

Accountability in Public Administration & Politics

Being accountable has many meanings, but usually public officials are expected to be accountable to both the public and their superiors 上级 in government. Some political theorists divide the concept into “soft” and “hard” forms. Soft accountability means following through on 完成 proposals and statements to either (but preferably both) of these groups, in accordance with laws and requirements of one's position. An “accountable” official does what s/he says, but sometimes s/he says different things to different audiences and thereby appears unaccountable to the one(s) s/he “lied” to. Or in the much-criticized statement of Hillary Clinton, politicians may try to be accountable to *themselves* by holding "a public position and a private position" on a given topic. Hard accountability means that officials who don't do what they say (lack “soft accountability”) or who make mistakes will face consequences or punishment, such as losing their position or even fines and imprisonment. The "hard" version is both more strict 严格 and more difficult to establish, with even consolidated, liberal democracies failing to achieve it with regularity. In all, accountability is very similar to responsibility, though with deeper and more official connotations related to one's position, and more often evident *after* an event occurs.

Traditional Chinese political theory has a source of accountability in the concept of 民本, “the people as foundation.” In Lily Tsai's *Accountability without Democracy*, she finds that Chinese village officials fulfill their "community obligations" (AKA are accountable and exercise better governance) especially when villagers invoke ties to clans 宗族 and traditional, moral values within the locale 现场. A structural problem in Chinese politics, as studied by Westerners, is that lower levels of government are accountable to higher levels for implementing 履行 policy and personal promotions 提升 or demotions 降职, but perhaps less accountable to local populations. Local elections are one way to address this lack of accountability, ideally leading to “self-governance” 自治 (but notably, not quite democracy!).

How do elections affect accountability? Electing someone to represent a constituency does not guarantee soft accountability, as politicians can and do regularly break their campaign promises. Just because someone has been elected rather than appointed to their position does not mean they will do what they said they would do. Ironically 讽刺地, elections may do better at providing a "mechanism 途径" for hard accountability in that if elected officials fail to do as they say, are corrupt, make big mistakes, or are incompetent 不称职的, the people have the option to “throw the bastards out of office” by choosing different candidates in the next election (i.e. choosing *not* to re-elect politicians who do not govern well). In practice 事实上, however, many who are seen as corrupt by outsiders and the media retain 保留 enough of a loyal, local following 本地信众 (i.e. by channeling 引导 resources from the national/federal government to their constituencies) that they are still re-elected again and again.

Public officials have four options when facing accusations: 1. Do not engage; ignore the problem. 2. Pivot away from or reframe the question/problem (often combines 1&3). 3. Deny wrongdoing/responsibility (including by blaming someone else). 4. Admit mistakes/take responsibility. In 2-4, we expect the accused to "give an account" of what happened from his/her own perspective, though 2 won't be the account the accuser requested. The two figures in “The Fog of War” and “The Unknown Known” both held the position of U.S. Secretary of Defense, effectively designing and managing U.S. war strategy in highly consequential foreign wars which were less than successful (Vietnam & Iraq II). How do McNamara and Rumsfeld differ in their approaches toward the director, the media, and the public with regard to strategic and tactical mistakes? Why is admitting mistakes sometimes too costly for leaders? What examples can you think of where a past leader clearly used 1, 2, 3, or 4 (above)? Was it successful? Why/why not?

Helpful Questions & Phrases: ·(play the) "blame game" ·break a promise ·call for/demand Sb.'s resignation ·change the subject 转移话题 ·cover one's ass(俚语) ·dodge the question ·get away with Sth. (avoid punishment for something bad Sb. did) 不受处罚的 ·get off scot-free 不受处罚的 ·Have one's head (for Sth.) (i.e. “I'll have your head for this!”) ·Hold Sb. accountable, Hold Sb. to account ·"Mistakes were made." ·nothing “sticks to” Sb. (Sb. always emerges from criticism without damage) ·offer one's resignation ·“pass the buck” 推卸责任 VS. “The buck stops here.” ·rake Sb. over the coals 谴责 ·shift the blame ·skirt the issue ·“Shit rolls downhill.”(俚语) ·take the blame for Sth. ·take the fall for Sb.
Q: Whose fault is it (that...)? A: It's Sb.'s fault.

Other Vocabulary: ·(be) answerable to... 对 ... 负责 ·apologize/apologetic/apology 抱歉 ·blameworthy 该受责备的 ·confront Sb. 使面对, 使对质, 使对证 ·consequence 后果 ·contrite/contrition 悔悟 ·corner Sb. 使走投无路 ·defiant 目中无人 ·evasive 含糊 ·(the) fall guy ·fall from grace 失宠 ·flee the country 出逃国外 ·(The) Government Accountability Office (GAO) ·liability 责任和义务 ·misconduct 管理或处理不善 ·nail Sb. for Sth. ·non-apology ·pin (Sth.) on Sb. ·plausible deniability 泛指做了坏事而能不留证据的行为 ·regret 后悔 ·resign 辞职 ·save face 挽回面子 ·scapegoat 替罪羊 ·shirk (Sth.) 逃避 ·smear campaign 毁谤攻击 ·stonewall Sb. ·(have a) “struggle session” against Sb. 斗争 ·top-down Vs. bottom-up ·unaccountable 不负任何责任 ·unbowed 不屈服的 ·unrepentant 顽固不化的 ·witch hunt 莫须有的迫害, 政治迫害