

Power, performance, and the governance of systemic goals:
evidence from national wellbeing framework integration

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Abstract

Performance regimes are critical tools within contemporary governance but face well-documented limitations when goals are complex and power dispersed. We explore how performance regimes might utilize what Joseph Nye called soft power: the ability to attract others and shape their preferences. We develop the Performance Strategy Framework (PSF) which shows how performance regimes can operate through soft power, using attraction and agenda setting, hard power, using financial inducement and coercion, or smart power, combining mechanisms from both. We employ the PSF in a most similar systems comparative analysis of national ‘wellbeing framework’ integration in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, drawing on 35 interviews and a substantial document review. Our findings locate a critical role for soft power mechanisms, particularly set within a smart power strategy, in achieving effective integration. We provide a novel theoretical framework to modernize performance management theory and actionable guidance to design ‘smarter’ performance regimes.

Performance regimes in a governance context

Performance regimes – institutionalized sets of performance indicators and management routines - hold strong appeal in a governance context where goal achievement depends on multi-actor coordination (Van Dooren et al., 2015). Far from their traditional roles in organizational control and regulation, performance regimes now play critical functions in collaborations (Douglas & Ansell, 2021) hybrid partnerships (Ahmad et al., 2020; Rajala et al., 2020)2/10/2025 2:30:00 PM, purpose-oriented networks (Nakashima, 2023) and global governance regimes like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Biermann et al., 2017).

However, new governance contexts make for uncomfortable territory for performance management theory, which has traditionally centered around coercive accountability and incentive power within principal-agent relationships. Scholars have begun to modernize performance management theory, however there remains a noted need for both theoretical advancement (Bonomi Savignon et al., 2021; Kroll, 2022; Moynihan et al., 2011; Steccolini et al., 2020) and practical guidance to help administrators of performance regimes navigate non-hierarchical settings (French & Mollinger-Sahba, 2021; Tenbensen & Burau, 2017). Drawing from the work of political scientist Joseph Nye (1990; 2009), we explore whether performance management's soft power dimension – its ability to attract and convince rather than control and induce – can provide a constructive route forward.

We make two significant. First, we integrate Nye's theory of power into a performance management context to develop the Performance Strategy Framework (PSF). The PSF contributes an expanded theoretical repertoire to better understand the dynamics of performance regimes in practice, particularly in complex and multi-actor settings where soft power holds most conceptual appeal.

Second, we demonstrate the empirical significance of the PSF through a most similar systems comparative analysis of the power strategies employed in the integration of national wellbeing frameworks in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Drawing from 35 semi-structured interviews and a substantial document review, we compare the effectiveness of power strategies using Bouckaert & Halligan's (2007) framework of performance regime integration. Our empirical analysis locates a critical role for soft power in improving performance regime integration, particularly when combined with hard power mechanisms in a smart power strategy.

In this article, we briefly review the literature linking power and performance management, then translate Nye's theory into a performance management context to develop the PSF. We detail our comparative case study design, then explore our findings using the PSF. We finally reflect critically on the article's contribution to theory and practice.

Power and performance management

As public service systems became decentralized and fragmented during the New Public Management era, performance regimes helped governments steer behaviors while preserving managerial autonomy (Steccolini et al., 2020; Van Dooren et al., 2015). However, as the challenges confronting governments have grown more cross-cutting and complex, and governance itself more dependent on autonomous networks, two problems have emerged.

First, performance regimes were typically administered by powerful central authorities capable of enforcing new accountabilities and meting out extrinsic performance incentives (Heinrich & Marschke, 2010; Talbot, 2008). However, in a modern context, performance regimes involve multiple authorities operating with limited authority, overlapping jurisdictions and diverging goals (Choi & Moynihan, 2019; Douglas & Ansell, 2021; French & Mollinger-Sahba, 2021). Second, while performance regimes typically concentrated on intra-organizational outputs, the challenges confronting governance are supra-organizational and systemic, characterized by goal ambiguity and causal complexity (Bovaird, 2014; French & Mollinger-Sahba, 2021; Moynihan et al., 2011). Extrinsic performance incentives encourage subjects to manipulate performance regimes through gaming, cheating or output distortion rather than undertake more risky goal-directed behavior (Bevan & Hood, 2006; Jakobsen et al., 2018).

Tenbensen and Burau (2017, 854) argue, in a modern governance context, the “dilemma for governments is whether (and when) to use sticks, carrots or gentle persuasion, as each of these approaches has a particular mix of benefits and side-effects”. Addressing this dilemma in an international relations context, Nye (1990) argued too much emphasis was afforded to hard power - coercion through force (sticks) and inducement through economic incentives (carrots) – and advocated for soft power – attracting others through appealing to or shaping their preferences.

In attempting to reconcile performance management with its modern governance context, recent scholarship has drawn from what could be called performance management’s soft power dimension. Studies have demonstrated the empirical significance of “soft” mechanisms like persuasion and negotiation in lieu of control (van Erp et al., 2020) and appeals to intrinsic motivation rather than external goals (Moynihan et al., 2020). Other studies have begun to unpick the role which social mechanisms play in non-hierarchical performance management regimes (Choi & Moynihan, 2019; Douglas & Ansell, 2021; Kroll, 2022), and explored how stewardship theory might provide an alternative relational dynamic for constructing performance relationships (French et al., 2021; Torfing & Bentzen, 2020). Other studies have proposed using performance goals to “attract” voluntaristic engagement from others (French & Mollinger-Sahba, 2021) or spur collaborative action by operating as boundary objects (Rajala, 2020).

Nye’s soft power concept orbits recent performance management scholarship, and echoes the discipline’s strategic concern with behavior change (Van Dooren et al., 2015; Virani & van der Wal, 2023), however power has remained an implicit and insinuated element of

performance management theory. Numerous recent studies have noted the need for further theoretical development in polycentric and complex contexts where traditional ‘hard powers’ are known to underperform (Bonomi Savignon et al., 2021; French & Mollinger-Sahba, 2021; Kroll, 2022; Tenbenschel & Burau, 2017). As it did for international relations, an explicit theoretical focus on soft power could help theorists better understand and practitioners better navigate contemporary governance contexts. However, the specific resources and mechanisms of power which Nye proposed were distinctive to his foreign policy context. We therefore pose as our research question: How can soft power mechanisms support the integration of performance regimes in complex multi-actor environments? To address this, we integrate Nye’s theory into the distinctive operational context of performance management.

Theoretical framework

Nye (2005; 2009) described power as a spectrum with four domains based on the degree of voluntarism afforded. Coercion removed a subject’s available choices almost entirely through force or intimidation. Financial inducement, affording somewhat greater agency, involved granting economic incentives in return for compliance. Agenda setting, the first soft power domain, concerned shaping others’ perceptions to generate support for a desired course of action. Finally, attraction involved communicating desirable cultures, values or aspirations which were admired and aspired to by others.

Coercion

For Nye (1990), coercion referred to intimidation and military force. While Performance regimes are not weapons of war (at least in a literal sense), they do routinely make use of coercive power. Performance regimes can function as management control systems,

cascading performance measures through organizational hierarchies as vertical principal-agent performance relationships (Heinrich & Marschke, 2010; Talbot, 2008). Coercive power can be enacted through legislation, with statutory obligations requiring agencies to adopt, collect and report on performance indicators. Regulatory, audit and inspection regimes utilize coercive power by monitoring performance and administering sanctions or reputational damage to underperformers (van Erp et al., 2020).

Financial inducement

Performance regimes also routinely make use of economic incentives. Performance thresholds and targets align external incentives with organizational goals by closely coupling payments, bonuses or other rewards with performance indicators (Talbot, 2008). Performance budgeting systems utilize performance information in goal-setting and reporting to condition access to financial resources (Yu & Willoughby, 2018).

Budget-holders can leverage financial power by attaching conditionalities to funding and investment decisions, creating economic incentives to target performance goals or participate in performance regimes. External service providers can be induced through payment-by-results contracts where payment is conditional on demonstrated achievement of pre-specified impacts (Considine et al., 2020).

Agenda setting

By determining the content and interrelationships of performance goals, indicators, milestones and targets, performance regimes can shape how problems are understood, whose participation is required, and frame how appropriate actions are developed in response. The selection and weighting of performance indicators for instance provides emphasis and urgency to certain areas while deprioritizing others (Biermann et al., 2017).

Performance regimes are often administered by powerful institutions like governments and international organizations who possess significant influence and, therefore, agenda setting power. Such organizations might leverage positions of influence to persuade others to integrate performance regimes. Convening power may be also used to broker new inter-institutional performance routines like learning forums (Wilson et al., 2023) or performance summits (Douglas & Ansell, 2021).

Attraction

French and Mollinger-Sabha (2021) argue performance regimes can attract the behavior of others by expressing shared values and visions in the specification of performance goals and indicators. Value alignment, intrinsic interest and goal salience have been linked with motivating greater use of performance information (Kroll & Vogel, 2014; Moynihan et al., 2020).

Performance regimes might also attract through moral leadership. For example, the UN Sustainable Development Goals hold widespread appeal owing to their cultural significance and the UN's position as a respected moral authority (Biermann et al., 2017). Performance regimes might additionally bring instrumental utility for participants, for instance by helping to secure funding, collect and use data for individual improvement, or develop prestige, reputation or useful networks. Performance regimes demonstrating a desirable culture of learning and improvement might then be more attractive than those which yield external judgment and scrutiny (Jakobsen et al., 2018; Moynihan et al., 2020).

The Performance Strategy Framework

Figure 1. The Performance Strategy Framework (adapted from Nye 2005)

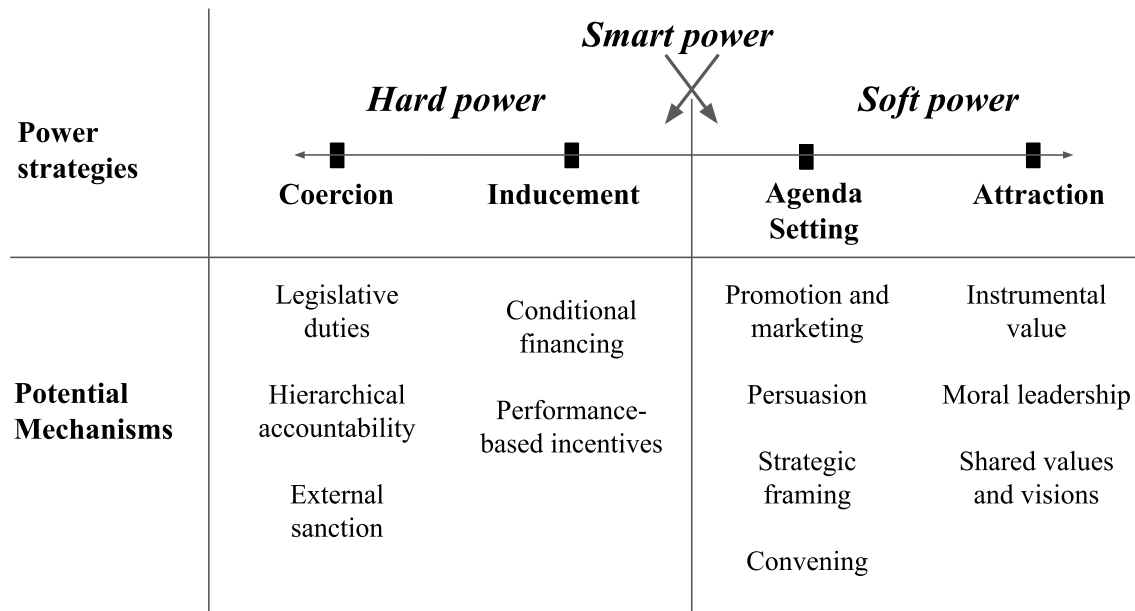


Figure 1 presents the Performance Strategy Framework (PSF) which, drawing from our analysis, shows how performance regimes can utilize a range of potential mechanisms across three distinct power strategies. Hard power regimes preserve a misalignment of goals between administrators and subjects of performance regimes, utilizing coercive institutional structures and financial power to motivate desired behaviors in subjects. This could encompass many of the mechanisms familiar to performance management studies including coercive managerial or statutory obligations, sanctions or incentive-linked performance targets.

In contrast, soft power regimes cultivate the perception of a shared interest amongst performance regime convenors and subjects. This could involve attraction mechanisms to appeal to others, like the shared visions and values embodied by performance regimes, the instrumental value of participation, or by inspiring others through moral leadership. It could also involve using agenda setting mechanisms to actively shape others' preferences through persuasion and negotiation, exercising convening power and networking, or seeking to frame problems through the lens of the performance regime.

Importantly, Nye did not consider soft and hard power strategies mutually exclusive, but referred to their effective combination as smart power, the “ability to combine hard and soft power into successful strategies where they reinforce rather than undercut each other” (Nye, 2017, 10). The third possibility, a smart power strategy, would involve engaging soft and hard power mechanisms so they interact and synergize with one another.

Contribution of the Performance Strategy Framework

Soft power provides a conceptual response to the challenges of goal complexity and dispersed power endemic when tackling systemic goals in governance contexts. Neither attraction nor agenda setting necessitate a powerful “principal” to assign new accountabilities or administer extrinsic incentives, so seem particularly appropriate in non-hierarchical settings. However, lacking strong incentive power, a soft power strategy might lead to lip service, where performance goals are superficially adopted without accompanying behavior change (French & Mollinger-Sahba, 2021), or be crowded out by competing performance accountabilities and more proximal job demands (Choi & Moynihan, 2019; Molenveld et al., 2021).

Smart power regimes might reduce trade-offs associated with soft and hard power mechanisms and respond to a broader range of motivational contexts (van Erp et al., 2020). However, Nye (2005) cautioned the two could undermine one another. Extrinsic incentives through coercion and financial inducement might conflict with the intrinsic motivations targeted by some soft power mechanisms (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Blending soft and hard power mechanisms demands actors to morph between performance-managed ‘agents’ and responsible ‘stewards’, each of which require different reward systems and management approaches (Torfing & Bentzen, 2020).

By harnessing Nye's (1990) theory of power, the PSF delineates between potential mechanisms based on the voluntarism afforded to subjects. While its individual mechanisms are not necessarily novel, their collation into a single framework may support a fuller analysis of performance regime dynamics. However, Emerson (2022) argues good public administration theory not only describes phenomena but explains causal relationships between variables of interest to the field. We therefore seek to test the PSF's explanatory power through a comparative analysis of performance regime integration.

Research approach

We tackle our research question through a comparative case study analysis of three national "wellbeing frameworks": multi-actor performance regimes centered on improving citizen wellbeing. We employ a most similar systems design, wherein our variable of interest, the application of a soft, hard or smart power strategy, is observed across cases as similar to one another as possible with respect to intervening variables (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Our research approach takes advantage of a unique case context: the adoption of different power strategies in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales which share a common cultural and institutional heritage as devolved nations of the UK.

The enactment of power strategies took place in a naturalistic policy environment with electoral cycles, leadership changes and policy crises interrupting integration strategies. For example, the collapse of the power sharing agreement between Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party in January 2017 left Northern Ireland's civil service without political leadership, a functioning National Assembly or Executive, proving a lasting barrier to the integration of its performance regime. We respond by following Bartolini (1993, 163) in

using within-case variation as a “secondary dimension against which theoretical propositions may be tested and elaborated”. We incorporate a substantial longitudinal dimension spanning the six-year period from the end of 2015, by which time all performance regimes had been established, until 2021.

We assessed integration across three stakeholder groups: central government, local governance partnerships and external (commercial or social sector) organizations not directly controlled by government departments. Local governance partnerships include Public Services Boards (PSBs) in Wales, and Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) in Scotland and Northern Ireland. These are multi-stakeholder local governance bodies whose membership includes the local authority, health services, police, and other place-based institutions which hold a duty to set long-term objectives and plan local service delivery in each locality. We compared these groups using Bouckaert and Halligan’s (2007) framework for performance regime integration.

- Adoption¹, how the performance goals and indicators within wellbeing frameworks are formally adopted by implementing organizations (e.g. annual reports, corporate or business plans).
- Incorporation, how adopted performance goals and indicators are embedded within routine (not one-off or ad hoc) management and corporate functions, (e.g. within strategic planning, performance reviews, budgeting and financial allocation, decision making forums, or scrutiny and accountability procedures).
- Use, how performance information is purposefully used within identified performance routines. We exclude passive or compliance-based use (Micheli & Pavlov, 2020),

¹ Bouckaert and Halligan (2007) term this stage “measurement”. We use “adoption” to better represent how, in a multi-actor context, performance goals are internalized through their formal adoption, not merely their measurement

instead seeking evidence of influence on decision making processes and changed behaviors.

Research context: wellbeing framework integration

The 2008 Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress advised governments cease relying on Gross Domestic Product as a proxy indicator for national progress and adopt a broader set of national indicators which represent citizens' wellbeing (Stiglitz, 2019). Many governments have since established national "wellbeing frameworks": multi-stakeholder, outcome-oriented performance regimes which involve tiers of government, arms-length public bodies, and often third sector and commercial organizations (Costanza, 2022; Stiglitz, 2019; Wallace, 2019). As systemic, outcome-oriented performance regimes involving multiple differentiated stakeholder groups, wellbeing frameworks must navigate both goal complexity and dispersed power, providing an ideal setting to explore the analytical potential of the PSF.

Northern Ireland

In 2015 Northern Ireland's wellbeing framework set out 14 (later revised to 12) National Outcomes and 42 (later 49) National Indicators. The government adopted a hard power strategy, cascading direct accountabilities for national outcomes and indicators through the civil service hierarchy and imposing a set of planning and monitoring routines based on Friedman's (2005) Results-based Accountability methodology. Accountability was expected to follow via political oversight and parliamentary scrutiny, however this was prevented by the aforementioned collapse of Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. Performance regime integration was supported by a small central government team and a network of coordinators across the government's nine departments, while Northern Ireland's national statistical office provided technical support and internal scrutiny.

The Local Government (NI) Act 2014 established 11 CPPs with statutory obligations to produce long-term community plans. However, lacking coercive authority, the civil service used soft power mechanisms, including convening and persuasion to pursue integration. The government used financial inducement, applying Results-based Accountability to certain funding schemes, to promote integration amongst external organizations.

Scotland

Scotland's wellbeing framework, the National Performance Framework (NPF), specified 11 National Outcomes and 81 National Indicators in its 2018 revision. Scotland adopted a soft power strategy, with its civil service using moral leadership, persuasion and some convening mechanisms to spur integration. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 required Scottish Ministers to consult on and renew the National Outcomes every five years but gave no formal accountability for their integration.

This Act also gave statutory basis to the country's 32 CPPs and committed these and other public bodies to "have regard" for the National Outcomes in their planning duties. However, this was an agenda setting rather than coercive measure since no guidance, duties or mechanisms were established for enforcement. The NPF was rebranded and promoted as a whole-of-society framework, and its leadership broadened to involve local governments. A small civil service team was created to provide strategic leadership for the NPF inside and outside of government, including a remit to increase integration amongst external organizations.

Wales

Wales' wellbeing framework comprised seven Well-being Goals and 49 Well-being Indicators introduced in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Wales introduced both soft and hard power mechanisms. The 2015 Act created duties for all 44 Welsh public bodies, including the Welsh Government, to incorporate new goal-setting (by developing and publishing a list of Well-being Objectives) and planning (developing and publishing Well-being Plans) routines. The 2015 Act gave statutory basis to 19 PSBs, which also held a duty to prepare Well-being Assessments in their planning processes.

The 2015 Act appointed the national audit agency and the Future Generations Commissioner (FGC), a senior public figure with a dedicated office also established by the 2015 Act, in scrutiny roles. Both scrutinized the integration of all public bodies' performance routines, and uniquely in our case cohort, could inflict reputational damage on those who failed to engage or were held to underperform. The FGC held 'Section 20' statutory review powers to open a public review of any public body (including the Welsh Government) it judged to underperform.

The FGC also provided moral leadership for the 2015 Act and led an Office which provided strategic guidance and used persuasion and convening to promote integration. National government integration was additionally supported by a small team within the Welsh Government.

Empirical approach

We sought to provide a rich, contextualized account of case dynamics consistent with an early stage of theory development (Ashworth et al., 2019; Ridder, 2017). Our approach

involved three stages to surface, elaborate, then corroborate causal links between power mechanisms and integration outcomes.

We captured an initial impression of integration through a targeted document review. We searched publication libraries of devolved governments, parliaments, representative organizations for local government, third sector and commercial organizations, and external scrutiny agencies for progress, review and evaluative documents relating to performance regimes. After screening for relevance, 45 documents were selected, with over half from Wales (detailed in Table A, Supplementary Material). We reviewed documents applying an a priori coding schema based on our nine potential integration outcomes, surfacing initial impressions of integration across stakeholder groups.

We then sought to elaborate causal links through 35 semi-structured interviews with key informants. We purposively selected participants with experience or oversight of power mechanisms, which led to some necessary variation in interview cohorts. For example, our Wales sample skewed toward scrutiny organizations owing to the centrality of these institutions to the performance regime. Interviewees included senior civil servants (9), senior leadership team members (including chief executives) outwith national government (9), and individuals with operational or analysis roles within performance regimes (17). Table 1 summarizes our interviewee cohorts, while Table B within the Supplementary Material provides a more detailed description including interviewees' relevant domains of experience.

Table 1. Interviewee cohorts

Interviewee category	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
National government	6	7	1
Local governance partnerships	1	2	3

External organizations	1	1	0
Scrutiny organizations	2	1	7
Independent analysis organizations	1	1	1
Total	11	12	12

We developed a central topic guide (Appendix A, Supplementary Material) centered on (1) engagement with the performance regime, (2) enactment of power strategies, and (3) perceptions of integration achieved. Since interviewees were only experienced in certain power mechanisms it was necessary to customize this to draw the most relevant information. Appendices B-D in the Supplementary Material show how we achieved this while maintaining a line of questioning focused on our research question. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes to accommodate different levels of engagement with power mechanisms, and were semi-structured, granting interviewees scope to contextualize causal relationships or identify factors which could have been overlooked. Verbatim interview transcripts were analyzed using QSR NVivo 12's relationship classification function, linking powers enacted to integration outcomes suggested.

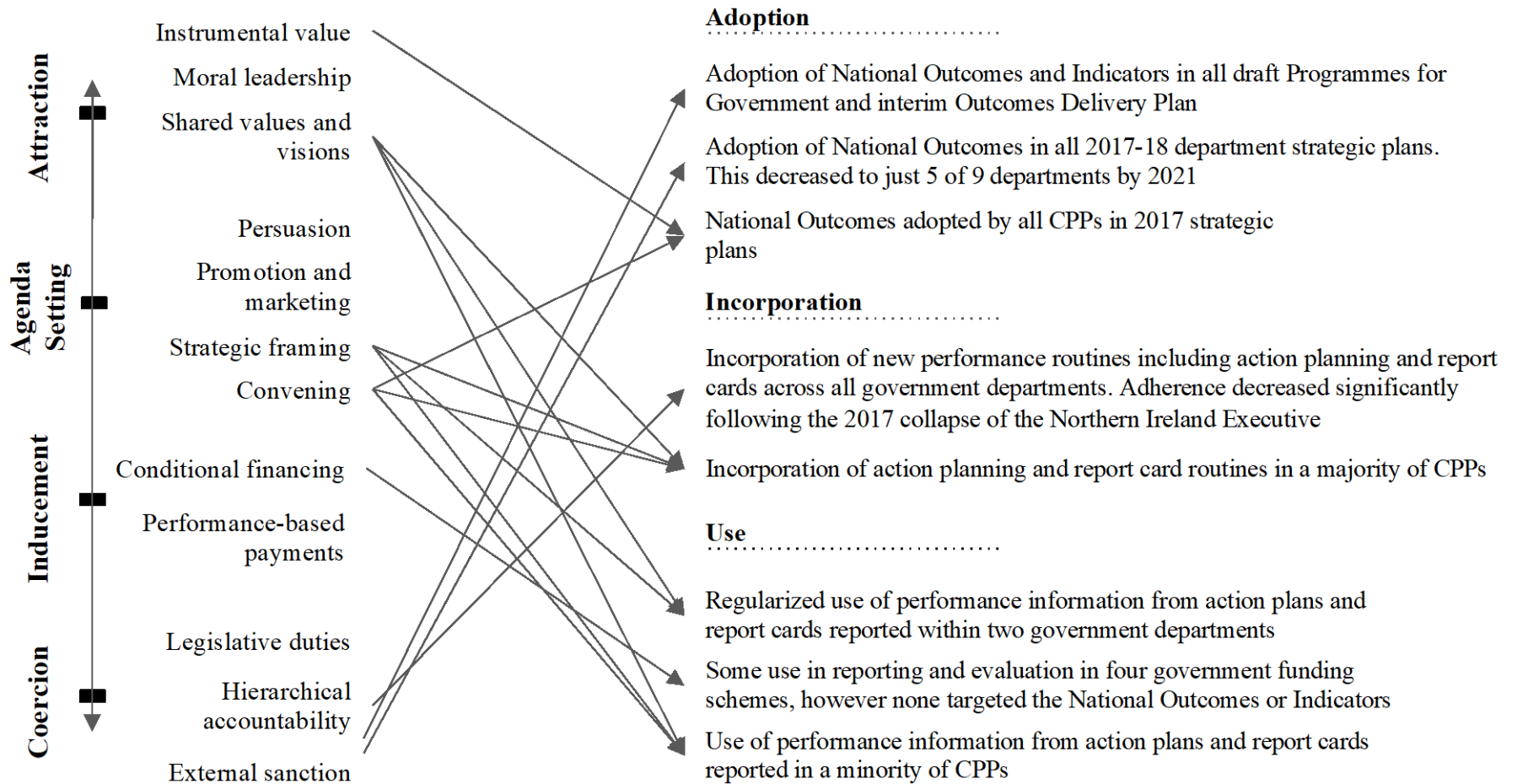
We finally sought to bolster the reliability of causal claims through a corroboratory document review, seeking additional evidence to triangulate each of the causal claims (Bowen 2009; Patton 1999). For instance, following interviewee claims of active performance information use in the Welsh Government policy development process, we corroborated this by reviewing relevant policy documentation and associated impact assessments. This detailed empirical approach resulted in the 26 corroborated integration outcomes and associated power strategies summarized in Figures 2-4. The full evidence base for these claims, drawing from the 35 interviews and over 160 documents, is provided in Table C in the Supplementary Material.

Findings

Figures 2-4 summarize the integration outcomes achieved by the three performance regimes and their associated power mechanisms. In this section, we explain how power mechanisms contributed to the differential performance regime integration outcomes observed.

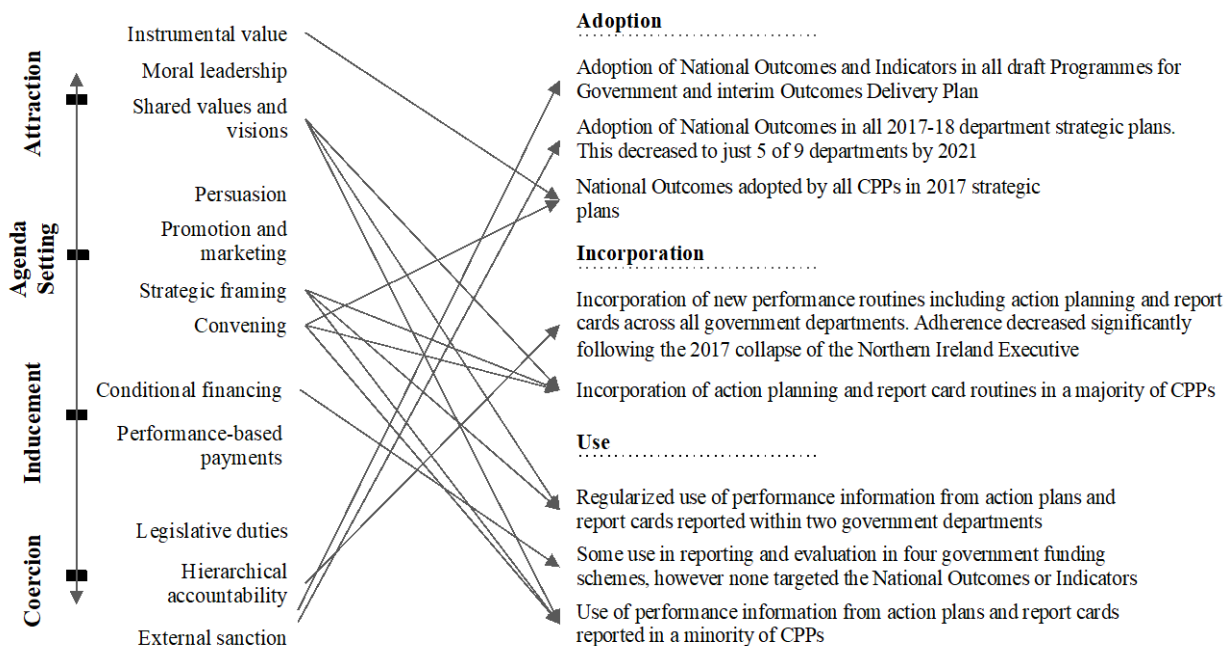
Northern Ireland

Figure 2. Performance regime integration outcomes and associated power mechanisms in Northern Ireland



Northern Ireland

Figure 2. Performance regime integration outcomes and associated power mechanisms in Northern Ireland



By using the civil service hierarchy to coerce the integration of its performance regime, Northern Ireland had achieved the highest comparative integration within government by the beginning of 2017. Permanent Secretaries leading the government’s nine departments became “Outcome Owners”, taking direct responsibility for one or more National Outcomes, while National Indicators were assigned to senior officials within each government department. Our document review found the performance regime was duly adopted within the 2016-21 draft Programme for Government, and in all departmental business/corporate plans by 2017.

Hierarchical accountability was also effective in motivating incorporation of Results-based Accountability performance routines. Departmental leaders oversaw the incorporation of data-driven ‘action plan’ routines targeting their assigned National Indicators. Subsequent ‘report cards’ were also incorporated to assess progress using a red-amber-green traffic light

system. Prior to 2017 all government departments had incorporated these new performance routines - a far more consistent integration than either Scotland or Wales.

However, the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive in 2017 halted the encroachment of performance-based accountabilities through Ministerial oversight and parliamentary scrutiny and revealed a deficiency in this hard power strategy: its dependency on stable leadership and organizational hierarchy. While performance routines were sustained in most departments, participation and ambition dramatically reduced. By the launch of the 2021 draft Programme for Government only two of the government's nine departments - those most supportive and aligned with the performance regime at outset - were considered by informed interviewees to demonstrate any active use of performance information aligned with National Outcomes and Indicators. Subsequent departmental business plans affirmed this reversal of integration, with only around half continuing to align with the National Outcomes and Indicators in 2021 business plans. Interviewees noted the performance regime became deprioritized in the business of most departments, while the collapse of coercive authority provided resistant civil servants an opportunity to withdraw their engagement:

“Oh, I think people are fed up with the idea, I do. (...) there's more loud people around the negative aspects than there are loud people around the positive aspects and they tend to come from the areas that may have felt threatened by a wellbeing framework (...) I think the challenge we still have is: are there enough positive people around the system that still believe this is the way to go?”

- Senior official, scrutiny organization

Had the Executive not collapsed, most interviewees considered further progress would have been made. However, early integration efforts also failed to spur the intended goal-directed and cross-departmental performance information use. Interviewees reported that senior colleagues, fearing accountability for National Indicators they had limited influence over, used their influence to ensure selected National Indicators were commensurable with existing role remits. Incorporated performance routines therefore reinforced pre-existing departmental goals:

“If you're measuring educational attainment, that's [one person's] job. If you're measuring low birth weight of babies, that's [another person's] job. And I think that naturally then the officials, not statisticians, fell into their silos of, well, ‘those are your things to do and these are my things to do’.”

- Technical advisor, Northern Ireland Civil Service

We found Northern Ireland achieved a high level of integration in local governance by deploying an effective soft power strategy. Our document review found all 11 CPPs adopted the National Outcomes in community plans and a substantial majority established linked performance routines associated with Results-based Accountability. Informed interviewees reported at least seven CPPs meaningfully incorporated action planning and report card performance routines, and our corroborating review affirmed two in particular were actively and voluntarily using performance information to meet their planning duties under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Interviewees linked this to close working relationships convened between civil service with local government leaders which helped frame the new regime as a galvanizing collective

vision. Attraction was also utilized: the performance regime was understood by local governance interviewees as being instrumentally useful, obviating the need to develop their own indicators within their first community plans under the 2014 Act:

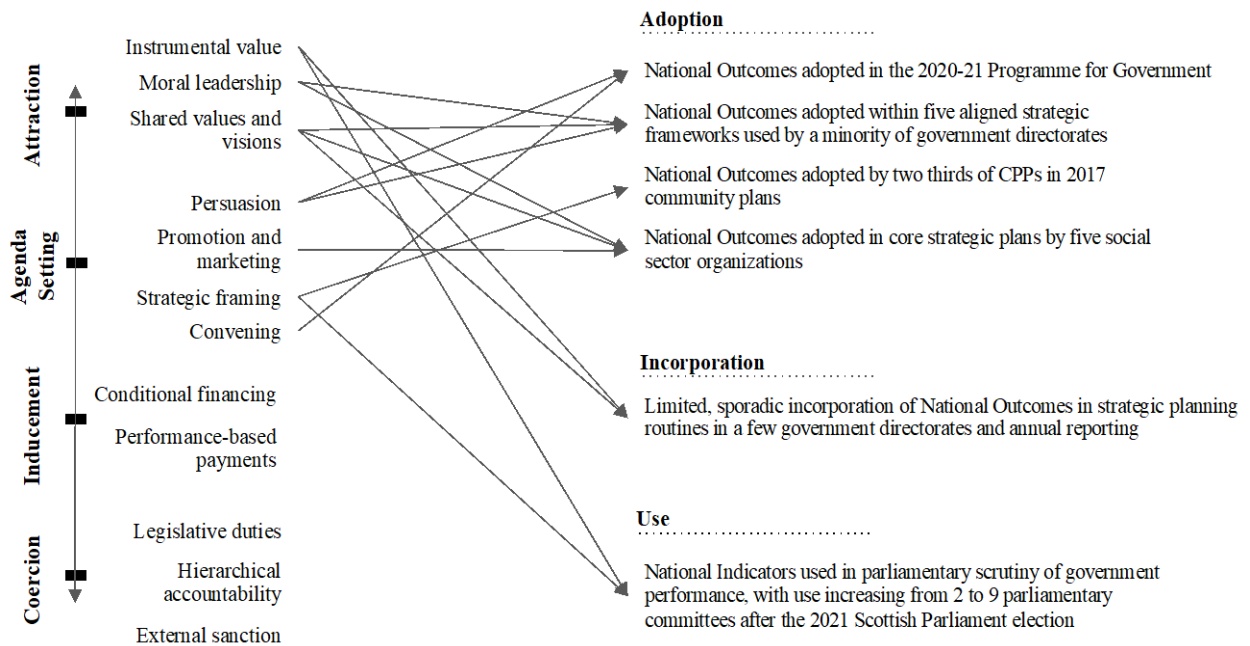
“The Northern Ireland Executive decided at that point back in 2015 to develop this [wellbeing framework]. And it was timely in the sense that we were sort of starting the community plans, we’d just reformed local government, we were looking at this new power and function and how it would work. So they set the tone.”

- Operational manager, community planning partnership

Northern Ireland was the only case to have substantially incorporated financial inducement in their external integration strategy. Our document review confirmed at least four of department-administered grantmaking programs adopted Results-based Accountability to evaluate funding beneficiary activities. However, the lack of integration of the wellbeing framework led to pre-existing goals, not strategically aligned with National Outcomes or aligned Indicators, being targeted in performance routines reviewed.

Scotland

Figure 3. Performance regime integration outcomes and associated power mechanisms in Scotland



Central government integration within Scotland was patchy and shallow, reserved largely to adoption rather than incorporation and use. The Scottish Government eschewed coercive accountability relationships, relying instead on senior political and civil service leaders to provide visible moral leadership for the NPF.

In lieu of coercive accountability, moral leadership was expressed by senior civil service and political leaders, who made regular pronouncements of support and endorsement for the NPF. Senior civil servants also advocated for the regime’s integration in senior forums like the Scottish Government’s Corporate and Performance Boards. Civil servants leading directorates were appointed “champions” of the National Outcomes rather than accountable owners, and expected to create a permissive environment for goal-directed adaptation and risk-taking within their directorates. Interviewees reported a high degree of latitude in the interpretation and discharge of that responsibility, concluding these soft power mechanisms, operating in isolation, were ineffective.

“Was [setting a permissive environment] enough? I think experience would suggest that permission was insufficient, given the scale of the organizational transformation required to work in quite different ways (...) You have the auditors coming in and scrutinizing staff for their bit of the delivery, not against the wellbeing framework. For as long as that continues to be the case, a permissive environment is not really going to cut it unfortunately.”

- Senior civil servant, Scottish Government

The NPF lacked comparable adoption to Wales and Northern Ireland within its annual Programme for Government and amongst its directorates. We found five performance frameworks aligned to the National Outcomes which were used to organize directorate-level activities in a minority of central government operations. Our corroborating document review found the NPF was regularly referenced in government policies, but not incorporated in policy development or evaluation. Staff responsible for implementation reported an uphill battle to promote integration, relying on persuasion and negotiation in the absence of available hard powers:

“People have been doing things a particular way for a long time and we are asking them to do things in a different way, and it can be hard (...) We’ve basically been harassing people about the NPF over the last year. I tell people that: ‘I’m here to harass you about the NPF’”

- Operational manager, Scottish Government

We did however find the National Indicators - uniquely amongst cases - used in parliamentary scrutiny of government activities. Parliament research staff used strategic framing mechanisms, positioning the NPF as a useful instrument in holding the government

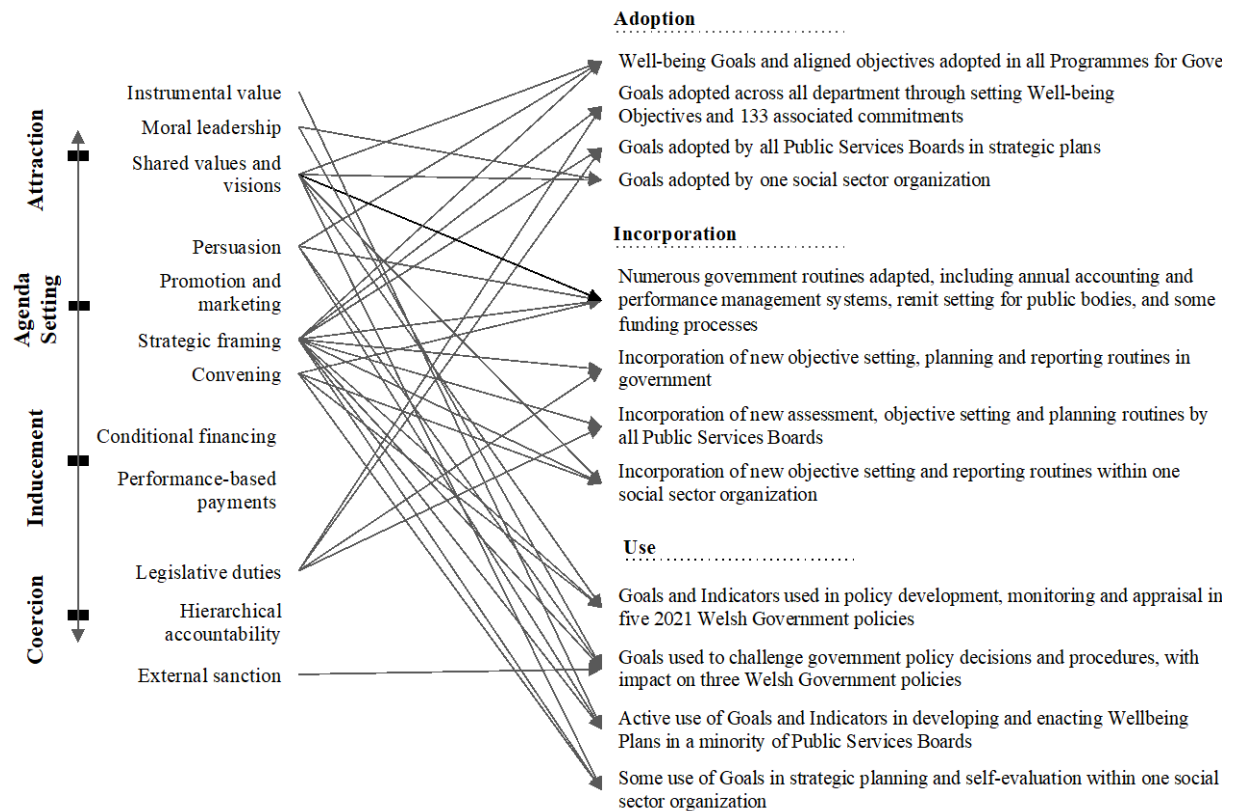
to account and producing guidance to promote its use in parliamentary scrutiny. By targeting incoming parliamentarians in the 2016 Scottish Election with these soft power mechanisms, documented usage of the National Indicators for government scrutiny increased from 2 to 9 of Scottish parliamentary committees in the 2016-21 election cycle.

Scotland also had the lowest level of integration within local governance. Despite statutory duties requesting CPPs “have regard” for the National Outcomes, only a slight majority of 2017 plans featured any alignment. Lacking either the attraction and agenda setting mechanisms used in Northern Ireland or the coercive statutory measures in Wales, CPP operations drawing instead from local government datasets and support infrastructure rather than the performance regime.

Scotland’s soft power strategy did achieve the highest comparative level of voluntary adoption by external organizations. The government NPF team used promotion and marketing to promote integration, rebranding the NPF “Scotland’s Wellbeing Framework” (not merely the Scottish Government’s) at a high-profile public event in 2018 to and establishing an outreach program and active social media presence. Networking and convening were also used, particularly in cultivating working relationships with external organizations in the public and third sectors. Our corroborating review found this successfully attracted adoption in five cases, however, lacking guidance or support for incorporation, integration remained superficial.

Wales

Figure 4. Performance regime integration outcomes and associated power mechanisms in Wales



By combining soft and hard power mechanisms, Wales achieved the highest level of integration by study end. Statutory duties mandated compliance with goal-setting and planning performance routines, however the Welsh Government went further, specifying 133 associated commitments to be undertaken across all departments. The prominent adoption of the Well-being Goals and associated Objectives in the 2016 and 2021 Programmes for Government were considered clear evidence of institutional commitment by one interviewee:

“Those [Well-being Goals] have been absorbed and embedded in the last two Programmes for Government. That’s not a legal requirement - that’s a choice that the government has made, and it’s taken quite a big risk in doing that.”

- Senior civil servant, Welsh Government

In addition to incorporating statutory goal-setting and strategic planning routines, by 2021 the Welsh Government had routinized the use of Well-being Goals and Indicators in annual accounting, the employee performance management system, and in some business case development processes, procurement guidance and funding agreements with non-departmental public bodies (called remit letters). Wales could also - uniquely amongst cases - demonstrate active use in policy development and evaluation, evident in revisions and evaluations of key policies including national planning, transport, recycling, net zero, recycling and marine strategies.

With the incorporation of performance routines assured through legislative duties, the central government team and the FGC could focus on deepening integration of the performance regime. Soft powers encouraged suitably motivated partners, aligned and inspired by the values and vision of the 2015 Act, to pursue integration further than coercive legislative duties required. Persuasion and instrumental support were then routinely applied by the FGC and Welsh Government team to alter individual policies and corporate processes on a case-by-case basis:

“So what we’ve done in policy as well, and the commissioner’s done some work around this, is worked with particular policy teams on particular guidance for particular strategies (...) So, you’ll see in our Beyond Recycling 2050 strategy... Our Future Wales 2040, which is our national development framework, that has been developed quite strongly with the Well-being Goals”

- Senior civil servant, Welsh Government

Strategic framing was also critical to national government integration, with key policy tools like the policy development capability framework and integrated impact assessments modified to promote focus on the Well-being Goals. The FGC developed a suite of tools and guidance, and used convening through workshops and training provision to promote integration. In addition to helping encourage and simplify incorporation into organizational routines, this made the FGC instrumentally useful, with requests for support increasing year-on-year. The FGC could then leverage its prominent moral leadership position for further application of strategic framing and persuasion to deepen integration:

“What I’ve been trying to do is to say, ‘look, here are broad areas in which you should be operating in order to meet these Well-being Goals and here is a menu of things that you could consider doing, regarding the practical steps that you could consider taking’. And that seems to have landed pretty well with public bodies.”

- Senior official, scrutiny organization

In particularly intransigent cases, the FGC could resort to hard power mechanisms, using their prominent public profile to pressure, name and shame public bodies, or activate statutory review powers to coerce rather than attract behavior change. Recourse to hard powers was considered a weapon of last resort since soft power mechanisms had already created a norm of engagement and sense of obligation:

“I would say we mostly do support by challenging (...) a lot of our work revolves around, say, pointing out what is wrong with [a Well-being Plan] and saying, “Look, here, you've missed an opportunity here (...) No one will want to be left behind and be the one public body that is not doing well

under the Act. So, I think that's quite a powerful, you know, tool: their fear that they're the only one that's not doing well.”

- Operational manager, scrutiny organization

Uniquely amongst cases, hard power mechanisms were effectively used to challenge policies and change government decisions. The Well-being Goals were used by the FGC to challenge and reconfigure the Welsh Government's approach to transport infrastructure projects, the national land planning system, and to revise the design and guidance of the government's Innovative Housing Programme. Hard power was enabled by soft power, since the independence and public profile of the FGC enabled them to express moral leadership and thus inflict reputational damage on targets. Asserting a misalignment with the Well-being Goals was a crucial element in each case:

“I then say, ‘right, we’ll work with you to revise the Transport Appraisal Guidance, so that next time there’s a potential [road development] being considered you’re working within the framework’ (...) I’ve got five examples here at least of where this hasn’t been done properly and if this doesn’t change, we will be using our review powers on you. At which point, then a moratorium on road building is announced and all of the schemes, even the approved ones, are going to be reviewed in line with the Future Generations Act.”

- Senior official, scrutiny organization

Discussion: soft power and performance management

Scotland's soft power strategy attained the lowest comparative integration. While it attracted the highest level of adoption amongst external organizations, the level of incorporation and

use remained comparatively low. Our findings support French and Mollinger-Sabha's (2021) assertion that external organizations' goal-setting routines can be "attracted" in decentralized environments, but also affirm existing findings that more proximal and direct accountabilities can displace attention toward what are seen as discretionary performance goals (Choi & Moynihan, 2019; Kroll, 2022; Molenveld et al., 2021).

Our within-case findings provide a more optimistic counterpoint, however. The dynamism of the policy environment and resulting flux in incentive and accountability systems created windows of opportunity through which a soft power strategy was effective. Northern Ireland achieved significant integration within local governance through a well-timed combination of attraction and agenda setting mechanisms. Scotland meanwhile achieved the most significant use of performance information in parliamentary scrutiny by targeting its soft power mechanisms around the onboarding of parliamentarians in a new political cycle. Soft power might also lend performance regimes resilience in dynamic environments. Lacking a soft power strategy to keep actors motivated and bought-in following the 2017 collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive, subjects instead took the opportunity to "de-integrate" the regime and set out opposition to its re-establishment.

We suggest a soft power strategy could function in situations where hard power falters: where coercive powers are absent, where data availability or quality is poor, or where complexity inhibits attribution and accountability. However, as Figure 3 demonstrates, integration outcomes seem hard-won through soft power alone. Since performance regimes increasingly operate in contexts without recourse to hard powers (Biermann et al., 2017; Tenbenschel & Burau, 2017), further research is needed on the strategies and enabling conditions where soft power strategies might make most difference.

Our clear conclusion is that a smart power strategy was the most effective approach. In Wales, legislative duties and powerful scrutiny organizations interacted with various attraction and agenda setting mechanisms to achieve far greater integration than Scotland or Northern Ireland. Soft power mechanisms, as Moynihan et al. (2012) argued about transformational leadership, “set the table” for effective performance regime integration. The moral leadership of the FGC and shared vision created by the 2015 Act meant legislative duties were often considered an opportunity for change rather than an additional burden. Hard power mechanisms in turn facilitated soft power: the strategic guidance, support and persuasive efforts of the Welsh Government and FGC teams were more effective since they were considered instrumentally useful in helping meet coercive statutory duties.

We found no evidence to support Nye's (2009) caution that hard and soft powers could undermine one another. However, with just three cases we could not test all interaction possibilities and observed no interaction within Nye’s ‘financial inducement’ category, where incentive conflict may be most likely to manifest (Deci & Ryan, 2008). We cannot therefore exclude the possibility of deleterious combinations of power mechanisms and urge close analysis in further research. With this caveat noted, our findings strongly suggest a smart power strategy should be the default position in complex and multi-actor settings. Further research on how best to blend, layer or integrate hard and soft power mechanisms will be crucial in helping convenors and managers of performance regimes navigate contemporary governance contexts.

Conclusions

Scholars and policymakers have questioned the relevance of performance measurement and management in a world characterized by increasing uncertainty, wicked problems and polycentric governance. By integrating Joseph Nye's theory of power into a performance regime context, our article provides a rare constructive counterpoint. Through harnessing soft power mechanisms - particularly within a smart power strategy - we argue architects, convenors and managers of performance regimes can achieve better integration outcomes in complex and multi-actor operating environments. We make two substantive contributions to performance management and governance scholarship.

First, in developing the PSF, we contribute a novel theoretical framework for analyzing the dynamics and impact of performance regimes which suits their increasing use in complex, multi-actor environments. Existing comparative performance management frameworks focus on functional or institutional distinctions between 'ideal types' of performance regime (Jakobsen et al., 2018; Van Dooren et al., 2015) or respond to mechanisms of action within single organizations (Simons, 1994; Virani & van der Wal, 2023). The PSF's strength is its generality and flexibility to any performance regime: single or multi-actor, simple or complex. Its most important use case however will be in exploring noted problem areas of goal complexity and dispersed power where soft power mechanisms seem most beneficial. As performance regimes become adopted in more dynamic and decentralized institutional contexts, the PSF could serve as a powerful analytical framework to help modernize performance management theory.

Secondly, our empirical findings add significantly to a developing empirical literature on performance management in non-hierarchical settings. Empirical studies have focused on the

use of performance information within established and mature performance regimes (Kroll, 2022). We show how power strategies influence the whole process of performance regime integration across a range of organizations. Empirical studies of non-hierarchical performance regimes report limited evidence of effectiveness or superficial integration (Choi & Moynihan, 2019; Rajala et al., 2020). The strength of our conclusion suggests that for practitioners and policymakers, a smart power strategy should be the default position when designing and managing performance regimes in situations of goal complexity and multipolarity. By drawing attention to a range of practical mechanisms, the PSF may also provide a useful planning heuristic for practitioners and policymakers seeking to develop impactful performance regimes or manage their strategic operations.

Our empirical approach has particular strengths in its opportune case conditions for a most similar systems comparative design and developing theory from within-case as well as across-case comparisons (Bartolini, 1993). However, we acknowledge several limitations and associated opportunities to extend our findings.

With just three case studies we cannot attest to strong external validity. However, as Ashworth et al. (2019) detail, qualitative comparative studies seek generalizability by developing grounded, theory-based propositions likely to hold in similar contexts. Through careful triangulation of data our study can assert strong internal validity and theoretical robustness, critical to the ability to generalize from theory-informed cases (Ridder, 2017). Our conclusions therefore provide a robust foundation for larger-N comparisons and deductive research designs for further theory testing.

Secondly, our article has concentrated on intra rather than inter-organizational integration. Our cases did not feature collective performance routines like learning communities (Wilson

et al., 2023) or performance summits (Douglas & Ansell, 2021), or foster collective modes of performance information use (Kroll, 2022). Further studies could adopt the PSF on an inter-organizational basis to analyze the social and relational dynamics of non-hierarchical performance regimes.

Lastly, we make no claim to have discovered the full concourse of possible power mechanisms, nor tested their interaction possibilities. A systematic review of the performance management literature may unearth mechanisms we did not consider in our concise theoretical integration. We were unable to observe how financial inducement interacted with soft power strategies, where incentive crowding and conflict may most likely manifest (Deci & Ryan, 2008), and which have been observed to run in conflict in hybrid institutional forms (French et al., 2023). Future empirical research should explore further the synergies, conflicts and tradeoffs involved with constructing smart power strategies.

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