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## Political Accountability As a Largely Desired Component Of Governments

In most modern western conceptions of government, accountability is a desirable component of political institutions. A general formulation of what constitutes accountability is easy to conjure. Democratic principles, after all, rely on a government operating under the consent of the governed. However, true accountability goes beyond mere consent. Mark Bovens's concept of political accountability include a triadic structure: political organizations or agents after must be subject to a forum of some kind, and then must be subject to some kind of sanctions imposed by the forum. While this formulation of accountability is widely accepted, much debate exists over what qualifies as sanctions and whether or not the leveling of sanctions is necessary to ensure political accountability. In particular, the question exists as to whether or not punishment as a form of sanctions is necessary for a model of political accountability. While sanctions in the form of a negative utility are an essential part of the forum's ability in a system of political accountability, only the possibility of sanctions is a necessary function of political accountability, in so far that a government agent (or agency) must face the risk of negative sanctions in order to be incentivized to make sure its account of its actions are to the approval of the forum. To clarify this position, a demonstration of the function and necessity of a triadic system of government accountability is needed.

Mark Bovens, in his paper "Two Concepts of Accountability," asserts that there are largely two different conceptions of accountability: accountability as a virtue and accountability as a mechanism. The former deals largely with a normative idea of positive qualities most citizens want in their government; while the latter, when referring to political accountability, is the mechanism within a political system that guarantees government agents are held to give an account of their actions. As previously asserted, most mechanisms of government accountability consist of three main components: the agent, in most cases the elected or appointed official carrying out a public office; the forum, or in a liberal democracy, the voters to whom the agent's account is given and determines whether or not the account is acceptable; and sanctions, or the negative consequences dealt towards the government agent if the account given does not satisfy the forum. The agent's role is obvious. She serves a given role for the public interests and as a result is given a kind of political authority. Of course, the agent can also be an agency and compose of an entire branch of government. The purpose of the forum is for political legitimacy. A representative body—or the voters themselves—grants approval to the government agent by measuring the value of their account. For this to occur, the forum must have the ability to engage with the agent, questioning its decisions and demanding an account of its actions. It is here where conceptions of accountability can differ.

To some, accountability is accomplished with the forum's inquiry. However, others argue that the forum must also be able to perform what composes the final pillar of Bovens' conception of political accountability: to impose sanctions. The purpose of the sanctions is to make the giving an account a worthwhile exercise. Though, it is important to note that leveling sanctions is not necessary for accountability, but the possibility for imposing sanctions. As Bovens puts it, "The possibility of sanctions – not the actual imposition of sanctions – makes the difference between the non-committal provision of information and being held to account." Without the possibility of sanctions, government agents would have little to no incentive to give an accurate account, let

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alone any account. And without the pressure of a negative outcome, any account given, however true, is not subject to any form of political referendum. The agent is then essentially free to do what she chooses, without consequence. Although, once again, this does not mean imposing sanctions are necessary.

One can imagine a forum determining the actions of a government agent to have been the right actions, and therefore choose not to enforce any form of sanctions. To say that sanctions are required would be to undermine the positive outcomes of a public agent performing her take in accordance with her public duty. Accountability, after all, is a method of assuring those in governance remain on a virtuous path as defined by their constituency. The positive outcome for an agent in a politically accountable system is clear; the preservation of a position of public office. Sanctions, then, can simply be described as the inverse of this, principally manifesting in democratic societies as removal from office. However, both less and more severe sanctions can exist. Of the less severe quality, falling out of favorability with the public is one immediate outcome of bad policy decisions by public officials, often leading to removal from office. A more severe sanction could be criminal prosecution for poor handling of the office. An extreme, while not often seen, that still occurs in democratic societies. The severity of punishment in these cases seems less to relate to accountability and more to the responsibility of a government official for her own actions or the political outcomes that follow her tenure in office. However, this is separate issue. The question does still exist whether political institutions that lack the ability to have sanctions brought up against them are still accountable.

Seemingly unaccountable systems like these exist in many forms in modern polities. In the United States, there is the Supreme Court, whose justices serve lifetime appointments, as well as the Federal Reserve; an institution rarely held in the public spotlight for its actions yet reserves a mass amount of influence over the global economy. The best response to these concerns is to point out the fact that neither of these two institutions is without the possibility of sanctions and therefore falls under the label of accountable, albeit in a more narrow definition than previous expanded.

Take, for example, the United States Supreme Court. Supreme Court Justices appointed or life; and throughout their careers, have the sole responsibility of giving an account of the highest legal disputes in the country. In doing so, the Court satisfies two tenants of Bovens triadic conception of a politically accountable system. Prima facie, the Court seems to lack the possibility of sanctions, as their lifetime appointments make them immune from conventional forms of democratic sanctions such as removal from office. However, Supreme Court Justices may be impeached by a trial of the U.S. House of Representatives and a vote in the U.S. Senate. However unlikely it may be, in this way Supreme Court justices are constantly subject to political accountability, any decision they make being grounds to remove them through Congress. The same conditions exist for Governors of the Federal Reserve, who may be removed anytime from office by the President. While conventional threats of sanctions may be hard to find in certain political institutions (occasionally by design), many systems are still rendered subject to some form of political accountability. Bovens even praises a balance between direct and more vague forms of political accountability.

“Accountability to legal and administrative forums, such as courts, auditors, ombudsmen, inspectorates and controllers, is an important mechanism to prevent and detect corruption and the abuse of public powers. Autonomous, or semi-autonomous, accountability forums provide for checks and balances that operate independently from the political process. Good

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governance arises from a dynamic equilibrium between the various powers of – and increasingly beyond – the state.”

Political accountability is a largely desired component of governments. By creating an active and conscious relationship between a polity’s separate parts, accountability as a mechanism enforces the idea of a government that is working for the best interests of its people and their beliefs. The possibility to impose sanctions is a necessary function of this mechanism; and without it, it would be difficult to trust or even consider a system to be truly politically accountable.

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