

The Culture of Accountability

A Democratic Virtue

Gianfranco Pasquino and Riccardo Pelizzo

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The three faces of accountability

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1 The three faces of accountability

Introduction

In recent years few topics have received more attention than accountability. Scholars have attempted to define what is accountability (Goetz and Jenkins, 2004), they have distinguished legal accountability from political one (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006), and they have suggested the existence of different channels through which accountability can be ensured noting, in this regard, a difference between what the literature, however improperly, defines as vertical and horizontal accountability. This literature has, also generally explored the obstacles that accountability is confronted with, the fact that the challenges it faces in some settings are not unique. The challenges that accountability has to cope with are the same in all democratic jurisdictions, horizontal accountability is more important in those settings in which vertical accountability is not properly exercised than in those countries in which there is proper electoral accountability (O'Donnell, 1998). Finally, elections are not always the best way but, rather, a very imperfect way to ensure accountability (Przeworski et al., 1999). Other streams of inquiry have noted that, just like we can speak of democracy with adjectives, we can also speak of accountability with adjectives. And this is the reason why in the literature on accountability in addition to studies on accountability *tout court* or on government accountability one could also find a discussion of fiscal, legal, and administrative accountability (Goetz and Jenkins, 2004). Using, improperly, spatial notions to describe the channels of accountability, scholars have suggested that in addition to horizontal and vertical accountability, one could also speak of a diagonal, societal (Smulovitz and Perruzzotti, 2000) and social accountability (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006)—which some studies (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006) regard as a subcategory of vertical accountability, while others (Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2013) treat it as a complementary notion.

While this large and rapidly growing body of research has generated a wide range of definitions, conceptualizations, and findings, the review of this literature leaves the impression that neither the facts nor the theory are terribly clear, and that the operationalization of accountability is just

Box 1.1 Accountability and adjectives

Electoral accountability, also known as vertical accountability refers to the voters' ability to hold elected officials, parties, and governments accountable at the ballot box. Voters can in fact reward or punish incumbents with reference to how well they performed when they were in office.

Interinstitutional accountability, also known as horizontal accountability, is the kind of accountability that results from the separation of powers and a system of checks and balances.

Diagonal accountability (...) reflects the contribution of non-state actors to accountability. Civil society organizations, independent media, and engaged citizens can use a broad range of actions to provide and amplify information about the government, thereby holding it accountable.

(Lurhmann et al., 2020:813)

Social accountability can be defined as an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability.

(Malena et al., 2004:3)

Societal accountability is a nonelectoral, yet vertical mechanism of control that rests on the actions of a multiple array of citizens' associations and movements and on the media, actions that aim at exposing governmental wrongdoing, bringing new issues onto the public agenda, or activating the operation of horizontal agencies. It employs both institutional and noninstitutional tools.

(Smulovitz and Peruzzotti, 2000:150)

as problematic as its conceptualizations. As Sartori (1970) knew all too well, concept misinformation leads to bad data collection and analysis and, in the end, undermines the conclusions that the analysis suggests (or gives the impression of suggesting).

The purpose of the present chapter is to propose a clearer notion of what accountability is, and is not, that could be more productively used to identify its forms, its modes, its causes, its consequences, and, more generally, its correlates.

The chapter is divided into four sections, in addition to the introductory one. In the first section, we challenge the habit of describing accountability in geometric terms and speaking of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal

accountability. We do so for two basic reasons: The first is that insofar as accountability entails answerability and enforcement/enforceability, what the literature generally defines as diagonal accountability cannot be regarded as accountability proper because while it may secure some levels of answerability, it lacks the ability to sanction elected officials, governments and parliamentarians, for their performance in office. The second is that what the literature characterizes as vertical and horizontal accountability should be, more appropriately described, as electoral and interinstitutional accountability because the voters and the institutions mandated to ensure accountability have the means to secure both answerability and enforcement.

Building on this discussion, in the second section, we argue that the notion of accountability, despite all the extensive efforts to theorize it, has been greatly undertheorized. In this respect, particular attention is paid to two issues. The first of such issues is represented by the fact that what is generally regarded or defined as accountability is not a monolithic or homogeneous phenomenon, but is the product of three different, albeit related, processes. We define these processes as taking into account, keeping into account, and giving account. Taking into account refers to candidates' and political parties' willingness or ability during the various electoral campaigns to take into consideration the demands of the voters they wish to represent and to modify their programmatic stances accordingly. Keeping into account refers to what elected officials, parliamentarians, do to preserve some kind of congruence between the preferences of their voters and their political

Box 1.2 Answerability and enforcement

Answerability and enforcement are the two constitutive dimensions of accountability. Answerability refers to the fact that office holders, elected officials, political parties, governments, and the opposition are asked to provide an account of their performance. In doing so they need to give an account of what they did or did not do and an explanation for that course of action/inaction.

Enforcement or enforceability refers to voters' ability to reward and/or sanction/punish at the ballot box elected officials, parties, and governments for what they did or failed to do when they were in office.

Some studies (Moser and Leipold, 2021) have, in recent years, argued that answerability can be understood as a form of "soft" accountability and that "enforcement" could be understood instead as a form of "hard" accountability. The work by Schedler (1999) made clear that there cannot be proper accountability in the absence of either answerability or enforcement.

and parliamentary actions. Giving account is the process through which governments, parties, parliamentarians, and elected officials more generally explain their conduct to their voters who have the power to sanction them if and when they attempt to be re-elected. Building on this discussion we go on to note that accountability should not be conceived as some kind of event, but should instead be regarded as a *process*. The parliamentarian who needs to take into account the preferences of his/her voters must also give an account of what he did for them while he/she was serving in office. For this reason, in this section, we formulate the cycle of accountability which, we believe, provides a more appropriate description of how the processes of accountability work in practice and relate to one another.

The third section discusses the relationship between democracy and accountability. In doing so, we do not simply note that accountability is a democratic virtue, a characteristic without which democracy cannot exist in substantive terms, but also that it is a set of processes especially effective in those countries in which there is a higher democratic quality. In this section, we take issue with two claims that have been advanced in the literature, namely, that interinstitutional accountability is particularly important in those settings in which electoral accountability is ineffective and that elections are generally speaking an inadequate mechanism for ensuring accountability. We challenge both claims because, as our model makes fairly clear, elections are an integral part of the cycle of accountability—without elections there is no “taking into account” and there is no “giving account”, and in the absence of such processes accountability proper cannot be ensured.

We also challenge the claim that interinstitutional accountability is particularly important when electoral accountability cannot be ensured. We do so on two grounds: first, the countries in which electoral accountability is poor are countries in which the regime is either nondemocratic or imperfectly democratic. In such settings, governments are able to avoid scrutiny, to be obliged to answer, and to be sanctioned, not only by the voters but also by those institutions to which they should give account. Second, interinstitutional accountability is an ancillary form of accountability—it is exercised on an ongoing basis, but it is intended to provide the voters with the necessary information about whether a government should be punished or rewarded. Hence, if the elections fail to perform this task, interinstitutional accountability has little to no impact on the functioning of the political system. In the fourth and final section, we will formulate some conclusions and will provide some justification for the analyses that we will perform and present in the next few chapters.

Accountability and the limits of spatial analysis

According to Peruzzotti and Smulovitz (2006:5) “accountability refers to the ability to ensure that public officials are answerable for their

behavior—forced to justify and inform the citizenry about their decisions and possibly eventually be sanctioned for them”. This definition is reminiscent of what Goetz and Jenkins (2004) had noted a few years earlier namely that “accountability describes a relationship between power-holders and those affected by their actions, and consists of two key elements: ‘answerability’ (making power-holders explain their actions) and ‘enforceability’ (punishing poor or criminal performance)”. This point was originally proposed, in the political science literature, by Schedler (1999), and has resonated in several publications that scholars and practitioners have devoted to this subject in recent years (Blick and Hedger, 2008; Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2013).

Accountability is the relationship between an accountee and an accountant, between an office holder and the public or some other branch of government, and between what rational choice scholars call a principal and an agent. The literature (Schedler, 1999; Blick and Hedger, 2008; Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2013) noted that in the first phase of accountability, that of answerability, the office holder is expected to provide information and/or an explanation for her course of actions, choices, and decisions. In other words, the agent is *called to account*. In the second phase of accountability, that of enforcement or enforceability, the principal (voter) has the ability to sanction the behavior or the conduct of the agent (elected official, party, and government) and correct, amend, modify, alter the agent’s course of action. In this second phase, the agent is *held to account*. This line of inquiry has generally noted that a principal (elected official, party, and government) can be accountable, in the sense of being called and held to account, by either the public or by some institutions mandated to ensure some level of accountability of the government.

Without having to rewrite a significant part of the recent history of political science, it is sufficient to recall that spatial metaphors or analyses have increasingly been used in the study of politics after the publication of Downs’s seminal work (Downs, 1957). The echo of spatial analyses or metaphors is nowhere clearer than in the discussion of the channels of accountability that have portrayed such channels with geometric terms as if accountability were something that could be depicted on the Cartesian axes.

The literature in this respect has identified four channels through which accountability is ensured and, as a result, it has spoken of vertical, horizontal, diagonal, and social accountability. The vertical channel of accountability ensures that the agent, the government, and governmental agencies, are all accountable to the electorate; that the electorate rewards and/or punishes the incumbent for its performance in office; and that this type of accountability is said to be intermittent because the government conduct can only be sanctioned when elections are held, but not between elections. The horizontal channel of accountability ensures that the agents are accountable to institutions that are legally or constitutionally mandated to call them and

hold them to account. The institutions mandated to keep the government accountable can call and hold the government and its agencies to account on an ongoing basis. These two relationships between principal(s) and agent(s) can be graphically displayed as shown in Figure 1.1.

In recent years, vertical and horizontal accountabilities have been defined as the “traditional” concepts of accountability (O’Donnell, 1998; Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2013). The reason why such a definition was provided is that the literature has introduced new concepts of accountability: social accountability and diagonal accountability. According to Perruzzotti and Smulovitz (2006:10), “social accountability is a nonelectoral yet vertical mechanism of control of political authorities that rests on the actions of an array of citizens’ associations and movements and the media”. The proponents of the notion of diagonal accountability have noted that “Diagonal accountability (...) reflects the contribution of non-state actors to accountability. Civil society organizations, an independent media, and engaged citizens can use a broad range of actions to provide and amplify information about the government, thereby holding it accountable” (Lurhmann et al., 2020:813). These definitions highlight the existence of three problems of various importance. The first problem is that, while efforts have been made to differentiate social accountability from diagonal accountability, the fact that both reflect the involvement of civil society in calling the government to account raises some doubts as to whether these two types of accountability should actually be distinguished from one another or not. The second problem is that both social and diagonal accountabilities fail to qualify as accountability proper. From Schedler (1999) onward, the literature has consistently noted that accountability results from both answerability and enforcement. While it is clear that civil society, media, and citizen associations may play a role in calling the government to account and in promoting (but not securing) answerability, they lack the authority, the power, and even just the ability

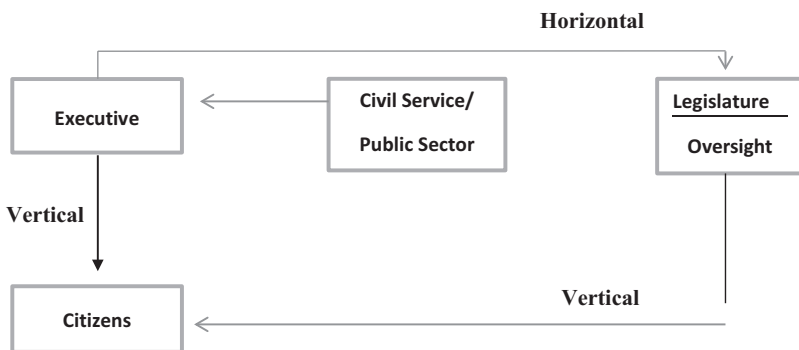


Figure 1.1 Prevailing Concepts of Accountability

to sanction the government for its conduct. As a result, they are unable to hold the government to account and promote/secure enforcement. The third problem, highlighted by the fact that three channels or modes of accountability are described in geometric terms (vertical, horizontal, and diagonal), is that the application of such terminology is inappropriate in describing the relationship between accountee and accountant. The case of vertical accountability is in this respect emblematic. The notion of verticality postulates the existence of a line connecting the top to the bottom and/or the existence of a hierarchy or order. Yet, with regard to accountability, it is not at all clear what is the top (voters, government, voters?) or the bottom.

The discussion above has two basic implications, namely that accountability proper is the one associated with the “traditional” concepts of accountability and, second, that these traditional forms of accountability should be described as electoral and interinstitutional.

Accountability as a process

Despite much theorizing on accountability, that is notwithstanding various efforts to conceptualize, define, and measure it, the majority of the works on accountability seem to be centered upon calling and holding to account. This tradition of scholarship is in fact primarily, if not exclusively, focused on what could/should be done to ensure answerability and enforcement. Given the difficulties that can at times be encountered in securing electoral accountability in formal democracies, scholars have at times suggested that in those policies in which the electoral process may be insufficient or inadequate to ensure electoral/vertical accountability, interinstitutional accountability represents a safer solution for calling and holding governments to account. In the remainder of this section, we will try to show that the notion of accountability is considerably more complex than the literature has thus far been able to appreciate and, second, that the electoral dimension is crucial to securing accountability properly understood.

As we noted above, accountability is a complex, multidimensional process, that entails three distinct dimensions. Giving account is the best-understood dimension of accountability, as it pertains to the notions of answerability and enforcement recalled above. However, important as it may be, giving account is only one of the three constitutive dimensions of accountability, and it is just as important as taking into account and keeping into account. In the remainder of this section, we will discuss in greater detail the three faces of accountability.

Taking into account

Downs (1957:28), famously, noted that “parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies”. To formulate policies, eventually presented in party manifestoes, political

parties may strive to take into account the preferences of the voters, or, to borrow some terminology from economics, need to adjust their policy supply to the voters' demands.

In a somewhat simplistic understanding of the electoral process, it is believed that parties produce policy proposals and try to persuade the voters that their proposals are better than, and therefore preferable to, the proposals formulated and presented by their competitors. While it is obvious that in the course of the electoral campaigns parties promote specific platforms and agendas and that, by doing so, attempt to maximize their electoral return, the politics of persuasion represents only one, however important, side of any electoral campaign. The other, and possibly equally important, aspect of an election is represented by the fact that elections and electoral campaigns provide candidates and political parties with valuable information. In fact, generally speaking, leaders, parties, and coalitions do not miss the opportunity represented by their electoral campaign to acquire information on what the voters (may) want, listen to their complaints and their expectations, and even reframe their own proposals.

There are of course differences in how parties attempt to do so. Some parties simply seek to give voice to a segment of the electorate attempting to capitalize on what Parisi and Pasquino (1979) called the vote of *belonging*, that is on the fact that the electoral choice of some voters (a portion of the electorate) is a function of their political identity, their ideological makeup, or, at least in the American context, their party identification (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960). Other parties attempt instead to water down their ideological identity or connotation to appeal to a broader segment of the electorate as Kirchheimer (1966) admirably explained.

Electoral systems, most notably, electoral formulas also influence the candidates' and political parties' ability to take into account the voters' demands. The fact that a candidate is competing in a single-member district compels her/him to pay attention and give voice to the preferences of the territorial unit that he/she attempts to represent. The relationship between candidates and voters, between candidates and the demands of a specific territorial unit, is possibly much weaker in multimember districts that are expected to provide representation to much larger territorial units (Fenno, 1978; Cain et al., 1987).

Party systems, Sartori (1976, 2005) noted, are structured patterns of interparty competition. The fact that a party system is predominant, two-party, moderate pluralist, polarized pluralist, and atomized, also affects the way in which the relationship between, on the one hand, candidates and parties and, on the other hand, voters. All these important differences have not been explored in a comparative way. Intracountry comparisons, for instance, of Italy before and after the electoral reform of 1993, would allow the analyst to gain greater insight as to how changes in the electoral formula and in the pattern of interparty competition altered/transformed the relationship between candidates/parties and voters. More precisely, how they altered the

way in which candidates/parties had to behave to take into account and give voice to the demands of the voters.

Introduced by the laws 276/93 and 277/93, the Italian electoral reform replaced the PR formula that had been in place since 1946 with a mixed electoral system, that allocated three-fourth of the seats in single-member districts and the remaining one-fourth of the seats through PR. Policymakers were compelled to reform the electoral system in the wake of the 1993 electoral referendum. In the course of the debates that led to finalizing the reforms, the advocates of a new electoral system suggested that a majoritarian system would ensure greater transparency, alternation in government, closer bonds between the elected and the electors, and more accountability. The new electoral law was expected to ensure better representation of territorial units and their demands, greater responsiveness to the needs and the demands of the voters in such territorial units, and the enhancement of voters' ability to reward and sanction candidates and parties for their conduct in office.

The new electoral system would have been more successful in achieving the results for which it had been adopted had some conditions been respected. If candidates had always been the expression of the territorial units that they sought to represent; if candidates had not been allowed to be put up in multiple single-member districts (and even in the PR lists); and if candidates elected in a given district had been mandated to seek re-election in the same district in the following elections. Yet, in the elections held with the new electoral system, candidates were not always the expression of the territory. On the contrary, many of them were chosen because loyal to their respective party leaders and allowed to run in safe districts with which they had little to no familiarity. Furthermore, candidates were also not mandated to seek re-election in the same districts to give voters the opportunity to call them and hold them to account. To make just one, though significant example, in the 1994, 1996, and 2001 elections—held with the so-called *Mattarellum* law—Veneto had 17 single-member districts. Of the 17 Senators elected in the 1994 elections, only seven ran in the 1996 elections—3 in the same district but with a different party (Serena, Manfroi, and Ceccato who had been elected in the 1994 elections as Senators of the PDL were re-elected in 1996 as Senators of the Northern League), 1 in a different district and with a different party (Fabris), and only 3 ran, unsuccessfully, in the same district. Hence, the voters, in their respective single-member districts, rarely had the opportunity to call to account the Senators they had elected.

The Italian data stands in sharp contrast to US data. The analysis of historical data (Huckabee, 1995; Huckabee, 2003) revealed that the percentage of incumbents seeking reelection in the House of Representatives was below 50 per cent in only two elections (1816, 1842), that it increased to more than 70 per cent from the 1880 elections onward and that from 1938 onward has consistently been closer to or higher than 90 per cent. The difference in the

Table 1.1 Senators in Veneto

<i>District</i>	<i>Senator Elected in 1994-all PDL</i>	<i>Senators Elected in 1994 and Running in the Same District in 1996</i>	<i>Elected Senator in 1996</i>
Venezia-Spinea	Fabris		Sarto (U)
Venezia-San Donà	Bastianetto		Rigo (U)
Chioggia	Fante	Fante	Cazzaro (U)
Treviso	Zanetti		Amorena (LN)
Vittorio Veneto	Serena	Serena (LN)	Serena (LN)
Conegliano	Perin		Bianco (LN)
Belluno	Manfroi	Manfroi (LN)	Manfroi (LN)
Rovigo	Surian		Crescenzo (U)
Padova	Merigliano		Giaretta (U)
Cittadella	Alberti Casellati	Alberti Casellati	Gasperini (LN)
Abano Terme	Zaccagna	Zaccagna	Bedin (U)
Vicenza	Stefani		Bortolotto (U)
Bassano	Ellero		Lago (LN)
Schio	Ceccato	Ceccato (LN)	Ceccato (LN)
San Bonifacio	Andreoli		Antolini (LN)
Verona	Stanzani		Viviani (U)
Villafranca di Verona	Brugnetini		Danieli (PDL/ CDL)

Source: Ministero degli Interni.

percentage of incumbents seeking reelection suggests that American voters have considerably more opportunities to call and hold legislators to account than their Italian counterparts (Table 1.1).

Candidates are not the only political actors who need to gather information from the voters and adjust their policy positions accordingly, political parties too need to make such adjustments, at the national level, in an effort to maximize their electoral returns. Scholars working in the spatial analytic tradition made clear that voters' preferences, as well as parties' policy stances, can be expressed in spatial terms. They can in fact be depicted as points on all the relevant policy dimensions. This left-right dimension is regarded as a sort of super-issue and party positions on such dimension provide an indication of what parties stand for in/on various other substantive dimensions. Scholars working in this tradition have noted that various party families can be identified, that party positions reflect to some extent parties' identity, but also that party positions change over time. The literature has so far identified two main sources of such changes. Parties may adjust or modify their position in response to changes in other parties' positions (Adams and Somer-Topku, 2009) or to changes in the position of the median voter (Pelizzo, 2010). Adjustments to the changes in the median voter position reflect the parties' ability and willingness to take into account the demands of the electorate in an effort to increase/enhance their competitiveness at the ballot box.

Keeping into account

The second dimension of accountability concerns the ability/willingness of elected party officials, political parties, and, ultimately, governments to keep voters' demands into account in formulating and implementing policies. There are various ways in which office-holders can keep their electoral promises at the same time as they keep voters' preferences into account. This variation reflects, or is a function of, different types of representation, in terms of the type of commitment as well as the style of representation. Figure 1.2 represents an effort to summarize the insight that Eulau et al. (1959) developed in this respect building on the data collected through comparative research on the representatives in the state legislatures of California, New Jersey, Ohio, and Tennessee.

What is important to stress are the differences between the delegate who will strive to represent his/her district; the trustee who will mainly try to represent what he/she perceives is the interests of the State; and the politico who will attempt to combine all these interests following the party line.

The tasks performed by the representatives have been frequently explored and several good pieces of research are available as to their individual performance. For example, Eulau and Karpis (1977:242–246) identify four components of responsiveness: (i) “*policy responsiveness*, where the target is the great public issues that agitate the political process”; (ii) “*service responsiveness*, which involves the efforts of the representative to secure particularized benefits for individuals or groups in his constituency”; (iii) “*allocation responsiveness*, which refers to the representative’s efforts to obtain benefits for his constituency through pork-barrel exchanges in the appropriations process or through administrative interventions”; and (iv) “*symbolic responsiveness*, which involves public gestures of a sort that create a sense of trust and support in the relationship between representative and represented”.

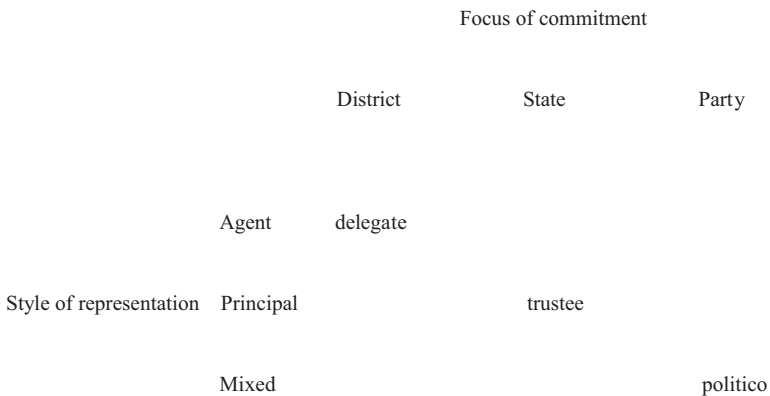


Figure 1.2 Style and Focus of the Representatives

Though not aiming at a precise classification of the types of responsiveness, Cain et al. (1987:50) discuss “the nature of constituency service” and clearly state that “constituents attach relatively greater importance to service responsiveness and allocation responsiveness than do academics who traditionally have been preoccupied by policy responsiveness or congruence”. Their in-depth comparative research does indicate not so much that the constituents are more interested in service and allocation responsiveness, but that this is the perception of the representatives. Therefore, the representatives effectively engage in providing that specific kind of responsiveness. However, this does not mean that the representatives are not at all preoccupied with “policy responsiveness or congruence”. What is very difficult to tell, because it is missing from the overall picture, is how much of the work done by the representatives in their assemblies can be related to their attempt/need/will to keep into account what they have learned and, to a lesser extent (see below), what they have promised in their electoral campaigns.

In any case, an analysis of the phase/process/activities meant to keep into account the preferences of the voters seems absolutely imperative in order fully to understand the complexity of this particular component of the process of accountability. Once more, the nature of individual parties and the structure of the party system introduce major differences in the performance of this type of accountability. In the USA, it is definitely up to individual Congresspersons (and their staff!) to keep into account what they have offered to the voters and what the voters have communicated to them, and may still do on “as a matter of fact basis” or very occasionally. In Britain, the constituency party is usually of great help to every individual parliamentarian. Quite clearly, this help is given because of the obvious and well-grounded assumption that in single-member constituencies it is important continuously to keep into account most of the preferences of the voters. It also indicates that each constituency party considers itself accountable through its parliamentarian. In Italy, the situation appears less clear. Based on what is known, it seems easy to introduce a note of criticism. Any kind of “service” to the constituency will obviously be extremely difficult for the many “carpetbaggers”, that is those parliamentarians who have been parachuted into single-member constituencies and who have practically no ties whatsoever with the voters therein. Moreover, in the interval between one election and the following, most Italian parties fundamentally do not exist and do not perform any activity in the SMD. Finally, most voters have not yet learned to ask their representatives “what have you done for me lately?”—which is why, unsurprisingly, there continues to be a more than the modest dose of voters’ apathy (Pasquino, 2002).

There are two ways of analyzing the process of “keeping into account”. The first way consists of looking at the conflicts occasionally arising between the parliamentarian and the national leadership of his/her party. This analysis needs to be carried out with a fatidic grain of salt. Cross-national analyses

should in fact take into consideration that parliamentarians' willingness or ability to take stances that are at odds with the official party line depends on whether parliamentarians are masters of their own electoral fortunes (as in the American case) or owe instead a debt of gratitude to the party thanks to which they were elected, on whether and to what extent party discipline is enforced, and on the political culture of the country under examination—a culture that stems from practice and that provides the parliamentarian with some behavioral guidance. A simple comparison between the American and the Italian case may be useful to illustrate the point we are trying to make.

Over the years social scientists in general and political scientists, in particular, have devised a variety of indexes to quantify the cohesion within voting bodies. The Rice index has been extensively used to study the cohesion of Congressional parties in the USA. Cooper and Young (2007) have shown that in the 1867–2003 period the cohesion of the Democratic party in Congress varied from a minimum of 54.3 per cent to a maximum of 83.9 per cent with an average of 68 per cent. In the same period, the cohesion of the Republican party varied from a minimum of 53.8 per cent to a maximum of 90.1 per cent with an average of 70.1 per cent. What these data reveal is that cohesion has varied greatly over time as there were phases in which cohesion was fairly low and phases in which it was substantially higher. In Italy, the cohesion of political parties in the course of the XIII and XIV legislatures was phenomenally higher. Pelizzo (2008) in this respect reported that in the XIII legislature the level of cohesion varied from a minimum of 91.9 per

Box 1.3 The rice index of cohesion

The Rice Index of Cohesion, originally proposed by Stuart A. Rice (1925), estimates the extent to which the members of a given group vote in the same way.

It is computed by calculating the difference between the percentage voting one way from the percentage of group members voting the opposite way. So if 50 per cent of a party's parliamentary group votes YES and 50 per cent of that party's parliamentary group votes NO, the party's cohesion on that issue is $50 - 50 = 0$. When, by contrast, 100 per cent of a party's parliamentary group votes in the same way, the party's cohesion is $100 - 0 = 100$. Intermediate values of the index of cohesion can be estimated depending on whether and how a party's parliamentary groups split on a given vote.

By averaging the index on all the legislative votes cast in the course of a legislature it is possible to estimate the cohesion of a party in the entire legislature.

cent in the case of Forza Italia to a maximum of 99.3 per cent in the case of the Democratic Party of the Left, that the cohesion of five of the six parties for which the level of cohesion was computed was higher than 95 per cent, and that the cohesion of the six parties in question was consistently higher than the highest cohesion recorded in the US Congress. The analysis of the data from the XIV legislature painted a fairly similar picture: the level of cohesion varied from a minimum of 93.49 per cent in the case of the PDS to a maximum of 99.19 per cent in the case of Forza Italia, that for four of the five parties for which the level of cohesion was estimated the level of cohesion was higher than 98 per cent, and that the cohesion of these five parties was consistently and substantially higher than the highest level of cohesion recorded by the US Congressional parties. This evidence is consistent with the claim that when elected officials, namely, the parliamentarians, own their election to the party to which they belong, they do not have the freedom to dissent and to vote against the party line—something which could come at the cost of keeping their voters' preferences into account.

The differences in party cohesion that we have just documented are to some extent a function of the metrics that one adopts to estimate parties' cohesion. The Rice index computes parties' cohesion by dividing the difference in the vote choice of the party members by the total number of votes cast by the party members. The formula is

$$RI = \frac{yes - no}{yes + no}$$

And it is estimated by considering votes cast in a binary way (yes, no). Hix, Noury, and Roland (2005) suggested that to more properly capture parties' cohesion, one should also take into consideration the number of party members abstaining because several members may be unwilling to vote against the party line and to support/reject the bill under consideration, are likely to prefer to abstain. Hence, Hix, Noury, and Roland (2005) proposed the Agreement Index that, in addition to considering the number of votes in favor and against, takes also into consideration the number of abstentions. Building on this line of inquiry, Landi and Pelizzo (2013) suggested that in the Italian case, the cohesion of parties (in parliament) should be estimated by considering not only the votes in favor, the votes against, and the abstentions but also the absences. For fear to enter into a direct conflict with the party leadership and yet being unwilling to participate in a decision that may upset their respective voters, a certain number of parliamentarians are likely to choose to be absent. By computing the Rice Index, the Agreement Index proposed by Hix et al. (2005), and a Modified Agreement Index, that they had developed, Landi and Pelizzo (2013) reported that while party cohesion was extremely high when it was estimated based on the Rice Index or the Agreement Index, it was considerably lower when calculated based on the Modified Agreement Index. As noted above for the XIII legislature,

the Rice index of cohesion varied from a minimum of .919 to a maximum of 1, the Agreement index varied from a minimum of .914 to a maximum of .991, while the Modified Agreement Index varied from a minimum of .499 to a maximum of .779. The computations performed for the XIV and XV legislatures present a fairly similar picture (Landi and Pelizzo, 2013:336).

This evidence speaks to the fact that there is intraparty dissent, but that the manifestation of this intraparty dissent is country- or context-specific. In the USA, Congresspersons are not afraid to vote against the official party line. In other settings, the dissent from the party line is manifested in a less confrontational way by abstaining, while in Italy dissent is often expressed in the least confrontational way possible. When the vote is expected to be divisive and to create a rift between the party and the parliamentarian, the parliamentarian avoids participating in the vote. This solution may not be terribly appealing for those who wish parliamentarians to be as independent-minded as in the USA, where Congresspersons take into serious account the demands of their voters, but the ritual of (the strategic) absence allows parties and their members to save the face (Goffman, 2017). The different manner in which dissent is manifested has obvious implications as to how elected officials, parliamentarians, and Congresspersons, keep into account the preferences of their respective voters. But this difference also raises an important question, that we will attempt to explore at greater length later on, concerning the cultural determinants of accountability.

The forms, the modes, and the ways in which elected officials keep their voters' preferences into account may not simply reflect the incentives and the constraints that the institutional framework provides. They may also be the result of what could be defined, for lack of a better word, as cultural factors—dissent can be and is manifested in different realms and jurisdictions, but it has to be manifested in ways that are culturally acceptable. What is acceptable (or not) is the result of, among other things, the kind of knowledge or culture that emerges from the praxis, from the way things are usually done—and this is the reason why we believe that to appreciate the conditions that facilitate or hinder accountability, attention has to be paid to cultural factors.

There is a final point that may account for the differences in cohesion between the American and the Italian parties. Hirschman (1970:4) famously noted that when organizational performance deteriorates, members of the organization have two major options, either to *voice* their dissatisfaction or to *exit* the organization. *Loyalty*, in Hirschman's theory, is what shapes members' choices. According to Hirschman "loyalty holds exit at bay and activates voice" (1970:78). Hirschman's analytical framework has been widely accepted, and rightly so. If parliamentarians were indeed loyal to their respective party, they would not even consider the possibility of choosing the exit option and leaving. But the parliamentarians' conduct cannot be fully understood and explained solely in terms of loyalty or the lack thereof. Even in this respect, an understanding of what is acceptable, culturally

acceptable, as a praxis or *modus operandi* is essential to understand and explain why parliamentarians in some jurisdictions are more inclined to express their dissent (voice option) while in others they are more inclined to leave (exit option) their respective parties.

In the middle of the so-called Italian transition, in the aftermath of the crisis/collapse of the so-called First Republic (and its parties), the Italian parliament experienced an unprecedented amount of party-switching (Heller and Mershon, 2005)—which we regard as the party politics analog of exit. Heller and Mershon (2008) documented that party switching was a function of party discipline: parliamentarians switched parties in an effort to escape strong party discipline.

While it is not our intention to dispute such findings, we have nonetheless the impression that they leave some questions unanswered, namely, why parliamentarians who had long managed to cope and live with tight party discipline in the first phase of the Italian Republic (1946–1992), found the exit option so appealing at the beginning or in the course of the transition? Was

Box 1.4 Party switching in Italy

In the course of the XII Legislature (1994–1996) according to Verzichelli (1999) 122 MPs switched parties and there were a total of 208 party switches.

In the course of the XIII legislature (1996–2001) Heller and Merson (2005:542) reported that 139 MPs switched parties and there was a total of 272 party switches.

The linkage between accountability and party-switching is not straightforward. A party switch could represent a response to voters' demands and be, subordinately, an example of accountability (as both taking and keeping to account). In other instances, a party switch could occur against the wishes of the voters by whom the MP was elected, and in this case, the party switch undermines the process of accountability—both in terms of keeping into account and giving an account.

While party switching in those years was uncharacteristically high (for Italy's historical standards and in comparative perspective), the data presented by Heller and Mershon (2005:545) show that party switching was more common among MPs elected with the PR (and those who did not have a particularly strong connection with the voters in their constituency) than among MPs elected in SMD with the FPTP. In fact, while a little more than 20 per cent (97 out of 475) of the MPs elected with the FPTP switched party, more than 27.1 per cent of those elected with PR (42 of 155) switched party.

it because the old parties had disappeared or were in crisis and the new ones were too new/young to command much loyalty? Was it because of a cultural change in terms of what was deemed an acceptable behavior? There is some reason to believe that especially in Italy political parties are no longer able to secure the loyalty of their elected officials. Worse their political cultures are vague, thin, and poor and do not differ very much. Hence, many parliamentarians feel free to move around and go where they are offered more credible chances of re-election. In any event, party-switching has reached unprecedented levels (and remains among the world's highest) providing a partial explanation for why party cohesion in Italy is so high. Party cohesion (in the parliamentary votes) is high (partially) because dissenting voices chose the exit option.

This long digression about the Italian case allows one to note that Italian parliamentarians enjoy a wide range of options to express their dissatisfaction with the official party line and to keep their voters' preferences into account. In the USA, a disgruntled Congressman/woman votes against the party line; in Italy, a parliamentarian may (rarely) vote against the party line, but he/she may also decide to abstain, be absent, or change party. The differences in how elected officials manifest their dissent and/or keep voters' preferences into account reflect differences in what is regarded as acceptable conduct.

The second way consists in analyzing parliamentarians' efforts to give voice to the demands of the voters he/she represents. Elected officials may give voice to their voters and keep their demands into account by introducing specific legislative proposals (bills), proposing amendments to the legislative proposals under consideration (and/or to the budget), and engaging in legislative oversight activities.

The literature on oversight has over the years emphasized that parliamentary questions may prove to be a weak oversight tool, that their effectiveness may vary depending on procedural conditions, or that they can ensure government accountability when properly used (Martin, 2011:261). This line of inquiry focuses, predominantly, on the role that parliamentary questions play in calling and holding governments to account. Yet, as Bailer (2011) noted, parliamentary questions can perform a second and related function, namely, that of showing the extent to which parliamentarians keep voters' preferences into account.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union makes available the data concerning the number of written parliamentary questions asked and answered. A preliminary analysis reveals that there is a considerable variation in the number of written questions asked. Looking at the data concerning the four largest European democracies, one finds that the number of written questions asked varied from a minimum of 3,866 written questions asked in Italy to a maximum of 48,351 written questions asked in the United Kingdom. The data also reveal significant cross-national differences in terms of the number of written questions asked. In this respect, the number of written

Table 1.2 Written Questions Asked

<i>Country</i>	<i>N. of Written Questions Asked</i>	<i>N. of Written Questions Answered</i>	<i>Last Year for Which Data were Available</i>
France	6,655	5,540	2017
Germany	10,390	10,321	2020
Italy	3,866	902	2017
United Kingdom	48,351	48,193	2020

Source: <https://data.ipu.org>.

questions asked varies from a minimum of 902 in Italy to a maximum of 48,183 in the United Kingdom. Finally, there is also a significant variation in the percentage of written questions that were actually answered out of those that were asked. In Italy only 23.3 per cent of the written questions asked was answered—a value considerably lower than those recorded in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom where more than 80 per cent of the written questions asked was answered by the government (Table 1.2).

These differences can be due to a variety of factors. They can be imputed to the institutional framework in which parliamentarians operate, to the quality of democracy, but they can also be due to the fact that across these regions there is a different understanding of what a parliamentarian/legislator should do, of how he/she should understand his/her role, and of the extent to which he/she should attempt to keep voters' demands into account.

The data that we have presented show considerable differences in the number of parliamentary questions that parliamentarians submit. Quantity is, obviously, an important determinant of how well parliamentarians perform their tasks, but it is not the only one. The quality of the questions that parliamentarians submit to the attention of the government is an equally, if not more, important determinant of how well they voice their voters' preferences and keep them into account.

Parliamentary questions, as the literature has acknowledged, are not the most effective oversight tool. Interpellations, where available, are considerably more effective in compelling executives to provide information. But, despite their limitations, parliamentary questions are the most common oversight tool and, if used properly, they could greatly contribute to accountability. A question is properly asked if it either demands the government to provide information, that is giving account, or it voices voters' concerns. In some instances, this is not, however, the case. Some parliamentary questions, submitted to the Italian Parliament in January 2020, are a perfect case in point. Question 4-02874 asked whether the government had any intention to take action to revoke the collaboration between the city of Parma and the photographer Oliviero Toscani, after Toscani's (unfortunate) remarks about the collapse of the Morandi Bridge.¹

Box 1.5 Questions and interpellations

Questions are used to obtain information, request government action to solve problems, criticise government, expose abuses and seek redress. Answering publicly for any potential shortcomings is seen as an important contribution to accountability and is the direct consequence of ministerial responsibility and accountability to the legislature.

(Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2012:35)

Interpellations are similar to parliamentary questions, but often more formal and extensive, “designed to provoke comprehensive debate on an issue or a particular case of ministerial neglect”.

(Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2012:35)

Similarly, question 4-04421 asked the government whether it planned to do anything after two Feltrinelli bookstores closed down their activities. These questions are not proper because in both instances—the issues at stake were beyond the government’s responsibility and the questions were not necessarily an expression of voters’ concerns.

Giving account

At the end of their term, most parliamentarians run again for office. All parties have a strong interest in regaining their seats and winning additional ones. The incumbent government is looking for another mandate and the opposition is hoping for a reversal of roles. To an extent to be determined and evaluated, quite a number of office-holders return to the voters stressing their own achievements and underlining the inadequacies, the mistakes, and the wrongdoings of their opponents. All of them will try to present a balance sheet of their respective activities. Therefore, they will give an account of their overall performance and their specific achievements. Several actors may more or less usefully and effectively intervene in this process that stands at the very core of the theory and practice of democracy.

First of all, the mass media usually try to provide an assessment of what has been done by the government and by the opposition, how much, why, and why not, with which consequences. The local press will probably focus on the activities of the representatives in their respective communities. There may also exist more or less independent research institutes engaged that have monitored the activities of the government and the opposition and are capable of providing a balanced evaluation. Though far less reliable,

some especially visible opinion-makers are also in the position to affect many a view. There are also situations in which specific organizations will rank the parliamentarians' performance with reference to a specific scale. For instance, we have in mind the American Civil Liberties Union and its scale of "liberalism" based on the votes cast by US Senators and House Representatives. Very often some parliamentarians will distribute to all the voters in their constituency a detailed document containing much information on the votes they have cast, the bills they have sponsored, and the additional activities they have performed. Unfortunately, there is no systematic collection of data on all these elements and, as a consequence, no analysis of the (positive/negative) impact of these important pieces of political information on the voters' evaluations of parties and parliamentarians and their decisions to change or not their vote. However, something of interest can be said.

Generally speaking, there are two interpretations. The first one points to the difficulty even for the interested voters to collect in splendid isolation the necessary information, to peruse and evaluate it. Most voters would feel at a loss in performing such a difficult operation. Some of them may still ask the famous questions: "what have you done for me lately?", but they will still be unable to come to a firm conclusion based on what the parliamentarians and the parties will tell them. When carried too far this interpretation will destroy any possibility of analyzing the processes of accountability and may come dangerously close to denying the very possibility of the existence of a viable democracy. Fortunately, it is known that most voters collect from different sources exclusively the amount and the type of information they believe to be indispensable and adequate. Moreover, they always have some clues, for instance, "party identification" or "subcultural belonging", even though if their vote is fully and exclusively determined by those clues, then, the entire process of accountability may count less than one would expect and less than it should to satisfy the requirements of the proponents of accountability as the true democratic virtue.

The second interpretation claims that the voters are not isolated entities. They belong to a multiplicity of associations. Hence, their task in acquiring political information and, even, in shaping their voting decision is made easier by what is distributed through associational channels. This interpretation goes on to suggest that the voters obtain, have, rely on enough information and are capable, if they want to do it, to collect the amount of *additional* information they consider necessary to evaluate the performance of the various political actors. Whenever possible, the voters resort to "retrospective voting" as initially formulated by V.O. Key, Jr. (1966) and refined by Fiorina (1981). Of course, even retrospective voting is bound to be positively affected by the existence of a dense network of associations. Whether accountability, in terms of giving an account of what has been done, not done, badly done, and what shows to work or not, can be assessed in a relatively easy way through surveys and interviews and, finally, by analyzing the

electoral results (for an interesting combination of retrospective and prospective motivations in shaping the vote of the Italians in the 2001 elections see ITANES 2001, spec. pp. 161–170).

For those who believe in the democratic process, the casting of the vote produces a democratically acceptable judgment on the performance of the different political actors. Once the votes are cast and have been counted, in a way the process of accountability has come to an end. However, no democratic election is a one-game experiment only. Democratic elections are iterative games. Hence, the circle is not at all definitely closed. Indeed, the new cycle of accountability that begins (as shown in Table 1.3) will be nourished by the feedback of lessons learned both by the winners and the losers (for an approach stressing the importance of the feedback process, see Easton, 1965) and, above all, by the voters. It will not be the same game. Some old actors abandon the political scene and new actors make their debut. New issues make their appearance and new voters have acquired the right to cast their electoral verdict. What is more important from the perspective of accountability is that the political and electoral game will (re)start building on the increased awareness acquired by all the actors, the voters, of course, included. If and when this is the case, the quality of democracy itself has some chance to improve.

What we have said in this section has three basic implications: one is that accountability is a complex, multidimensional, and iterative process—which is why we spoke of a cycle of accountability. The second point that, we believe, emerges from the what has been said so far is that to properly understand accountability, and its subdimensions or processes, it is often necessary to explore them from a systemic perspective—accountability contributes to the functioning of the political system and to democracy, but the nature and organization of the political system are also, to some extent, responsible for how accountability is ensured. The third point that, in our

Table 1.3 The Cycle of Accountability

<i>Phases</i>	<i>Electoral Campaign</i>	<i>In Parliament</i>	<i>Returning to the Polls</i>
Process	Taking into account	Keeping into account	Giving account
Content	The voters communicate their preferences; the candidates offer their platform and promises	The parliamentarians attempt to decide with reference to the voters' preferences and their promises and constraints	The parliamentarians try to explain their positive/negative performance
Feedback	Old preferences are re-affirmed; new preferences are articulated		

view, emerges from what we have said thus far is that the structure, the organization, and the functioning of the political system—which include how candidates and elected officials relate to the voters or to the way in which parliamentarians relate to the government—are the byproduct not only of institutional factors and conditions but also of that specific political culture that emerges from practice and that makes some types of conduct and actions more or less (culturally) acceptable.

Accountability and democracy

Before concluding the present chapter, we would like to make a final point concerning the relationship between accountability and democracy.

Democracy and accountability go hand in hand. For the past 25 years the international community, the World Bank more specifically, has underlined the nexus between good governance and socioeconomic development. Countries that have a higher level of socioeconomic development and, conversely, countries in which the level of good governance, or the quality of government, is higher are more developed from a socioeconomic perspective. Studies produced in this line of inquiry (Mauro, 1995) have shown that good governance promotes foreign direct investments and economic development at the same time that, to some extent, is a function of socioeconomic development (Ambraseys and Bilham, 2011). However, the high correlation between development and good governance may be spurious because development and good governance are both the result of the interaction of some other institutional factors.

The literature on good governance has produced a wide range of definitions of what good governance is and of how it should be measured. While Rhodes (1997) noted that the notion of good governance was associated with a plurality of meanings, other studies (Pelizzo, 2020) noted instead that the international community introduced the notion of good governance to refer to the substance of what makes a political system democratic without having to use the D-word and/or to speak of democracy—a concept that was believed to be incredibly less appealing to autocratic rulers in the developing world than the more technocratic notion of good governance. More recently, some studies (Pelizzo, 2020) have noted that not only good governance was just another word for democracy, but also that the way in which good governance was measured closely resembled empirical efforts to measure the quality of democracy. Specifically, several of the variables used to assess the level of good governance (Kaufmann, Kraay and Zoido, 1999) are used by some political scientists (Morlino, 2012) to assess the procedural quality of democracy.

Leaving aside the question of whether good governance and democracy are one and the same or whether good governance only corresponds to the procedural dimension of a democratic polity, both practitioners and political scientists have noted that accountability is a subdimension

of good governance (and subordinately to democracy) and that accountability also contributes to or is a determinant of good governance and democracy.

A higher level of accountability improves the quality of democracy or is one of the reasons why the quality of democracy is higher in some settings than in others. As Schmitter and Karl (1991:76) noted “modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives”. At the same time, the fact that the quality of democracy in some settings is higher than in others is one of the reasons why the level of accountability is also higher, and vice versa. Democracies are political systems in which citizens can run for office, can vote, can seek information from a plurality of independent sources, can express themselves, can form/join parties, in which free and fair elections are held on a regular basis and in which governments are accountable to the citizens in the sense of having to give an account for what they do/did while they were in office. In the absence of these conditions, especially in the absence of free and fair elections, it is impossible for the political system to secure a minimal level of accountability in terms of taking voters’ preferences into account, keeping them into account, and giving an account for their implementation (performance).

This point is of some importance because it challenges the notion that elections are ill-suited to secure accountability. Elections may not be sufficient to secure the answerability and the enforcement that a political system needs to ensure government accountability, but it is also clear that in the absence of free elections candidates and parties cannot properly gather adequate information as to what the voters want. Elected officials and parties would not know which preferences they ought to take into account to finalize their decisions, and the voters would not be able to reward/punish elected officials, parties, and governments for their conduct in office.

What we have said so far allows us to challenge a second claim that has been advanced in the literature, namely that in imperfectly democratic settings horizontal accountability is more important than in those settings in which accountability can be ensured by electoral means. This opinion, voiced most famously by O’Donnell (1998), is somewhat problematic. The claim neglects the fact that accountability and democracy go hand in hand, *simul stabunt simul cadent*. There is no accountability without democracy and there is no democracy without accountability. What this means in practical terms is that if the quality of democracy is lower or inexistent, the level of accountability is also lower and/or inexistent. Of course one could claim, as O’Donnell did, that in those imperfectly democratic settings in which elections fail to secure a meaningful level of accountability, mechanisms of interinstitutional accountability are more important, but to do so one has to take a rather questionable step and reduce accountability to what we have defined as giving an account. By doing so, however, one overlooks

the fact that interinstitutional accountability—because of the way in which it is secured—does little to ensure even a minimal level of accountability understood in terms of taking into account and keeping into account voters' preferences.

In all likelihood, there is a third problem in the view voiced by O'Donnell. The literature has generally underlined that elections, however important, cannot be the only means by which accountability is secured. In the words of Schmitter and Karl (1991) the kind of accountability that elections secure is at best intermittent and has to be complemented or integrated by that kind of ongoing accountability that specific institutions (courts, parliaments) are, among other things, designed to secure. And this is precisely where the problem lies. If, as O'Donnell (1998) contends, interinstitutional accountability is expected to secure the rule of law, individual rights and freedoms, and the configuration of republican-liberal values that are peculiar to each and every polity, then, obviously interinstitutional accountability is as important instrument, if not more important (in this respect alone) than electoral accountability. If instead interinstitutional accountability is expected to be a surrogate for electoral accountability, secure accountability between elections, ensure that policymakers keep into account voters' preferences, and contribute to the proper functioning of a democratic system, then the importance of interinstitutional accountability is dependent on or connected with electoral accountability. This is so because it is only in the course of an election that voters can use the information gathered by the institutions mandated to secure interinstitutional accountability and make up their minds as to whether a government should be punished or rewarded.

Conclusions

In recent years, the literature has paid considerable attention to accountability, the way in which it should be conceptualized and measured, and its contributions to both good governance and democracy. More precisely, the literature has noted that accountability entails answerability and enforcement, that it can be electoral and interinstitutional, and that it is instrumental in securing democratic governance.

The purpose of the present chapter was to take seriously the notion of accountability and problematize it. In doing so we have attempted to explain why the application of spatial metaphors is somewhat inappropriate with regard to accountability, that instead of speaking of vertical and horizontal accountability one should speak of electoral and interinstitutional accountability, and that while other forms of accountability (social/diagonal) can increase answerability, they lack the means to secure any kind of enforcement. And, in so far as accountability entails both answerability

and enforcement, we suggested that the traditional notions of accountability (electoral, interinstitutional) should be regarded as the only forms of accountability.

The second point that we have advanced in this chapter is that, despite a considerable amount of theorizing, accountability remains nonetheless greatly undertheorized. In this respect, we attempted to show that accountability is a multidimensional process that includes three different, albeit related, processes, namely, the taking into account, the keeping into account, and the giving an account. A political system can be considered more properly democratic if and when candidates and parties, in the course of an electoral campaign, make an effort to understand what the voters want and to modify their electoral programs and platforms in the light of the voters' preferences. This is the process that we have defined as *taking into account*. We then went on to note that a political system is properly democratic if and when elected officials and parties keep into account voters' preferences. In this respect, we noted that there should be some kind of congruence between what elected officials and parties (and of course the government) plan to do and what the voters want. Voters' preferences should be taken into consideration when policy decisions are made and/or finalized. This is the process that we have defined as *keeping into account*. The third process of accountability, which we defined as *giving account*, is the only one to which the literature has paid attention. It is the process through which governments and representatives provide information and attempt to justify their actions to the voters and to the institutions mandated to ensure inter-institutional accountability.

In discussing these processes we formulated two basic claims: first, that accountability is ongoing, it should be understood as an iterative process and it should be assessed in systemic terms; second, that the differences in the extent to which political actors are able or willing to take voters' preferences into consideration, to keep them into consideration and to explain their conduct reflects a wide range of systemic characteristics as well as the political culture of the polity under consideration. What is (culturally as well as politically) acceptable may vary across jurisdictions. The variations are a function not only of the institutional features of such settings but also of what is regarded as good practice—which, in its turn, is a function of the political culture of the polity itself—not to mention the fact that the choice of institutions and institutional change is, to a large extent shaped, by cultural and/or ideational factors (Blyth, 2002).

To conclude, this chapter has made two additional claims. The first claim is that accountability is the pre-eminent democratic virtue, as it is higher in more democratic settings and it contributes to the quality of democracy. The second claim is that in so far as free and fair elections are a condition without which democracy cannot possibly exist, elections cannot be regarded, as the literature has at various points in time suggested, as fairly

ineffective means for ensuring accountability. Without free, fair, and periodical elections, there is no taking into account, no keeping into account, and no giving account. And without knowing what the voters want, without trying to align policy decisions with the voters' preferences, and without answerability and enforcement, there is no democracy.

Note

- 1 On August 14, 2018, the Morandi bridge, which was part of highway A10 administered by the Compagnia Autostrade per l'Italia, collapsed. After the breakdown of the bridge, which had caused 43 casualties, Toscani, who had long been associated with the Benetton family, owners of Autostrade per l'Italia, was asked how he felt about the collapse of the bridge and the photographer callously replied asking "who cares about the collapse of a bridge"—answered that triggered a wave of indignation and the parliamentary question that we allude to in the text.