

Targets, trust and COVID-19 testing, by Christina Boswell

Political scrutiny of the UK's management of COVID-19 has recently revolved around an ambitious target the government set for itself: the goal of carrying out 100,000 tests per day by the end of April. The debacle around this target exemplifies many of the challenges – and paradoxes – generated by the use of quantitative targets in government.

Let's start by considering the purpose of setting this ambitious target. The '100,000 tests a day' target is a classic case of the dual function of targets: targets being used as a tool of political communication, but also as a means of galvanising action within public administration.

The first function is all about political signalling. By setting a high profile and ambitious target, the government was attempting to reassure a sceptical public by locking itself into an ambitious pledge. This type of numerical target has a particular appeal, as it can be tracked and monitored through publicly available data, thereby establishing a particularly robust tool of accountability.

But at the same time, the target also acted as a disciplining device, designed to whip the civil service into action. Political leaders have frequently expressed their frustration at the perceived inertia of Whitehall mandarins. Setting this type of 'stretch' target can place huge pressure on public officials to ramp up resources to achieve ambitious goals in a short space of time. And in this case, it clearly did have a galvanising effect on public administration.

Yet combining these two functions in one target is likely to create problems. High profile targets designed to reassure publics are rarely devised in a way that aligns with

operational needs. Such targets are often set with political communication in mind – rather than a consideration of the types of actions that would be most effective in achieving a particular outcome. Thus in this case, it may have been more sensible to focus on questions such as prioritisation, quality control, logistics, and the role of these tests within a broader test, trace and isolate strategy. Too much attention on just one aspect of the strategy – the number of tests conducted – narrowed down attention in an unhelpful way.

The effects of the target were also predictable. This simple and snappy numerical goal became a lightning rod for media and political attention, the central focus for holding the government to account. In doing so, the target displaced attention from other, more pertinent questions. Thus we had several days of media headlines focused on whether or not the government had met the goal, obscuring wider issues about the relevance or importance of this numerical goal as part of the government's overall response.

As is often the case with targets, even those who disagree with the target on principle cannot resist critiquing the government for failing to achieve it. Even those sceptical of the target have found it irresistible to use it as a tool for holding the government to account. In this way, detractors of the target have inadvertently helped shore up its validity. In this sense, targets are highly performative, recasting how we frame social problems and evaluate policy responses.

Finally, what about the political leaders who set such targets? For governments, setting this sort of ambitious, publicly monitored, goal is a big political gamble. Governments can face a severe loss of credibility when they fail to meet targets. But they also accrue very little political capital when they do meet them. Ambitious targets that end up being met tend to get very little air-time. And when they are covered, they tend to be greeted with suspicion – as we saw in sceptical media coverage at the end of April,

when the government's target appeared to be briefly met. The fact that a government meets a target it set for itself is not likely to meet criteria of newsworthiness.

So why do governments keep setting risky targets when they have so much to lose, and relatively little to gain? Despite their short-comings, targets retain a strong appeal to political leaders. They offer an especially rigorous tool for holding government to account, in an age where governments are searching for ways of shoring up credibility. First and foremost, these tools are seen as a device for grounding political trust – even though in the longer-term, they may have precisely the opposite effect.

Given these dynamics, governments are unlikely to learn the lessons of episodes such as the 100,000 tests targets. The immediate political capital gained from signalling commitment to such an ambitious goal will continue to outweigh the potential risks further down the line.

Christina Boswell is Professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Edinburgh. Her book 'Manufacturing Political Trust: Targets and Performance Measurement in Public Policy' won the 2020 Political Studies Association Mackenzie Prize for best book in political science.

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