

**The Quality of Democracy: The Ambiguous Virtues of  
Accountability  
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When Terry Karl and I were searching for the most generic definition of “modern representative political democracy,” we hit upon the concept of accountability. We wanted a definition 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. All of these focused too single-mindedly on the regular conduct of elections that (allegedly) offered citizens a choice between alternative set of rulers (with no attention to the relations of citizens and rulers leading up to the holding of such presumably “free and fair” elections or to those prevailing after such episodic events). Indeed, many of the more theoretically inclined scholars who relied on such a definition seemed embarrassed in doing so and excused themselves by arguing that, even though elections are not the only manifestation of democracy, they were easy to measure (even to dichotomize!) and/or that alternative, so-called substantive definitions of “it” were 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 could 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 contrôlée* 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.”**<sup>1</sup> 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 switch to an alternative representative whose program is more in accord with their preferences. 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 “guardians” whose actions determine in large part whether their interests/passions are realized, the answer would be equally unsatisfactory – namely, the elected representatives grouped in a parliament will take care of holding them 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,” “communitarian 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.

[I have to confess that much of what I have read recently about accountability is hardly an improvement on the past. Most of it is devoted exclusively to justifying what political scientists have already doing, namely, analyzing electoral behavior – except that elections are now presented as mechanisms for ensuring accountability, rather than for revealing individual preferences, expressing party loyalty or acting out civic duties. Rational choice theorists quickly caught on to the analogy with “the principal agent problem,” conveniently forgetting that citizens acting out their rights as principals subsequently become agents when fulfilling their obligations. The poor representatives intermediating between citizens and rulers are so frequently switching back and forth in their roles as agents and principals that it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the two at any moment in time.]

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 make a few suggestions about measuring it in the context of assessing the quality of democracy. Obviously, this entails a further hypothesis, namely, **the more politically accountable that rulers are to citizens, the higher will be the quality (or, better, the qualities) of democracy.** It also follows that **the better that representatives/politicians are at their ambiguous role in intermediating between citizens and rulers, the higher will be the qualities of democracy.**

### Searching for a Definition

**Accountability** is first a relationship between two sets of actors (actually, most of it is played out 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 have become subject to the command of the former, must also provide required information, explain how they are obeying or not obeying 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); 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

Third, all stable political regimes probably have some predictable form of accountability to some type of constituency. Sultanistic autocracies have their coterie and cadres. Military dictatorships have their juntas and complex arrangements between the different armed services. Even absolute monarchies were supposed to be accountable to God – not to mention more earthly dynastic and marital connections. What democracy has that these do not is **citizens** – a constituency covering the entire country and populated (these days) by all adult persons – minus legal and illegal foreign residents. Moreover, in terms of political accountability, each citizen has the same rights and obligations, i.e. to be informed about 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 have 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 did not even know about.

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 codes of law 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.<sup>4</sup>

### **Trying to measure the Illusive Concept of QoD**

My first attempt to measure what accountability is supposed to produce, namely, a better quality of democracy was a failure. I approached the task inductively, i.e. by digging into the burgeoning literature on the alleged defects of neo-democracies. I came up with the following seven items.

**Figure 1: The Seven Items of the QoD Scale**

Q -1	Agreements on the partial regimes and constitution itself are effectively applied to all groups and territories
Q -2	Conditions of effective political competition are equal for most citizens and groups
Q -3	Effective participatory equality produced greater substantive (income) equality for most citizens and groups
Q -4	Voter turnout decreased or increased significantly, or remained the same over 3 successive national elections
Q -5	Membership in associations and movements increased and extended its coverage to a wide range of interests
Q -6	Individuals show an increasing tendency to regard themselves as "politically efficacious"
Q -7	Gender equality has improved

All of them turned out to be very difficult to measure reliably. They may make intuitive sense to those who have been observing critically neo-democracies, but converting them into cardinal or even ordinal measures proved to be virtually impossible. None of them define democracy as such (in the "accountable" sense that I have proposed), but all have been inferred by one author or another as likely and desirable products of the continuous functioning of "good" democratic institutions. A rapid glance at well-established democracies would confirm that they have differed considerably in all of these qualitative aspects – even if, one can detect some convergence in outcomes in recent



decades in Western Europe. Moreover, there is some reason to suspect that the items/tasks may be connected with each other – either causally or functionally – and that implies that they should scale. For example, greater participation in units of civil society and/or a broader dispersion of political resources may tend, over time, to produce greater social and economic equality through the pressures they exert upon public polity. Survey research indicates that increases in the sense of personal “political efficacy” are related to lowering electoral abstention at the level of individuals. The diffusion of the rule of law in different domains across the national territory can result in greater gender equality and more participation in interest associations and social movements – as people feel safer to act within such protected spaces. Much evidence on some of these matters has been gathered and analyzed at the micro-level of individuals, but we still do not know empirically how they cluster at the macro-level of whole polities.

Inter-coder agreement in the pre-test of the items for the QoD Scale proved difficult to reach. Judging the extent to which the constitution and rules about major partial regimes are evenly applied across the national territory and “social surface” is obviously no easy task. Guillermo O’Donnell has popularized the notion of “brown areas” outside of major cities (and presumably outside of dominant ethnic groups or social classes) in which otherwise resolutely democratic norms are systematically ignored or violated – and suggested that this is especially characteristic of neo-democracies in Latin America where “the rule of law” has succeeded not preceded “the practice of democracy.”<sup>5</sup> But how can one measure the surface covered by these “brown areas” or the discrimination suffered by these “brown classes”? Even if one turned to examining court cases challenging the misapplication of norms, the risk would be to miss precisely those

areas and classes in which violations were so systematic than no one imagined that legal recourse would be successful. The same is the case with greater equality in the conditions of political competition. Concession of the electoral franchise and freedom of association to all adults are by themselves two potentially important elements of formal equalization characteristic of all neo-democracies, but these rights can be exercised in very different ways. One “unobtrusive” indicator might be the margin of victory between political parties and/or the presence of stable competing sets of class associations on the grounds that these processes would tend to make citizens feel that their participation could make an active contribution and not just be a passive civic duty.

Changes in income and gender equality can be measured quantitatively across a large number of polities, but data on such attitudinal items as “sense of personal political efficacy” is much harder to come by on a comparative (not to mention, longitudinal) basis. The evolution of electoral participation over time is easy to measure, but not so easy to interpret. Virtually everywhere in neo-democracies, abstention tends to increase after they have had the “civic orgy” that usually accompanies their founding elections, but does this indicate relative citizen satisfaction and rational “free-riding” or growing disenchantment (*desencanto*) with the emerging class of politicians? Data on the diversity of purposes and membership of individuals in the organizations of civil society are notoriously hard to come by, and can easily be distorted. Seizing on one type of organization for which there exist data – whether it is trade unions or bowling societies – can be quite unrepresentative of collective actions that are occurring elsewhere in society.

In my research on QoD, I have probably committed one or more of three possible errors: (1) I have chosen the right items for measuring QoD, but they are

impossible to score reliably; (2) I have chosen the right items, but asked the wrong people to score them or given them the wrong instructions; and (3) I have simply chosen the wrong items. Not only did the items not scale as I had presumed, but the intercoder reliability was much lower than for the more successful scales of Liberalization of Autocracy, Mode of Transition and Consolidation of Democracy and this was the case for almost all of the items! My hunch is that I committed error (1) and, possibly, error (2). It was simply too difficult to arrive at a consensual score for questions such as “agreements on partial regimes and the constitution are effectively applied to all groups and territories.” Leaving aside the obvious point that this is a system property that no well-established democracy has fully satisfied, even the most conscientious coder would have trouble shifting through all of the (probably, contrary) evidence – and, to make it worse, I was unable to offer a convenient formula or algorithm to help him or her to do so. I cannot judge (yet) whether I have committed error (3) for the simple reason that the entire discussion of QoD has suffered from several fallacies.

This begins with the unquestioned assumption that **all or most neo-democracies are inferior in quality**. Among political scientists specializing in these regions, there has emerged something of a competition to find the most negative adjective or prefix they can imagine to put in front of the word “democracy:” façade, semi-, partial, incomplete, illiberal, sham, defective, *ersatz*, low intensity, pseudo-, phony and, of course, “delegative.” There is hardly a case in Latin America, Central Europe, the former Soviet Union or ex-Yugoslavia that has not attracted one or another of these “disqualifiers,” and I suspect this is also the case in Asia and Africa. Usually without specifying the grounds for such a negative judgment, it is just taken for granted that these democracies are inferior

to existing Western democracies and that they have a long way to go before they can possibly catch up to such exalted “models” of political behavior. I am convinced that this evaluation is doubly wrong: (1) most (but not all) neo-democracies are performing much better than anyone had the right to expect and, in fact, many of them are doing astonishingly well; and (2) most archeo-democracies are not performing as well as is implied by this judgment and, in fact, many are doing much less well than they used to.<sup>6</sup>

Imagine turning to these pundits from established Western democracies and asking them the following question: “How was your country doing ten, twelve or even twenty years after it initiated its democratization?” Think of Great Britain in, say, the late 1830s or France in the early 1880s or Denmark in the 1860s. Were any of them doing as well as Eastern European or Latin American countries are today? Was there really less corruption of public office, vote-buying, mal-apportionment of constituencies, policy distortion to favor privileged interests, disregard for oppressed classes—not to mention, denial of voting rights to women, illiterates and the poor? I doubt it.

Now, I would be the first to admit that this is not a fair comparison. Political history has accelerated. Modern Democracy has changed its rules and processes and, with them, the standards for evaluating its performance. Today’s neo-democracies are not just supposed to be better than yesterday’s neo-democracies; they are supposed to be the equals of today’s archeo-democracies! The fact that it took the latter almost (or more than) a hundred years to produce honest government with free and fair elections, equally proportioned constituencies, reliable implementation of human and political rights, and assured

access for all social groups to public officials that can be held accountable to the entire adult population somehow gets lost in the equation. We tend to forget how long Western European and North American democracies took to clean up their practices and manage even to approximate the standards that we now routinely impose upon the neo-democracies of Latin America, Central Europe and elsewhere.

So, the first fallacy is **anachronism**. Not only must the analyst be specific and clear about the criteria he/she is applying, but also these criteria must be apposite for the time period in which they are being applied. This has two implications: (1) we must not hold neo-democracies to the highest standards of performance that took previous democracies decades (if not a century) to acquire; and (2) we should not castigate archeo-democracies for not doing things that no one would have expected them to do at that time. Yes, the post-1974 democracies – including the post-1989 ones in Central Europe – have to be evaluated according to what would be considered “normal,” i.e. within the range of variation, in established Western democracies. This means placing them before a higher threshold than their predecessors, even though it means being judged not by “best” but by “normal” standards. The goal posts have to be moved to account for the fact that the game is being played at a different moment in the evolution of democracy, but they cannot be set at a height that only the best Western competitors can reach. Also, it goes without saying, these posts cannot be continuously moved around just to discredit what has been accomplished by the new entrants into the game.

The second potential fallacy is **idealism**. This is a particular susceptible 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. It was precisely this intrinsic failure to match up to theoretico-normative expectations that led Robert Dahl to try to substitute the concept of “polyarchy” for that of “democracy.” Unfortunately, for the sake of political analysis, this did not work and we are stuck with a word that inevitably has both empirical and normative connotations. 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 neo-democracies have (and have not) accomplished.

The third fallacy is **partisanship**. It is very tempting to assume that the neo-democracy one is studying and evaluating should be accomplishing what one would like it to do. Not infrequently, as least among North American and Western European observers, this is not unrelated to what they would like their party of reference to accomplish in their own polity. Hence, Social Democrats castigate neo-democracies for not making the income of citizens more equal; Liberals complain that they are not privatising or de-regulating fast enough; Conservatives get upset when they deprive previous elites of their privileges and status; and, so forth. The trick is to focus on goals that are not subject only to partisan dispute, but that are likely to enjoy a widespread consensus in that society, e.g. respect for

human and civic rights, reducing poverty, holding rulers accountable, protecting national identity, and so forth, and when applying standards that are not so clear cut, e.g. reducing gender inequality, subsidizing agriculture, promoting less developed regions, etc, to be sensitive to the preferences of those legitimately in power. Denigrating a neo-democracy that has had a string of Conservative governments for not expanding welfare spending or one that has been ruled for a long time by Socialists for not selling off state enterprises would hardly be apposite. Needless to say, when there has been frequent alternation of parties in power, there may be very little one can expect – other than the pursuit of a few consensual objectives.

Behind all three of these potential fallacies lies another theme. It has already been raised in the paper by Leonardo Morlino for this conference, namely, that **the consolidation of democracy is no guarantee of the quality of democracy**. Consolidating democracy is one problem; improving its quality is another. According to my usage of the term, CoD involves getting people to compete and cooperate according to mutually acceptable rules—ones that are acceptable to the politicians who are competing (and cooperating) with each other and that are acceptable to the citizens who are also competing and cooperating with each other via their representatives. And that is independent of the quality of the democracy. One can consolidate rules and institutions that produce a “low,” a “medium,” or a “high quality” democracy. Ideally, citizens in a consolidated democracy of low quality will react by demanding not just different policies, but changes in the rules of competition and cooperation among their representatives and rulers. Nothing ensures that this will occur immediately or within the timeframe imposed by the analyst. One of the main hypotheses of advocates of

democracy is that, while it may be no guarantor of social justice, human rights, the rule of law or non-discriminatory treatment, even a low quality, purely procedural, democracy is more likely eventually to improve these substantive conditions than is a high quality autocracy – if such a thing exists. Democracy offers the possibility of attaining these in the future; it doesn't guarantee them in the short run.

And, with this comes the implication that it is preferable first to consolidate democratic processes and institutions – of whatever quality – and, then, seek to improve that quality. It can even prove counterproductive to try to produce too high quality a democracy during the transition, because this may mean that such radical reforms in substance will generate resistance among threatened groups that might otherwise have gone along with a more procedural and gradual approach. Actors in a democracy can more easily afford to be patient than in an autocracy. They can even afford to lose, provided the rules are fair and reliable enough so that they can compete again in the future. Democracy is unique among generic types of regime, not just because it can rule-fully and peace-fully change substantive policies by changing the composition or identity of the government, but also because it can consensually change its own rules and make itself into a different type of democracy.

### **Switching to the Degree of Accountability (DoA)**

Having failed in my direct approach, I now propose to try an indirect one. Let us try to observe and (eventually) measure how successful neo-democracies are at building political accountability into the consolidation of their respective regimes and, then, see if this bears any correlation with higher rates of economic growth, greater social and gender equality, more evenly distributed rule of law,



better protection of human rights, and so forth. Since we have no reason to believe that the mere consolidation of democracy will bring all these benefits right away, perhaps the missing link to a better future lies in the variety of mechanisms that link citizens to rulers via representatives.

The working definition that we have been using above gives us three generic types of actors: **citizens, representatives and rulers**, and it is their “cyclical and reciprocal” exchanges of information, declarations of intention/justification and acts of delegation that may or may not produce accountability.

In seeking a second dimension to define the property space surrounding DoA, I first considered the spatial one that has been given so much attention in recent writings. The traditional metaphor focused on controlling and exploiting the **vertical** relations of power between citizens, representatives and rulers. Citizens may be numerous, but they are dispersed and, as individuals, have few incentives to participate directly in the contest for power. They therefore tend to rely collectively on political representatives of various sorts to intervene on their behalf before the ruling authorities of the state, but this is complicated by the fact that some of these politicians also aspire to form governments and exercise authority. Somehow in this set of vertical exchanges, information is supposed to flow both ways, justifications are handed down and up, and sanctions are threatened and sometimes even applied -- admittedly more to less powerful citizens than to more powerful rulers.

To this vertical dimension, liberal advocates of democracy and, most recently, scholars of democratization have added a **horizontal** component,

namely, the interaction between agencies within the state according to some pre-established constitutional or legal rules. These “checks and balances” between rulers are supposed to ensure greater accountability – and, in some accounts, even to trump the vertical connection with citizens – as, for example, when a Supreme Court rules against legislation supported by most citizens or when a Central Bank ignores a popular government’s request to lower interest rates in order to raise employment levels. Elsewhere, I have expressed my empirical skepticism about the efficacy of such mechanisms (largely on the grounds that the “servants of the state” will often be tempted to collude and protect their shared privileges rather than expose them to outside scrutiny) and my normative doubts about the democratic nature of such arguments (largely on the grounds that checks and balances were introduced by the American founding fathers as “auxiliary precautions” precisely to limit the impact of popular enthusiasms and pressures).<sup>7</sup> No one can deny, however, the extra-ordinary diversity of effort that has gone into creating new institutions of horizontal accountability in archeo-democracies and their imperative transfer to neo-democracies. Some of these are juridical in nature, ranging from Supreme and Constitutional Courts to 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. Others intervene in the classical triangle of executive-legislative-judicial checks and balances to provide “outside” accountability in the form of what Robert Dahl has called “guardians,” i.e. auditing agencies, inspectorate generals and ombudsmen offices – not to mention the plethora of so-called “independent regulatory agencies.” Ironically, without an autonomous (and, hence, non-democratic) Central Bank, no contemporary polity will be considered

by its Western peers as “properly democratic” – nor will it stand much of a chance of being bailed out by the IMF!<sup>8</sup> My conclusion about the utility of applying a spatial metaphor to the conceptualization of accountability and its mechanism is ambiguous. There must be something significant behind the proliferation of these institutions and the persistence with which Western democracies demand that they be imitated by newcomers, but could this be due more to the need for stable property rights and secure elite interlocutors than for the quality of democracy *per se*?

For this reason, I have chosen to use a different dimension in Figure Two: a temporal one. 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 Two), a more compressed moment during which a decision is made via interest alliances, inter-agency bargaining, executive-legislative transactions and eventual ratification (the **dum** in Figure Two) 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 Two). 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.<sup>9</sup>

## Figure Two: The Generic Properties of Successful Accountability:

### Time x Actors

	<i>Ex Ante</i>	<i>Dum</i>	<i>Ex Post</i>
Citizens	Participation	Attention	Obligation
Representatives	Mobilization (for and against)	Competition	Compliance
Rulers	Accessibility	Deliberation	Responsiveness

In Figure Two, I have cross-tabulated the temporal aspect of the decision-making process with the type of actor whose behavior is being evaluated and generated nine criteria for 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 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 after it has been ratified, on the other hand, 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 Three: The Generic Properties of Failed Accountability: Time x  
Actors

	<i>Ex Ante</i>	<i>Dum</i>	<i>Ex Post</i>
Citizens	Absention	Indifference	Resentment
Representatives	Mobilization (against)	Obstruction	Resistance
Rulers	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 theoretical importance will become more evident now that we finally turn to 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!

### **Measuring the Degree (or Type) of Accountability**

Before turning to the quantitative or qualitative measurement of these 9 x 9 variables, we should reflect first on the certain properties of the overarching concept itself. It makes no sense to plunge into indicators if the mode of scoring or aggregating them is inconsistent with the very notion of accountability. A great deal of the recent empirical work on democratization suffers from this default,

especially from the urge to collapse a considerable range of data into a single number or name. As a result, two cases receive the same score or fall into the same box, but their “profiles” can be radically different. Only after one has accomplished the penurious task of coding more discretely equivalent variables and then tested them explicitly for scalability does it make sense to use the aggregate result and to compare countries according to their relative approximation to such complex phenomena as liberalization, democratization or accountability.<sup>10</sup>

As we have learned from the preceding discussion (and other treatments), accountability is not only going to be hard to measure directly, but it has a very “tricky” conceptual structure. For one thing, some of its “positive properties” may be incompatible with each other, or at 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 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 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, when trying to fit the nominal scores generated above, one should be attentive to the probability that there will be curvilinear, even parabolic, relations with the QoD. There may even be bizarre “kinks” due to peculiar sequences or unique combinations.

Finally, the operationalization of these variables will be almost inevitably contaminated by prior knowledge about the longevity, stability or reputation of the regime being scored. It will be difficult **not** to conclude that, say, Norway, Switzerland and the United States of America must have more accountable practices than, say, Germany, Japan and Italy simply because liberal democracy has survived for such a longer period in the former countries. Needless to say, all the neo-democracies (except perhaps for Uruguay) will automatically be



suspected of “defects” in their mechanisms of accountability. The scientific answer to this problem would be to deprive the data of their national identity and code it anonymously, but this would be simply impossible to do. Just imagine trying to present the practices of Swiss or Italian or American or Peruvian politics to a blindfolded research assistant – or to oneself! If somehow one could invent a way of decontaminated the data gathering process, the research (and the reader) should be prepared for some counter-intuitive scores. If, for example, such countries as Norway, Switzerland and the USA with their long democratic histories and their (relatively) satisfied citizens turn out not to have more accountable rules and practices, then we will have not only falsified the hypothesis that “good accountability” improves the quality of democracy (at least as assessed by their citizens), but also its causal relation with the survivability of such a regime.

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My approach to measurement will be similar to that which I have been using to capture the complexities of liberalization of autocracy, mode of transition and consolidation of democracy – with a few new twists and turns. I will try to come up with simple questions capable of being answered in yes-no terms (with the possibility of a “fuzzy” intermediate score) for each of the 9 x 9 variables and only then try to see if they produce a single scale or cluster into nominal categories. The questions should be multiple for each variable and they may very well prove not to be correlated with each other. They should be capable of capturing both the positive and negative aspects in the cells of Figures Two and Three. And they should be composed of a mix of generic and specific issues – although the latter will be difficult since not all of the polities that interest us have had to deal with the same policy issues within the same timeframe and with the same intensity.

Since I have only just begun thinking about accountability from a conceptual/theoretical point-of-view, I have not yet come up with operational suggestions for all of the requisite questions. But let us begin with the easiest: **participation/abstention** by individual citizens.

1. Has the turnout over the past three national parliamentary elections increased significantly (1), remained about the same (0,5) or decreased significantly (0)?
2. (Pick a salient issue area of contemporary politics, say, environmental protection) Have individuals over the past 5 years tended to join and support parties focusing particularly on this issue much more than other parties (1), about the same (0,5) or much less than other parties (0)?
3. Have individuals responding to public opinion polls over the past 5 years expressed a greater interest in politics (1), about the same interest (0,5), or less interest (0)?

NB that two of the questions touch on very generic matters, i.e. electoral turnout and interest in politics, and one on more specific one. Also they involve different techniques of data-gathering. Given its general availability through all those ...

*Baromètres* and the World Values Survey, one might be tempted to rely exclusively on public opinion data to assess the perceived degree of accountability. I am convinced that this would be misleading, especially on a comparative basis, since responses are difficult to interpret across languages and cultures, are “costless” when they are uttered and may reflect immediate circumstances rather than deeply held values or judgments. Such subjective data definitely have a place in research on accountability, but they should be “surrounded” so-to-speak with more objective measures of actual behavior. Also

NB that the evaluation should be made over some specified (but flexible given data restrictions) time period to avoid momentary fluctuations.

Now, let us try a difficult one: **responsiveness/imposition** by rulers:

1. (Presuming that most citizens would benefit from the enhanced competitiveness of their respective national economies), According to the best available indicators of economic competitiveness, has (country X) improved (1), sustained (0,5) or diminished (0) its relative position over the past five years?
2. Has the congress of (country X) over the past five years tended to approve the annual government budget within the prescribed time limit (1), with a slight delay (0,5) or with a considerable delay (0)?
3. When polled over the past five years, have citizens reported that they believe that their rulers/leaders pay more attention to persons such as themselves (1), about the same (0,5) or less (0)?

Finally, let us focus on representatives and their **competition/obstruction** of the decision-making process:

1. In the past five years or so, have there been major incidents in which significant parties, associations or movements have refused to participate in hearings or discussions of important legislation (0), minor incidents (0,5), no noticeable incidents (1)?
2. Is it the general practice of executive decision-makers to invite spokespersons from competing parties, interest groups and/or social movements to discuss the drafting of major laws before they are submitted

to parliament (1), more-or-less while parliamentary debate is taking place (0,5) or only after a formal decision has been made (0)?

3. Have there been frequent incidents over the past five years in which significant parties, associations or movements have urged their members/supporters to boycott or resist the implementation of government decisions they deem to have been improperly taken (0), a few incidents (0,5) or no noticeable incidents (0)?

I do not see why, with a little more time and concentration (plus some help from colleagues and students), the other cells cannot each be filled a tripartite set of apposite questions. Some will no doubt be more difficult to fill than others, especially when it comes to so-called objective indicators. But as long as one avoids excessive dependence on one source or method of observation, triangulation should provide the researcher with a reasonable confidence that she/he has captured a valid score. As I said above, it is highly unlikely that these scores will produce a single reproducible scale of political accountability (actually, I thought the same thing about modes of transition and they did end up scaling rather well). I would be quite satisfied if the effort ended with a nominal typology of different “profiles” that might produce more-or-less the same quality of democracy (and of legitimacy) in societies of different composition and historical trajectory. After all, if we have learned one thing from the recent study of transitions from autocracy and consolidations of democracy, it is “equifinality.” Many countries having left from different points of departure and chosen different modes of transitions have been ending up, not with the same type of democracy, but with similarly stable and consolidated institutions. Why should there not be multiple

ways of exercising political accountability? And even to the ways in which they contribute to different qualities of democracy?

## SIN MÁS NADA (FOR THE MOMENT)

<sup>1</sup> Source. NB 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 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.

<sup>2</sup> Schedler cite.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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 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 ruler 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.

<sup>5</sup> G O’D

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, I have argued that the most egregious cases of “phony, illiberal, defective democracy” – Belarus, Ukraine, Serbian (until recently), Azerbaijan, and the Stans of Central Asia – are irrelevant since they never underwent a regime transition and even attempted to hold founding elections. They simply “transited” from one sub-type of autocracy to another. When one excludes these cases from the universe and recognizes that most of the others that seemed at some time to be threatened with either “defective” or “delegative” democracy – Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Rumania, Bulgaria – the record looks remarkable good since 1974, far better than after any previous wave of democratization. Cite Stanford1 paper.

<sup>7</sup> Reference to my article in Schedler et al. In this article, I also suggested that it might be useful to add a third spatial dimension to the metaphor, namely, “oblique accountability” to various semi-public units of civil society.

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<sup>8</sup> Nor will the country stand any chance of being admitted to the European Union – regardless of how proper are its other democratic credentials. It should be noted in passing that many well-established democracies managed to survive quite well without this element of horizontal accountability, that there is no firm empirical evidence that autonomous central banks promote the stability or quality of democracy, and that even their ostensible purpose, namely, controlling inflation, may not be a democratic objective.

<sup>9</sup> 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 ruling *équipe*. 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. One way of reinforcing this tendency is to make sure that citizens do not get into the vertical game “prematurely” by assigning more-and-more responsibility for decision-making to such “horizontal” agencies as autonomous Central Banks, independent Regulatory Commissions, etc. in which neither citizens nor their representatives have a right to participate or demand access. 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 *ex post* elections have become so similar in their programmes that citizens increasingly question whether they are being offered a meaningful set of alternatives. Especially in neo-democracies, the response has been very high levels of electoral volatility and frequent turn-over 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.

<sup>10</sup> Reference to Stanford2 and Salamanca1. Also papers presented at APSA 2003.