research article

The performance of accountability and the treatment of experts by politicians: UK parliamentary select committees during the COVID-19 pandemic

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While recent research on policy making and implementation has shifted analytical attention from formal to informal or voluntary accountability processes, there remains a lack of systematic attention to the individual-level dynamics of accountability. Similarly, existing research has largely overlooked the intra-institutional dynamics of the accountability 'forum' and the diverse and often politicised ways that accountability processes are deployed. Responding to these gaps, this article brings together hitherto separate strands of literature regarding political performance, democratic representation and accountability discourses to examine how politicians enact their accountabilities and the factors that shape their performance, particularly under conditions of heightened politicisation. Empirical evidence is provided by an analysis of legislative committees, specifically the select committees of the UK's national parliament; and it presents the findings of original research that draws on a unique data set of 2,815 questions posed to expert witnesses by select committees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite concerns about the prevalence of populist pressures during heightened politicisation, we show that politicians rarely engaged in politicised blame games or partisan grandstanding, offering a positive rejoinder to concerns about the denigration of experts. Instead, we suggest that politicians regard experts as valuable actors in accountability processes, engaging with their expertise and evidence in relevant ways, even when under political pressure. By understanding the act of accountability as part of the political performance, and expression of what it means to be a political representative, this research offers a fresh analytical perspective on the dynamics of the accountability of experts in policy making.

Political accountability forums such as legislative committees are core components of accountability processes in liberal democracies. These are public sites where unelected yet powerful agents provide evidence and insight, which is scrutinised by politicians whose recommendations can entail significant consequences for governance (Bovens, 2007). This renders them as having great societal relevance as mechanisms for making powerful actors 'give account' outside of election periods; and their effectiveness is indicative of the health of liberal democracy (Warren, 2014). Understanding how politicians perform within political accountability forums is therefore crucial for our wider understanding of their role as stewards of the democratic process, particularly in the context of 'democratic backsliding' (Bauer et al, 2021; Wood et al, 2022). Yet, studies are rare, with extant literature often focusing on the actions of those who *give* account to the forum (for example, Busuioc and Lodge, 2016; Rimkutė, 2020; Overman and Schillemans, 2022; Schillemans, 2022). Moreover, existing research has largely overlooked the intra-institutional dynamics of the forum (for notable exceptions, see: Maricut-Akbik, 2021; Akbik, 2022; Coen and Katsaitis, 2022; Eriksen and Katsaitis, 2023); and the diverse and often politicised ways that accountability processes are deployed, with account-holders using them to claim credit, shift blame and grandstand.

Responding to this gap, we examine how politicians enact their account-holding responsibilities, and the factors shaping their performance in the accountability forum. To do so, we draw on a burgeoning body of scholarship that comprises an epistemological turn towards examining how politicians construct, enact and navigate their roles (Crewe, 2015; 2021; Caramani, 2017; Geddes, 2020; Bertsou and Caramani, 2022; Mannevuo et al, 2022). Drawing on this, we conceptualise political accountability forums as sites where elected politicians make diverse claims as democratic representatives (Geddes, 2021), and that in doing so they appeal (knowingly or not) to diverse ideas of what it means to be a political representative (Saward, 2006). Moreover, when conducting inquiries into matters of great political significance, we theorise that politicians will discursively frame their interventions by appealing to competing conceptions of political representation (Saward, 2006). Indeed, in an age of alleged 'democratic backsliding', politicians may believe that appealing to alternative ideas of representation will enable them to perform their representative role more effectively (Caramani, 2017).

To bring these strands together, the article poses the following question: what factors influence politicians' performance of democratic representation in political accountability forums? To answer it, we build on the research we have already described to conceptualise accountability forums as sites of the discursive performance of political representation, and operationalise conceptual work on competing forms of representation (Caramani, 2017) to systematically map how politicians enact their account-holding responsibilities. The article's empirical foundation is a unique data set of 2,815 questions posed to 126 witnesses between May 2020 and July 2021, as part of 19 legislative (select) committee inquiries into the implications of COVID-19 in the UK, conducted as the pandemic unfolded. This context is particularly pertinent for answering our research question, given the almost exclusive focus of the UK government on the pandemic between 2020–21, and its domination of news media coverage, a condition defined by Wood and Flinders (2014: 152) as 'societal politicisation'.

Building on research that suggests elected politicians' accountability performances are shaped by their beliefs about their role as representatives (for example,

Caramani, 2017; Geddes, 2021), our analysis shows how the performance of democratic representation is mediated by formal institutional structures and informal institutional norms, findings that add nuance to extant studies highlighting the cohesiveness of select committees (for example, Benton and Russell, 2013; Fisher, 2015; Russell and Gover, 2017; Russell and Cowley, 2018). At the same time, our analysis shows that account-givers who appear before select committees are rarely drawn into politicised blame games or subject to partisan grandstanding; offering a positive rejoinder to broader concerns about the denigration of experts by elected politicians (for example, Marien and Werner 2019; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Bertsou and Caramani, 2022) during periods of heightened political pressure (Koliba et al, 2011; Paton, 2021; Smith et al, 2024). These findings are pertinent in the context of the UK, which is typically regarded an exemplar of adversarial majoritarianism (notably Lijphart, 2012) and has been seen as increasingly subject to divisive populist discourses and pressures (for example, Flinders, 2020; Ward and Ward, 2022).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section locates our study within existing scholarship regarding the political performance, democratic representation and accountability discourses. The subsequent section builds on this, drawing on research in the field of legislative studies to generate testable research hypotheses. Next, we detail our research design, before setting out the study's findings, including the results of a multinomial logistic regression analysis. We conclude by setting out the wider implications of these findings for our understanding of the interplay between beliefs about representation and the enactment of accountability, issues that are of significance in countries worldwide where the denigration of expertise and pluralistic openness in policy-making challenges their liberal democratic foundations.

Democratic representation and the performance of accountability

Recent research has begun to shift analytical attention from formal to informal or voluntary accountability processes, and from the level of the organisation to the individual (Li et al, 2024). Nonetheless, while there is a recognition that 'it is imperative to study accountability at the actor level in order to assess its effects on decisions and behaviours in public administration' (Overman and Schillemans, 2022: 12), little attention has been given to the construction and interpretation of account-*holding*. Our study responds to this gap, building on insights from the field of legislative studies, where there is a growing literature that regards accountability as a part of democratic performance by elected politicians (Rai, 2010; 2015; Crewe, 2015; 2021; Geddes, 2020). Here the work of Rai has been crucial in drawing attention to how performance provides politicians with opportunities to 'communicate to an audience meaning-making related to state institutions, policies and discourses'; and, in turn, how the 'performativity' of parliamentary proceedings 'allows us to make judgements about the authenticity, legitimacy and liminality of both political claim-making and claim-makers' (Rai, 2015: 1180, 1194). Together, these studies highlight the ambiguities of the representative role and how politicians in legislative arenas are required to wear multiple 'hats' (Geddes, 2021), simultaneously acting as representatives of their constituents, agents of their party, independent actors seeking to protect the public good, and representatives of their country. These studies also interrogate the 'connection between descriptive and substantive representation' that defines political

accountability (Miller, 2023: 534), examining how representative dimensions such as gender, class or caste are interpreted and performed by MPs when holding government to account (Spary, 2010; Rai, 2015; Miller, 2023).

Against this backdrop, the enactment of accountability should be seen as offering elected politicians the opportunity to navigate between their manifold (and sometimes competing) roles, enabling them to signal their commitment to particular causes or constituencies, and to demonstrate their democratic or representative values (Akbik and Diessner, 2025). Building on Saward's (2006) notion of the 'representative claim', which conceptualises democratic representation as dynamic, relational and subjective, we can therefore think of political accountability as more than *just* a formal mechanism to enable political principals to control their agents and contain the losses associated with the 'chain of delegation' (Strøm, 2000). Instead, if we understand democratic representation as something that is performed by representatives who 'make claims about themselves and their constituents and the links between the two' (Saward, 2006: 302), we should in turn regard the act of account-holding as the enactment of a 'representative claim' about the issues that matter to their key constituencies and therefore demand explanation (Wood et al, 2022). More broadly, an approach that regards the performance of accountability as the enactment of democratic values connects with wider arguments about administrative practices as guardrails of democracy (Wagenaar, 2004; Bertelli, 2021). As Wagenaar notes, 'administrators' actions express the nature of the public body that, given the possibilities and constraints of our time, both they and our society at large aspire to' (2004: 652). Accordingly, if we regard elected politicians as administrators of democracy, the way they enact account-holding tells us something vital about how our democracies are 'administered'; and the discourse through which account-holding is enacted therefore reveals their assumptions about the role of accountability as an expression of democratic values.

Existing studies examine how politicians hold executives to account in a principal–agent relationship (Akbik, 2022; Akbik and Diessner, 2025) or how they hold other key actors accountable, including independent agencies (Eriksen and Katsaidis, 2023), mapping parliamentary discourse to encompass the ways in which these activities are performed. We complement these approaches by focusing on a key aspect of accountability performance: how politicians engage with experts and expert evidence during periods of heightened political pressure. Politicians are constantly subject to 'pressure politics' (Schattschneider, 1948). Their ultimate accountability to the electorate means that interest groups and lobbyists can shape their decisions; and that political decisions do not simply reflect 'the evidence' (Majone, 1989; Boswell, 2009). This reality poses a crucial dilemma and a variability in how politicians *use* and are *seen to use* expertise and expert evidence in accountability processes (Boswell, 2009). Moreover, periods when such political pressures intensify – a process Wood and Flinders (2014: 152) term 'societal politicisation' – have been shown to affect interest group access to accountability forums (Willems, 2020). Thus, the use of expertise within accountability forums is far from a neutral exercise in information processing (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984; Akbik and Diessner, 2025). Instead, politicians wear multiple 'hats' when assessing evidence and consulting expert opinion within legislative forums. They represent their constituents and political parties, carry out administrative roles, and respond to media and other political pressures and agendas (Geddes, 2020).

Together, these strands of scholarship provide theoretical reasons to anticipate that such pressures will affect how elected politicians act in the accountability forum when

engaging with experts; with attendant implications for the quality of accountability processes, as well as the effective incorporation of expert evidence within policy responses (Pearce, 2020). Recognising this, our research systematically maps how experts providing evidence to legislative accountability forums are performatively treated by politicians. To do so, we draw on recent conceptual innovations that highlight technocratic and populist forms of representation as challenges to pluralist forms of representation within party democracy (Bickerton and Accetti, 2017; 2021; Caramani, 2017; Rockman, 2019; Forster and Heinzel, 2021; Fernandez-Vazquez et al, 2023), and use 'populism', 'technocracy' and 'pluralism' as umbrella concepts to capture, in relatively simple yet conceptually systematic terms, politicians' performative treatment of expert evidence. In broad terms, technocracy considers the best form of representation to rest on a rational interpretation of the desired policy direction, based on expert evidence, with experts treated with deference (see also Esmark, 2017; Fischer, 2000). Pluralism views experts as one potentially useful set of actors among many, their views considered in relation to the ideas of others within and beyond the policy domain (Manin, 1997). There are similarities between technocracy and pluralism, but in pluralist politics 'compromise is sought', whereas in technocratic politics experts are entrusted to do 'what is good for all' (Caramani, 2017: 60). There is also a degree of commonality between technocracy and populism, in that both are 'antipolitical' and rest on a conception of a 'unitary, general, common interest' (Caramani, 2017: 60; see also Giovannini and Wood, 2022). However, in stark contrast to technocracy (and pluralism), populism views experts as nefarious actors (Mudde, 2004). For populists, politics is about responsiveness to the 'will of the people', with experts regarded as lacking legitimacy because 'they are not like us' and stand in opposition to 'the people' (Caramani, 2017: 60–4).

Returning to the performance of accountability, these three concepts provide a useful way of understanding how politicians approach their roles within accountability forums, particularly in terms of how they value the experts' contributions, which assumes increasing importance against a wider backdrop of growing populist pressures on public bureaucracies (see Wood et al, 2022). A pluralist approach seeks to balance the need to account for evidence and expert opinion with wider political concerns in an iterative learning process. By contrast, a technocratic approach is essentially depoliticised, assuming 'solutions to complex (political) problems waiting to be discovered if we could only get the right experts in front of the right computer crunching the right data at the right time' (Blunkett and Flinders, 2021). In accountability processes, a technocratic viewpoint hopes that accurate data and expert evidence can be used to adjust institutional outputs with minimal political considerations. A populist approach rejects expertise and seeks to impose the 'will of the people', an approach that has been termed 'hyper-politicized' (Nelson and Gibson, 2019). Concerns about populist accountability discourses have been picked up by several scholars, who have highlighted their potential to undermine the good faith assumptions that underpin effective accountability processes, destabilising how account-holders understand their respective roles and reputational domains (Batory and Svensson, 2019; Wood et al, 2022; Bauer, 2024).

Drawing on these insights, we posit that technocratic, pluralist and populist accountability discourses can be conceptualised on a spectrum from *depoliticised* (technocracy) to *politicised* (populist), as depicted in Figure 1.[1] Pluralist discourse sits between the two, carrying both politicising and depoliticising elements. The

Figure 1: Spectrum of democratic discourses

Depoliticised ←—————————————————————→ Politicised

| Technocratic | Pluralist | Populist |
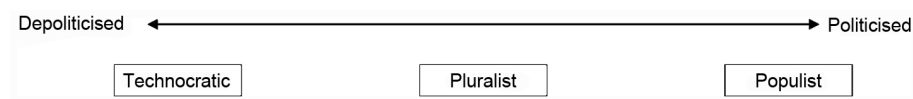
prevalence of one discourse over another may signal important trends in the quality of accountability processes, and hence democracy more generally. A predominantly technocratic discourse may overly privilege expert evidence, neglecting important political questions and blindsiding account-holders to value conflicts and injustices. A populist discourse on the other hand indicates a high level of distrust in political accountability 'as usual'; and a growing preference for a 'strong leader' and a more punitive, blame-oriented approach (Flinders et al, 2024). A pluralist approach seeks inclusion of a wide range of evidence and a learning-oriented approach, although such an approach is not without its own blind spots, not least incrementalist assumptions rooted in existing democratic institutions. In this study we use these three concepts to systematically chart the diversity of accountability discourses; and, having done so, to identify the relevant underlying individual-level factors that shape elected politicians' treatment of experts in accountability forums.

The performance of account-holding in parliamentary select committees

To generate concrete theoretical expectations and hypotheses about variations in these discourses, we focus on the legislative (select) committees of the UK's Westminster parliament. Select committees have established themselves as important actors in the legislative process (Matthews, 2020), providing a 'dramatic' political arena that attracts extensive media coverage (Gaines et al, 2019; Geddes, 2020), with their inquiries' recommendations influencing government in multiple ways (Russell and Cowley, 2016; Geddes, 2020; 2021). Indeed, extant scholarship has offered important insights regarding the different imperatives or values attached to seemingly quotidian legislative activities. In particular, Geddes's ethnographic research on how select committees perform scrutiny finds that 'committees are a site for a diverse range of ideas and interpretations that push and pull committees in different directions' (Geddes, 2020: 38). More generally, select committees are a central point of scientific engagement with policy making, with hearings providing a site of accountability where expert 'witnesses' present evidence and are questioned by politicians. Select committees have hence been described as important 'crowdsourcers' of scientific evidence (LSE GV314 Group, 2020), and the significance of science-led committee recommendations has been demonstrated by inquiries including an Environment Audit Committee report on microplastics that contributed to UK legislation banning microbeads (Honour, 2018). Select committees are also key sites for public engagement with scientific expertise (for example, Leston-Bandeira, 2016), with members of the public often involved in inquiries as experts with 'lived experience' (Matthews, 2023).

As this suggests, examining the enactment of account-holding within select committees will furnish us with key insights regarding how politicians understand and interpret their role as 'administrators of democracy'. Extant scholarship also offers clues about the individual-level factors that might shape this, enabling us to generate testable hypotheses. Several studies have considered how select committees use expertise in

inquiries, drawing attention to the considerations that affect invitations to appear before select committees, such as the political utility of certain types of witnesses and the extent their expertise will advance the committee's broader objectives (for example, Geddes, 2018; 2020; 2021; Evans, 2019; Beswick and Elstub, 2019; LSE GV314 Group, 2020; Bochel and Berthier, 2021; Ban et al, 2022; Coil et al, 2024). Some committees have conducted oral hearings with high-profile external actors as a very public way of 'grilling' those perceived as responsible for a crisis. Examples include a Treasury Committee hearing with chairs of the four biggest banks during the 2007–08 global financial crisis (Rombach, 2018) and similar hearings with chairs of water utility companies (Gill et al, 2024). Drawing on these studies, we therefore hypothesise that account-holders' discourses will reflect the position of the account-giver and the nature of their accountability obligations. Specifically, we expect that 'internal' (formal/obliged) account-givers such as public officials will be subject to lines of questioning squarely focused on the performance of their organisation rather than including wider political issues for which they are not responsible, whereas 'external' (informal/voluntary) account-givers such as academics or professional bodies will be asked about their perspectives on government policy and performance. At the far end of the de/politicisation spectrum, we expect the use of populist rhetoric against elite actors external to government (for example, multinational corporations), as this represents one of the few ways that such actors can be held publicly accountable.

- H1: The odds of being asked a more politicised question than a more depoliticised question will be higher for account-givers external to government than for account-givers internal to government.

Studies have also examined whether committee composition affects the conduct of inquiries. A key insight relates to the cohesiveness of select committees and their tendency to set aside party political differences and act in 'committee mode' (for example, Benton and Russell, 2013; Fisher, 2015; Russell and Gover, 2017; Russell and Cowley, 2018; Matthews, 2020). Indeed, and contra the Westminster's reputation as an archetype of adversarial majoritarianism (notably Lijphart, 2012), the stature of select committees has been forged on their 'lauded tradition of avoiding the adversarialism often seen on the floor of the Commons' (Fisher, 2015: 421), which is underpinned by the norms of collegiality and consensus, and reinforced through 'behavioural socialisation' (Rush and Giddings, 2011: 135). The few studies that have identified evidence of partisanship have made clear its limited magnitude (for example, Matthews, 2020). Building on these insights, we expect that broadly similar lines of questioning will be pursued by committee members from government and opposition parties, as the reputation of the committee as a whole overrides partisan considerations. Questions could reflect depoliticised or politicised discourses, but our broad expectation is for little variation along party political lines.

- H2: The odds of asking a more politicised as opposed to a more depoliticised question will be the same for government-affiliated and for opposition-affiliated committee members.

However, while select committees rarely divide on party lines, evidence suggests that chairs are assuming greater public prominence relative to ordinary members, and are

adopting an increasingly robust approach to their account-holding responsibilities (for example, Fisher, 2015; Kelso, 2016; Crewe and Sarra, 2019; Gaines et al, 2019). This has been attributed to institutional reforms such as the direct election of chairs by the House, which 'bolstered the prestige of the roles and burnished their importance' (Fisher, 2015: 422); with chairs 'representing the focal point of the committee' to a range of actors, including the media (Crewe and Sarra, 2019: 846). Indeed, it is increasingly common for chairs to be senior parliamentarians with frontbench experience. Drawing on these studies, we therefore hypothesise that questions will vary between chairs and members. More specifically, we expect that chairs will seek to assert their authority by pursuing lines of questioning focusing on the performance of the account-giver or their organisation (that is, technocratic), demanding precise and detailed answers. Existing research offers indicative evidence in support of this expectation, with chairs having an important role in shaping the subject focus of inquiries, prioritising witnesses with operational knowledge on policy issues relevant to their own constituents (Gill et al, 2024). In contrast, we expect that lines of questioning pursued by ordinary members will be diverse and more likely to apportion blame, reflecting the manifold ways they interpret their role.

- • H3: The odds of asking a more politicised as opposed to a more depoliticised question will be higher for a committee member than for a committee chair.

Overall, this literature provides several important cues regarding how the performative style of account-holding may vary, suggesting its enactment will be affected by institutional dynamics such as the role and position of the member within the wider committee, as well as the nature of the witness and their perceived status as experts on the issues under discussion. It also draws attention to how hearings are carefully choreographed to enable committees to realise a range of ambitions, and how the selection and interrogation of witnesses provide an important opportunity for members to demonstrate their commitment to certain issues via the act of account-holding. The next section details our research design, explaining how we constructed the data set; and how we operationalised the independent variable of accountability discourse and three dependent variables set out earlier.

Research design

Our research adopted a two-stage design. First, we undertook a frequency analysis to chart how select committee members enacted account-holding by applying the technocratic, pluralist and populist accountability discourses already detailed (question scope). Second, having done so, we undertook a regression analysis to examine the individual-level factors that affect the dynamics of the performance (H1: nature of expert, H2: partisan affiliation; H3: committee role). To situate our analysis, we examined the questions put to non-elected expert witnesses by select committee members during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period of intense media and public interest and challenges to evidence and expertise concerning the virus (Gilbert et al, 2021). Select committees assumed particular prominence as a point of scientific engagement with policy making during the pandemic, and incorporation of evidence into 'deliberative accountability' processes (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2022). In the pandemic's early stages, the UK government's response was heavily informed by experts in the Scientific Advisory Group for

Emergencies (SAGE) and New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG). Yet both SAGE and NERVTAG produced advice about social distancing and mask wearing that was contested even within the scientific community.[2] Moreover, with the pandemic's rapid development, the severity and unpredictability of the virus, and the widespread social and economic consequences of social distancing measures, it was vital for relevant evidence to be scrutinised in detail. This context provided select committees with a important accountability role, able to call evidence at short notice and publicly scrutinise experts from a range of areas in detail. Such pressures were rendered more acute by the weight of media and public opinion, as well as the wider backdrop of misinformation and conspiracy theories (Eberl et al, 2021), which introduced further dilemmas for politicians in terms of which sources of evidence and expertise to trust (Weinberg, 2022). These dynamics generated a heightened environment of 'pressure politics', which, as we theorised earlier, incentivises politicians to strategically perform diverse approaches to their representative role.

As the pandemic touched upon all aspects of social and economic life, numerous inquiries were conducted by multiple committees during this period, focusing on issues as diverse as the impact on food supply chains and the educational inequities stemming from school closures. To narrow down the field of analysis, we focused specifically on inquiries examining health policy aspects of the pandemic, on the basis that the high-pressure immediacy of the environment of these inquiries constitutes a fertile ground for examining the treatment of experts. This resulted in a data set of 2,815 questions posed to 126 witnesses, covering 36 evidence sessions, across 19 inquiries held by 10 select committees between May 2020 and July 2021.

Questions were extracted from the verbatim transcripts produced after each evidence session and published on the UK Parliament website,[3] and coded in accordance with the independent variable and three dependent variables already given. First, we coded each question in terms of its underlying accountability discourse, that is, whether it was 'technocratic', 'pluralist' or 'populist' in scope, drawing directly on scholarship delineating the key characteristics of each of these discourses (notably Bickerton and Accetti, 2017; 2021; Caramani, 2017; Rockman, 2019; Forster and Heinzel, 2021; Fernandez-Vazquez et al, 2023). Second, informed by scholarship that has systematically differentiated between various types of witnesses (notably Geddes, 2018; Beswick and Elstub, 2019), we coded each witness in terms of their relationship to the select committee, differentiating between experts internal to government (that is, formal/obliged) and experts external to government (that is, informal/voluntary). This information was extracted from the list of witnesses that accompanies each transcript, which provides factual information about a witness's role and/or professional affiliation. Third, we coded each question in terms of whether the questioner was from a government or non-government party (partisan affiliation); and fourth, whether they were a member or the chair (committee role). Again, information about select committee members was extracted from the transcript. Further information about our classificatory schema can be found in the article Appendix. By utilising publicly available committee transcripts, our study provides a replicable and accessible methodological approach, which is relatively low cost and reduces the challenges associated with securing access to elite institutions. The potential richness of such data has begun to be recognised, and has been deployed in a handful of studies examining legislative committee behaviour (for example, Matthews, 2020; Maricut-Akbik, 2021; Ban et al, 2022; Coen and Katsaitis, 2022; Eriksen and Katsaitis, 2023)

The given specifications were used in the project codebook. To develop the reliability of the codebook, we conducted several calibration exercises with pilot transcripts, with four separate coders (the authors and two research assistants). We used the Krippendorff's Alpha test to determine the consistency of coding across all four coders. Krippendorff's was chosen as a tough test, because it determines the likelihood of non-random agreement among all coders for any given coding decision using a coding framework. For the final calibration exercise, the Krippendorff's Alpha score was .719, indicating high levels of inter-coder reliability. Following these calibration exercises, the two research assistants coded the sample of 36 transcripts, with each allocated half of the sample. To check inter-coder reliability, a random sample of four of these transcripts were allocated to both research assistants without their knowledge. For this 10 per cent sample, the Krippendorff's Alpha score was .705, which again indicated high levels of inter-coder reliability.

Empirical analysis

The first step to building our analytical model was to undertake a frequency analysis to map the distribution of questions in terms of our dependent variable (question scope: that is, democratic accountability discourse), and our three independent variables (expert type, partisan affiliation, committee role). Table 1 charts this distribution.

In light of scholarship concerning the impact of populist spillovers on bureaucratic performance, we expected that experts external to government would be subject to populist questions (Peters and Pierre, 2019; Wood et al, 2022; Bauer, 2024). However, despite our initial expectations, the frequency analysis showed that populist questions comprised a tiny sample (29 of 2,815 questions); and that 19 of the 29 populist questions posed were directed at former Chief Adviser to the Prime Minister, Dominic Cummings, a select committee witness *internal* to government. This was an interesting and unexpected finding. Despite hearings being held at the height of the pandemic, there was little evidence to suggest that the experts in our data set were subject to

Table 1: Frequency analysis of full data set

		Frequency (n)	Percentage
Question scope	Technocratic	1,211	43.0
	Pluralist	1,575	56.0
	Populist	29	1.0
	Total	2,815	100.0
Expert type	Internal	1,597	56.7
	External	1,218	43.3
	Total	2,815	100.0
Questioner's political affiliation	Government	1,443	51.3
	Opposition	1,372	48.7
	Total	2,815	100.0
Questioner's committee role	Chair	781	27.7
	Member	2,034	72.3
	Total	2,815	100.0

highly politicised populist discourse. Indeed, even Dominic Cummings was not subject to significant populist pressure: only 19 of the 292 questions he was asked were populist, during an extensive joint hearing with the Health and Social Care Committee and Science and Technology Committee. Because of the low frequency and disproportionate concentration on one individual, we decided to exclude populist questions from further analysis. Table 2 charts this updated distribution.

Having mapped the prevalence of technocratic, pluralist and populist accountability discourses, the second step was to *explain* the prevalence of one accountability discourse over another. As populist discourses were not prevalent in our data set, we excluded them from this explanatory stage. Instead, we sought to hypothesise the likelihood of pluralist or technocratic discourses. The frequency analysis shows that our data set includes similar proportions of 'technocratic' and 'pluralist' questions, posed to roughly similar proportions of 'internal' and 'external' witnesses, by similar numbers of select committee members from 'government' and 'opposition' parties. The data set also shows that select committee chairs played an active role in proceedings, asking relatively more questions than an ordinary member. The next stage of the analysis is therefore to explain the patterns of questioning, adjusting the initial hypotheses as follows:

- H1: The odds of being asked a pluralist rather than a technocratic question will be higher for account–givers external to government than for account–givers internal to government.
- H2: The odds of asking a pluralist as opposed to a technocratic question will be the same for government–affiliated and for opposition–affiliated committee members.
- H3: The odds of asking a pluralist as opposed to a technocratic question will be higher for a committee member than for a committee chair.

To test these hypotheses, we built an analytical model appropriate to the data type and structure. All of our variables are categorical and binary:

Table 2: Frequency analysis of data set excluding populist questions

		Frequency (n)	Percentage
Question scope	Technocratic	1,211	43.5
	Pluralist	1,575	56.5
	Total	2,786	100.0
Expert type	Internal	1,568	56.3
	External	1,218	43.7
	Total	2,786	100.0
Questioner's political affiliation	Government	1,423	51.1
	Opposition	1,363	48.9
	Total	2,786	100.0
Questioner's committee role	Chair	775	27.8
	Member	2,011	72.2
	Total	2,786	100.0

- Question type (dependent variable): 0 = technocratic, 1 = pluralist.
- Expert type (independent variable 1): 0 = internal, 1 = external.
- Questioner affiliation (independent variable 2): 0 = government, 1 = opposition.
- Questioner role (independent variable 3): 0 = chair, 1 = member.

Our data is also hierarchical and nested, with no overlap within/between levels. Questions were asked in hearings, which take place in inquiries, which were held by committees. Drawing on the scholarship, already described, concerning how select committees conduct inquiries, there are solid theoretical reasons to expect these levels to affect patterns of questioning:

- Questions are likely to cluster within hearings. Select committees typically hold multiple hearings for each inquiry, and each hearing typically brings together expert witnesses with similar types of expertise and experience. The pattern of questioning within a hearing is therefore likely to be affected by this.
- Hearings are likely to cluster within inquiries. Select committees fulfil a number of different tasks. Inquiries can be information-gathering exercises, intended to shine a light on an issue or develop fresh policy ideas. They can also be used to directly hold the government to account or offer criticism of government policy. While overlap is inevitable, the overarching purpose of the inquiry will shape decisions around witnesses invited to hearings.
- Inquiries are likely to cluster within committees. While multiple committees may examine the same issue, there will be variation in the significance or priority accorded, depending on the individual committee's remit. This is likely to affect the overall direction or purpose of the inquiry, which will in turn shape the structure of the hearings.

We treat all of our independent variables as level 1 variables. An initial frequency analysis confirms these expectations to show there is a non-standard distribution of questions according to the three levels of hearing, inquiry and committee (chi square tests for all $p = <.001$).

As our data is categorical and variables are binary, we built a generalised linear mixed model and conducted a binary logistic regression. Our reference category for the dependent variable is 'pluralist', so the model generates the log odds ratio of a question being pluralist as opposed to technocratic. Our model also includes an intercept for each of the three levels. Following best practice (in particular, Sommet and Morselli, 2017), we built this model stepwise. Space precludes a full presentation of the results of each step, but in summary we proceeded as follows.

First, we ran a standard binomial logistic regression model including all of our independent variables to provide a benchmark against which to assess variation in model fit. The only statistically significant factor with a strong effect in this model was expert classification (IV [independent variable] 1). Holding all else constant, the odds of a question falling into the pluralist category are 15.6 times greater when the expert was an external expert. IV 3 also had a statistically significant, but small effect.

Second, to estimate the effects of nestedness on the dependent variables, and therefore whether it is worth running multilevel analysis, we tested for intra-class

correlation (ICC) by running three empty generalised linear mixed models with no variables, just levels. The ICC between the units at our levels suggest that 42.0 per cent of variance in question scope is due to between-hearing differences, 39.7 per cent of variance in question scope is due to between-inquiry differences, and 22.4 per cent of variance in question scope is due to between-committee differences. These ICCs showed sufficient clustering to run a multilevel analysis to determine the effect of the hierarchical data structure on the outcome variables.

Third, we ran a series of three intermediate models for all level 1 independent variables, with each model including a random intercept for one of our data levels. As shown in Table 3, in each model, all level 1 independent variables are statistically significant ($p = <.001$). Each model therefore offers an improvement on the standard binomial logistic regression model, which did not take account of levels. In other words, accounting for the clustering of the data improves the statistical significance of the relationship between the independent variable and the target variable, that is, the likelihood of a question falling into the pluralist question category. In terms of the relationships between the variables, all three models show similar relationships between the independent variables and target variable, in a similar direction. Expert classification (IV 1) consistently exerts the strongest effect on the likelihood of a question falling into the pluralist category: that in any single hearing, single inquiry or single committee an expert subject to pluralist questioning is likely to be an external expert. The likelihood of a question being pluralist is also higher when the committee member is opposition-affiliated rather than government-affiliated (IV 2), or is an ordinary member of the committee rather than the chair (IV 3). However, the likelihood ratios are significantly lower for IV 2 and IV 3. Because of the overall good fit of the model, and the similar direction of the relationships between variables, we do not explore the impact of introducing random slopes into our modelling.

In terms of the overall fit of the models, we can compare the -2 Log Likelihood of each model. A comparatively lower -2 Log Likelihood means an improved overall model fit to the data. As Table 4 shows, Model 2 clustering the data by inquiry, comes out as the best performing in terms of overall fit, as measured by the -2 Log Likelihood statistic, with scores for AIC and BIC statistics showing similar results.

Our final model includes random intercepts for all three levels (hearings, inquiries and committees) and an interaction effect between committees and inquiries. We again included all three independent variables. The results are set out in Table 5. As this shows, all three independent variables have a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of a question falling into the pluralist category. One average, across all hearings, inquiries and committees:

- A question posed to an external expert (as opposed to internal expert) is 13.1 times more likely to fall in the pluralist category, holding the MP's political affiliation and position on the committee constant.
- A question asked by an opposition-affiliated MP (as opposed to a government-affiliated MP), is 1.6 times more likely to fall in the pluralist category, holding position on the committee and category of expert constant.
- A question asked by an ordinary committee member (as opposed to the chair) is 1.6 times more likely to fall into the pluralist category, holding questioner affiliation and expert type constant.

Table 3: intermediate models for all level 1 independent variables

		Coefficient	Likelihood of a question falling into the pluralist category
Model 1: random intercept for 'hearing'	Intercept	−2.492*** (.2416)	.083
	Expert type: internal	2.452*** (.2452)	11.611
	Expert type: external	0ᵃ	.
	Questioner's political affiliation: government	.531*** (.1071)	1.701
	Questioner's political affiliation: opposition	0ᵃ***	.
	Questioner's committee role: chair	.412*** (.1142)	1.510
	Questioner's committee role: member	0ᵃ	.
Model 2: random intercept for 'inquiry'	Intercept	−2.208*** (.2332)	.110
	Expert type: internal	2.701*** (.1579)	14.898
	Expert type: external	0ᵃ	.
	Questioner's political affiliation: government	.486*** (.1047)	1.626
	Questioner's political affiliation: opposition	0ᵃ	.
	Questioner's committee role: chair	.454*** (.1118)	1.575
	Questioner's committee role: member	0ᵃ	.
Model 3: random intercept for 'select committee'	Intercept	−2.433*** (.2634)	**.088**
	Expert type: internal	2.595*** (.1338)	**13.397**
	Expert type: external	0ᵃ	.
	Questioner's political affiliation: government	.431*** (.1039)	**1.538**
	Questioner's political affiliation: opposition	0ᵃ	.
	Questioner's committee role: chair	.461*** (.1112)	**1.586**
	Questioner's committee role: member	0ᵃ	.

Notes: ᵃ This coefficient is set to zero because it is redundant.
Standard error (in parentheses).
p <.05.; **p* <.01.; ***p* <.001.

Table 4: −2LL, AIC and BIC scores for Models 1, 2 and 3

Model	−2 Log Likelihood score	Akaike Information Criterion (AIC)	Bayes information Criterion (BIC)
1	13770.7	13774.7	13786.5
2	13565.0	13569.0	13580.9
3	13587.9	13591.9	13603.7

Table 5: The final generalised linear mixed model

		Coefficient	Likelihood of a question falling into the pluralist category
Final model: random intercepts for all three levels (committees, inquiries and hearings), and an interaction effect between committees and inquiries.	Intercept	−2.415*** (.2697)	.089
	Expert type: internal	2.573*** (.1466)	13.109
	Expert type: external	0ᵃ	.
	Questioner's political affiliation: government	.459*** (.1045)	1.583
	Questioner's political affiliation: opposition	0ᵃ	.
	Questioner's committee role: chair	.453*** (.1116)	1.574
	Questioner's committee role: member	0ᵃ	.

Notes: ᵃ This coefficient is set to zero because it is redundant.
Standard error (in parentheses).
*p <.05.; **p <.01.; ***p <.001.

The likelihood ratios are broadly similar both in the direction of the relationship between independent and dependent variables, and the much higher likelihood ratio of expert type in relation to questioner affiliation and position on the committee. For our final model, $-2LL = 13554.1$. This is marginally lower than for the three intermediate models, indicating that including all relevant levels and interaction effects between levels provides a model with superior overall fit to the data.

In terms of our hypotheses, these results indicate the following.

- H1: The odds of being asked a pluralist rather than a technocratic question will be higher for external experts than for internal experts. This hypothesis is *confirmed*.
- H2: The odds of asking a pluralist as opposed to a technocratic question will be the same for government-affiliated and for opposition-affiliated committee members. This hypothesis is *rejected*.
- H3: The odds of asking a pluralist as opposed to a technocratic question will be higher for a committee member than for a committee chair. This hypothesis is *confirmed*.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has sought to examine the treatment of experts by elected politicians in accountability forums, moving towards a broader understanding of accountability relationships as constructed, interpreted and subject to institutional norms. More broadly, it has sought to situate accountability processes within the context of democratic politics by conceptualising account-holding practices as expressions of politicians' beliefs about the purpose of representation and their role as representatives. To examine these dynamics the article developed a series of theoretically informed hypotheses, drawing on scholarship concerning political performance, democratic representation and accountability discourses; and tested these hypotheses by analysing

a unique data set of 2,815 questions posed by select committees members during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite concerns about the denigration of experts in policy making (for example, Marien and Werner 2019; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Bertsou and Caramani, 2022), our findings suggest that elected politicians regard experts as valuable actors in accountability processes, as reflected in their generally respectful and appropriate engagement with their expertise and evidence. In particular, and contra concerns about populist politicians seeking to politicise public administration (for example, Arellano-Gault, 2020; Wood et al, 2022), our analysis shows that populist accountability discourses were largely absent during the period under analysis. Rather than evidencing a 'a tide of "medical populism"' (Lasco, 2020: 1418), this finding dovetails with studies that suggest the pandemic saw a strengthening of trust and engagement with science and expertise (for example, Bromme et al, 2022). This is particularly pertinent in the context of the UK, which has been regarded as subject to populist pressures (for example, Flinders, 2020; Ward and Ward, 2022). Instead, our findings suggest that behaviour of select committees during the pandemic was something of a political bright spot. While the UK government was accused of ignoring the advice of scientific experts, for example in relation to the timings of lockdown and social distancing measures, our data show that select committees systematically engaged with experts, showing interest in their knowledge of organisational processes and decisions, and engaging them in reasoning over wider policy decisions. Indeed, our findings show the technocratic and pluralist lines of questioning, comprising 43.0 per cent and 56.0 per cent of our overall data set respectively.

Drilling down into this data, there are clear patterns to this distribution, much of which accorded with our theoretical expectations. As anticipated, experts internal to government were subject to lines of questioning that focused on the performance of their organisation, whereas external experts were asked more expansive questions that invited them to reflect on the wider policy context. Indeed, the position of the account-giver relative to the accountability forum was the most powerful explanatory factor, with external experts being 13.1 times more likely to be asked a pluralist question than internal experts (H1). Our analysis also suggests that committee chairs tended to enact account-holding in particular ways, and were 1.6 times more likely to ask technocratic questions than ordinary committee members (H3); this finding dovetails with scholarship that has demonstrated an increasing willingness on the part of chairs to assert their authority and engage in focused and robust accountability practices (for example, Fisher, 2015; Kelso, 2016; Crewe and Sarra, 2019; Gaines et al, 2019). Finally, and contra our own expectations (H2), our analysis revealed that patterns of questioning varied among select committee members, with members from government parties being 1.6 times more likely to pose technocratic questions than members from opposition parties. This finding also runs counter to scholarship that emphasised the tendency of members to set aside party political differences and act in 'committee mode' (for example, Russell and Gover, 2017; Russell and Cowley, 2018; Matthews, 2020). It is important that the magnitude of this finding is not overstated, and it should also be noted that while our analysis identifies clear patterns of questioning, it does not seek to offer a normative evaluation of its appropriateness. Indeed, the UK's select committees – like many legislative committees worldwide – fulfil a wide range of functions, which include both the direct scrutiny of government policy and performance as well as the wider consideration of policy problems and

alternatives. Nonetheless, this finding suggests that there may be differences in how members from different political parties approach these manifold tasks.

Our article makes several important contributions to scholarship, in particular the analysis of 'populism' and accountability as performance. First, our evidence of populist discourse is minimal, providing somewhat of a corrective to those who have raised the spectre of populist pressures undermining or subverting democratic accountability relationships (for example, Peters and Pierre, 2019; Wood et al, 2022). What evidence we did find was populist discourse directed towards a prominent internal actor in the Johnson administration: Dominic Cummings. Even then, only a very small number of questions were populist. One implication here may be to reflect on the coding framework itself and its applicability to parliamentary discourse. While our codebook was directly informed by how populism is commonly coded in political science, our focus on written text inevitably ignores differences in tone or inflection that may have led us to recode seemingly more depoliticised comments on paper, as highly politicised (that is, populist). Non-verbal elements are also important in populism conceptualised as a 'political style', and could be included in additions to our codebook (Moffitt, 2016). A second implication may be the need to code for the effect of discursive interactions between committee members and witnesses. Witnesses may respond to more technocratic lines of questioning in a defensive manner, thereby eliciting antagonism from the questioner in their line of inquiry. Witnesses are encouraged by committee clerks to respond to questions in an informative and helpful way, offering to supply further evidence and admitting when they are unsure. Hence, we may only see populist discourse from committee members when they unexpectedly break from this approach or are resistant or rude towards committee members.

Finally, and reflecting back on the implications of this article for the literature on accountability, our attempt to map accountability performance using the threefold conceptual framework, along a 'spectrum' of de/politicised discourses, has implications for future research. We showed that politicians' treatment of experts in accountability forums under conditions of pressure politics tends to cluster around either technically focused questions concerning the internal performance of governing bodies, or attempts to solicit expert views and opinions on the inquiry topic at large. The parliamentary select committee as an accountability forum is performed both as a traditional accountability site for scrutinising governing bodies in a principal–agent mode, and as a forum for gathering opinions and evidence about the policy problem and possible responses. These findings dovetail with existing research that suggests legislative accountability forums operate in diverse 'modes' – police patrol, fire alarm and other approaches (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984; Leidorf–Tidå and Busuioc, 2025). Our study suggests there is some analytical leverage in grouping these approaches around the framework of 'technocratic' and 'pluralist' democratic discourses (although a distinct populist discourse was not identified). The added value of such an approach is in identifying potential spillover effects from other arenas in the political system. Further research could interrogate the role of hybrid 'technopopulist' logics identified in party politics (Lipow and Seyd, 1995; Bickerton and Accetti, 2021) in parliamentary and other accountability forums. Research could also examine links between media and other discursive arenas and select committee inquiries using the politicisation and depoliticisation concepts. Our study reinforces insights from literature on (de)politicisation that highlights how these discursive processes do not really exist along a singular spectrum, but interact in complex and often complementary ways

across discursive sites (Fawcett and Wood, 2017; Kettell and Kerr, 2022). Further research may interrogate the role of external pressure politics, conceived as societal politicisation, in influencing politicisation and depoliticisation processes within the accountability forum. Finally, the context of our study, the COVID-19 pandemic, was purposefully chosen to enable us to understand the pressures under which experts are placed during periods of extreme and acute pressure, which have been seen as 'triggers' of accountability (Koliba et al, 2011). Future research could build on this by focusing on account-holding practices during conditions of mundane normality to understand whether the dynamics identified in this article are business-as-usual or constitute a specific response to politicised conditions.

Notes

[1] The reality of political discourse is, of course, far messier than this. Blunkett and Flinders (2021) diagnose a form of 'Technocratic populist' discourse in a speech by former Conservative minister Michael Gove. We do not discount the prevalence of multiple hybrid discourses in accountability processes, but prioritise our empirical aim of assessing the more general trends.

[2] For example, Independent SAGE, https://www.independentsage.org, last accessed 27 March 2025.

[3] https://www.parliament.uk.

Research ethics

This research did not involve human participants or personal data, and so formal ethics approval was not required, in line with the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Policy.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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