



Agnieszka Pawłowska

University of Rzeszów, Poland

Anna Kołomycew

University of Rzeszów, Poland

Bogusław Kotarba

University of Rzeszów, Poland

ARE PUBLIC AND POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITIES COMPATIBLE? EVIDENCE FROM POLISH MUNICIPALITIES

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Authors

Agnieszka Pawłowska is a professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Rzeszów, Poland. Her research focuses on local democracy and governance. Her recent publications focus on advisory councils: Pawłowska, A. (2024). Role sets of advisory councils in local policymaking process: The perspective of council members. *Policy Studies*, 45(6), 860–882. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2023.2253776>; and political accountability: Pawłowska, A., Kołomycew, A., & Kotarba, B. (2026). Przystępność informacji w procesie rozliczalności władz publicznych: Wyniki badań politologiczno-lingwistycznych. *Horyzonty Polityki* (The accessibility of information in the process of public accountability: Findings from political science and linguistic research. *Horizons of Politics*), 17(58), 261–281. <https://doi.org/10.35765/hp.2914>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0083-3833>

apawlowska@ur.edu.pl

Anna Kołomycew is an associate professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Rzeszów, Poland. Her research interests include issues related to public governance, civil society, and instruments of public engagement. Her recent publication is focused on youth participation: K. Radzik-Maruszak, A. Kołomycew, E. Szulc-Wałecka, P. Lehtonen (2025). Youth empowered or just involved? Exploring youth participatory budgeting in Finland and Poland, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 30(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2025.2570232>.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2105-2953>

akolomycew@ur.edu.pl

Bogusław Kotarba is an associate professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Rzeszów, Poland. His research focuses on issues related to public administration and local government. His recent publications include: Kotarba, B. (2024). Raport i debata o stanie gminy jako narzędzie rozliczalności władz lokalnych. *Polityka i Społeczeństwo* (Report and debate on the state of the municipality as a tool for the accountability of local authorities. *Politics and Society*), 22(3), 144–160. <https://doi.org/10.15584/polispol.2024.3.10>.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4466-762X>

bokotarba@ur.edu.pl

Abstract

The article examines the question of compatibility between political and public accountability. The study is based on the research of the mayoral accountability mechanisms in Poland: the annual debate on the municipality, which culminates in the decision of the municipal council to grant or refuse the vote of confidence in the mayor (political accountability); the recall referendum and the general election of the mayor (public accountability). Authors examined debates and confidence votes in 14 non-randomly selected municipalities over the course of the five-year term (N=70), as well as the results of recall referendums and the 2024 mayoral election. The primary research findings are as follows: a) the granting of a vote of confidence to the mayor is not related to the debate on the state of the municipality; b) the sole factor that determines the decision to grant or refuse a vote of confidence is the balance of political power in the council; c) there are cases where the results of political and public accountability do not align: either a mayor who consistently received a vote of confidence was not re-elected, or a mayor who was consistently refused a vote of confidence was re-elected. The authors conclude that the investigated accountability mechanism is of a formal nature and has symbolic consequences, which undermine its utility. They also reflect upon the accountability model that informed the present study, and they propose its deconstruction into its constituent parts.

Keywords

accountability, local authorities, recall referendum, elections, vote of confidence

Introduction

There are many ways to hold public authorities accountable. General elections are the most common way to express support or distrust of government officials. Some countries hold recall referendums as well. There are many ways for citizens to obtain information (the right to public information, open meetings of collegial bodies), and discuss issues with public authorities (e.g., public hearings, mini-publics, round tables, public debates), and these go some way to increase the ability of the public to hold public authorities accountable. However, these do not usually result in sanctions, such as dismissal of public officials or them even being forced to act in the desired way. Whilst certain scholars argue that accountability can exist in the absence of it (see, for example, Młynarska-Sobaczewska & Zalesny, 2021; Mulgan, 2003; Schedler, 1999a), the ability to exert pressure or impose sanctions on public authorities is considered by some to be an important, and frequently claimed constitutive element of the definition of accountability (Bovens, 2010).

Recent publications tend to adopt a simplified definition of accountability, as a relationship between the accountable actor and the accountability forum before which the actor explains their actions (Aleksowska et al., 2019). There is also a trend towards treating accountability as an independent variable or a 'black box'. Researchers are focusing more on the outcomes, particularly the impact on the quality of decisions made in the public sector. However, the findings of Aleksowska et al. (2019) show that the characteristics of accountability mechanisms can significantly impact their effectiveness – an issue that has largely been overlooked in the literature on accountability in public administration. The present article seeks, in part, to address this deficit.

Although the theoretical model of accountability consists of information, discussion, and consequences (Bovens, 2007, 2010; Brandsma & Schillemans, 2013), it is quite chal-

lenging to find an accountability process in political practice that incorporates all three stages equally. The prevailing mechanisms of accountability in democratic systems, including the procedures for granting a vote of confidence or no confidence, and for adopting the report on the implementation of the budget and granting a discharge, are not examined as an integrated process. Consequently, the accountability literature lacks empirical evidence to test a theoretical model of accountability.

The present study has drawn upon the situation that has arisen in Polish municipalities due to the introduction of a mayoral accountability mechanism in the form of an annual report and debate on the state of the municipality (henceforth: the report and debate), which culminates in a vote of confidence in the mayor. This mechanism fits the model of accountability and meets Goodin's definition of an accountability mechanism as the way "for calling people to account, for judging the adequacy of the accounts rendered, and for bringing sanctions to bear for failures to produce an adequate account" (2010, p. 365). While the mechanism under analysis is an integrated process, the focus of this study is on its final stage, with some reference to the debate. This is due to the study's objective and the constraints imposed on the scope of the article.

The aim of this article is to determine the convergence of the results of the processes of holding the executive accountable by the legislative body (political accountability) with the results of holding the same authority accountable by the citizens (public accountability). In other words, the objective is to determine whether the legislative body judges the executive in the same way as the citizens do.

As this is a brand-new accountability mechanism in Poland which has not previously been studied in relation to the aim of this article and which has no equivalent in other countries, we were unable to formulate any reliable hypotheses that could be tested in our research. We posed several research questions instead. As the accountability mechanism under study is both vertical (towards residents) and horizontal (towards the municipal council), we addressed the question of participation by both municipal residents and councillors:

1. Do residents participate at all in debates? If so,
 - 1a. Is there any relation between citizens' participation and granting or not granting a vote of confidence to the mayor?

We assumed that councillors would engage in debates, i.e., that discussions would actually take place during council sessions devoted to debating reports. However, the pilot study showed that this is not always the case. Therefore, instead of taking into account the number of councillors participating in the discussion and analysing its entire course, we decided to reduce the issue of its intensity to the duration of the debate and posed the question:

2. How long do debates on the state-of-the-municipality report last?

The subsequent questions relate to the relationships between debate, vote of confidence, and the balance of power within the municipal council:

3. Does the length of the debate depend on the balance of power in the municipal council?
4. Does the vote of confidence depend on the balance of power in the municipal council?

We also addressed the consequences of two consecutive failed votes of confidence, asking the question:

5. Did the municipal council adopt a resolution to organise a referendum on the recall of the mayor? If so,
 - 5a. What are the results of the recall referendums?

Furthermore, the local elections held in 2024 allow for an assessment of the convergence of their results and the results of the report and debate mechanisms, therefore the final research question is:

6. When deciding whether to grant or refuse a vote of confidence in the mayor, do councillors agree with the residents who elected or did not elect the incumbent mayor for another term?

The study covered 14 non-randomly selected municipalities and analysed all debates and decisions regarding the granting or denial of a vote of confidence to the mayor (N=70) that took place during the five-year term of office of the local authorities (2018–2023). The results of the recall referendums that took place in connection with the accountability mechanism under study were analysed, as were the results of the mayoral elections.

The rest of the article is organized in the following way. First, we present the theoretical framework of the topic, including ways of defining and typologising the accountability of public authorities and the framework for its analysis proposed by researchers in this field. We then discuss the three accountability mechanisms: general elections, recall referendums, and report and debate. The next part presents the research methodology; this is followed by a section that presents the research results. We end with the discussion and conclusion.

Theoretical facets of accountability

The accountability of public authorities is a fundamental principle and condition of democratic regimes. Firstly, accountability provides citizens and their representatives with the essential information needed to evaluate the performance of a government, enabling citizens to hold public officials accountable for their actions. Secondly, from the perspective of the division of powers, political accountability is vital to prevent abuses of public authority and to expose them when they occur (cf., Grzeszczak, 2011; Młynarska-Sobaczewska & Zaleśny, 2021). Finally, contemporary democratic states are responsible for delivering numerous public services entrusted to many state and non-state actors in various multi-level and network governance constellations. Under the conditions of arm's-length governance, accountability extends beyond merely 'having executive power in your hands' or scrutinizing public officials; it aims to enhance public performance.

There are several ways to define accountability, which we can categorize as follows: a) accountability as a relationship (Bovens, 2007; Mulgan, 2003; Papadopoulos, 2023; Schelder, 1999a; Sinclair, 1995), b) accountability as a process (Bovens et al., 2014; Lawton & Rose, 1994, p. 19 in Flinders, 2001); c) accountability as a multidimensional experience (Brandsma & Schillemans, 2013; Flinders, 2001).

Mulgan describes accountability as "a relationship of social interaction and exchange involving complementary rights on the part of the account-holder and obligations on the

part of the accountant” (2003, p. 11). The author indicates three constitutive features of accountability: a) the account-holder is an external actor from accountant; b) accountability is based on social interaction; c) accountability implies some rights of authority, but not necessarily involve actual or formal power. Similarly, Bovens addresses accountability as “a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor must explain and justify their conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences” (2007, p. 450).

Bovens, Schillemans, and Goodin (2014) highlight three consecutive stages of accountability: a) the obligation of the actor to inform the forum about their conduct; b) the forum can debate with the actor about their conduct, and the actor can explain and justify their conduct; c) the forum is authorized to assess the actor’s conduct, and if it sees fit, may impose sanctions on the actor. Brandsma and Schillemans (2013) offer a similar interpretation of accountability, presenting a three-dimensional ‘accountability cube’ consisting of information, discussion, and consequences, rather than three stages.

The diversity of actors to be held to account (who), the forums for accountability (by whom), the objectives of accountability (for what), and mechanisms of accountability (how) have made scholars distinguish several accountability types (Gregory, 2012; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). Building on the work of Mashaw (2006), Steffek (2010), and Papadopoulos (2023), for the purposes of this study we distinguish between political accountability and public accountability. Furthermore, the scope of actors involved in accountability relations has been narrowed to encompass the local legislative (municipal council), local executive (mayor), and the local public (municipal residents). Consequently, political accountability is defined as a way of holding the local executive accountable by the local legislative, while public accountability is held by the municipal public.

Political and public accountabilities match, respectively, horizontal accountability, which results from the system of checks and balances between interdependent authorities (Papadopoulos, 2023; O’Donnell, 1998), and vertical accountability, ensuring that citizens have the right to choose their representatives and impose sanctions on them when they make decisions that contradict their expectations (more in Sklar 1999). Some scholars claim that “[t]he dichotomy of *horizontal versus vertical (hierarchical) conceptions of accountability* is central to current understandings of the concept [of accountability – authors’ note]” (Bemelmans-Videc, 2017, p. 25). However, we believe that horizontal and vertical accountability complement each other, and even more – the one contains remedies for the other’s deficiencies, e.g., elections (vertical accountability) do not always remove officials who abuse power from politics, at this point horizontal accountability mechanisms seem critical (Waldrauch, 1998).

Institutionalized mechanisms of political and public accountability in municipalities

By institutionalized accountability mechanisms, we mean those forms of holding public authorities to account that have a legal basis, i.e., the grounds for their application, the rules for their implementation and the consequences are regulated by law. In this study, however, we are only interested in those mechanisms that go beyond day-to-day control. Thus, we do not include here such mechanisms as the routine oversight of the execu-

tive's actions by council committees and councillors, as well as the filing of complaints by residents against the actions of the mayor or the institutions and officials under their authority. In this section, we therefore refer to: general elections, recall referendums, and the procedure for the report and debate on the state of the municipality. The brief characteristics of these mechanisms are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected mechanisms of local authorities' accountability

Accountability mechanism	To whom does it apply?	On whose initiative?	Who participates?	What are the consequences?
Local elections	Municipal council and mayor	State authorities under the law	Residents of the municipality	Changing the composition of the council; changing or keeping the mayor in office
Recall referendum	Municipal council and mayor	Municipal council or residents	Residents of the municipality	Changing or keeping the council and/or mayor in office
Report and debate on the state of the municipality	Mayor	Municipal council under the law	Municipal council and residents	Granting or not granting a vote of confidence

Source: Authors' own work.

As Flinders writes, “[a]ccountability in a representative democracy is, in its strictest sense, linked to the revocability of a mandate” (2001, p. 21). Thus, popular elections are the most common instrument for choosing people's representatives, but also hold them accountable (cf., Wojtasik, 2018). Elections, apart from being an ex-post public accountability, also have the value of keeping office-holders in check. The threat of electoral sanction should ‘encourage’ those in power to keep their promises to voters (Papadopoulos, 2023, p. 7). It is worth emphasizing that the increasingly common direct elections of local executives make them a more effective accountability mechanism than ever before. According to Colombo and Tojerow (2020), the competitiveness of general elections makes citizens better informed about the candidates' merits and planned activities and more interested in casting their votes. This seems to be the case, as turnout in local elections has increased (especially in the second round) since the introduction of popular mayoral elections in Poland¹.

However, elections as an accountability mechanism have some weaknesses, which – according to Manin, Przeworski and Stokes (1999) – include the limited knowledge of citizens about the performance of local authorities, infrequency, and bias of election campaigns. If elections are to be an effective way to hold public officials accountable, according to Schedler, “voters have to value retrospective over prospective voting, and in their evaluations of past performance, they must give priority to institutional issues rather than to policy issues, valence issues, character issues, or party labels” (1999b, p. 334), thus disregarding most of what elections are about.

The circumstances preceding the introduction of the recall referendum into the legal and political order were generally associated with a loss of trust in the party and political

1 Turnout in the second round of local elections in 2002 — 35.02%, 2006 — 39.56%, 2010 — 35.31%; 2014 — 39.97%; 2018 — 48.83%, 2024 — 44.06%. PKW, online <https://pkw.gov.pl/wybory-i-referenda/wybory-samorzadowe-i-referenda-lokalne>, 14.05.2024.

system, and the mechanisms of representative democracy (Springer et al., 2024). Therefore, researchers typically analyse recall referendums as a form of direct democracy or democratic innovation (Geissel & Jung, 2018; Smith, 2013). However, they also agree that they serve as a mechanism for holding authorities accountable. The advantage of a recall referendum is that it can be used to hold public authorities accountable at any time, without waiting for the next general election – as Welp puts it, it is a ‘safety valve’ that can be triggered at any time when elected representatives mislead their voters (2022, pp. 56–57). Furthermore, a recall referendum increases the sense of being represented among voters, who can theoretically recall an elected politician at any time (Springer et al. 2024). Among disadvantages of this accountability mechanism are: instrumental use in party politics, spreading fake information, and escalating conflicts. Furthermore, it could undermine trust in the entire political system and create a sense of a constant political campaign among the public (Springer et al., 2024; Welp, 2022; Welp & Rey, 2016).

If we consider the distinction we have made between political and public accountability, a recall referendum can be seen as a one or the other accountability form, depending on the forum that took the initiative to hold it. In most countries, the recall initiative belongs exclusively to citizens (direct recall). There are few countries in which a recall is initiated by local councils (indirect recall) (Geissel & Jung, 2018). In Poland, both the municipal council and the mayor can be recalled in a referendum – the municipal council can be recalled only at the initiative of residents and the mayor at the initiative of residents or the council.

Although the accountability mechanism that we are going to describe below – consisting of a report on the state of the municipality, a debate, and a decision to grant a vote of confidence in the mayor – has no one-to-one equivalent in other countries, it should be mentioned that reports on the municipality, debates, and votes of no confidence exist to varying degrees in different local governments. However, these elements do not constitute coherent procedures.

For example, open meetings of collegial authorities are a widely accepted standard in local government (Leirset, 2021). A significant proportion of these meetings are dedicated to the discussion of community issues, with residents being given the opportunity to address the meeting (for example, annual debates on the state of London based on the mayor’s financial report, or the open debate for Londoners known as People’s Question Time, held twice a year). While these gatherings are organised with the intention of facilitating information exchange between authorities and residents, they have the potential to serve as a platform for holding public authorities accountable by highlighting the concerns and dissatisfaction of the local community.

On the other hand, a vote of no confidence (as well as a vote of confidence) are not commonly observed in local government. In Spanish municipalities, where the mayor is elected by the council, the council reserves the right to express a vote of no confidence in the mayor (García 2016). This practice, which can be seen as a symbolic manifestation of the negative assessment of the mayor, is also observed in the UK, New Zealand, and the US.

The present article concerns the accountability mechanism introduced by the parliamentary act of 11 January 2018, which came into force with the subsequent term of local authorities, which commenced in autumn 2018. The objective of the drafters was to consolidate the legislative authority of the municipality (council) in relation to the executive authority (mayor). Since 2002, the mayor has been a single-person entity elected in gener-

al elections. Candidates are nominated by electoral committees. In municipalities, these committees are usually formed by voters or local associations, who also nominate candidates for councillors. Municipal elections are non-partisan. However, the mayoral candidates in large cities usually enjoy the support of political parties. With a direct mandate from the voters and extensive powers, the Polish mayor is categorised as a strong mayor (Heinelt et al., 2018; Heinelt & Hlepas, 2006; Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). In summary, the institutional context of the investigated accountability procedure reflects a presidential system in the organisation of local authorities in Polish municipalities, whereas the new procedure for holding mayors to account is derived from parliamentary accountability of the national government. It is this combination that makes the solution 'original'.

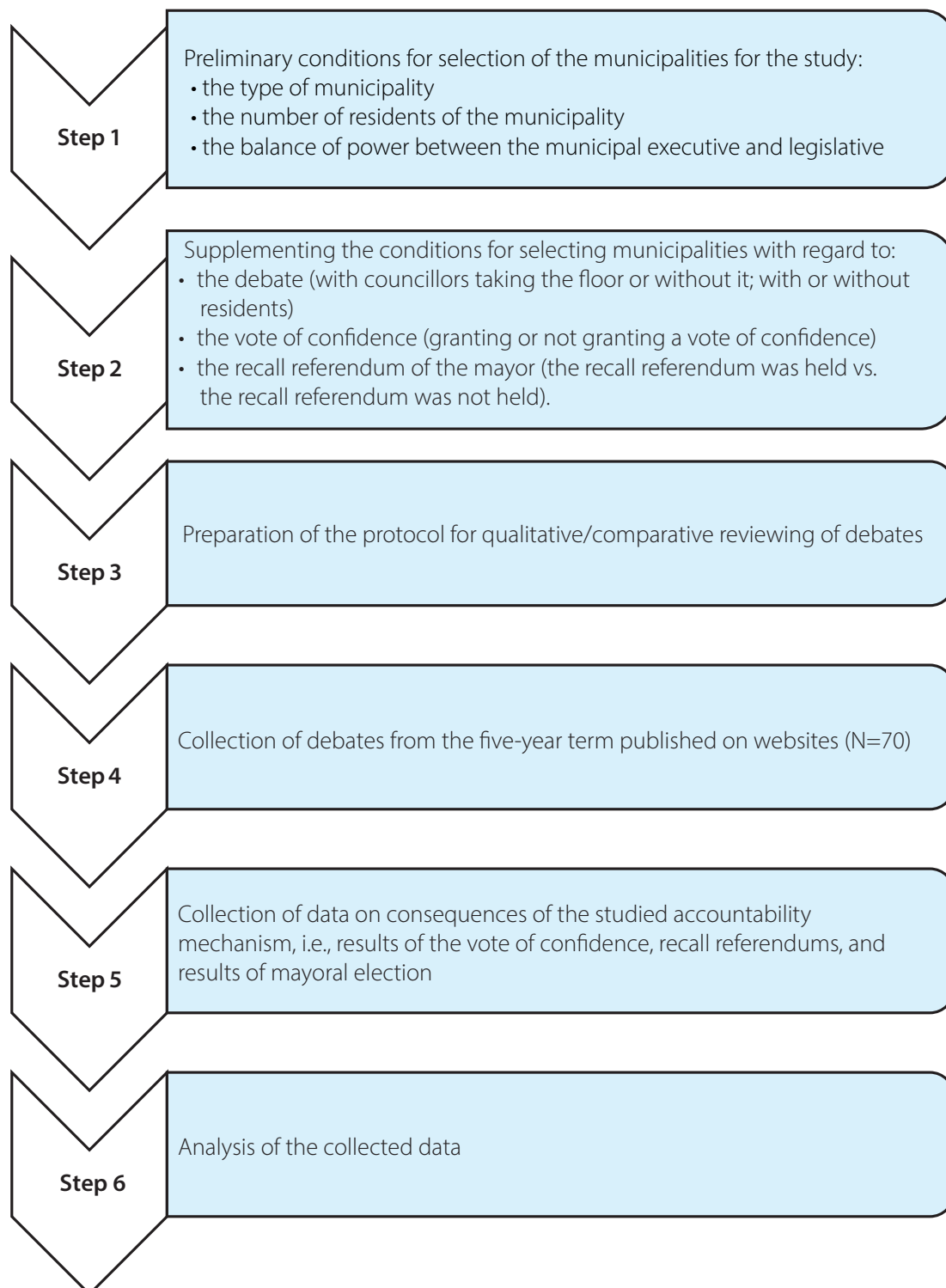
The accountability mechanism under study is initiated by the mayor, who is obligated to submit a report on the state of municipality to the municipal council by May 31 of each year. The document is published on the municipal website as well. The report comprises a summary of the mayor's activities during the preceding year, with a particular emphasis on the execution of policies, programs, and strategies, the resolutions of the municipal council, and the implementation of the participatory budget. The report is then discussed at a council meeting, with the possible participation of residents. The debate on the report ends with a vote of confidence. The decision is taken by an absolute majority of the statutory composition of the municipal council. If the vote of confidence is not passed for two consecutive years, a referendum may be held to recall the mayor.

The aforementioned accountability mechanism has been implemented in Polish municipalities since 2019. The results of this practice throughout the five-year term of the municipal authorities will be presented later in this article.

Research methodology

Given the complexity of the accountability mechanism under study and its application in municipalities with different local conditions, we decided to use a mixed-method research based on multiple-case studies. The procedure employed was multistage, and the subsequent steps of its implementation are illustrated in Figure 1.

In the first step, we established the preliminary conditions for selecting municipalities: the type of municipality, its size, and the balance of power within the council. The type of municipality is a widely recognised method of categorising local governments in Poland. The number of inhabitants determines the method of electing the municipal council: the first-past-the-post system applies to municipalities with up to 20,000 inhabitants, while the proportional representation system applies to municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants. The two conditions delineate the local distinctiveness of municipalities (in terms of proximity and frequency of social interactions), a factor deemed significant in the present study. The third condition is pivotal in delineating the relationship between the local legislative and executive bodies, which we assumed could be significant in holding the latter accountable. All combinations of conditions presented in Figure 1, Step 1, required selecting 14 cases (Table 2). To mitigate the selection bias and optimize the likelihood of obtaining meaningful data aligned with the research questions, a *theoretical replication* of cases was implemented (Yin, 2014). This took into account the additional attributes of the accountability mechanism (Figure 1, step 2) to capture the full range of situations that may arise from its implementation.

Figure 1: Research design

Source: Authors' own work.

Table 2. Combination of municipality selection criteria

Municipal population/ electoral system	Type of municipality	Majority in the municipal council
Less than 20,000 / majority	rural	supporting the mayor
		in opposition to the mayor
	urban-rural	supporting the mayor
		in opposition to the mayor
	urban	supporting the mayor
		in opposition to the mayor
Over 20,000 / proportional	rural	supporting the mayor
		in opposition to the mayor
	urban-rural	supporting the mayor
		in opposition to the mayor
	urban	supporting the mayor
		in opposition to the mayor
Over 20,000 / proportional	cities*	supporting the mayor
		in opposition to the mayor

* Cities are municipalities carrying out municipal and provincial tasks; their authorities are organized on the municipal model, in which the legislative and executive authorities are elected by residents.

Source: Authors' own work.

The third stage of the process involved formulating a protocol for analysing the debates. This protocol contained a number of conditions that the debates were expected to meet. However, given the objectives of this article, these were limited to the participation of residents in the debate, the debate's duration, which indicates its intensity to some extent, and the result of the vote of confidence in the mayor². The balance of power in the council was also considered.

In order to minimise the potential for mistakes in the analysis of the debates (in essence, in measuring their duration), it was conducted by three researchers, who then proceeded to compare their results in order to eliminate any errors.

Research results

The results of the research are presented in the Appendix. Municipal residents participated in 28 out of 70 debates on the report, and this could have been as few as one resident. A total of four or more residents participated in six debates, with participation in the debate being defined as taking the floor. It is possible that a greater number of residents were listening to the debates, as municipal council sessions are typically open to the public.

2 The results of votes of confidence form part of the debate record. The results of recall referendums and local elections were obtained from the website of the State Electoral Commission: <https://pkw.gov.pl/wybory-i-referenda/wybory-samorzadowe-i-referenda-lokalne/wybory-i-referenda-w-to-ku-kadencji/kadencja-2018-2024>; <https://samorzad2024.pkw.gov.pl/samorzad2024/pl/wbp/okregi>; <https://samorzad2024.pkw.gov.pl/samorzad2024/pl/wbp/okregi>.

Furthermore, the debates are broadcast online and their recordings are accessible on the Internet. Although debates involving residents usually lasted longer than 45 minutes, such debates also took place without residents participating. Therefore, it is impossible to conclude that there is any significant relationship here. Similarly, no relationship was found between resident participation and the outcome of the debate, as measured by a vote of confidence in the mayor.

Of the 70 council meetings devoted to the debate on the report, 11 debates were not held because no councillor expressed interest in speaking, and no resident attended the debate. In 21 cases, the debates were brief (up to 45 minutes), in 15 cases, they were medium (from 45 to 90 minutes), and in 23 cases, the debates were long (over 90 minutes). The length of the debate, which also serves as an indicator of its intensity, is somewhat related to the balance of power in the municipal council (Table 3), as indicated by the Pearson correlation coefficient value of 0.485 ($p < 0.05$).

Table 3. Time of the debate and the balance of power in the council

Debate and its time the council's majority supports the mayor		Balance of power in the council		Total
		the council's majority is in opposition to the mayor		
No debate	No.	10	1	11
	%	27.8%	2.9%	15.7%
Debate up to 45 minutes	No.	14	7	21
	%	38.9%	20.6%	30.0%
Debate 45 to 90 minutes	No.	7	8	15
	%	19.4%	23.5%	21.4%
Debate over 90 minutes	No.	5	18	23
	%	13.9%	52.9%	32.9%
Total	No.	36	34	70
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Authors' own work.

Of the 15 medium length debates, half took place in opposition-dominated councils; of the 23 long debates, 3/4 took place in councils where opposition councillors also had a majority. There were twice as many short debates in councils where the mayor had a majority, while, with one exception, no debates took place in councils dominated by the mayor's supporters.

In most cases, the balance of power in the council corresponds to the result of the vote of confidence in the mayor (r -Pearson=0.815; $p < 0.05$). That is to say, a majority of the mayor's supporters in the council guarantees them a vote of confidence, and vice versa – if the opposition councillors have a majority, the mayor does not receive a vote of confidence. This rule was broken seven times. In most cases, this happened during the first debates on the report during the term of office (local elections were held in the fall of 2018), that is, debates that took place in 2019 and related to the previous year. As a result, councillors

debated the activities of the municipality under the leadership of the previous mayor, not the current one.

In seven municipalities where the councils refused to give the mayor a vote of confidence for two consecutive years, they could decide to hold a mayoral recall referendum. However, only in two municipalities did the councils exercise this option, and only in one municipality was the recall referendum successful, i.e., it resulted in a change of mayor. In the other municipality, the recall referendum was invalid due to low voter turnout, and the mayor, who was poorly rated by the council, remained in office until the end of the term. Interestingly, in two other municipalities, councils decided to organize recall referendums, but for reasons other than the report and debate procedure. In both cases, the attempt to recall the mayor was unsuccessful.

As a result of the 2024 election, the four incumbent mayors who ran in those elections were defeated. The mayor who was elected in the midterm election due to the recall of the predecessor retained the position. In four municipalities, the outcome of the general elections, i.e., the voters' assessment of the mayor (public accountability), did not coincide with the assessment expressed through the granting or withholding of a vote of confidence in the mayor (political accountability). In one municipality, councillors showed a consistent pattern of trust in the mayor, while residents showed a clear rejection of the mayor in the electoral process. In contrast, in three other municipalities, the opposite occurred: the lack of confidence in these mayors did not result in their removal from office in the 2024 elections.

In instances where the outcomes of political accountability aligned with public accountability, the mayor was systematically granted a vote of confidence and subsequently re-elected in six cases. Conversely, in three cases, the mayor did not receive a vote of confidence and was unsuccessful in the election.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we raise two issues for consideration. The first is the consistency of the results of political and public accountability. The second is the effectiveness of the executive accountability mechanism introduced in Polish municipalities: the annual report and debate on the state of the municipality, ending with a vote of confidence in the mayor. The studied mechanism exemplified political accountability, while public accountability was examined using the results of recall referendums and mayoral elections.

Since votes of confidence are an integral part of debates on the state of the municipality, we analysed them, taking into account both resident participation and the intensity of debates, as measured by their length. The results of the study do not suggest a connection between these factors and the outcome of the vote of confidence in the mayor. However, we did find a significant relationship between the vote outcome and the composition of the municipal council. When a majority of councillors are elected from the list that supports the mayor, it is likely that the mayor will receive a vote of confidence each year. Conversely, if the council is primarily made up of members elected from opposing lists, the mayor can expect to not receive a vote of confidence.

The research result can be analysed from two perspectives. The first of these is informed by the parliamentary system, in which the investigated mechanism is anchored. In this system, the accountable actor – the cabinet – has a majority in the accountability

forum – the parliament. Consequently, the cabinet subject to the vote of confidence can be assured of the positive outcome of the accountability process. From this standpoint, the study’s findings are unsurprising.

The alternative perspective stems from the dynamics of municipal politics. Firstly, it is characterised by non-partisanship. Secondly, the consequences of a mayor’s actions or in-action are immediate and visible. Thirdly, personal relationships are important, especially in small municipalities, where councillors, and frequently the mayor, often live in close proximity to their constituents. These connections are formed through family, neighbourhood and friendship ties, as well as formal relationships if a councillor or resident is employed in a municipal institution or enterprise. Taking this into account, one might expect more diverse research results than those obtained by the authors.

However, the core question was whether residents’ ratings of the mayor at the end of their term in office, as expressed through local elections, aligned with the ratings of their representatives, specifically councillors, during the mayor’s tenure. A comparison of the votes of confidence in the mayor, which were largely consistent throughout the term, with the results of the 2024 mayoral elections, resulted in the municipalities under study being grouped according to councillors’ and residents’ assessments of the mayor, as expressed through these accountability mechanisms (Table 4).

Six municipalities were categorised as ‘positively compatible’, meaning that the mayor or was consistently granted a vote of confidence and was re-elected by the residents. In ‘negatively compatible’ municipalities, councillors and residents agreed with the negative assessment of the mayor, not granting them a vote of confidence nor electing them for the next term. One municipality was categorised as ‘radically compatible’, where councillors and residents decided to recall the mayor in a referendum before the end of the term. Four municipalities were categorised as ‘incompatible’, meaning councillors and residents were inconsistent in their decisions. They either granted a vote of confidence to a mayor who subsequently lost the election or denied a vote of confidence to a mayor who then won the election.

Table 4. Municipalities according to the compatibility of the political and public accountability

Positively compatible	Negatively compatible	Radically compatible	Incompatible
BI	BB	MO	BR
L	MI		SW
NR	MR		I
PU			PR
ST			
Z			

Source: Authors’ own work.

However, the present study does not explain the specific conditions that would render the results of accountability mechanisms consistent or inconsistent. These factors need further investigation. A comprehensive examination of each municipality selected for the study is needed, including the study of financial and living conditions, and the political

culture of the community. This is a limitation of the present study and a recommendation for future research.

The second objective of this article was to evaluate the efficacy of the investigated accountability mechanism in improving the accountability of the mayor, balancing the influence of the municipal legislature and executive on local governance, and boosting residents' engagement in municipal affairs. The first observation that emerged was the limited engagement of residents in the debates. If any residents took part in the debate on the state of the municipality, it was usually just one or two individuals. Nonetheless, in the majority debates, residents did not participate. Much to our surprise, an absence of interest in the debate was also demonstrated by councillors: in one municipality in the 2018–2024 term, there was not a single debate on the report; in six other municipalities there were years in which a session devoted to the report was held without a debate. Furthermore, the duration of the debate, as well as the resultant vote of confidence, contingent on the political balance within the council, indicate that this accountability mechanism, intended to encapsulate the mayor's activities in achieving local public policy objectives, has fallen short of its intended purpose. The report and debate functioned as either an additional opportunity to confirm the council's unconditional acceptance of the mayor's actions or as a tool for the council confronting the mayor.

Although the law permits a recall referendum for the mayor if the vote of confidence is refused in two consecutive years, this is not an inevitable outcome, and even when it occurs, its effectiveness is questionable. Councillors' reluctance to organise recall referendums is understandable, given that voter turnout is usually too low for the results to be considered valid. During the last term of local government (2018–2023), a total of 78 recall referendums were organised, but only nine of these attracted enough voters to be considered valid³.

The findings of the research presented herein give rise to questions regarding the *raison d'être* of political and public accountability outside of general elections, which continue to be regarded as the ultimate means of influencing those in positions of authority at all levels. For instance, can a vote of no confidence in a parliamentary system be regarded as effective if it is applied ineffectively to cabinets that hold a strong majority in parliament? (c.f., Strøm 2000). Or, can Q&A sessions with the mayor and residents be considered effective in holding the mayor or subordinate officials accountable if they do not result in immediate consequences? On the other hand, what is the power of the hybrid and holistic mechanism of political accountability presented in this article? Every year it provides complex information about the municipality and gives an opportunity among residents, councillors, and executive officials to discuss it. Yet, in one-third of the municipal council meetings examined, which were devoted to a debate on the state of the municipality, either no debate took place or it was very brief. Furthermore, the outcome of the debate, i.e., granting or denying the vote of confidence in the mayor, is unrelated to the debate itself and merely reflects the council's majority.

The formal nature and symbolic consequences of the accountability process under scrutiny compromise its practical value, prompting reflection on the accountability model it represents. The model is predicated on three interconnected stages: information, discussion, and consequences. However, these findings suggest that these stages may not

3 Terminarz wyborów i referendów w trakcie kadencji 2018–2024. PKW online: https://pkw.gov.pl/uploaded_files/1730805147_terminarz-wyborow-w-trakcie-kadencji-2018-2024.pdf (8.11.2024).

be related in a way that undermines the classic definition of accountability, in which an accountable actor provides information to an accountability forum for discussion, and the forum may impose sanctions or other consequences if it sees fit. Political and public accountability can manifest as either a single event or a series of events, or feelings, such as perceived (Mero et al., 2014), reputational (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016), and felt (Overman & Schillemans, 2022) accountability (cf. Pérez-Durán, 2024). Consequently, further research needs deconstruction of the accountability model outlined in the theoretical section of this study to analyse its elements and manifestations independently to ascertain their roles in the accountability process.

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Appendix

Conditions for debates on the municipality and the consequences of the accountability procedure

Municipality ^{a)}	Debate on the report for a given year	nor ^{b)}	tod ^{c)}	cmo ^{d)}	out ^{e)}	Recall referendum	Mayoral election	Relation between political accountability (pol) and public accountability (pub)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
BB	BBd18	0	0.25	1	1	No resolution on holding a recall referendum	The mayor lost in the second round of elections	pol = pub
	BBd19	1	1	1	1			
	BBd20	1	1	1	1			
	BBd21	1	1	1	1			
	BBd22	1	1	1	1			
BI	BId18	1	0.25	0	0	NA	The mayor won in the first round of elections	pol = pub
	BId19	1	1	0	0			
	BId20	1	1	0	0			
	BId21	1	1	0	0			
	BId22	1	1	0	0			
BR	BRd18	0	0.25	0	0	NA	The mayor lost in the second round of elections	pol ≠ pub
	BRd19	0	0.75	0	0			
	BRd20	0	0.25	0	0			
	BRd21	0	0.75	0	0			
	BRd22	1	0.25	0	0			
I	Id18	1	0.75	1	0	No resolution on holding a recall referendum	The mayor won in the first round of elections	pol ≠ pub
	Id19	0	0.75	1	1			
	Id20	0	0.75	1	1			
	Id21	0	0.25	1	1			
	Id22	0	0.25	1	1			
L	Ld18	0	0	0	0	NA	The mayor won in the first round of elections	pol = pub
	Ld19	0	0	0	0			
	Ld20	0	0	0	0			
	Ld21	0	0	0	0			
	Ld22	0	0	0	0			

Municipality ^{a)}	Debate on the report for a given year	nor ^{b)}	tot ^{c)}	cmo ^{d)}	out ^{e)}	Recall referendum	Mayoral election	Relation between political accountability (pol) and public accountability (pub)
MI	MIId18	1	0.75	1	1	No resolution on holding a recall referendum due to no granting a vote of confidence. Recall referendum organized due to other reason, but not valid	The mayor lost in the first round of elections	pol = pub
	MIId19	0	1	1	1			
	MIId20	1	1	1	1			
	MIId21	1	1	1	1			
	MIId22	1	1	1	1			
MO	MOd18	1	1	1	0	Recall referendum valid and effective	The former mayor, recalled in the referendum, did not run in the 2024 elections. The new mayor, elected in his place in 2023, was elected in 2024 in the first round.	pol = pub
	MOd19	1	1	1	1			
	MOd20	1	1	1	1			
	MOd21	0	1	1	1			
	MOd22	0	0.75	0	0			
MR	MRd18	1	0.25	1	0	Recall referendum not valid	The mayor lost in the first round of elections	pol = pub
	MRd19	1	1	1	1			
	MRd20	0	0.25	1	1			
	MRd21	0	0.75	1	0			
	MRd22	0	0.25	1	1			
NR	NRd18	0	0	0	0	NA	The mayor won in the first round of elections	pol = pub
	NRd19	0	0	0	0			
	NRd20	0	0.25	0	0			
	NRd21	0	0.25	0	0			
	NRd22	0	0	0	0			
PR	PRd18	1	0.75	1	0	No resolution on holding a recall referendum	The mayor won in the second round of elections	pol ≠ pub
	PRd19	1	1	1	1			
	PRd20	0	0	1	1			
	PRd21	0	1	1	1			
	PRd22	1	1	1	0			
PU	PUd18	0	0.75	0	0	NA	The mayor won in the first round of elections	pol = pub
	PUd19	0	0.75	0	0			
	PUd20	0	0	0	0			
	PUd21	0	0.25	0	0			
	PUd22	0	0.25	0	0			

Municipality ^{a)}	Debate on the report for a given year	nor ^{b)}	tod ^{c)}	cmo ^{d)}	out ^{e)}	Recall referendum	Mayoral election	Relation between political accountability (pol) and public accountability (pub)
ST	STd18	0	0.25	0	0	NA	The mayor won in the second round of elections	pol = pub
	STd19	1	0.75	0	0			
	STd20	0	0.25	0	0			
	STd21	0	0.25	0	0			
	STd22	0	0.25	0	0			
SW	SWd18	1	1	1	0	No resolution on holding a recall referendum due to no granting a vote of confidence. Recall referendum organized due to other reason, but not valid	The mayor won in the second round of elections	pol ≠ pub
	SWd19	1	1	1	1			
	SWd20	0	0.75	1	1			
	SWd21	0	0.25	1	1			
	SWd22	0	0.75	1	1			
Z	Zd18	1	0.25	0	0	NA	The mayor won in the first round of elections	pol = pub
	Zd19	1	1	0	0			
	Zd20	0	0.75	0	0			
	Zd21	0	0	0	0			
	Zd22	0	0.25	0	0			

^{a)} to protect the anonymity of interviewees in the study, we decided not to disclose the full names of the municipalities.

^{b)} participation of residents in the debate (residents did not participate – 0; residents participated – 1)

^{c)} debate and its time (no debate – 0; debate up to 45 min – 0.25; debate 45–90 min – 0.75; debate over 90 min – 1)

^{d)} majority in the council (supporting the mayor – 0; in the opposition to the mayor – 1)

^{e)} result of a vote of confidence (vote of confidence passed – 0; vote of confidence not passed – 1)

NA – does not apply in connection with each time a vote of confidence is passed