



GOVERNANCE EXPLAINER

# *Accountability* for Better Government



*Legitimacy*



# Accountability for Better Government

One of the greatest challenges in ensuring the legitimacy and longevity of any polity lies in making sure that when certain individuals are given power over others, they neither abuse it nor take advantage of their position to acquire ever greater powers. A state's capacity to achieve such governmental accountability relies on an apparent paradox – the ability of the less powerful to restrain those more powerful than themselves.

This requires two things:

- Legally enforceable norms governing the acts of everyone in society, including those at the very top (such as the US's written Constitution, which is regularly used by judges to sanction decisions by local and national officials, even those who theoretically outrank them);
- The options for anyone in society to invoke these norms against individuals who break them, including those at the very top (in the US case, anyone can bring a court case against government officials, with the possibility of accusing them of having infringed higher level norms – such as the Constitution – in the course of their work).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luis Duarte d'Almeida, John Gardner, and Leslie Green (eds.), *Kelsen Revisited: new essays on the Pure Theory of Law*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

## What is Accountability in Government

Accountability in government generally refers to the obligation of public officials, institutions, and agencies to be answerable for their actions and decisions to the public and other oversight entities. It is intended to ensure transparency, ethical conduct, and the effective use of resources to achieve public goals. The methods used to attain accountability include legal sanctions (such as the right to arrest public officials for illegal acts falling outside their official remit), political penalties (such as voting out politicians found to have overstepped their role) or social threats (such as public embarrassment inherent in being caught doing something illicit).

Historically, accountability in government has been achieved in different ways. While there are many interpretations of what government accountability should mean, all share certain key elements.

One was the idea that people have the right and the duty to remove tyrannical governments, and that failing to do this is a form of tacit consent. The modern version of this concept emerged just as revolutions swept Europe and the United States from the 18th century. The leaders of these revolutions formalised a role for the populace in ensuring the accountability of their leaders.<sup>2</sup>

Another was the idea of separation of powers or checks and balances. Separation of powers divides the responsibilities of

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<sup>2</sup> César García, "Challenging hegemony and power in the sixteenth century: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude as antecedent of critical public relations theory", *Communication & Society* (2021).

government into three distinct branches: the executive, legislative, and judicial. Each branch operates independently to prevent any one branch from accumulating excessive power. In most cases the executive proposes laws, the legislative has the right to veto them, and the judiciary can refuse to enforce them if they are incompatible with higher-level norms, such as the Constitution. This system works through a framework of checks and balances, under which each branch has the authority to limit or oversee the actions of the others, ensuring accountability and preventing abuse of power.<sup>3</sup>

Different perspectives of accountability have proliferated throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Political accountability is used to specify the kinds of democratic safeguards mentioned above. Political scientists and policy analysts also recognise bureaucratic accountability (a principal-agent relationship between politicians and civil servants with clear performance management systems governing the conduct of civil servants) and citizen or social accountability (such as freedom of information regulations and citizen feedback mechanisms). Other forms of accountability include legal accountability (judicial frameworks governing the interactions between civil servants and members of the legislature) and fiscal accountability (control of and transparency in the management of public funds).



## Why Accountability is Important

Government accountability is crucial not just to prevent abuses of power, but also to improve government efficiency,

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Waldron, "Separation of powers in thought and practice." *BCL Rev.* 54 (2013): 433.

prevent corruption, build public trust, ensure government responsiveness to citizen needs and to promote democratic governance.

A review of various types of accountability interventions – including initiatives to reduce unequal access to information (eg public expenditure tracking surveys), institutionalised answerability (eg social audits) and devolved authority (eg participatory budgeting) – suggest that they can have positive impacts such as exposing corruption and improving service delivery.<sup>4</sup> Another study in Uganda showed that improved awareness among citizens on how to report misbehaviour by civil servants not only reduced corruption but also resulted in significant service quality improvements.<sup>5</sup> Studies in China,<sup>6</sup> Thailand<sup>7</sup> and Canada<sup>8</sup> have shown greater citizen satisfaction as a result of greater government accountability. A study in the US<sup>9</sup> also showed improvements in trust and social capital following such efforts.

## How Accountability Works

Transparency and access to information are fundamental to accountability. This may be provided via a free press or open parliamentary debates, as was the case from the earliest years of the modern era. Various other mechanisms have been introduced to favour more open government – freedom of information laws, televised government proceedings, social media and others, as well as international monitoring services such as the OECD’s Open Government Partnership and World Bank’s Public Accountability Mechanisms. When government operations are transparent, citizens and oversight bodies can scrutinise actions and decisions, reducing the risk of corruption and mismanagement.

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**4** Frida Boräng and Marcia Grimes, “Social accountability and quality of government”, *The Oxford handbook of the quality of government* (2021): 268-289.

**5** Klaus Deininger and Paul Mpuga, “Does greater accountability improve the quality of public service delivery? Evidence from Uganda.” *World development* 33, no. 1 (2005): 171-191.

**6** Cheung Chau-kiu, and Kwan-kwok Leung, “Enhancing life satisfaction by government accountability in China”, *Social indicators research* 82 (2007): 411-432.

**7** Sakapas Saengchaia, Thanaporn Sriyakulb, and Kittisak Jernsittiparsertc, “Linking e-Government with Citizen Satisfaction through Transparency, Accountability and Transformation of Government: An Empirical Study in Thailand”, *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 12, no. 11 (2020): 589-607.

**8** Pat Robinson, “Government accountability and performance measurement”, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 14, no. 1-2 (2003): 171-186.

**9** Pamela D. Gibson, Donald P. Lacy, and Michael J. Dougherty, “Improving performance and accountability in local government with citizen participation”, *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal* 10, no. 1 (2005): 1-12

These approaches can be reinforced by independent oversight bodies, such as auditors general, ombudsmen, and inspectors general, which play a critical role in holding government entities accountable. These institutions operate autonomously from the entities they oversee, conducting audits, investigations, and evaluations to ensure compliance with laws and policies. Their independence is crucial for unbiased assessments and for maintaining public trust. Public scrutiny can also be reinforced through public consultations, participatory budgeting, and platforms for lodging complaints or reporting issues, where citizens can influence decision-making and oversight.

What is also important is that clear legal and ethical standards must be established beforehand to provide a framework for government officials to operate.

Police patrols and fire alarms provide a useful analogy here (Figure 1)<sup>10</sup>. In the police patrols model, oversight is proactive and centralised, with authorities or watchdog agencies systematically monitoring government activities to detect and prevent misconduct or inefficiency. In contrast, the fire alarms model relies on decentralised, reactive mechanisms where external actors – such as citizens, interest groups, or the media – identify and report issues when they arise, triggering corrective action. While police patrols provide thorough and consistent oversight, they can be resource-intensive and provoke suspicions of co-optation and whitewashing, whereas fire alarms leverage public engagement and external scrutiny to hold officials accountable, making them less consistent but often more trusted by citizens.



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<sup>10</sup> Mathew D. McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, "Congressional oversight overlooked: Police patrols versus fire alarms", *American journal of political science* (1984): 165-179.



**Figure 1** Examples of approaches to enhance government accountability and public scrutiny

This problem of improving accountability is also compounded by the inherent difficulty of measuring performance of oversight bodies: if an oversight body brings up relatively few problems with

government bodies, is this a sign of efficacy or complacency? One approach is to look at international comparisons. Various international indices are used to assess government accountability, notably the World Governance Indicators,<sup>11</sup> Open Budget Index<sup>12</sup> and Rule of Law Index.<sup>13</sup> However, these indices have also been criticised for using opaque methodologies, relying heavily on expert surveys or subjective opinions, failing to account for local cultural contexts and using arbitrary weighting systems.

Transparency may be necessary, but it does not guarantee that accountability is established. The OECD's Open Government Partnerships Global Report points out that the information "needs to be useful, usable, and used for it to change government performance."<sup>14</sup> For instance, in their analysis of transparency and accountability in multilateral climate negotiations, Gupta and Asselt found that the "scope and practices of climate transparency reflect (rather than necessarily reduce) broader conflicts over who should be held to account to whom and

**11** Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Massimo Mastruzzi, "The worldwide governance indicators: Methodology and analytical issues", *World Bank policy research working paper* 5430 (2010).

**12** Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Ramin Dadašov, "Measuring control of corruption by a new index of public integrity", *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 22 (2016): 415-438.

**13** Mungiu-Pippidi and Dadašov, "Measuring control of corruption".

**14** Open Government Partnerships, *Open Government Partnership Global Report – Volume I* (Open Government Partnerships, 2019), 16, [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Global-Report\\_Executive-Summary\\_EN.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Global-Report_Executive-Summary_EN.pdf).



about what, with regard to responsibility and burden sharing for ambitious climate action.”<sup>15</sup>

## Government Accountability in Singapore

In establishing government accountability, the Singapore government adopts both the police patrols model such as through the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) and Auditor General’s Office (AGO), as well as fire alarms models through whistleblower protections and data sharing.

## *Investigating Corruption and Financial Mismanagement*

The Prevention of Corruption Act which was first enacted in 1960, serves as a cornerstone of the country’s anti-corruption framework. The CPIB, an independent agency reporting directly to the prime minister, investigates and prosecutes corruption in both the public and private sectors. Notably, the bureau possesses the authority to investigate both public officials and private individuals as well as to seize assets and require individuals to account for their sources of wealth.

<sup>15</sup> Aarti Gupta and Harro van Asselt, “Transparency in multilateral climate politics: Furthering (or distracting from) accountability?”, *Regulation & Governance* 13, no. 1 (2019): 18-34.

While the CPIB focuses on investigating corruption, the AGO complements this by identifying irregularities and systemic weaknesses that could create opportunities for corrupt practices. The AGO conducts audits on public agencies to ensure proper use of public funds and compliance with financial regulations. Its Annual Audit Report is tabled in parliament and issues raised in these reports often prompt immediate corrective actions and, in some cases, CPIB investigations if there are signs of corruption. Such audits have historically uncovered issues such as lapses in procurement processes, overpayment of contracts, and non-compliance with financial regulations.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of non-criminal incidents, the Public Service Commission takes responsibility for investigating and sanctioning breaches. The Commission is responsible for appointing, promoting,

and confirming public service officers, particularly for senior positions, as well as overseeing disciplinary matters involving public officers, including cases of misconduct, negligence, or corruption that are not severe enough to require a prosecution.

### ***Feedback Mechanisms and Access to Information***

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While media-driven accountability is less intense in Singapore than in other jurisdictions like the US, various other mechanisms have been instituted to help grant executive and public oversight of civil service activities.

There are strong protections for whistleblowers under Singapore law. Section 36 of the Prevention of Corruption Act ensures that the identity of whistleblowers who report corruption



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**16** Lim Soo Ping, "Audit Profile: The Auditor-General's Office of Singapore", *International Journal of Government Auditing* (2008): 1.

is kept confidential during investigations unless the whistleblower consents to disclosure or disclosure is required for prosecution. Likewise, the CPIB and other government agencies accept anonymous tips, allowing individuals to report corruption or misconduct without revealing their identity.

Though there are no freedom of information laws in Singapore, other more centralised forms of citizen consultation and feedback mechanisms exist - notably, frequent consultation and polling exercises are conducted, and politicians are expected to engage citizens regularly in meet-the-people events. Public statistics and information services also help to provide citizens with the information they need to assess state effectiveness. For instance, a key component of Singapore's Smart Nation strategy, the Open Data Initiative is aimed at enhancing transparency, fostering innovation, and improving public service delivery through the open sharing of government data. Data.gov.sg is the central portal for Singapore's open data initiative with over 2,000 datasets across sectors like health, education, transport, and environment.

These measures have encouraged a culture of accountability in the Singapore public sector, which in turn has helped the Singapore government build its credibility and cultivate public trust in the civil service.

## Sustaining Government Accountability

Ensuring government accountability is a perpetual challenge that requires legally enforceable norms, institutional oversight, and public engagement to prevent the abuse of power. The key lies in balancing transparency, efficiency, and adaptability. Singapore's experience illustrates how a robust legal framework, independent institutions, and a strong cultural commitment to integrity can foster a strong sense of accountability, cultivate public trust and deter corruption. However, effective accountability mechanisms must evolve with changing political, economic, and technological landscapes, to ensure that governance remains both principled and pragmatic in serving the public interest.



