

Accountability as an important part of the political theory

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



Accountability has long been an important part of the political theory of democratic systems. The democratic process in many forms of representative governments has long been viewed as its own form of political accountability. However, accountability can exist in many different arrangements. In his paper, *Accountability: Fundamental to Democracy*, Jeremy Waldron asserts that democratic accountability should be regarded as similar to agent accountability, mostly because of the value it places on transparency and the responsibility for the government to convey an accurate account. Waldron is not the only theorist to suggest with this comparison. Many argue that political accountability should be viewed as similar to the relationship between an agent and a principal. In this paper, I will argue that while democratic accountability contains similarities to agent-principal accountability, it is distinctly different due to the opportunity it grants agents to act outside of principal interests and the lack of defined responsibility many democratic political positions have to their constituency.

In his paper, Jeremy Waldron posits that there are two forms of accountability as they relate to political theory: “ forensic accountability” and “ agent accountability.” The difference between these two, according to Waldron, are the processes by which accountability is obtained. In forensic accountability, an individual can have his or her actions reviewed by a panel to see if she has acted in accordance with an established norm. This form of accountability can be seen a similar to criminal accountability, in which individuals are charged and evaluated according to specific codified rules. Agent accountability, on the other hand, is a duty placed on an agent towards his principal, “ whereby the principal may demand from the agent

an account of the work that the agent has been doing in the principal's name or on the principal's behalf." This form of accountability is most often seen in commercial interactions, such as a realtor, where one who does not wish to do a job herself hires someone else to do so. When the given job is completed, the agent (in this case the realtor) must give an account of his actions.

Democratic accountability is often seen as similar to the latter conception for a number of reasons. One of the fundamental similarities drawn to support the comparison of these two ideas is the function of elections as an agreement between agents and principals. Electing officials to a public office is a tacit agreement between an agent (the elected official) and his principals (his constituency) that the official's responsibility is to execute the duties of that office to the best of his abilities in accordance to the general will of the people. This also similarly implies some form of transparency of action. An agent has the responsibility to explain his actions to the principal in order to give an account as to why he acted in a certain way. As Waldron puts it: "the business of government is public business." Elected officials are tasked with carrying out duties in the public interest, and accompanying that duty is a responsibility to convey to the public how the official is executing that responsibility and what actions he has taken to do so.

While the relationship between an official and his constituency stands as a great parallel to agent accountability, it differs in some very distinct ways. Firstly, in a republic or parliamentary form of government, elected officials—while certainly acting mostly in accordance with constituent interest—are not

exclusively subject to the will of the people. In democratic accountability, an agent is free to act according to his own agency, and necessarily so. In the democratic process, the principals are surrendering some of their claim to an account from the elected official by putting him in a privileged position of power and trusting he will know how to best act in any given circumstances. Take for example an elected official who must decide whether or not to authorize the mobilization of troops into another country to overthrow a dictator. Public opinion is overwhelmingly against the decision. However, the elected official, having access to classified information, knows that if they were not to invade a terrible genocide would take place; and so decides to authorize the mobilization.

Were this traditional agent accountability, the agent may be more inclined to follow the will of the people and reject the mobilization due his position's responsibility to carry out the requests of his principal. However, democratic accountability provides the agent with greater autonomy by which to carry out what he sees as the best action; and it grants him the opportunity to provide an account not based on principal interests alone, but an undefined ethic as well. Yes, there are ulterior and alternative interests at play.

However, the access to information the politician is granted gives him a special perspective that motivates his actions as separate from any group or specific interest; and instead he acts on an interest of the greater whole.

It could be argued that the official's explanations for his actions is congruent with agent accountability, as he is giving an account of what the people intended for him to do, which is carry out his office to the best of his abilities.

However, I would argue that it would be very unlikely that a realtor would sell a house his principal did not want to sell, and retroactively make a case for why that was the best choice. This makes the two cases distinct. Thus far, I have displayed how in democratic accountability, the standards by which an agent are held accountable necessarily more separated from the interest of the principle. However, this is not the only way in which democratic and agency accountability differ. Democratic accountability also differs from agent accountability in that the agent principal relationship in democratic accountability is often far less specifically defined than it is in agent accountability.

As I stated earlier, electoral accountability in democratic systems often means that an elected official is acting in accordance to at least some of the interests of her constituency, or the interests of whatever other powers that aided her getting elected. " Legislative accountability relates law-makers to particular groups (constituencies) of citizens. In most democracies, lawmakers operate in a representative system: the members of a large legislature represent their constituents on a basis of various axes of representation such as geographic interest, party sympathy, ethnicity, and so on. " The complexities of representative democracies results in the interests a politician represents are nor clearly defined, but rather complex. This creates an ambiguity of interests and a responsibility the agent holds to the principal. Certain districts or regions may have a more clearly defined majority that holds similar interest. However, even in these cases, an elected

official does not have a specific set of policies she must pursue or execute; only those her constituency wishes for her to pursue.

In agent accountability, the principal tasks the agent to execute a very specific set of actions. If the agent does not follow through on the arrangement, then she is held accountable according to the principal's interest. It would be extremely difficult to do this in the case of democratic accountability. There are no set specific standards and regulations that we can place on elected officials outside of legal limitations. All other standards are subject to the general will of the electorate, or principal. To compare these two separate methods of deriving standards would be to suggest that there is a defined set of standards to which elected officials are held when placed in office.

I have thus given two significant ways in which democratic accountability differs from agent-principal accountability, especially as it relates to the relationship between the agent and principal. Democratic accountability, especially in representative systems, exists to create certain dynamic between elected officials and their constituency to ensure good governance as well as responsibility of action. While it holds similarities to agent accountability, the differences it possesses also help distinguish it as a political system. As a result of these differences, I do not believe one should conflate the two ideas and define them as similar, but should rather consider them two distinct systems.