Political Accountability: Vertical, Horizontal, and Diagonal Constraints on Governments

The Articles of Impeachment being walked from the House to the Senate in the United States Capitol. House Judiciary Democrats (@housejuddems), 1/16/20

KEY FINDINGS

- Governments make accountability concessions only when the cost of suppressing demand becomes higher than the cost of concession.
- Vertical accountability must be present and robust in a state before high level aspects of either diagonal or horizontal accountability can develop.
- The presence of vertical accountability alone is not enough to deter governments from entering conflicts; a robust civil society and horizontal oversight are also required.

How and in what order do accountability subtypes and their aspects develop? What roles do different types of constraint on the government play in the maintenance of democratic peace? Two recent, related articles answer these questions using V-Dem data. The first study (Mechkova et al. 2019) attempts to map the order in which accountability subtypes and their specific aspects develop. It finds that high levels of vertical accountability are observed before high levels of other forms of de-facto accountability. The second study (Hegre et al. 2019) investigates the presence and strength of the three subtypes and the continuation of democratic peace between states. Contrary to prior studies, the authors find that vertical accountability is less effective at preventing inter-state wars than either horizontal or diagonal accountability.

Before the release of the Varieties of Democracy dataset in 2015, there was not enough data to effectively study the order of development of accountability mechanisms. Theory on this topic has been present in the literature for many decades, but the lack of comprehensive data resulted in inconclusive findings. Likewise, the use of coarse measures to study governmental restraints and weak causal logic hampered the study of vertical and horizontal accountability in preventing conflicts between democracies. Additionally, the contemporary and increased role of the media and civil society organizations in politics fails to fit into the existing understanding of either vertical or horizontal accountability. Both of the studies covered in this policy brief are among the first to examine these actors of so-called diagonal accountability.
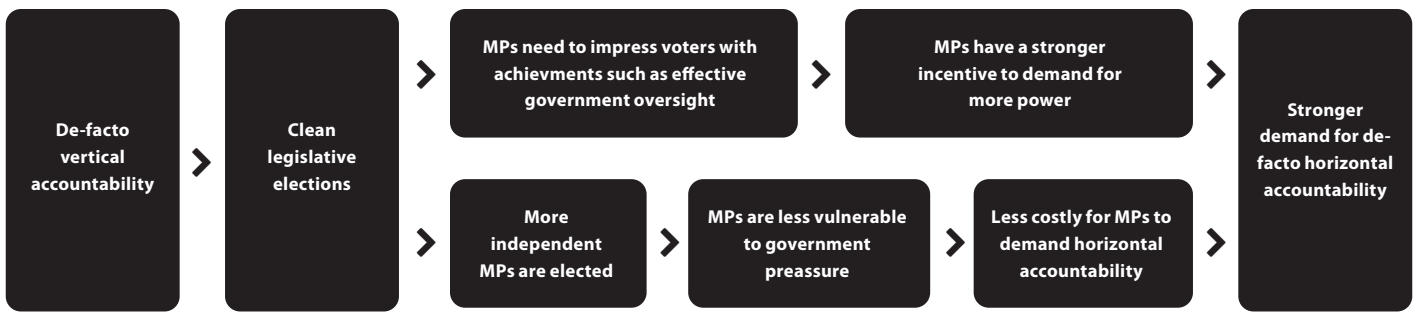
DEFINITIONS

Political accountability refers to constraint on executive power and comprises the mechanisms for holding an agent accountable and the means to apply sanctions when a principal (citizens) transfers decision making power to an agent (the government).

- *Vertical (electoral) accountability:* institutions and actions that make the government accountable to the people through elections or political parties.
- *Horizontal accountability:* the checks and balances that are in place and used by the legislative and judicial branches of government to hold the executive branch accountable.
- *Diagonal accountability:* means that media and civil society have to hold the government accountable, through, for example, the spread of information, publicity, protests, and other forms of engagement.

Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg (2019) examine how and in what order specific aspects of the accountability subtypes develop. The authors use individual V-Dem indicators supplemented by data from the Comparative Constitution Project (Elkins et al. 2014) to measure the presence of different accountability aspects within a state. Using new sequencing methods, they are able to find that aspects of vertical accountability develop first. Their findings support the claim that the expansion of vertical accountability can lead to higher levels of practiced

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┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────┐
│ De-facto     │ > │ Clean        │ > │ MPs need to impress  │ > │ MPs have a stronger  │ >
│ vertical     │   │ legislative  │   │ voters with          │   │ incentive to demand  │
│ accountability│  │ elections    │   │ achievments such as  │   │ for more power       │
└──────────────┘   └──────────────┘   │ effective government │   └──────────────────────┘
                                       │ oversight            │
                                       └──────────────────────┘

                                       ┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐
                                     > │ More         │ > │ MPs are less     │ > │ Less costly for MPs  │ > │ Stronger demand  │
                                       │ independent  │   │ vulnerable to    │   │ to demand horizontal │   │ for de-facto     │
                                       │ MPs are      │   │ government       │   │ accountability       │   │ horizontal       │
                                       │ elected      │   │ preassure        │   └──────────────────────┘   │ accountability   │
                                       └──────────────┘   └──────────────────┘                              └──────────────────┘
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POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Pursue measures that aim to increase vertical accountability in states with low levels of democracy. These measures will have positive repercussions in the other two accountability subtypes as well.
- For peace and accountability, efforts aimed at strengthening civil society, legislatures and the judiciary are highly relevant; and they are more likely to be successful in a context in which there are clean elections.

- Once democratic minimums have been reached, international policy agendas should include measures directed toward the strengthening of non-executive governmental institutions and the role of civil society organizations in politics.

diagonal and horizontal accountability. Conversely, efforts to strengthen either horizontal or diagonal accountability mechanisms are likely to fail when there is a lack of advanced vertical accountability.

Overall, horizontal accountability aspects do not manifest until very late in the sequence, when both vertical and diagonal accountability are already present and strengthened. This is because horizontal accountability enables both the accumulation of information about government wrongdoing and the sanctioning of the government. Thus, the costs of concession to demands for horizontal accountability are high, which increases government reluctance to concede to demands. Vertical and diagonal accountability are only involved in sanctioning the government or information accumulation, respectively. In all cases, institutions that are part of any accountability aspect must exist de-jure before that aspect can be observed de-facto.

Hegre, Bernhard, and Teorell (2019) study the relationship between the strength of the three accountability subtypes and the likelihood that a state will enter a military interstate conflict resulting in at least one death. This article shares the same understandings of vertical and horizontal accountability as the first, but their definition of diagonal or "social"

accountability focuses only on citizen engagement and participation in civil society organizations. The authors create their own measures for vertical and horizontal accountability by aggregating existing V-Dem indicators and indexes, and their measure for social accountability is the V-Dem 'civil society participation index.'

The authors' main argument is that different forms of accountability play a role in the prevention of conflict. The presence of elections in two states can be a buffer against militarized conflict between them, but horizontal and diagonal accountability are more likely to prevent war beginning. This is because diagonal and horizontal accountability mechanisms are in force at all times, but most vertical mechanisms are only present during an election.

The authors observe that the presence of both vertical and diagonal accountability provides the strongest defense against the outbreak of conflict. Strengthening civil society organizations makes vertical accountability mechanisms more effective. Engaged civil society organizations help voters receive information. This leads to a more aware populace that will sanction the government in an election.

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A voter casts her ballot in Timor-Leste's parliamentary elections. Photo: Martine Perret (Source: UN)

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V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 17 staff, and a project team across the world with 6 Principal Investigators, 14 Project Managers, 30 Regional Managers, 170 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and 3,000 Country Experts, the V-Dem project is one of the largest ever social science research-oriented data collection programs.