

Political Accountability in ‘Real-Existing’ Democracies: Meaning and Mechanisms

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Democracy has many definitions, implications and consequences, but accountability is one of its most important components. Citizen participation, political equality, civic consciousness, self-realization, decent treatment by authorities, sense of individual political efficacy, respect for constitutional norms, protection of human rights, responsiveness to public opinion, social and economic leveling and, of course, “freedom” have all been associated with this form of political domination – either as a defining feature or a likely product of it – but they are all contingent and vulnerable if citizens cannot reliably hold their rulers accountable for the actions that they take in the public realm. Traditional sovereigns, benevolent despots or elected autocrats might momentarily tolerate any or all of the above, but if they cannot be held accountable they can dismiss these ‘political concessions’ as irrelevant or retract them at will.

Therefore, when Terry Karl and I were searching for the most generic and concise definition of “modern liberal representative political constitutional democracy,” i.e. “real-existing democracy” (RED), we hit upon the concept of accountability. We wanted a definition that captured the core of its meaning, that was not dependent upon a specific institution or set of institutions, that was not uniquely liberal or excessively defensive in its presumptions, that was neither exclusively procedural nor substantive in its content, and that could travel well across world cultural regions. None of those in widespread use in the burgeoning literature on democratization fit our admittedly demanding bill of particulars, especially not the so-called Schumpeterian definition or the many

versions derived from it.ⁱ All of these focused too single-mindedly on the regular conduct of a particular institution, i.e. elections that offered citizens a choice between competing sets of rulers and a subsequent opportunity to get rid of those they had previously chosen. Moreover, these definitions seemed to presume that whoever was elected remained accountable to those who did the electing and that those competing with each other must have offered different programmatic alternatives to citizens.ⁱⁱ

Indeed, many of the more theoretically inclined scholars who relied on such a ‘minimalist’ definition seemed embarrassed in doing so and excused themselves by arguing that, even though elections are not the only manifestation of democracy, their presence is easy to measure (even to dichotomize!) and/or that alternative, so-called substantive definitions of “it” are subject to partisan manipulation. Terry and I were all too aware that some alternative specifications have indeed been calculatedly “unrealistic” – i.e. they stipulated conditions of citizen equality in resources, access or benefits that no “real-existing” polity had ever satisfied. However useful these may be in setting standards by which self-proclaimed democracies should be judged normatively, they were not going to be useful for the task that we had assigned ourselves, namely, to measure empirically the extent to which a given polity had managed to consolidate a regime that merited the prestigious *appellation* of “modern political democracy.”

We came up with the following definition of “generic” democracy:

A regime or system of government in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public domain by citizens acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their representatives.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Although the article has been cited with respectable frequency, its effort at an omni-portable specification of “What democracy is ... and is not” has met with responses ranging from indifference to hostility. To the former, the emphasis on accountability must have seemed irrelevant or redundant. These readers presumed, as does much of the literature, that the mere holding of regular and honestly conducted elections in which all adult citizens are equally eligible to participate provides “the” most reliable and effective mechanism through which citizens can hold their rulers accountable. With Schumpeterian simplicity, all they have to do is leave their rulers alone once they have been chosen and, then, switch to an alternative set whose program is more

in accord with their preferences if they do not like what they have been delivered. When asked why it is that citizens seem to spend a lot of time and energy on supporting other kinds of representatives who do not stand for territorial constituencies (and who are rarely chosen by competitive elections), e.g. from interest associations and social movements, or even on acting individually between elections in order to get “their” elected rulers to conform to their preferences, the answer would presumably be that this is of minor importance and, even if not, it is contingent upon the outcome of “free and fair elections.” When asked about how citizens expect to hold accountable the numerous (and growing) set of non-elected but delegated “guardians” whose actions determine in large part whether their interests/passions are realized, the answer would be equally unsatisfactory – namely, that their elected representatives grouped in a parliament will take care of holding these guardians accountable.

To the latter, i.e. those readers hostile to the very notion of placing accountability at the center of such a definition of democracy, the source of objection probably differed more significantly. To epistemological positivists, the concept must have seemed too abstract and vague to be quantifiable and, therefore, not worth being taken into consideration – especially, when something much more concrete and observable (the holding of contested elections) was readily available. To political conservatives, accountability must have smelled of “mandated representation” in which those elected would be held to strict citizen-imposed limits on their subsequent behavior (and, horror of all horrors, recalled if they failed to do so). Those in positions of authority would lose their requisite autonomy for determining what was good for the polity as a whole and for resisting the momentary impulses of the populous. If necessary, the wise Edmund Burke could always be cited to this effect.

Needless to say, none of these objections convinced me at the time. And the subsequent literature seems to have vindicated my skepticism. In the last ten years there has been a veritable explosion of scholarly concern with the notion of political accountability, not to mention such cognate concepts as “corporate social accountability,” “community responsiveness” and “individual moral responsibility.” And predictably, in a perfect illustration of why strict positivism is so sterile in the social sciences, once a concept has been identified and accorded a certain theoretical or even

practical priority, analysts focus more and more critical attention upon its meaning(s) and begin to provide an increasingly secure basis for its measurement.

In this exploratory paper, I will first try to elaborate further on the intrinsically ambiguous, not to say contradictory, elements that are contained within the concept of accountability and, then, I shall pursue this further by attempting to specify the mechanisms that are available in RED to hold rulers effectively accountable.

Searching for a Definition

Accountability is first a relationship between two sets of actors (actually, most of it is played out not between individuals, but between organizations) in which the former accepts to inform the other, explain or justify his or her actions and submit to any pre-determined sanctions that the latter may impose. Meanwhile, the latter who/that have become subject to the command of the former, must also provide required information, explain how they are obeying or not obeying the formers' commands and accept the consequences for what they have done or not done. In short, when it works, accountability involves a mutual exchange of responsibilities and potential sanctions between citizens and rulers, made all the more complicated by the fact that in between the two are usually a varied and competitive set of representatives. Needless to say, there are many caveats, loose linkages and role reversals in this relationship, so that its product is almost always contested. Information can be selective and skewed ("sexed up" seems to be the current expression); justifications and explanations can be deflected to other actors ("The IMF made me do it"); sanctions are rarely applied and can be simply ignored ("Who are you to question and threaten my ...?"). Most importantly, as Andreas Schedler has pointed out, in the real world this relationship typically involves "recursive cycles of mutual accountability," rather than a simple, linear and self-exhausting event.^{iv}

Second, the subject matter of accountability can be quite varied: ethical behavior, financial probity, social esteem, sexual relations, functional interdependence, familial obligation, patriotic duty, etc., but the distinctive type that interests us is **political accountability**, i.e. that which may accompany the exercise of asymmetric power. Needless to say, all of the above may enter into the political equation in the form of promises and payoffs, but the core question in terms of

democratic theory is how to tame **and** to exploit the coercive power of specific institutions, especially the permanent institutions of a regime that exercises a putative monopoly of the legitimate use of that power over a given population and within a given territory, i.e. a modern state.^v

Third, all stable political regimes probably have some predictable form of accountability to some type of constituency. Sultanistic autocracies have their coteries and cadres. Military dictatorships have their juntas and complex arrangements for resolving the conflicts between the different armed services. Even absolute monarchies were supposed to be accountable to God – not to mention more earthly dynastic and marital concerns. What democracy has that these do not is **citizens** – a constituency presumably covering the entire country and populated (these days) by all adult persons – minus some legal and illegal foreign residents, prisoners and ex-felons and/or mental patients. Moreover, in terms of political accountability, each citizen has the same rights and obligations, i.e. to be informed about prospective actions, to hear the justification for them and to make a judgment about how they were performed. What makes their role increasingly complex is that they have had to rely more and more upon specialized **representatives**, i.e. on agents who in turn act as principals when it comes to ensuring accountability of elected or appointed **rulers**. If this were not complex enough, these very same representative agent/principals may be been ruling agents in the past and probably aspire to be so in the future! Meanwhile, citizens who started out as principals in this arrangement subsequently become agents themselves when they are obliged to conform to decisions they may have opposed or not even known about.^{vi}

Fourth, as fiendishly complex as it is, political accountability has to be institutionalized if it is to work effectively, i.e. it has to be embedded in a stable, mutually understood and pre-established set of **rules**. Some of these may be formalized in a constitution, in basic legal codes or in sworn oaths, but political accountability is not the same as legal, financial or ethical accountability. Rulers can be investigated and held to account for actions that did not transgress the law or result in personal enrichment or violate common mores. They may have simply made bad political choices that failed to produce their intended effect or cost vastly more than initially announced. And rulers can even be held accountable for not making a good or a bad choice – just for having failed to act

after promising to do so as a condition for getting elected or selected. Similarly, citizens can be held responsible by their rulers for what they have done or not done – provided the rules were taken by previously established consent.

Finally, it should be noted that political accountability is **not only negative**. Citizens in a democracy – or their representatives – do not normally desire to “throw the rascals out.” This form of government does offer regular and periodic occasions when this can be done peacefully, although in parliamentary systems the opportunities are more dispersed, irregular, and potentially costly. Moreover, regardless of the executive-legislative format, rulers have a considerable array of mechanisms to defend themselves against such an eventuality. More frequently, the exchange of information, justification and judgment is unobtrusive and citizens reward (or, at least, tolerate) rather than punish their rulers. Hence, it would be completely inappropriate to use manifest incidents of electoral turnover, loss of a vote of confidence, impeachment of a president, resignation of a minister, or removal from office due to scandal as positive indicators for the efficacy of political accountability. In all likelihood, the rulers who are most accountable are those who are never threatened with such measures. They have so internalized the expectations of those they are ruling that they have nothing to fear from accountability; indeed, it gives them greater legitimacy when they have to act against immediate popular opinion.^{vii}

Finding Political Mechanisms to Ensure Accountability

The orthodox answer, we have seen, is quite simple – so much so that most democratic theorists regard it as unproblematic: “free, fair and regular conducted elections.” Needless to say, these scholars are usually not so naive as to believe that the mere holding of regularly conducted elections and the honest tabulation of votes are sufficient. Robert Dahl in his by-now classic specification of the components of “polyarchy” or, as I prefer to call it, “real-existing democracy,” has added the following as procedurally necessary:

(1) Practically all adults have the right to vote in the election of officials;

(2) Practically all adults have the right to run for elective offices in the government;

(3) Citizens have a right to express themselves without the danger of severe punishment on political matters broadly defined;

(4) Citizens have a right to seek out alternative sources of information. Moreover, alternative sources of information exist and are protected by law; and

(5) Citizens also have the right to form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest groups.^{viii}

At some level, virtually all REDs in advanced capitalist countries satisfy these procedural requisites and, therefore, deserve their favorable appellation. But *nota bene* the conditions that were **not** specified by Dahl:

(1) All adults have not only the equal right to vote, but should demonstrate some equal probability of actually doing so – regardless of social status, wealth, physical location, age, etc.;

(2) When they do vote, their preferences should not be aggregated in territorial constituencies that are systematically disproportionate in size or designed to favor pre-determined outcomes;

(3) Practically all adults have not just the right to become candidates for elected office, but some reasonable probability of being nominated by one of the contending parties;

(4) From those who do become candidates, there should be more than one that has a reasonable probability of winning and that probably entails approximately equal financial resources and media access;

(5) When offering competing candidates for election, the platforms or campaign promises of parties should offer policy alternatives that are not only plausible, but also address issues of concern to citizens;

(6) Alternative sources of information not only exist and are protected by law, but their ownership and diffusion should not be so concentrated or monopolized by a self-empowered minority that citizens can only receive a biased account;

(7) These sources of information are not only diverse in origin and accessible in cost, but citizens must also be sufficiently capable and motivated to acquire the political information needed to make a “well-informed” choice among candidates.

(8) Competing political parties and associations are not just independent of state authorities and each other, but their leaders and members are not systematically drawn from a skewed segment of the population;

(9) None of these parties or associations should enjoy privileged recognition, access or subsidization from state agencies or governments officials;

(10) Incumbent elected office-holders should not enjoy decisive advantage in subsequent elections;

(11) Winning candidates show some high probability of at least attempting to fulfill promises made while campaigning; and

(12) This should be monitored and, where necessary, sanctioned by the intervention of the disciplined political parties that nominated them.

These twelve conditions did not make the list for the simple reason that virtually no RED fulfills all of them and many do not fulfill any of them.^{ix} And yet, I would argue that they are more important for ensuring accountability than the ones that Dahl has listed. It is one thing regularly to hold “free and fair” elections; it is quite another to ensure that these elections will be uniquely capable of holding the winners accountable. And they might not even contribute much to guaranteeing that the representatives elected will act as reliable agents for the citizens who voted for them. In other words, if REDs depended as exclusively on parliamentary and/or presidential elections as most of liberal democratic theory seems to assume, they would probably fail even the

most elementary test of accountability.^x And, as I have suggested elsewhere, to the extent that political parties are crucial to the conduct of these elections and the subsequent behavior of legislative and executive bodies, the situation has been getting worse with the declining role of these political organizations in most REDs.^{xi}

Fortunately, REDs have several other mechanisms to monitor and, occasionally, to sanction the exchange between citizens and rulers *via* their representatives. Let us search for these by exploring the three ‘metaphorical’ dimensions that have surrounded recent discussions of accountability.

Space

By far the most common dimension has been spatial. In the classic liberal account, the triad of citizens, representatives and rulers are connected vertically in an order that begins with individual citizens at the bottom, who are grouped together in various forms of collective action (of which parties, elections and territorial constituencies are only one) that empower and constrain governing agents and agencies at the top. In turn, the process flows downward through multiple channels of public authority, delegated responsibility to intermediary representatives and, eventually, the voluntary compliance of individuals, families and firms. Needless to say, there can be short circuits in the up and down exchange when citizens address demands directly to their rulers and when rulers impose their commands directly upon their citizens – but the metaphor remains constant, with or without the intervening representatives.

Some of the other vertical mechanisms are complements to the most visible, i.e. the electoral, one. Referendums, initiatives and recalls may or may not follow lines of cleavage organized around political parties, but they would hardly be effective without the periodic (and more-or-less predictable) occurrence of elections. It is their “shadow” that determines whether these popular consultations will be held and (usually) whether their results will be effective. Elections themselves can be held at various levels and at different times in federal or decentralized polities – just as by-elections can insert an additional interim element of accountability

in more unified ones.^{xii} Representative organizations can also have their own elections, e.g. primaries in parties and leadership contests in associations, and their results can be utilized by members to improve the process of vertical accountability. What is more problematic in interpretation is the enormous proliferation of ‘passive’ vertical consultations undertaken by rulers and representatives via survey research, focus group analysis and exit polling.^{xiii} On the positive side, these devices greatly improve the information available concerning citizen preferences and may be used constructively by politicians to orient their behavior accordingly. Elections are notoriously poor in information content, especially when (as usual) they involve multiple issues of uncertain salience to voters. Retrospective interpretations of them can be very inaccurate and, thereby, distort vertical accountability in both directions. On the negative side, all this passive information-gathering by rulers and representatives can be exploited to produce symbolic and misleading responses. Instead of learning what to do, politicians learn what not to say and how to obfuscate what they are doing.

Citizens and rulers are not confined only to interacting indirectly and vertically through their respective representatives. The former can demonstrate in various unconventional ways (although usually party, association and/or movement leaders are involved in organizing these events); the latter can tolerate, listen to and even react to the content of such demonstrations. Also, rulers can organize their own (counter-) demonstrations or, anticipating their likelihood, they can address the issues beforehand in a form of ‘pre-emptive’ representation.

To this vertical spatial dimension, liberal advocates of democracy have added a **horizontal** one, based on the interaction between agencies within the state according to pre-established constitutional or legal rules. Strictly speaking, these “separations of power” and subsequent “checks and balances” are not democratic. They can even be invoked to trump the vertical connection between rulers and citizens. Their historical origin lies in aristocracy – in the pre-democratic efforts by local notables to curb the autocratic powers of the sovereign king and they are the contemporary embodiment of one of the oldest

principles of political prudence, namely, the desirability of “mixed regimes.” It is argued that vertical accountability alone would be unstable, i.e. subject to short-term swings in public enthusiasm, and dangerous, i.e. susceptible to domination by tyrannical majorities. To countermand these tendencies, REDs need institutions that are not based on the preferences of citizens, competition between political representatives or popularly accountable rulers. In other words, all contemporary REDs should be (and are) mixed regimes with rules embedded by previous generations in their respective constitutions or basic laws that guarantee the autonomous powers of non-democratic institutions in order to limit the exercise of vertical accountability.

The mechanisms of this horizontal accountability are multiple and there is evidence to support the observation that they have considerably increased in variety and authority in recent decades. The most venerable is an independent judiciary with powers of constitutional/legal review. There is nothing “democratic” about a Supreme Court that rules against a piece of legislation that is supported by most citizens, drafted and passed by normal legislative procedures and approved by executive institutions – and, yet, such actions have routinely been accepted as legitimate in some (but not all) REDs. Moreover, these high courts have been supplemented with more specialized ones dealing with human rights, racism, labor relations and the conduct of elections – not mention such American *bizarries* as grand juries, special counsels and class action suits. Such a process of juridification may have beneficial effect – especially where the rule of law is precarious – but they impinge on matters that democratic institutions should be resolving, no matter how inefficiently or inconclusively.

Similarly, the checks and balances (“veto points” in the current jargon) exercised by legislative and executive agents representing different constituencies may permit relatively small (and often highly privileged) minorities to block measures that enjoy widespread

citizen support. And the list of such potential mechanisms of horizontal intervention has lengthened and diversified. Autonomous Central Banks can ignore a popular government's request to lower interest rates in order to raise employment levels. General Staffs of the Armed Forces and Intelligence Agencies in league with small (and secretive) factions within executive agencies can declare wars or national emergencies without the approval of elected representatives. And other non-electorally accountable institutions have emerged to intervene in the classical executive-legislative-judicial triangle by empowering actions by so called "outside" and "disinterested" experts, e.g. auditing agencies and inspectorate generals.^{xiv} Various regulatory commissions, licensing authorities and expert bodies within the public administration can issue binding regulations with extensive effects on the citizenry under powers vaguely delegated to them by previous legislatures. Even more problematic from the perspective of vertical democratic authorization are the powers allocated by international treaties to regional and global organizations that are not themselves subject to citizen approval or scrutiny. One can, of course, argue that most of such delegations are functionally and temporally imperative in the complex, multi-layered, interdependent and accelerated context (*viz.* globalization) in which contemporary polities are compelled to operate – but this does not make them any more democratic.

These national and supra-national "guardians," to use the expression coined by Robert Dahl, have proliferated to the extent that REDs have been accused of having been so deprived of policy content that they are no longer capable of responding to changes in the preferences of citizens.^{xv} Their mechanisms can make it impossible for popularly elected legislatures or executives to change national policies – even when 'free and fair' elections have produced partisan rotations in the government in power. Mixed regimes filled with guardian agencies, veto players and restricted agendas may be necessary to

protect contemporary national REDs from their own potential excesses and inefficiencies, but will they still be able to extract political legitimacy from such questionably democratic practices?

To these two spatial referents, I have suggested adding a third, namely, **oblique** accountability. This would be exercised by diverse organizations in civil society that do not (at least, not overtly) nominate candidates and compete in elections, but are capable of mobilizing citizens (and sometimes denizens) to defend their interests and passions in the political process. This collective action is much more continuous and insidious in the sense that they seek access independently of the electoral cycle and at all sites where “authoritative allocations” are made.^{xvi} They tend to be permanently organized and professionally staffed which can give them unique capacities to gather data and exercise influence in highly specialized policy arenas. Politicians are held accountable not so much because of the votes that these organizations can deliver as for their indispensable information, financial support, threat of disruption, and/or capacity to ensure conformity to policy goals. Unfortunately from the perspective of normative democratic theory, their ability to deliver such public goods is highly unequal.^{xvii} Unlike the putative equality of the voting act, the “real existing” associations and movements of civil society are much better at promoting some interests and passions than others. Or, as E.E. Schattschneider put it so cogently, “The problem with the interest group chorus is that it sings with an upper class accent.”^{xviii}

The civil societies of most REDs are still in expansion – despite some alarmist noises about “bowling alone” in the United States.^{xix} Their coverage of interests and passions varies considerably according to the pluralist or corporatist nature of their system of intermediation, but everywhere it is skewed in favor of particular classes, sectors and professions, and specific “causes.” The smaller and more concentrated the category of

interested ‘stakeholders,’ the greater is its likelihood of effective self-organization (*viz.* “the domination of special interests”). The more intense and focused the source of passionate concern, the greater is the probability of its mobilizing followers (*viz.* “single-issue movements”). The oblique role of such an inevitably skewed civil society is, therefore, not a substitute for the potentially equal contribution of citizens exercising vertical accountability, but it has become a very important complement to it. Moreover, the associations and movements that compose it can be of crucial importance in informing and supporting those state agencies involved in activating the checks and balances of horizontal accountability.

Time x Actors

No one can deny that democracy of whatever type has its distinctive rhythms, tempos, timings and sequences. Elections, popular mobilizations, policy cycles, public attention spans and even the popularity of politicians follow more-or-less predictable patterns over time once the regime has been consolidated – even if their coincidences occasionally produce exciting moments of *fortuna* and induce acts of unexpected *virtù*. Simplifying greatly, one can distinguish a relatively lengthy period of proposing, discussing and agenda-setting (the ***ex ante*** in Figure One below), a more compressed moment during which a decision is made via interest alliances, inter-agency bargaining, executive-legislative transactions and eventual ratification by vote (the ***dum*** in Figure One) and, finally, a long drawn out process whereby the proposal – now a law or regulation – is implemented, produces its intended and unintended effects and may be reviewed by courts or become a matter of wider political controversy (the ***ex post*** in Figure One). The implication of highlighting the temporal rather than the spatial dimension is that what determines the outcome of “recursive cycles of mutual accountability” may be more a matter of **when** than **where**, i.e. at what point in the process of making binding decisions

specific actors – whether principals or agents or both – enter into political contention rather than whether they are located vertically, horizontally or even obliquely in pre-established networks. Needless to say, I cannot prove this “intuition.” I can only build upon it and discover later if it is more fruitful in explaining outcomes than the more usual spatial metaphor.^{xx}

Figure One: The Generic Properties of Successful Accountability:

Time x Actors

Actors/Time	<i>Ex Ante</i>	<i>Dum</i>	<i>Ex Post</i>
<i>Citizens</i>	Participation	Attention	Obligation
<i>Representatives</i>	Mobilization	Competition	Compliance
<i>Rulers</i>	Accessibility	Deliberation	Responsiveness

In Figure One, I have cross-tabulated the temporal aspect of the decision-making process with the type of actor whose behavior is being evaluated and, thereby, generated nine criteria for describing and evaluating a successful accountability sequence.

The most “classic” one is probably that in the upper-left hand corner: **participation**. It has long been presumed that the more that citizens participate actively in the “decision to make a decision,” i.e. in the discussion about whether a decision should be made, what should be on the agenda and who should be involved in making the decision, the more **attention** they will pay to the subsequent process and the more likely they will feel an **obligation** to conform with what will eventually be decided – even if they opposed the decision itself. Representatives in the *ex ante* phase will presumably play a key role in

collective **mobilization**, both by surveying the attitudes of their supporters/members/voters and by informing them of what may be at stake. During the making of a decision, they will enter into a **competition** under pre-established rules with representatives from other parties, associations and movements to influence its substance and, even if they are unsuccessful in doing so, they should be willing to accept the result as fair and try to evoke the **compliance** of their supporters/members/voters. Following a similar logic, the more that rulers provide **accessibility** to the greatest number and widest variety of individual citizens or organizations from civil society, the higher will be the level of information that they will carry into their more restricted **deliberations** and the greater will be the likelihood that the decisions they eventually take will be **responsive** to the interests and passions of citizens and their representatives.

Note that these criteria are not functionally or necessarily interrelated. Rulers can gain access to relatively passive and disorganized citizens (for example, via informal soundings, survey research or focus groups) and active and well-organized citizens can participate in “unconventional” ways that do not involve being granted formal access (for example, by demonstrating against the lack of access). The active participation of individuals in the initial phase may not be a guarantee of their subsequent interest in a particular issue and they may feel no obligation to conform once the decision has been made and is being implemented. Representatives are in a particularly ambiguous position since they have, on the one hand, to mobilize their followers if they are to compete effectively for influence over the decision, but, on the other hand, after it has been ratified the rulers will expect them to deliver the compliance of these very same people – even if their influence has been marginal. Should they fail to do so, i.e. act as a disloyal opposition, they risk being excluded from future decision-making.

**Figure Two: The Generic Properties of Failed Accountability:
Time x Actors**

	<i>Actors/Time</i>	<i>Ex Ante</i>	<i>Dum</i>	<i>Ex Post</i>
Citizens	Absention	Indifference	Resentment	
	<i>Representatives</i>	Mobilization (against)	Obstruction	Resistance
	<i>Rulers</i>	Exclusion	Collusion	Imposition

Figure Three simply inverts the previous matrix in an effort to capture what qualities might emerge if the process of political accountability were to go wrong. There is no reason to provide any detail about these negative criteria. They are merely intended to capture the reverse of those discussed above. Their importance would only become more evident when empirically minded scholars attempt to deal with the thorny issue of measurement since accountability seems to be one of those political concepts, like legitimacy, that usually becomes apparent only when it does not exist or is practiced badly. When it works well, nothing seems to be happening and one can arrive at the false conclusion that it makes no contribution to improving the qualities of democracy!

Concluding with a Frustration

If nothing else, the preceding discussion of accountability should have demonstrated that the concept has a very complex and “tricky” structure. For one thing, some of its positive properties may be incompatible with each other or, at the very least, involve complex tradeoffs. High levels of individual participation may not be so benevolently linked to subsequent attention and sense of obligation. Citizens may tire after their passionate

advocacy of causes and subsequently blame representatives and authorities unjustifiably for the inevitable compromises they had to make during and after the decision-making process. Rulers may be accessible to the widest possible range of individual and collective expressions of interest, but not take them into account when they start deliberating seriously and implementing their decisions authoritatively. Even more commonly, persons in positions of authority – whether elected or selected – may honestly be convinced that they have done their best to be responsive to citizen preferences, only to discover that citizens did not really want what they said they wanted or have changed their minds in the meantime. Democratic and accountable politicians very frequently have to take risks of this sort and follow courses of action that are not immediately popular, with the calculation that once the effects are experienced the citizenry will have learned to accept them. The inference I draw from this is that the scores on the 9 x 9 variables in Figures One and Two are very unlikely to produce a single scale of accountability. The most one should expect are distinctive clusters of scores that will generate types (or, better, profiles) of accountability that might be equally effective or defective in different social, cultural, institutional or historical contexts.

For another thing, reflection suggests that the relation of many of these variables to accountability may not be linear and incremental. Officials may be so accessible that they only manage to arrive at a decision when it is too late to resolve the problem. Representatives may over-mobilize their followers and raise expectations beyond realistic possibility. They may also compete so strongly with each other and be so balanced in their efforts pro- and con- that a tiny and quite unrepresentative minority may determine the outcome – undermining both responsiveness and compliance. The lesson I have gleaned from this reflection is that, one should be attentive to the probability that there will be

curvilinear, even parabolic, relations with the actual performance of REDs. There may even be bizarre “kinks” due to peculiar sequences or unique combinations.

All of which means that moving beyond theoretical speculation to data gathering and hypothesis testing will be a daunting task. But it will be worth the effort. I hope that I have convinced the reader that relying on a single indicator of accountability – the holding of free, fair and regular elections – was always unsatisfactory and is becoming less so under contemporary conditions. Regardless of the perspective – spatial, temporal or actor-defined – other mechanisms are involved and in REDs they may not be correlated with each other. I doubt very much if the multiple indicators that are needed to capture its complex dimensionality can be eventually collapsed into a single indicator that can reliably and validly tell us whether a given polity is more democratically accountable than another. The best we may have to settle for is that some types of REDs are differently accountable than others.

Which is going to make it difficult to test what I think is the most important hypothesis embedded in the literature, namely, that **the more accountable a real-existing democracy is, the higher will be the quality of its performance**. No REDs will ever reach the level of perfection implied by normative democratic theories, but it would be nice to be able to document how close any one of them has come.

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ His oft-quoted definition is “(Democracy is) that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote” [Joseph Schumpeter](#), *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1950), " p. 269. It is not clear whether those scholars who use this “minimalist” and “elitist” definition are aware of the context in which it is inserted where Schumpeter expressed great pessimism about whether citizens in modern capitalist democracies could have any other effective means of holding their leaders accountable. They could only vote periodically and then hope for the best until the next election.

ⁱⁱ Reference to Dahl's point

ⁱⁱⁱ (with Terry Karl), "What Democracy is ... and is not", [Journal of Democracy](#), Vol. II, No. 3 (Summer 1991), pp. 75-88. NB I have inserted two significant changes from the original: (1) I have replaced “governance” with “government” as the result of my subsequent critical engagement with the vast flow of literature on “governance” and my conclusion that many uses of this term are intended precisely to justify the introduction of less than democratic practices; and (2) I have corrected the earlier version when some zealous editor at the [Journal of Democracy](#) inserted the word “elected” in front of “representatives.” Neither Terry Karl nor I caught this mistake until it was too late, but it illustrates well the extent to which the conduct of elections is rooted in the perception that Anglo-American liberals have of what is democracy.

iv Schedler cite.

v One of the peculiar features of virtually all of the recent discussions about political accountability is its lop-sided emphasis on limiting the power of state authorities. This is a marked feature of liberal democratic thought which is single-mindedly concerned with the prospect of tyranny (and justifiably so), but it does not excuse the almost complete lack of attention to the equally democratic concern with mobilizing the power of citizens to overcome the entrenched privileges of aristocracies or oligarchies. Rulers in a democracy, in other words, should be held accountable not just for misusing power for their own benefit, but also for not using it for the benefit of the citizenry.

vi Much of the recent literature on accountability makes heavy use of the “principal/agent problem” without any sensitivity to these switches in status in the course of the political process. Citizens are only and always the “principals” and rulers are only and always the “agents.” The crucial intervening role of representatives is almost never recognized (or else representatives and rulers are fused into a single actor/agent). When it comes to empirical analysis, the usual econometric estimations (often with dodgy data across a large number of incomparable units) commit egregious fallacies of inference from the individual all the way to the societal unit.

vii This may help to explain a puzzle raised by Andreas Schedler. Why do rulers willingly enter into a relation of accountability with their citizen/subjects? From the naked perspective of self-interest, they should do everything to avoid it – especially if they are powerful, unified and cynical, and the populous is weak, dispersed, ill-informed and probably rather credulous. The simple answers are either habit formation or law-abidingness. Rulers when they were previously citizens or representatives were socialized to expect such a political relationship or to respect the constitution. Neither of these is convincing in the case of a neo-democracy since rulers will have been socialized to expect the opposite under the *ancien régime*. Another possibility is that the international environment (at the present moment) supports accountable rulers and punishes non-accountable ones. But are these mechanisms of diffusion and reward strong and predictable enough? I am more convinced by two distinctively political micro-foundations: (1) respecting, even anticipating accountability to citizens increases one’s legitimacy when comes the inevitable moment for taking unpopular decisions; and (2) accepting accountability builds up a set of expectations among citizens that will limit the range of policy options available to one’s successor.

viii Robert Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 11.

ix I do not believe that in stipulating these conditions I am being excessively **idealistic**. This is a particular common error since the very nature of democratic political theory encourages it. Normative standards are frequently set at a level that no “really-existing” democracy has ever satisfied, e.g. all citizens participate actively in the political process and have equal resources to invest in pursuing their interests; the national constitution is fairly applied to all social groups and territorial units; rulers only make decisions that are approved by a majority of the citizenry; or, elected officials only pursue the public and not their private interests. Unless we recognize that much of democratic theory is hortatory – aimed at encouraging us to do better in the future than we have done in the past – we will not be able to make fair and “realistic” assessments about what REDs have (and have not) accomplished.

x I have read with fascination the amazingly contorted efforts of some American political scientists to convince themselves and the public that despite the manifest non-functioning of most of these conditions, members of the US House of Representatives, nevertheless, do remain accountable to their citizen/principals through such mechanisms as

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xi “Parties are not what they once were”, in L. Diamond and R. Gunther (eds.), *Political Parties and Democracy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 67-89.

xii In the case of the member states of the European Union, these ‘supplements’ are supra- and not just sub-national. Indeed, the fact that so-called “secondary elections” to the European Parliament have been producing increasingly divergent outcomes from national “primary elections” has become a growing embarrassment to rulers. When one combines these elections with sub-national elections due to intra-national devolution to regions, provinces and “Estados Autonómicos,” the sheer number of electoral opportunities available to the citizens of Europe in different constituencies has increased quite significantly, which may be interpreted as increasing the degree of ruler accountability – however difficult it may be to interpret these “multi-layered” events.

xiii There have even been rumors to the effect that brain-scanning has been used to measure instinctual reactions to various political stimuli.

xiv The diffusion of Ombudsmen offices is more unambiguously democratic in that it provides citizens and associations with a vertical channel of direct access to rulers. Admittedly, these agencies usually act in a horizontal fashion to extract information, produce justifications and sanction actions by other state agencies.

xv Reference to Dahl.

xvi One of the most astonishing features of recent work by American political scientists on accountability is not only its single-minded focus on elections, but also its assumption that parliaments are the exclusive site at which binding decisions are made. The “discretion” of administrative agencies and “delegated powers” of guardian institutions – not to mention in some cases, the “decretismo” of elected executives – goes unmentioned.

xvii Actually this “handicap” of oblique accountability raises an important issue in normative democratic theory. According to the orthodox perspective, strict political equality is what is expected of citizens. They all should have the

same right and opportunity (some would even say, duty) to participate in the making of all decisions, regardless of how much these decisions might affect them or how interested they might be in the issues involved. In practice, REDs not only recognize but institutionalize all sorts of arrangements that reflect the fact that citizens do have quite different **intensities** of preference. Through apportionment of constituencies, weighting of votes, selective means of access, quotas of admission and other proportional allocations, some citizens are deliberately (if often informally) privileged over others. Categories of them, such as religious or linguistic minorities, are protected from numerical domination by granting them specific collective rights. Cabinets, executive boards and advisory councils are deliberately composed with over-represented territorial or functional minorities. Are these practices un-democratic because they are rooted in inequality? Or, do they correspond to a deeply entrenched normative conviction that “fairness in treatment” and “tolerance of diversity” are matters of proportion and, therefore, that a “proper mixed” RED has to incorporate differences in intensity among its citizens?

^{xviii} Reference to EES

^{xix} Reference to Putnam and Putnam+

^{xx} An associated hypothesis would be that there has been a tendency – accelerating in recent years – toward a decline in *ex ante* accountability and an effort by rulers to convince their subjects/citizens that they should be content with the *ex post* variety, especially that offered by periodic elections and the opportunity they provide to change the incumbent set of rulers. The usual reason cited for this impoverishment is that the increased scale and scope of governing, combined with the rising importance of technology, makes the average citizen less capable of evaluating the costs and benefits of a given course of action *ex ante*. This should be left to technocrats and political specialists and it is only **after** they have experienced the results of such policies that citizens should hold rulers accountable. Perhaps, this would be a justifiable modification of democratic accountability were it not for the fact that the parties occupying most of the space in retrospective elections have become so similar in their programs that citizens increasingly question whether they are being offered a meaningful set of alternatives. The response, especially in neo-democracies, has been very high levels of electoral volatility and more frequent turn-overs in power – without, however, any apparent sense of satisfaction at having exercised so successfully their capacity for rendering rulers accountable. The same policies persist and the same rulers later return to power – contributing to even more *desencanto* with democracy.