

# Democracy, Accountability, and Evaluation

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*Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*

Volume 21, Issue 50, 2025

**JMDE**  
Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation

ISSN 1556-8180

<http://www.jmde.com>

**Background:** The focus of this article concerns the final step in the accountability chain in democratic societies, the one between the people and their elected representatives. The importance of this relationship has meant that questions regarding accountability and independent scrutiny have been important in the democratic discussions for more than 2,300 years. Based on a discussion of this relationship, the article asks the question of what role evaluation can have in strengthening this relationship.

Trust and mistrust must be balanced in a democratic society. An important prerequisite for this balance is that the citizens know that those to whom they have entrusted power are under constant and independent scrutiny.

However, we can find indications of a lack of trust in evaluative information delivered by government offices, audit, inspections, and research bodies. This seems most obvious in extreme situations, crises, breakdowns, suspicions of abuse of power and corruption, or what is seen as just shocking incompetence, where routine oversight does not give trustworthy answers to the questions raised. The article points out that such situations seem to demand something extraordinary, ad hoc accountability mechanisms.

**Purpose:** To discuss what role evaluation can have in strengthening the accountability relationship between the people as accountability holder and their elected representatives and thereby democracy.

**Intervention:** Not applicable.

**Research Design:** Not applicable.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Systematic qualitative analysis. Particular attention is paid to the publications of INTEVAL in the area of accountability and the role of investigating commissions in Sweden.

**Findings:** Since the 1960s accountability has been an important part of the evaluation discourse and has also been seen as an important purpose for evaluation. However, the article points out that the debate about accountability reveals tensions within the evaluation field. The conclusion, given the background of lack of trust in many democracies, is that it is important that the evaluation community, more than earlier, emphasize the importance of accountability and discuss how the evaluation practice can contribute to enhanced accountability.

**Keywords:** *democracy; representative democracy; public administration; governance; accountability; accountability chain; accountability information; ad hoc accountability mechanisms; oversight; scrutiny; audit; trust and mistrust; evaluation; INTEVAL.*

When the group that eventually became INTEVAL was founded by IIAS with Ray Rist as chair, he held a key position within GAO. Many of those he recruited to the group were also employed by national audit institutions. It is therefore not surprising that questions about accountability, and the role of evaluation and audit, were central already in the early discussions within the group and have thereafter been addressed in a number of the books the group has published e.g., Rist, 1990; Gray et al., 1993; Bemelmans-Videc et al., 2007; Barrados & Lonsdale, 2020). It is also worth noting that many of the members of the group came from countries which over the 1980s had started to move “towards the New Public Management (NPM)” (Hood, 1995; NPM first used by Hood, 1991). A consequence of this development was that a broader and somewhat critical discussion started about accountability within the public administration. With titles such as *The Audit Explosion* (1994) and *The Audit Society* (1997), Michael Power pointed out what he saw as negative effects of the expansion of information with an accountability purpose. This problem was also central in a great number of books and articles about New Public Management (e.g., Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004, 2011; Perrin, 2019).

These discussions have been focused on relations among the chain of principals and agents involved in the processes of implementation. It has therefore largely been about accountability relations within the public administration and what, relatively speaking, can be seen as the lower levels in the accountability chain. The focus in this article is a different one: the final or highest relation in the accountability chain, the accountability relation between the people as, using Behn’s terms (2001), accountability holder and their elected representatives (Parliament or similar) as accountable holdee. It is the accountability relationship which defines a society as a democracy, and in the debate about how democracy can be preserved and strengthened this relationship is of central importance. Based on a discussion of this relationship, this article asks the question of what role evaluation can have in strengthening this relationship and thereby democracy.

## Accountability and the Accountability Chain

Two central aspects are included in most definitions of accountability. Firstly, the agent has a “duty to account for his actions to his principal,” it is an obligation to inform the principal about how different obligations have been fulfilled. Secondly,

the principal has the right to sanction or punish the agent if the information shows that the agent “fails to perform according to expectations” (Lewin, 2007, p. 4). These two aspects were also emphasized in an early book in the INTEVAL series: Marie-Louise Bemelmans-Videc noted, after a review of the literature, that accountability is not only about an obligation to provide information; “to sanction is a vital part of that relationship” (italics in original; Bemelmans-Videc, 2007, p. 24). However, in both earlier and modern discussion a necessary prerequisite is emphasized. A third independent party must scrutinize the information given and the actions taken by the agent.

Accountability exists, as earlier mentioned, between different levels and can be described as a chain of accountability relations. You can be a holder of accountability in one relation and an accountable holdee in another relation. The accountability chain can be seen as a mirror of a chain of responsibility relations.

## Accountability and Democracy

The discussion about accounting and audit is not something which has started recently. The distrust underlying accountability and audit has always been central in the discussion about democracy and the exercise of power. The democratic origin of auditing “appears to be a deeply rooted concern in a democratic society to limit the possibilities to exceed power in public positions” (Gustavsson, 2013, p. 7). Todd remarks in *The Shape of Athenian Law* that “Athenian democracy was acutely suspicious of its appointed officials, and was always terrified that they might overstep the bounds of their severely limited responsibilities” (Todd, 1993, p. 112). Complex examinations of magistrates were constructed to detect, for example, embezzlement and bribes, but also concerned “any malpractice alleged against the official” (p. 113). Distrust was a central theme in Aristotle’s discussion in *The Politics*. He points out that the magistrates not only can conspire against one another, but “also against the constitution from which they derive their power” (Book V, 1302b.3).

Aristotle also emphasized the importance of independent scrutiny. He argues that “there must of necessity be another office which examines and audits them, and has no other function. Such officers are called by various names – Scrutineers, Auditors, Accountants, Controllers.” (Book VI, 1322b5–15).

Moving forward, to what can be seen as the beginning of modern democracy, accountability is central in documents such as the *Federalist Papers*

and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* 1789 (15th paragraph).

Accountability can also be important in non-democratic societies. Of course, the king by the grace of God, as well as modern dictators, could hold his subordinates accountable. However, the point is that it certainly wasn't the ruler who was accountable to the people he ruled. And in today's non-democratic societies, in which God is not part of the accountability chain, the ruler is still not accountable to the people.

In a democratic society or, to be more precise, a representative democracy, the people are the final principal, and the rulers are therefore "accountable to the society over which they are placed," as it was expressed in the American discussion (Federalist Papers, 1788, No. 55). The ruler can continue to rule only with the consent of this principal. Democracy without accountability to the people is unthinkable, and a statement about such a society can be seen as a contradiction in terms.<sup>1</sup> However, the role of accountability in a democratic society has not only to do with a definition. Accountability is also crucial for upholding the necessary balance between trust and mistrust in democratic societies.

## The Balance Between Trust and Mistrust

Democracy presupposes trust. If we, as voters, did not trust our representatives, we would not voluntarily hand over power to them, and without trust it would seem pointless to vote, as it would not be possible to know or even guess in which direction different candidates or parties would govern. The design of democracy must be such that the voters can trust that the elected will not act based on what favors their own interests. Democracy is canceled through abuse of power and corruption.

At the same time, mistrust is fundamental in a democracy. The transfer of power to the elected is restricted in time. It is also limited in scope and sometimes restricted by the separation of power (Weber et al., 1978, p. 652). Different constitutional mechanisms ensure that restrictions and boundaries in the exercise of power are not violated.

Too much mistrust will, obviously, lead to a questioning of the democratic system itself. However, too much trust will give the same result. It will undermine the critical approach to the rulers,

which are fundamental in a democracy, and the awareness that power and responsibilities can be abused.

An important prerequisite for the balance between trust and mistrust is that we (as voters) know that those to whom we have entrusted power are under constant and independent scrutiny. Questions about control have therefore been central in the democratic discussion. Doctrines about the separation of power, which we associate with Locke and Montesquieu, are not only about a division of power but also about control. Woodrow Wilson emphasized in his book *Congressional Government* that "Quite as important as legislation is vigilant oversight of administration" (1885, p. 297).

Also in Sweden, where the constitutional debate traditionally has been limited, questions were raised, in the process that preceded the decision in 1809 on a new regeringsform (the central part of the Swedish constitution), about how extensive the control of the governing power should be and who should exercise this control (Tarschys, 2002).

So, accountability has been central in democratic discussions. It is based on the insight that we can trust the ones we have given power to—not because of their moral superiority, but because we know that they know that they are scrutinized by an independent party in a pre-regulated process. Without such a process we can easily imagine that the ones being controlled may want to influence the process and even ensure that there is no process.

## Constitutional and Other Accountability Mechanisms

Constitutions in democratic nations regulate accountability both directly and indirectly. Practically all democratic nations have some constitutionally regulated form of independent audit, and the United Nations has also emphasized the importance of independent audit institutions (UN, 2014). However, reports and statements published by supreme audit institutions can be spread in such a way that they can also be important in the next step in the accountability chain, for the voters.

This motivates a more general remark. The purposes of audit and other constitutional accountability arrangements are, generally

<sup>1</sup> Although the discussion in this article concerns representative democracy, the discussion is relevant even

if the starting point is a more deliberative view of representative democracy.

speaking, not directly related to the final step of the accountability chain. The purpose is often to enable the legislature to hold the next level accountable; the elected body is the holder and not the holdee. However, not only audit reports but also all other forms of studies, evaluations, and investigations can be spread in such a way that they can be important in the last step of the accountability chain. The final accountability holder in a democracy is therefore in a very crucial way depending on the media and the freedom of the press.

That freedom of speech is crucial for the possibility of holding leaders accountable was a consequence noted in Milton's discussion in *Areopagitica* (1644), before the modern democratic discussion (Blasi, 1995). It can also be noted that in a memorandum written before the adoption of the Swedish constitution 1809 (Regeringsformen) the question about how the government could be scrutinized was directly connected with the question "How extensive should the freedom of the press be, and how can it be preserved?" (Tarschys, 2002). By securing freedom of opinion and freedom of the press, constitutions also indirectly provide prerequisites for accountability.

## Easier to Hold the Elected Accountable—Stronger Democracy?

A precondition for us, as citizens, to hold the elected accountable is the existence of information about the decisions taken by the elected and about the consequences of their decisions.

Against this background it seems possible to argue that democracy has been strengthened in recent decades. The expansion of evaluation, not least described in books published by INTEVAL and its members, has meant that the amount of information, which potentially can be useful in the final step of the accountability chain, where the people are the accountability holder, has increased. It should be said that this does not mean that the information is produced with an exclusive accountability purpose. Evaluations with other primary purposes can give information which is relevant for accountability, and an evaluation with an accountability purpose can give information which can be used for improvement as well.

A part of this expansion has been that performance audit has become more central in many supreme audit institutions. Another development is a growing number of governmental bodies focusing on evaluation and inspection

within specific sectors in fields such as crime prevention, health, international development, education, labor markets, etc. And to the picture at least two things can be added. NGOs and different forms of associations are conducting more evaluations. And investigative journalism means that the media themselves produce evaluations which impact the public debate. These developments suggest that it is easier than in previous times to hold the elected accountable. Democracy is stronger today than earlier.

## Lack of Accountability Information?

However, surveys and indexes show us a different picture. More "old" democracies are described as flawed democracies. And, in several democratic countries, the political structure has undergone great changes with a rapid development of new political parties. These new parties have often been strongly critical of earlier existing parties and demand a fundamental shift in policies. It is not difficult to see this development as a result of a process in which mistrust has increased to such a level that it is impossible to talk about a balance between trust and mistrust, and where many voters don't really believe that those in power are under constant and independent scrutiny.

We can also find indications of a lack of trust in evaluative information delivered by government offices, audit, inspections and research bodies. In extreme situations, crises, breakdowns, suspicions of abuse of power and corruption, or what is seen as just shocking incompetence, this information is not seen as trustworthy. "Routine oversight," to use Light's expression (2014, p. 3.), does not give the answers to the questions which are raised. Such situations demand something extraordinary, an *ad hoc accountability mechanism*. An example is the investigating commissions in Sweden which are appointed in such situations.

The more precise nature of these situations may vary. It can be about the handling of an extreme event, dealing with questions about how the consequences could have been reduced by political and administrative decisions. Other commissions have been about suspicions about misuse of power, including cover-ups of earlier mistakes. The decision to establish an investigative commission is often taken in agreement between the government and the political parties, and they are often appointed after a certain question has been broadly and publicly discussed and questions about "what has actually happened (or what is actually happening)" and "should the government and agencies have been more prepared" have been

raised. The commissions often also have a clear accountability perspective. When it comes to the commission set up to examine Sweden's response to the pandemic, the leader of the opposition clearly stated, "Firstly, the crisis management of the government and the authorities must expressly be subject to the Commission's evaluation" (Riksdagen 2019/20:136, p.20; see also Forss and Andersson in this volume). However, commissions are normally also expected to make recommendations about what can be done to avoid certain mistakes or how society can be better prepared for similar situations in the future.

A special group of the investigating commissions are historical investigations and can be described as truth commissions. A commission that started its work in 1997 investigated the question of mandatory sterilization of some women from 1935 (SOU 2000:20). In 2003 an investigative commission presented its report about the disappearance in 1945 of the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg (SOU 2003:18). One commission working today describes itself as a truth commission (the Truth Commission for the Sami People).

An important aspect of these commissions is to restore trust. Also, commissions that address problems several decades back point out the importance of their work for building future trust. The lack of trust is sometimes explained by the lack of trust in earlier investigations. They can therefore be seen as a form of meta-investigations. The government pointed out, in the directive to a commission investigating the domestic surveillance after 1945, that "a number of investigations have gone through various issues that concern both the police and the military security service. However, it is missing still a comprehensive picture..." and that such picture was a prerequisite for future public confidence in what was done by the security police and by the military intelligence and security service (SOU 2002:87, p.642).

Before 1980 there were only a few examples of investigate commissions in Sweden. The number has subsequently increased. During the 14-year period 1999–2012, 30 reports were published, compared with 26 reports during 1964–1998 (Hirschfeldt, 2013, p. 172). Similar investigative commissions have been conducted in both Denmark and Norway. An obvious example from Norway is the special investigation after the terrorist attacks in 2011 in Oslo and on Utøya (NOU 2012:14). It also seems that similar developments have taken place in other Nordic countries and, at least partly, in the United States (Light, 2014). The United Kingdom has a special legal framework for

such commissions, The Inquire Act, from 2005 (Hirschfeldt, 2013, p. 171).

Some form of ad hoc system for commissions exists in several countries and also within the EU, as could be observed during and after the pandemic (Eliadis et al., 2023). This development points out that the ordinary systems for scrutiny and oversight are not enough. Something else is asked for when it is about some kind of "government breakdowns, whether the result of a decision or nondecision" (Light, 2014, p. 11) or suspicions about such breakdowns. In such situations the balance between trust and mistrust needs to be restored to avoid democracy itself being questioned.

## The Role of Evaluation

Evaluation can contribute to strengthening democracy in two ways. The first is to give knowledge and to contribute to a shared understanding of social and economic conditions. People in a democracy have, and should have, varying opinions about what can be seen as problems and whether the political system should intervene in solving or managing what is seen as a problem. However, it is also important that a shared understanding of actual conditions exists. Despite both technical and value-based difficulties in describing social and economic realities, such knowledge makes the democratic discussion more insightful than it would otherwise be. Another way in which evaluation can, at least potentially, contribute to strengthening democracy is through enhancing the possibilities to hold the elected accountable.

Accountability has been part of the evaluation discourse from the beginning and is "the trunk... built on the dual foundation of accountability and systematic social inquiry" (Alkin & Christie, 2004, p. 12). However, the relationship has been and still is complicated. In the around 20 contributions in *Evaluating Action Programs: Readings in Social Action and Education*, questions regarding accountability are nearly absent, certainly for what here has been described as the final step of the accountability chain (Weiss, 1972). And even authors who have seen accountability as a purpose of evaluation (e.g., Rossi et al., 1999, p. 40) focus on accountability on lower levels in the accountability chain.

Evaluation theorists have noted that "evaluations that sets out oversight and compliance as a priority have at least until recently been considered the backwater of the field" (Mark et al., 2000, p. 129). A possible explanation for this is what Fetterman, in the conclusion of

*Empowerment Evaluation*, described as the “inherent tension... between focusing on improvement and enhancing wellness or accountability” (Fetterman, 1996 p. 379). Accountability has frequently been seen as a mechanistic process within a certain administrative concept and if evaluators wanted to contribute to improvement, they should be careful about being involved in something like accountability.

However, today, with a background of what can be seen as a stagnation and lack of trust in many democratic societies, it seems more important to point out that evaluation can contribute to accountability in the final step of the accountability chain, the one between the voters and the elected. Aware that the line is now being crossed into what can be seen as speculation, this is particularly important if we assume that one explanation for this lack of trust is that large groups of voters—in many countries—do not trust that the elected are scrutinized to a sufficient extent and in an independent manner. This explanation leads obviously to further questions which point in different directions in today’s democracies.

One of these directions is evaluation. If the explanation is at least partly correct, the situation can be seen as even more problematic given the expansion of evaluation and the increased amount of evaluative information. An important conclusion of the discussion in this article is that the evaluation community must, more than earlier, emphasize the importance of accountability and discuss how the evaluation practice can contribute to enhanced accountability. A possible consequence for the practice of evaluation is that we, as evaluators, should more often address questions about how observed shortcomings can be tracked back to the elected, and whether problems in implementation can be explained by actions or lack of actions at the highest political level.

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