includes "pluralistic and participatory approaches" that range from interest group pluralism to direct citizen involvement (pp. 16-18).

Another important feature of accountability and responsibility in most democracies is that of the media. Studies of media-government relations find that the media, in their news gathering and transmitting roles, often view themselves as representing the public, which at times is manifest in a role of exercising social responsibility or serving as a watchdog by searching out corruption and malfeasance and seeking to guard against special interests (Graber 1993, 23-24; McCamy 1939, 247; Nimmo 1964, 35). The media may be a critic of government (Cohen 1963, 33-36), and through focusing on certain issues they can impact the way that citizens evaluate public officials (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993, 176-77; Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 82-97). The media, by focusing attention on an issue, also can impact agenda setting (Cook 1998, 11-13; Cohen 1963, 12-14; Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 54-62). Thus there are several possible sources or mechanisms in addition to those posited by Friedrich and Finer through which the responsibility of public officials can be defined and for which their actions or decisions may be held accountable.

DATA AND METHODS

This study explores the relative importance public administrators place on each of the several sources or mechanisms by examining local government managers in the United States. The manager's task includes bringing scientific management to bear upon solving the problems of local government, implementing the policy choices of local government elected officials, and relating with their governing boards directly as they undertake these tasks (Nalbandian 1991; Svara 1989). These managers thus provide excellent subjects for studying the long-term debate about the
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relationship between elected and career officials in democracies. This study examines the self-reported behavior of nonelected public servants to indicate how the various definitions of accountability and responsibility actually show themselves in practice. While it focuses on these questions, the study will also attempt to measure empirically the varying scholarly perceptions of accountability and responsibility by examining the views of an important group of practicing public managers. Their perceptions may lead to greater understanding of how responsibility and accountability work in relating public administrators to their larger environment.

The data come from a survey of local government managers in the United States. The sample includes 858 persons selected randomly from Who's Who in Local Government Management (International City and County Management Association 1996). Those who were selected include association members who had a title that indicated that they were the top managers in local governments in the United States. They had one of the following possible titles: city manager or administrator; county manager or administrator; village manager or administrator; township manager or administrator; or borough manager or administrator. These officials received a mail questionnaire and follow-up postcard in late 1997, and those who did not respond received a second questionnaire in early 1998. A total of 488 responded, for a response rate of 56.8 percent.

A comparison of returned responses for known characteristics of the sample indicated that women were slightly overrepresented and men were slightly underrepresented among those who returned questionnaires. City and county managers and administrators returned the questionnaire at a slightly greater rate than did town, township, village, or borough managers and administrators. Finally, returns by region indicate that managers in the South, as classified by V.O. Key (1949), returned questionnaires at a slightly lower rate than did those who were not in the South. Thus, for known characteristics of the sample, differences in return rate were not large enough to impact the results appreciably.¹

FINDINGS

In order to examine the relative importance of various mechanisms of accountability and responsibility, the survey requested respondents to indicate the importance of several accountability and responsibility sources—including elected officials, citizens, the profession, the media, and court cases—in different facets of their work. The study did not examine hierarchy since the

¹Women managers totaled 4.8 percent of the original sample and 6.8 percent of those who returned questionnaires. City managers and administrators totaled 65.4 percent of the original sample and 67.7 percent of those who returned questionnaires. County managers and administrators totaled 8.4 percent of the original sample and 8.2 percent of returned questionnaires. Managers and administrators of other jurisdictions included 23.4 percent of the original sample and 26.2 percent of those who returned questionnaires. Managers in the southern United States made up 28.9 percent of the original sample and 27.7 percent of the returned questionnaires.
respondents stand at the apex of the organization and hence are less bound by direction from above than are other employees in local government jurisdictions. For each question, managers were presented with a six-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from very unimportant (coded 1) to very important (coded 6). Thus, the higher the value, the greater the importance of the item to the managers.

Managers were asked to respond to the following: In defining your responsibilities, please indicate the importance of the following: . . . The results, presented in exhibit 1, indicate that in defining responsibilities, local government managers place the greatest emphasis on knowledge from the profession. For those who educate public administrators, this finding is encouraging because it places professional knowledge first (5.42). But those who prefer administrative responsiveness to democratically elected officials may be disturbed that managers rate professional knowledge somewhat higher than the preferences of elective officials and still higher than those of citizens. In defining the way that they approach their position, local government managers rely on professional knowledge even though they depend directly on elected officials for their very survival. The managers rated preferences of elected officials (5.30) and preferences of citizens (5.12) as most important after knowledge from the profession, followed by court cases (4.57), with the media a distant last (3.79). Though the absolute differences between the sources are often small, especially among the top three, given the size of the response group these differences are great enough to indicate the relative importance of each to the managers.

The managers also were asked to respond to two additional items that are more specific in their references than the question in exhibit 1. One question asked: What importance do you place on each of the following when you develop and analyze new policy options? The second question was: What importance do you place on each of the following when you respond to routine matters related to your responsibilities? In each case, the alternatives again ranged from very unimportant (coded 1) to very important (coded 6). The possible responses listed for these questions were the same as the ones included in exhibit 1, except that an additional response, groups most affected by a proposal, was included because the more specific inquiry of these two questions increases the possibility of group action in these situations as compared with the more general inquiry of the previous question. Exhibit 2 presents the results. Local government managers, when then develop and analyze new policy, place the most importance on the preferences of elected officials (5.47) and the reaction of the groups most affected by the proposal (5.15). Following these
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Exhibit 1
Important Factors Local Government Managers Use to Define Responsibilities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean**</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preferences of elected officials</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>.836</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences of citizens</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>.826</td>
<td>485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge from the profession</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>.682</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local media</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court cases</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>.996</td>
<td>486</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents were asked to respond to the following: In defining your responsibilities, please indicate the importance of the following: . . .

**The mean scores in the exhibits are based on responses ranging from very unimportant (1) to very important (6). The mean scores consist of the average score of the entire group of respondents for that item.

Exhibit 2
Importance Local Government Managers Place on Various Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>When Developing and Analyzing New Policy* Mean**</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Routine Matters** Mean**</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preferences of elected officials</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>.653</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>.872</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction of groups most affected</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>.716</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>.911</td>
<td>485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences of citizens</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>.774</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge from the profession</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>.812</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>.842</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local media</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court cases</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>.951</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>485</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents were asked to respond to the following: What importance do you place on the following when you develop and analyze new policy options?

**Respondents were asked to respond to the following: What importance do you place on the following when you respond to routine matters related to your responsibilities?

is knowledge from the profession (5.02) and preferences of citizens (4.97). Court cases and media rank lower (4.74 and 3.60 respectively), just as they do when managers define their more general position responsibilities.

Exhibit 2 also indicates that managers rate each source somewhat lower when they deal with routine matters. Preferences of elected officials still tops the list (5.00). Knowledge from the profession comes next (4.83), outpacing reaction of the groups most affected (4.70). Preferences of citizens (4.30), court cases

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(4.58), and the media (3.31) rate the lowest. The primary difference between managers' responses to the two questions relate to their concern for the reaction of citizens, or the general public, which they rank as a less important factor relative to all others except the media when they consider routine matters as compared to the new policy question in exhibit 2. There are two possible reasons for this finding. Administrators are more concerned with the public reaction to new policy, which at times may be controversial, than with routine matters, which are usually less controversial. Alternatively, managers may turn to the public for reactions to broad policy proposals but rely on their own expertise for managing ongoing, routine matters.

DISCUSSION

These findings indicate that several sources play a part in establishing responsibility and accountability for local government managers. Overall, local government managers indicate some differences in the importance of each source in relation to other sources as the context shifts from a consideration of their general responsibility to contexts that emphasize new policy development or routine matters. The managers do rank knowledge from the profession higher than preferences of elected officials or citizens when they define their general responsibilities. But when they move to the context of developing new policy or even considering routine matters, local government managers rate the preferences of elected officials somewhat higher than professional knowledge. We can conclude from managers' responses that they work in an environment in which multiple sources define responsibility and exercise accountability, including the governing board, their profession, groups most affected by an action, citizens or the general public, and court cases. The managers generally rank the media as least important.

These findings show that local government managers define responsibility and develop methods of accountability in a complex way. The definitions advanced by Friedrich and Finer do not work in practice because separately they define too narrowly the rich and complex accountability-responsibility relationship among public managers, governing boards, and citizens. The direction provided by elected officials to administrators cannot constitute so strong an accountability link as Finer posits because the officials do not often define administrators' responsibilities clearly and comprehensively enough. Administrators must therefore inevitably exercise more discretion than Finer allows. But elected officials must, in a democracy, constitute a key component of the accountability-responsibility relationship with public administrators, and Friedrich places little emphasis on this key link.

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It is thus not a question of either Finer or Friedrich, but a question of how best to blend the factors that they emphasize—the governing board, public sentiment, and professional knowledge—in a way that will produce a workable arrangement for defining responsibility and exercising accountability. The conceptual problem centers on the necessity for administrators to be simultaneously empowered (by the definition of their responsibility, both objectively and subjectively) and constrained (through mechanisms of accountability, which then feed into definitions of responsibility). These contradictory, even paradoxical, concepts make it easy for scholars to divide by emphasizing one or the other (as did Friedrich and Finer) rather than examining how they work together simultaneously to achieve responsiveness from administrative officials in a democratic polity (see also Harmon 1995). Additional components of the accountability-responsibility relationship identified by contemporary scholars—including court action, the media, citizens, and the groups most affected by an issue—can also affect how this relationship plays out among public managers, elected officials, and citizens. Managers tend to emphasize these mechanisms of accountability and responsibility somewhat less than those originally emphasized by Friedrich and Finer. Overall, however, managers identify a combination of internal and external controls as important sources of guidance in their work. This finding provides an empirical basis for the position advanced by Cooper (1998, 163) that “the fully responsible conduct of a public administrator” must derive from a balance between internal and external control. The precise weight assigned to either one or the other at a given time and context may vary, but the need for some combination of both is apparent.

Two findings deserve further comment. The managers gave their lowest rating to the media. This finding is surprising, given the importance of the media in government and the sensitivity of elected officials to the media. A higher rating for this source would be expected. Why did the local government managers respond as they did? In some localities, the media may not devote much attention to local government matters, which would make it a less important consideration than the other factors. Additionally, at least some officials, including both managers and elected officials, regard the local media with disdain. This general attitude may lead them to downgrade the media as a factor. Or, given the importance of other components of the accountability-responsibility relationship, perhaps the media is simply less important than are the other factors.

Although managers rated preferences of citizens or the general public higher than the media when they consider new policy...
or respond to routine matters, they still rated it lower than reactions by the groups most affected by a given situation or policy. This finding runs contrary to the positions of those like Wamsley (1990), Yankelovich (1991), and King and Stivers (1998b) who argue that public officials have a strong obligation both to involve citizens in governance and to take into account and even uphold the general interest. The groups most affected are likely to be organized more effectively and also to care more intensely than the public at large, especially when no systematic attempts have been made to involve the general public in governance. This makes it more likely that the managers and the elected officials may be especially sensitive to more specific interests than to abstract notions of citizens’ preferences or the public interest. This finding certainly supports the traditional view of pluralism in the tension between specific and general political interests, possibly stated most classically by Banfield (1961, 324-41, 349). Perhaps the managers’ greater emphasis on reaction of groups most affected than on preferences of citizens reflects their sensitivity to governing boards. Still, the managers do not neglect the more general public, which may partially mitigate the discomfort one might feel about this finding. It also suggests that this area should be emphasized by those who educate future public managers.

The findings also provide an interesting insight into the relationship of government structure to accountability and responsibility. The shared power that characterizes the federal and state governments of the United States establishes multiple lines for defining responsibility and exercising accountability for unelected officials (see Aberbach 1998). This study shows that responsibility and accountability remain comprehensive even in democratic governments that are not organized by the principles of separation of powers and checks and balances. The managers represented in this study for the most part work in a council-manager form of government, which means that responsibility and accountability as they pertain to elected officials exist in one governing board, not in separate branches of elected legislators and the executive. Even without the additional complexity of separation of powers and checks and balances, these managers indicate that they work within multiple mechanisms for defining responsibility and exercising accountability. This finding also means that accountability and responsibility work in various ways and through complex mechanisms and structures as citizens attempt to form governments that will remain responsive to citizens in democratic polities.
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