

THE PURPOSE AND LIMITS OF ELECTORAL ACCOUNTABILITY

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THE IDEA that voters hold political rulers to account for their actions while in power is generally taken to be one of the features of electoral democracy that most clearly distinguishes it from non-democratic forms of government.¹ This notion of political accountability is often thought to be advantageous, since it strongly incentivizes rulers to act in the best interests of their citizens.² But to make political accountability work would require that voters know how well their rulers have performed, and base their votes on this knowledge by reelecting rulers who perform well, and de-electing those who perform poorly. However, recent studies show that voters regularly do not know how well their rulers have performed, and even if they do, do not base their vote on this knowledge. If this is correct, then the idea that political accountability comes through the electorate seems to be mistaken.

This paper develops a novel way of formulating this problem for political accountability, arguing that, if these studies of voter knowledge and behavior are accurate, then as presently conceived, political accountability cannot succeed. However, the paper will set out and defend an alternative conception of political accountability that is not susceptible to these limitations on the part of the voter.

The paper first (section 1) briefly sets out the idea of political accountability as it comes through elections—*electoral accountability*—and what is required of voters to make it work. Section 2 argues that political accountability faces a dilemma: either voters do not know how well their rulers have performed, or if they do, they do not base their votes on such knowledge. The first horn of the dilemma is explored through literature on political ignorance, while the second looks at evidence that shows that the more people know about political affairs, the more likely they are to be entrenched in a particular political stance, and

1 See Erkkilä, “Governance And Accountability,” 10–12; Guerrero, “Against Elections,” 137–49; Moncrieffe, “Reconceptualising Political Accountability.”

2 Arneson, “Defending the Purely Instrumental Account of Democratic Authority”; Christiano, *The Rule of the Many*.

hence the less inclined they would be to change a voting decision to a different political party or ruler, even if they have performed well. On either horn of the dilemma, electoral accountability, as standardly conceived, fails. Section 3 considers several responses to this dilemma, through aggregative and heuristic approaches to voter knowledge, and alternative systems of government, such as epistocracy, sortition, and lottocracy. It is argued that these approaches are either deeply problematic or entirely inadequate.

In section 4, the paper offers a new way to conceive of electoral accountability. It is argued that we should focus not on what voters know, nor on how citizens cast their vote, but on what they *would* likely know and how they *would* likely vote under conditions where the actions of rulers have substantially negative consequences that are both pervasive and highly salient. In such counterfactual scenarios, political ignorance and arbitrary voting would seem much less likely. On this new theory, electoral accountability is not about checking how well or poorly incumbent political rulers have performed. Rather, it is about preventing rulers from committing or allowing substantial harms to come upon those they govern. This alternative theory gives electoral accountability a limited, but extremely important, role within a well-functioning democracy, one that can be achieved despite well-known, and often quite rational, limitations within the electorate.

It is worth pointing out two issues from the outset. First, a theory of electoral accountability is compatible with a range of theories about how people vote. For instance, people may vote to express a political identity or affiliation, or to try to secure good outcomes for themselves that have been promised in election pledges.³ The account this paper develops does not deny that any of these reasons are central in determining an agent's voting decision. It simply separates these reasons out from those of *accountability*—the keeping of political rulers to account for their actions while in office. The question to be addressed is: Do elections keep political rulers accountable? The answer this paper gives to this question turns on how we view accountability. On standard theories of accountability, the answer will be no, but on the account offered here, the answer will be yes.

The second issue is that the theory of accountability I develop in this paper is part of a defense of democracy within the “realist” strand of recent democratic theory.⁴ Democratic realists can be taken to make two claims. The first, *epistemic* claim, is that voters are often, or perhaps almost always, ignorant or

3 Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*; Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World*.

4 Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realist*; Brennan, “Does Public Reason Liberalism Rest on a Mistake?”

misinformed about most areas of political life.⁵ The second, *psychological* claim, is that people tend to vote on the basis of political affiliations that are analogous to sports team loyalties.⁶ This paper accepts both views, and indeed, will use literature that supports both of these claims to develop the dilemma for electoral accountability. However, unlike other democratic realists, I do not propose that accountability is not possible within current systems of representative democracy, nor will I suggest alternative forms of government that may make accountability more successful (I review these proposals in section 3). Rather, this paper proposes that electoral accountability within current systems is still possible if we change the way that we think about what electoral accountability is. Indeed, what I propose is how electoral accountability actually works. Given the realists' claims, electoral accountability may seem impossible. This paper argues otherwise: even given the realists' claims, electoral accountability is possible, but only if we reorient our views toward what electoral accountability actually is.

1. ELECTORAL ACCOUNTABILITY

There are several ways by which rulers are held accountable for their actions and policies. First, there is *horizontal* accountability, where rulers are critiqued by other professional politicians of one's own or another's political faction or party, through such measures as parliamentary debate and joint committees.⁷ Such methods can often include votes for or against bills and policies that may pass into law, and so mark a crucial way of holding rulers to account. Horizontal accountability can also come from rulers of other nations, as is the case with multinational institutions like NATO and the EU.⁸ A second form of political accountability comes externally through analysis and reporting from a free press, which provides information and scrutiny to a range of stakeholders, including politicians, businesses, and the public.

This paper focusses on a third, *vertical* kind of political accountability, which comes through the process of regular, free, and fair elections. The basic idea is that, first, the members of the electorate are given, through their right to vote,

5 See Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*; Brennan, *Against Democracy*; Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*; Delli-Carpini and Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*; and Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance*. For a general critique of peoples' tendency to believe falsely, see Duffy, *The Perils of Perception*.

6 See Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*; and Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*.

7 See Laver and Shepsle, "Government Accountability in Parliamentary Democracy." For the distinction between *horizontal* and *vertical* accountability, see O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy?"

8 Hirst, "Democracy and Governance."

the power to remove rulers from office if the electorate deems those rulers to have performed poorly, or to keep the rulers in power if they are deemed to have performed well. Call this *electoral power*. In turn, incumbent rulers are incentivized to perform well, in order to retain power in elections. Call this *the electoral incentive*. On this view, electoral power generates the electoral incentive: the fact that citizen voting rights empower or disempower political rulers on the basis of their performance generates for the rulers an incentive to perform well. Due to the strength of the electoral incentive, rulers have a significant motive to do all they can to perform well while in office. After all, winning elections is about retaining power, and so if retaining power is about performing well, then to win elections, rulers need to perform well while in power.⁹ Let us call this general description of electoral accountability, involving both *electoral power* and *the electoral incentive*, the *Standard Theory of Electoral Accountability* (STAN).

It follows from STAN that there is both a reward and punishment component to electoral accountability. If rulers are deemed to perform poorly or to fail to meet the demands and expectations of the voters, then voters can sanction or *punish* them by removing them from power.¹⁰ But if they have performed well or have met the required expectations, then the voters can *reward* the rulers by keeping them in power.

Electoral accountability, as conceived by STAN, is implicit both in arguments for democracy and in theories of voting. Consider the argument from J. S. Mill that participation in political affairs is required for citizens' interests to be taken into account:

The rights and interests of every or any person are only secure from being disregarded when the person interested is himself able, and habitually disposed to stand up for them . . . human beings are only secure from evil at the hands of others in proportion as they have the power of being, and are, self-protecting.¹¹

So, to have one's rights and interests considered by rulers, and to secure oneself from evil at the hands of others, Mill insists people need to be given the power (and have the personal interest to use that power) that comes through suffrage.

9 As Manin et al. note in *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, "what ultimately matters for accountability is . . . survival in office" (18).

10 See Darby and Martinez, "Making Identities Safe for Democracy," 12. This view treats elections as "a 'contingent renewal' accountability mechanism, where the sanctions are to extend or not to extend the government's tenure." See Manin et al., *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, 10.

11 Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 63; Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, 93–95.

In the background to this is electoral accountability, for the idea is that if rulers disregard or even harm the interests of enfranchised citizens, then the citizens will regard the rulers as having performed poorly, and hence will remove the rulers from power. As such, rulers have the electoral incentive to protect and not harm the interests of the enfranchised.

To elaborate on this point, consider the extant case of the Uyghur people in China's Xinjiang region. A recent report by the US government estimates that China's government has detained more than one million members of religious groups in internment camps

and subjected them to forced disappearance, political indoctrination, torture, psychological and physical abuse, including forced sterilization and sexual abuse, forced labor, and prolonged detention without trial because of their religion and ethnicity.¹²

On Mill's Argument, and STAN, if the Uyghur people had fair voting rights, then the Chinese government would have an electoral incentive not to commit the harms that have been reported, and thus to improve the Uyghurs' interests. In effect, the Uyghurs and other Chinese citizens would hold the government electorally to account for their actions. (We will return to the plausibility of this example in section 3.)

Electoral accountability is also assumed within theories of voting. In particular, in his *retrospective theory of voting*, V. O. Key depicted "the electorate in its great, and perhaps principal, role as an appraiser of past events, past performance, and past actions. It judges retrospectively."¹³ The idea here is that enfranchised citizens look back to how well rulers have performed to determine, through voting, whether or not to keep the incumbent ruler(s) in power. This theory of voting also connects with Mill's idea that voting enhances the interests of the electorate: "By basing their votes on evaluations of performance, voters . . . motivate officeholders to pay attention to the interests of the electors."¹⁴ Again, we see the electoral incentive being used to improve the performance of the incumbent political rulers for, if they perform poorly, they will be dispossessed of power.

It is worth noting three clarifications about STAN. First, it is not itself a theory of voting, but a consideration citizens have when making a voting decision. Voters cast their votes on a range of grounds, including offers made in

12 See the 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: China—Xinjiang: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/xinjiang/>.

13 Key, *The Responsible Electorate Rationality in Presidential Voting*, 61.

14 Ferejohn, "Incumbent Performance and Electoral Control," 7.

campaign manifestos and party-political loyalties. Electoral accountability is simply the idea that a significant proportion of the electorate weighs in the performance of the incumbent rulers when casting their votes, and in so doing, holds those rulers to account for their actions. Recent studies of voter behavior confirm this point. According to Jonathan Woon, people involved in making electoral decisions exhibit “a strong behavioral tendency to vote retrospectively, which in turn induces office-motivated politicians to act in the voter’s best interests.”¹⁵ But, second, even if electoral accountability does incentivize rulers to act in voters’ interests, as Mill and the electoral incentive suggest, it does not guarantee this. Rulers have other incentives to act that will be weighed against the electoral incentive of any particular group of voters. For instance, they may ignore the particular interests of one group if it is especially small, or unlikely to return a positive electoral vote even if their interests are supported. Third, a lack of electoral accountability would not prevent rulers from promoting the interests of the citizens they govern. There are other reasons why rulers might promote the interests of their citizens, including considerations of benevolence and justice. Electoral accountability simply provides a strong incentive to act in the interests of those they govern by performing well while in power.

For STAN to work, there are two conditions that must be met. To show this, let us consider a simple analogy. Suppose you hire me to work on your farm under the condition that, if I perform well, you will pay me, and if I perform poorly, you will not pay me. In this case, I have a *pay incentive* to perform well. Now, consider two extensions to the example:

No Knowledge: After a few days of working for you, I realize that you have no idea what I have been doing—you do not check on my work after I do it, and you do not ask anyone else how my performance has been. Despite lacking knowledge of my performance, you pay me some days and not others.

No Knowledge-Basing: You know everything about my performance. But when it comes to paying me, you flip a coin, and if it comes up heads, you pay me, and if it is tails, you do not. Some days I get paid when I have done a bad job, and other days I do not get paid, even when I have done a good job.

It seems that in both cases, I actually lack the *pay incentive* to perform well. In both *No Knowledge* and in *No Knowledge-Basing* I could just sit at home all day and still possibly receive pay. Indeed, it would be against my interests to

15 Woon, “Democratic Accountability and Retrospective Voting,” 927.

perform well in order to receive pay since I could work my fingers to the bone, and do an outstanding job, and still receive nothing in return.

The analogous point also applies to elections.¹⁶ Consider two symmetrical cases:

No Knowledge: The rulers of a nation realize that the voters have no idea what they have been doing—the voters do not check on the rulers' work, and do not ask anyone how their performance has been. Despite lacking knowledge of their performance, some citizens vote for them and some against them.

No Knowledge-Basing: The voters know everything about the rulers' performance. But when it comes to election day, the voters flip a coin, and if it comes up heads, they vote to keep the rulers in power, and if it is tails, they vote to get rid of the rulers. Sometimes, the rulers get to keep power even when they have done a bad job, and other times, they are disempowered even when they have done a good job.

Again, the rulers in both cases would lack the *electoral incentive* to perform well. In both *No Knowledge* and *No Knowledge-Basing*, the rulers could do no work for their entire term and still possibly retain power. That is not to say they have *no* incentive to perform well. It is just that they would not be held *electorally accountable* for their actions, and hence there would be no electoral incentive for those in power to perform well.

What these cases show is that two conditions must be met for STAN to work:

Knowledge Condition (KC): Electoral accountability requires the electorate to know how well their political rulers have performed while in office.

Knowledge-Basing Condition (KBC): Electoral accountability requires the electorate to base their votes on what they know about how well their political rulers have performed while in office.¹⁷

In the next section, I will present a dilemma for STAN. On the one hand, many voters will fail to satisfy KC. On the other, those who satisfy KC will fail to

16 Guerrero makes the same point in "Against Elections": "If people are ignorant about some issue, or about what their representative is doing with respect to that issue, or about whether what their representative is doing is good, they cannot monitor or evaluate what their representative is doing with respect to that issue" (145).

17 While KC and KBC are necessary conditions for electoral accountability to succeed, they are not jointly sufficient. For instance, we still require, among other things, elections to be free and fair, and suffrage to be universal and equal.

satisfy κBC . If this is correct, then neither condition is satisfied, and electoral accountability, as conceived by STAN , cannot succeed.

2. THE LIMITATIONS OF THE ELECTORATE

To evaluate the standard theory of electoral accountability in light of the first epistemic condition (κC), we can ask: Does the electorate know how well their political rulers have performed while in office? This is a vast empirical question. There are many policy areas over which political rulers could be judged to perform well or poorly, including the environment, crime rates, health care, foreign policy, inequality, and immigration. To proceed, I propose to focus on the question of voter knowledge in relation to the one issue that citizens most regularly recognize as being of the highest importance for them: the economy. If we focus first on this issue, we will be able to see that many voters in fact fail to satisfy κC , and from there we can make some salient extrapolations to other issues as well.

Studies of voting behavior have consistently found that citizens vote *sociotropically*—in accordance with their view of the national economic condition. Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier’s broad review of studies on sociotropic voting in the UK, US, and France finds a consistent pattern that

the economy reliably moves voters to hold their government accountable in national elections. When they see prosperity, they give support. When they see business conditions in decline, they withdraw support.¹⁸

For instance, in a study of voting in the 1996 US election, voters who believed the national economy was “better” were 38 percent more likely to vote for the incumbent (Clinton).¹⁹ Other studies show that the importance of the economy for voters in the US was the same in 1992 as it had been in 1996.²⁰

In Great Britain, David Sanders examined the effects of national economic perceptions in the five general elections between 1974 and 1997.²¹ Drawing from the well-established British Election Study, Sanders found that in 1974, odds of a vote for the Conservative Party were doubled when believing the economy had worsened. Across the range of elections, Sanders concludes that “the governing party loses support among those voters who believe that eco-

18 Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, “Economic Models of Voting,” 530.

19 Alvarez and Nagler, “Economics, Entitlements, and Social Issues,” 1360–62.

20 Norpoth, “Bush v. Gore,” 53.

21 Sanders, “Party Identification, Economic Perceptions, and Voting in British General Elections, 1974–97.”

conomic conditions have worsened.”²² In the 2001 general election, when the incumbent Labour Party won a significant majority of 413 parliamentary seats, 70 percent of voters saw the economic past as the “same or better,” and 68 percent of voters saw the economic future as the “same or better.”²³ For voters, economic conditions ranked second behind the National Health Service in terms of issue priority.²⁴

A similar picture emerges in France as well. Issues salient to the economy, particularly unemployment and inflation, are central issues for French voters. As Lewis-Beck et al. found from French voter surveys of the 1995, 2002, and 2007 elections, unemployment was always the number one issues for voters. They also found that economic concerns of inflation ranked numbers five and three in 1995 and 2007, respectively; inequality ranked numbers three and two, respectively, in 2002 and 2007; and deficits ranked number five in 2007.²⁵

While voters clearly use sociotropic considerations to judge how well their political rulers have performed while in office, do they *know* how well these governments have performed? Have they got their assessments correct about government performance on economic issues? According to some recent studies of sociotropic voting, the electorate in many countries is often misinformed about government performance with the economy. One recent study by Achen and Bartels that bears out this concern focusses on the problem of “end bias,” where “voters seem to evaluate incumbents on the basis of election-year economic outcomes rather than cumulative economic performance.”²⁶ In their study, Achen and Bartels focussed on the influence of incumbent economic performance in the final two quarters of an election cycle on voter behavior in US elections since the mid-twentieth century. They argue that, for “the cumulative rate of real income growth in the 13 quarters leading up to Election Day . . . every additional percentage point of income growth increased the incumbent party’s expected popular vote margin by almost 1.5 percentage points.”²⁷ This confirms the sociotropic claim that the economy is a priority in voting decisions. But in contrast, focussing merely on “Q14 and Q15—the six months leading up to Election Day,” they found that “every additional percent-

22 Sanders, “Party Identification, Economic Perceptions, and Voting in British General Elections, 1974–97,” 261.

23 Clarke et al., *Political Choice in Britain*, 84–85.

24 Clarke et al., *Political Choice in Britain*, 90.

25 See Lewis-Beck et al., *French Presidential Elections*, ch. 5; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck, “French Election Theory,” 57.

26 See Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*; Huber et al., “Sources of Bias in Retrospective Decision Making,” 725.

27 Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 152.

age point of income growth increased the incumbent party's expected popular vote margin by more than 6 percentage points."²⁸ That is, for each additional percentage point of income growth, the incumbent party was four times more likely to receive voter support when that percentage point occurred in the six months leading up to a general election.

End bias highlights the human propensity to bring to mind more immediately available evidence when making judgments—sometimes called “the availability heuristic.”²⁹ As an epistemic problem, this bias disposes voters to gather evidence in a way that points to incorrect or misleading conclusions. If voters were making a properly retrospective evaluation of incumbent performance, then they would judge incumbents on cumulative performance over an entire term, rather than on the basis of recent economic results alone.

Achen and Bartels say that end bias produces “myopic” voters who unfairly judge economic performance in terms of the final six months of an election cycle. This has direct implications for STAN, since how should we expect incumbents to behave given such myopic retrospection? According to Achen and Bartels, incumbents

should attempt to maximize income growth in the immediate run-up to elections, but care little about what happens to the economy at other times . . . there is little or no *electoral* incentive for presidents to promote myopic voters' well-being during much of their time in office.³⁰

So, because voting is generally myopic, not only does it fail to incentivize incumbents to promote citizen interests through effective economic management for the majority of their time in office, but it can actually do damage to those interests because the incumbents can do economic harm without facing punishment. For, an incumbent could perform poorly with the economy over the full term, but improve in the final six months, and gain reelection on that basis. This would seem to *undermine* the role of electoral accountability, particularly when it is taken to improve citizen interests.³¹

The conclusion to draw from this is that, with respect to sociotropic voting, there seem to be many citizens in the US who, although they believe that they know how well their government has performed economically over its tenure, are in fact misinformed. On this issue, then, the electorate fails to satisfy KC, and hence electoral accountability as standardly conceived fails with it. But

28 Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 153.

29 Tversky and Kahneman, “Availability.”

30 Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 170.

31 E.g., Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*; Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*.

since end bias is a general human disposition, we have some reason to suppose that it occurs in other elections outside of the US as well, and affects other issues, including crime, health care, immigration, the environment, foreign policy, and inequality.³² The extensive literature on political ignorance reveals widespread areas of misinformation among voters on many of these issues.³³ To dwell on this literature is not necessary to make the point already made for sociotropic voting: voters lack knowledge—to at least some significant extent—on key factors determining the performance of political rulers, and because of this, those rulers are less incentivized to perform well on these issues.

Now, perhaps this is incorrect. Perhaps voters *do* have knowledge of how well incumbents have performed while in office. In other words, κC *does not* fail, as suggested by the studies on voter ignorance. After all, even studies that outline the extent of voter ignorance indicate that the electorate does have some knowledge of government performance.³⁴ For example, Somin claims that the “biggest issue in the important 2010 [US] congressional election was the economy. Yet two thirds of the public did not realize that the economy had grown rather than shrunk during the previous year.”³⁵ But this still means that one-third of the public may well have known that the economy had grown rather than shrunk the previous year. So, perhaps governments have *some* electoral incentive to do well with the economy because *some* of the voters have salient knowledge of their performance. And if one-third of the voters have this knowledge, then that is a significant minority, and so the incentive to do well with the economy will also be significant. The remainder of this section considers a response to this point: that even though there are voters who satisfy κC , those knowledgeable voters will fail to satisfy κBC —they will not base their vote on such knowledge—and hence the incumbent government still lacks the electoral incentive.

To begin, it is worth stating that people tend to gather intricate knowledge on issues that interest them. Someone who learns as much as she can about coffee, or the Brazilian football team, or *Game of Thrones* will almost always be someone who cares a lot about, respectively, coffee, the Brazilian football team,

32 Huber et al, “Sources of Bias in Retrospective Decision Making.”

33 See Brennan, *Against Democracy*; Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance*.

34 Studies of voter ignorance often note that such ignorance is rational, or at least not irrational. For instance, in “Is Political Ignorance Rational?” Somin acknowledges the view, often attributed to Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, that since a single vote has only a fractional chance of changing the outcome of an election, the costs of informing oneself swamp the value of that vote. For discussion of this issue in the context of electoral accountability, see Hardin, “Democratic Epistemology and Accountability,” and for criticism, see Barnett, “Why You Should Vote to Change the Outcome.”

35 Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance*, 1.

or *Game of Thrones*. Because people care about these things, they also tend to have entrenched preferences toward them. The coffee connoisseur has a keen liking of coffee, and is unlikely to suddenly change her mind and come to dislike it.

A similar point is thought to apply to people who are knowledgeable about politics: those who know a lot about politics tend to also be those who care a lot about politics.³⁶ What is more, caring about politics tends to go along with specific partisan loyalties: if you are more politically knowledgeable, then you will tend to follow a particular political party that aligns to your identity.³⁷ Just as the person who cares about the Brazilian football team goes out to learn more about them and is an avid supporter of that team, so the person who cares about the Labour Party in the UK, or the Democratic Party in the US, goes out to learn more about the workings of government in general, and their own party in particular. Now, it is not that being knowledgeable makes one politically partisan, but that being partisan tends to go along with a keener interest in political affairs, which then leads to the acquisition of knowledge of those affairs: it is the partisan loyalty that motivates people to seek out information that satisfies the interest.

The problem that is often pointed out with this approach to acquiring political knowledge is that it is acquired through motivated, and hence biased, reasoning. That is, people tend to seek out information that tells them what they want to believe, and confirms the beliefs they want to hold. For instance, if someone is already strongly partisan toward the Labour or Democratic Party, then the information they will look for is that which supports positive beliefs and views about them, and opposes looking positively at, say, the Conservative or Republican Parties.³⁸ As Gunn puts it, “the more political knowledge people possess, the more “constrained” by ideology they tend to be,” in the sense that this ideology motivates their reasoning to preserve and reinforce their pre-existing partisan beliefs.³⁹ So, because people tend to have entrenched political allegiances, then the information they acquire on political affairs will

36 See Hannon, “Are Knowledgeable Voters Better Voters?”; Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance*, 93.

37 For evidence of this claim, see Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics”; Federico, “Predicting Attitude Extremity”; Feldman and Price, “Confusion or Enlightenment?”; Hetherington, “Putting Polarization in Perspective”; and Kalmoe, “Uses and Abuses of Ideology in Political Psychology.” Much of the literature on this issue is collated and discussed at length in Hannon, “Are Knowledgeable Voters Better Voters?” For response to Hannon, see Gibbons, “Is Epistocracy Irrational?”

38 See Kelly, “Intergroup Differentiation in a Political Context”; Green et al., *Partisan Hearts and Minds*; Huddy, “From Social to Political Identity”; Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*.

39 Gunn, “Against Epistocracy,” 35.

be sought to enhance those allegiances, rather than to make impartial judgments of the actions of political rulers.

One of the ways we could interpret the relevance of these claims for STAN is to assume that people acquire knowledge of how well or poorly the incumbent rulers have performed, but fail to take this into account when casting a vote. After all, if political loyalties are entrenched, particularly among the politically knowledgeable, then those loyalties will usually go along with electoral support for the party one is loyal toward. Hence, the acquisition of knowledge on the performance of incumbents will not ground a decision about whom to vote for. One could judge that the incumbent rulers have performed excellently, and yet refuse to support them at the ballot box because of political loyalties one holds toward a rival faction. The likely reason for this will be that she interprets the evidence supporting a good performance of the incumbent in a way that means that she still believes her own political party would be better in power. This does not make this agent's vote arbitrary—she still has reasons for not supporting the incumbent rulers—but it does disconnect her vote from any impartial judgments she should make of the performance of the incumbent rulers. Her judgment could also be correct—the party to which she is affiliated could be that which should be in power from the perspective of accountability. However, this may be due to luck rather than rational judgment, and if the situation changes, it might not mean that her judgment would change with it.

If this is in fact the situation, as the literature appears to show that it is, then we have knowledgeable voters who fail to *base* their vote on that knowledge, and hence who fail to satisfy KBC. This has significant consequences for STAN, for the incumbent rulers would then lack the electoral incentive to perform well while in power for fear that by performing poorly they will lose that power. It does not matter if they perform well or poorly, as they still will not convince others of a rival party to back them, and they will not lose support from their own base. Hence, we undermine the key motive that supports STAN.

We seem to have arrived at a dilemma. Recall that, for STAN to work, voters must know how well their political rulers have performed while in office (κC), and must base their vote on this knowledge (κBC). But, either voters do not know how well their rulers have performed, or if they do, then those voters have loyalties that are so entrenched that such knowledge makes no difference to the way they vote. That is, voters either fail to satisfy κC , or if they do satisfy κC , then they fail to satisfy κBC . In either case, electoral accountability, as conceived by STAN, does not work. In the next section, we will consider several ways of responding to this dilemma, each of which suffers from its own limitations. Then, in section 4, I will offer a further way of resolving the dilemma by developing a novel view of electoral accountability.

3. AGGREGATION, HEURISTICS, AND ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMS

There are at least three ways to respond to the dilemma for the STAN version of electoral accountability. First, deflate the impact of the empirical findings I have cited by, for instance, rejecting the claim that voters are broadly politically ignorant, or positing that, even if they are, accountability can still be achieved by pooling the electorate's knowledge as a whole. Second, propose changes to the political system by, for instance, enfranchising only those who have political knowledge, and thus hopefully securing KC; or, by selecting voters by lot to try to restrict the influence of partisan loyalties, in order to satisfy KBC. Third, reconceive of electoral accountability in a way that is not susceptible to the dilemma facing STAN. In this section, I will explore and critique the first two proposals. In the next section, I will develop on the third.

The first response itself can be approached in three different ways. First, one could seek to reject the veracity of the empirical findings I have cited. It is not the aim of this paper to challenge these empirical findings. I take them to be well-established in political science and psychology, dating back to at least the mid-twentieth century in the work of Downs, who argued that political ignorance was rational for the voter given their minute contribution to the overall electoral outcome.⁴⁰ As Friedman summarizes the findings:

That the public is overwhelmingly ignorant when it comes to politics is ... a discovery that has been replicated unfailingly by political scientists; indeed, it is one of the strongest findings that have been produced by any social science—possibly *the* strongest.⁴¹

Despite this, rather than attempt to discredit, challenge, or prove this vast body of literature, I want to more modestly suggest that the dilemma I have proposed for STAN be read as a conditional: if the findings from political science and psychology I have cited are at least largely accurate, then electoral accountability, as conceived by STAN, does not work.

One way to push back against this claim—and the second way of deflating the empirical findings I have cited—is to show that voters can make up for their lack of salient political knowledge through the use of heuristics. If that were the case, then electoral accountability may still be possible. But what heuristics would be relevant here? People often use political parties as an effective route from which to infer policy stances. They could also lean on activists who give support to particular parties due to their specific policy commitments. But

40 Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*.

41 Friedman, "Introduction," 397.

neither of these routes would be helpful for STAN, which requires voters to accurately track past *performance*, not current or future policy.

One heuristic that could be helpful is relying on discrete public groups, or bodies who keep track of political performance, so that the general public can turn to them for information at the time of an election. This issue is similar to the idea of “issue publics.”⁴² While this would no doubt be helpful if the information groups were independent, nonpartisan bodies, they are certainly not widely used at present. As noted in section 2, voters increase their support for an incumbent party dramatically when they do well closer to election time, and at the same time disregard older evidence. This suggests that voters have limited knowledge of incumbent performance, and so if there are issue publics on sociotropic measures, the general public rarely uses them. Instead, they take their information on government performance from the media, and their family and friendship groups. Even if reliable public groups exist, citizens appear to be (rationally) ignorant of them, in the same way they are ignorant of political matters more generally. One way to improve on this could be to formalize the idea of nonpartisan, independent, election-time information groups. I will return to this issue shortly when I consider alternative forms of government. But suffice it to say for now that it is not clear what heuristics are in place that can make up for the shortfall in voter knowledge of past performance.

A third, alternative way to deflate the effects of the empirical findings is to show that, even if, individually, voters are largely ignorant, when taken in aggregate, they are capable of making informed decisions. This is partly because of the diversity of people’s knowledge when taken in aggregate. For instance, ten people with one distinct unit of knowledge will know more than one knowledgeable expert with five units of knowledge. Given that the electorate is extremely diverse, then, in theory at least, it can pool what it does know, so that taken together, it is a highly knowledgeable unit.

Perhaps the leading account that has theoretically modelled this idea is by Landemore, who explored the way that problem solving and information pooling work in jury deliberation to deliver the correct result.⁴³ On her account, when deliberating about a decision, jurors (from a fictional case) dedicate themselves to “collectively brainstorming the available information and arguments and putting them through the many filters and lenses of the group.”⁴⁴ This deliberative process helps the jurors to make the best use of their cognitive skills, and the information at their disposal, to arrive at the correct

42 Iyengar, “Shortcuts to Political Knowledge.”

43 Landemore, *Democratic Reason*.

44 Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, 3.

outcome. She adds, though, that the diversity brought by the group will only trump expert individuals when it comes to arriving at good decisions if the group are “relatively smart (or not too dumb).”⁴⁵ And here we see the problem with using an analogy from a jury to an electoral decision to overcome political ignorance. First, jurors normally take their responsibilities seriously because of the weight of their individual vote (one in twelve, say), and so take time to inform themselves and deliberate carefully with others. In contrast, as Somin notes, “most voters spend either little or no time collecting political knowledge, or focus primarily on conversation partners and media that reinforce their pre-existing biases.”⁴⁶ And given the weight of their vote (one in many millions), this behavior seems rational. Second, it is not clear, given this and the other literature cited on political ignorance, that with respect to political knowledge, voters *are* relatively smart (or not too dumb). So, it is not clear that theories of voter aggregation and diversity are able to overcome the problems of political ignorance within the electorate.⁴⁷

The examples we have considered do not seem to provide any clear or obvious way to deflate the impact of the empirical findings cited in section 2. So, a second approach to the dilemma is to entirely accept its force and the findings used to support it, but to propose that we find alternative forms of government that are not susceptible to it. A number of such proposals have been made in recent years, often with the aim of improving the standards of politics, and in some cases, on the basis of failures of electoral accountability.⁴⁸ Here, I will consider three such proposals.

First, there are forms of so-called epistocracy.⁴⁹ These can include *restricted suffrage*, where people who lack salient political knowledge are disenfranchised (perhaps on the basis of a voter exam), or *plural voting*, where people with more salient knowledge are granted additional votes.⁵⁰ In theory, either, or a combination, of these systems could enhance electoral accountability. In either case, and particularly when combined, it would be more likely that the electors would satisfy κC —indeed, depending on the conditions in a test of salient knowledge, it could be virtually guaranteed that the electors have the

45 Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, 102.

46 Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance*, 132.

47 For discussion and critique of alternative models of aggregation, see Brennan, *Against Democracy*, 180–94; and Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance*, ch. 4.

48 See Guerrero, “Against Elections,” 137–49.

49 Estlund, “Why Not Epistocracy?”

50 See Brennan, *Against Democracy*, 211–14, on restricted suffrage; Mulligan, “Plural Voting for the Twenty-First Century,” on plural voting. The two forms of epistocracy are compatible—and often traced to Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*.

requisite knowledge. However, these forms of epistocracy face two problems. First, being knowledgeable might make it more likely that the electors would fail to satisfy KBC for, as was argued in section 2, their enhanced knowledge could indicate a rigid partisan affiliation. Second, citizens who tend to be more knowledgeable also tend to have certain demographics, like being white, male, and non-working class, and so, since people from these demographics will be overrepresented within the electorate, governments will be biased in their policies toward them, leading to unfair and potentially corrupt political rule.⁵¹ The first of these problems makes epistocracy an unviable solution to the dilemma of electoral accountability, and the second, an unlikely solution to poor political policy. On this basis, I will leave aside restricted suffrage and plural voting, and instead consider two alternative systems that have been proposed.

Second, there are *sortition* systems, such as López-Guerra's "enfranchisement lottery."⁵² His system has two devices. In the first, the "exclusionary sortition," "there would be a sortition to disenfranchise the vast majority of the population. Prior to every election, all but a random sample of the public would be excluded."⁵³ Although the sample will be random, López-Guerra holds that the lottery "would produce an electorate that would be demographically identical to the electorate under universal suffrage." The second device is a "competency-building process" that has been "carefully designed to optimize [the electorate's] knowledge about the alternatives on the ballot."⁵⁴ Again, in this kind of system, you could virtually guarantee that the enfranchised would satisfy KC by giving them the knowledge salient to evaluate government performance. Moreover, the enfranchisement lottery would be less susceptible to the problems facing the two forms of epistocracy we considered. For the electorate are not selected for their knowledge, which, as we suggested, could well indicate partisan loyalty. Rather, they are given knowledge in much the same way as a jury might, and what's more, since there will be far fewer electors, there will be greater weight given to each elector's vote. So, we might expect that the newly enfranchised would behave more closely to a jury, in the way predicted by Landemore's democratic model. Finally, since the enfranchised are demographically representative, incumbent rulers cannot privilege certain groups in their policy making while in office in the way they could with epistocracy.

51 This has come to be known as "the demographic objection" to epistocracy (See Estlund, *Democratic Authority*, 215–19). For responses, see Brennan, "Does the Demographic Objection to Epistocracy Succeed?"

52 López-Guerra, *Democracy and Disenfranchisement*.

53 López-Guerra, *Democracy and Disenfranchisement*, 4.

54 López-Guerra, *Democracy and Disenfranchisement*.

All of these features of the sortition system seem like a win-win. Indeed, I accept that, in theory, sortition would deliver better electoral accountability, and thus possibly better public policy than universal suffrage.⁵⁵ But I have two misgivings with this system. First, it conflicts with my stated aims in this paper, which were to show that electoral accountability within current systems of democracy is still possible. Showing *that* might make sortition less desirable than current systems of democracy, even if sortition can offer better electoral accountability. This is because changing the current system is impractical and therefore unlikely, and so a conception of accountability that works less well within existing systems of democracy may be preferable to one that works better within an idealistic system. The second misgiving is that sortition may, in fact, be less ideal than it initially appears. For instance, smaller electorates are liable to corruption by being bribed, or even threatened, by external interest groups. There is also the problem of who designs the competency-building process. It could be manipulated by the incumbent to present the voters with skewed data, leading them to think better of them than they perhaps ought to. The fact that alternative systems of government are not even theoretically ideal options gives us another reason to favor seeking a kind of electoral accountability that works within our current system.

Third, there are *lottocratic* systems that remove elections altogether.⁵⁶ In Guerrero's system, members of the public are chosen by lot for a short period of time to stand as political decision makers on single-issue legislation. They learn about the issue from experts and interact with other members of the public to take in a variety of public opinions. Since lottocracy does away with elections, it also does away with electoral accountability. That does not mean, though, that there is *no* accountability—there will still be horizontal forms of accountability for those selected. Now, of course we cannot say whether lottocracy is better for electoral accountability than current systems of democracy, since it has none. But it may well deliver more competent political decision makers, partly because they are not focused on retaining power, and so do not have to waste time cultivating their public image, but also because they will be focused on fewer issues, and so can be more dedicated to the issues at hand. As a result, lottocracy may well lead to better policy outcomes than current democratic systems.

As with sortition, it is only really the aim of this paper to explore how we should conceive of electoral accountability. However, there is one important reason, which is salient to the account I will develop in section 4, why democracy with universal suffrage is preferable to lottocracy. To preempt the

55 See Malcolm, "Epistocracy and Public Interests."

56 Bourcibus, "Democracy through Multi-Body Sortition"; Guerrero, "Against Elections."

account, we might wonder what happens when a lottocracy becomes corrupt, and the people in place refuse to leave power. There is no *electoral* mechanism to remove them—lottocracy lacks elections by definition. This limitation does not stand, however, in the case of democracy with universal suffrage. If political rulers become corrupt, and harm their own people, then the people have a recourse to remove them from power, namely, through elections. So, while elections may well lead to less competent politicians and worse policy, they retain an important device lost by the lottocratic system: the electoral capacity to remove corrupt rulers from power. Now, we could design lottocratic systems in which there are non-electoral ways to remove corrupt rulers from power. And democracy may well produce more corrupt politicians than would lottocracy. But at least to the extent that democracy with universal suffrage has in place electoral accountability, then in that respect, it has a benefit that lottocratic proposals lack.

So, while there are ways of restructuring the political system, each of these alternative systems faces its own problems, so if we want to retain our current system of electoral democracy with universal suffrage, then we need to explore whether electoral accountability is a defensible notion. This takes us to the account I want to develop in the final section. The idea that I will set out and defend accepts the full force of the dilemma identified in section 1, and agrees that electoral accountability, as conceived by STAN, does not succeed. However, rather than trying to deflate the dilemma, or restructure the political system, my approach *reconceives* of electoral accountability. In the next section, I will defend this novel account of electoral accountability, and argue that it can succeed despite the limitations of voter knowledge and voting behaviors.

4. THE COUNTERFACTUAL THEORY OF ELECTORAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The standard conception of electoral accountability (STAN) focusses on what voters know about the actions of their government, and how they behave in light of that knowledge. To see whether this idea has real purchase, we have looked at actual voters in current democracies in the West—principally the US, but also the UK and France. As far as voter knowledge and behavior goes in these states, there seems to be a lack of electoral accountability. But what if electoral accountability is actually occurring, despite limitations in voter knowledge and behavior? Indeed, what if there is genuine electoral accountability being achieved in these states, but it would only be visible if the situation in current democracies was very different? The kind of counterfactual situations we could imagine would be ones in which governments are disposed toward broad-scale tyrannical actions, such as subjecting their own people to widespread rights

violations, willfully allowing them to suffer extreme famine, or committing genocide on huge numbers of the population. These sorts of events have not occurred in recent years in the countries we have been investigating. Perhaps the reason such events do not occur in current democracies is because the electorate *would* hold their government accountable, so because of this, the governments do not allow them to happen. So, perhaps electoral accountability is a counterfactual accountability mechanism that prevents political rule from turning tyrannical. That would explain how it is occurring, but is not visible.

On this alternative account, we could think of electoral accountability as simply being disposed to depower a government if it engages in widespread, significant harms to the people it governs. That would be different from the STAN account, which treats the electorate as a supervisor of the government, who reviews its performance on complex issues like inflation, employment, and international trade. But these are matters that may well be beyond most citizens to understand, let alone keep track of over a term in office. The role of the electorate on the alternative account being proposed is much easier to satisfy, since those governmental actions would presumably be more salient. If this theory is correct, then since it is proposing that accountability is an unrealized disposition in the electorate because governments are not, it seems, engaging in widespread harms, that would make it invisible to social scientists. It would, in a sense, be a victim of its own success. Let us call this idea the *Counterfactual Theory of Electoral Accountability* (COUNT). On COUNT, electoral accountability is a backstop to tyranny and disastrous culpable mismanagement, rather than supervision over a range of complex micro-issues. In the remainder of this section, I will develop an account of COUNT.

We can build COUNT upon the idea that the function of electoral accountability in democracies is the same as having a formal constitution and the separation of powers, namely, that they are there to protect the rights and general liberty of those governed. This idea has been put forward by Rebecca Brown:

The structural feature of accountability for political actors can be understood . . . as a means primarily to minimize the risk of tyranny in government. . . . Accountability serves this goal . . . by allowing the people to check abuse of power at the polls if they detect a threat and wish to eradicate it.⁵⁷

On this view, the role of electoral accountability is the protection of the people from governmental tyranny, especially abuses to rights and liberties. This idea is distinct from the view that electoral accountability is in place to supervise

57 Brown, "Accountability, Liberty, and the Constitution," 536.

or manage the government to ensure they do well with complex issues such as employment and foreign affairs. The position advocated by Brown is simpler: if the government has turned tyrannical by destroying the rights of the electorate, then the electorate can get rid of them.

As with the typical view of electoral accountability, this alternative idea will also require the electorate to know about the tyranny, and to vote accordingly. With this in mind, here is an initial formulation of COUNT:

If governments were to become tyrannical, the electorate would be very likely to (1) know of the government's tyrannical actions, and (2) base their votes on that knowledge by de-electing the government.

If this account is correct, then it would give governments a strong incentive to resist becoming tyrannical, and would thus offer one explanation as to why current democracies do not seem to become tyrannies. The view is *prima facie* plausible, but there is much more we can say to develop and critique it.

First, what is it about tyrannical actions that make them problematic enough that the electorate would likely remove a tyrannical government from power? That is, why does 2 follow? Presumably, it is because these actions have *substantially bad effects* for the people being governed. This was one of the justifications put forward for representative democracy by J. S. Mill. He drew a historical contrast between "the free states of the world," such as "the Greek cities . . . [and] the Italian republics," with despotic oligarchies and monarchies, including "the Persian satrapies . . . [and] the feudal monarchies of Europe." He then claimed that

no amount of disorder which exaggeration itself can pretend to have existed amidst the publicity of the free states can be compared for a moment with the contemptuous trampling upon the mass of the people which pervaded the whole life of the monarchical countries, or the disgusting individual tyranny which was of more than daily occurrence under the systems of plunder which they called fiscal arrangements, and in the secrecy of their frightful courts of justice.⁵⁸

Mill does not say precisely what he has in mind by the actions of these despotic states, but it seems to concern stealing from the people, perhaps through excessive taxation and land ownership, and unjust courts of law and unfair punitive systems. Many such problems occurred under the communist states of the twentieth century, and still continue today in many countries, where governments are corrupt, law courts are unregulated, police engage in brutality, journalists are murdered, and people are denied rights, including to free speech

58 Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 68.

and education. Each of these problems, we can say, falls under the broad category of *substantially bad effects*.

Now, it may be that not every government must be tyrannical to bring about such substantially bad effects on its people. The political rulers could simply be incompetent, or disinterested in the people they govern. Many monarchies bred rulers who were so disconnected from the people they governed that they simply did not have any interest in their lives, nor any idea of how to improve them. Such ruling systems can still bring about substantially bad effects without being tyrannical, such as famines, low wages, and unemployment. So, it is not the fact of tyranny as such that would make people de-elect such a government, but the *effects* of tyranny, which can be felt in non-tyrannies as well, including monarchies and, as we will see, some democracies too.

To make COUNT work, could the bad effects only be felt by a small minority of the voters? Could it be that voters who are unaffected by the terrible harms a ruler does to other people would *not* vote to remove that ruler from power? Take the case of the Uyghur people in China. There are terribly bad effects being felt by these people. But while the group itself is extremely large—more than one million people in total—they are only a fractional minority of the total Chinese population. If the Chinese people could vote, would unaffected citizens de-elect the government to prevent further atrocities to the Uyghur people? We might naively hope that they would, and it seems fair to assume that the Uyghurs themselves would vote to remove their persecutors from power. But voters have often been found to vote egoistically, or in their own self-interest, and in particular, to prioritise economic factors affecting themselves when making their electoral decision.⁵⁹ For instance, when trade policies would harm someone's individual interests, they become less inclined to support them.⁶⁰ More generally, egoistic considerations have been found to affect party choice, preferences over trade and immigration policy, European integration, and the design of tax policy.⁶¹

How does the idea of egoistic voting square with the sociotropic evidence cited in section 2? Or, how can voters support political rulers on the basis of the impact of economic upturn for others, when, as I claim, they also take into

59 Brennan and Pettit, "Unveiling the Vote."

60 Schaffer and Spilker, "Self-Interest versus Sociotropic Considerations."

61 On party choice, see Tilley et al., "When the Pound in People's Pocket Matters." On trade preferences and immigration policy, see Scheve and Slaughter, "Labor Market Competition and Individual Preferences over Immigration Policy"; Mayda and Rodrik, "Why Are Some People (and Countries) More Protectionist Than Others?" On European integration, see Gabel, "Economic Integration and Mass Politics." On design of tax policy, see Ballard-Rosa et al., "The Structure of American Tax Policy Preferences"; Fernández-Albertos et al., "Economic Crisis, Globalization, and Partisan Bias."

account how it affects themselves? Well, both considerations are generally in play for voters, though given the circumstances, and whether the individuals tend to be more egoistic or altruistic, the considerations will carry a greater weight. For instance, Bechtel and Liesch found that “voters are about two times more sensitive to personal income gains and three times more sensitive to personal income losses than to similar changes in the nation’s average income.”⁶² So, while people do factor in the national income, as the sociotropic literature makes clear, they give greater consideration to changes in personal income—that is, they weigh more heavily egoistic than sociotropic considerations. But it is also the case that the economic impact affecting others in one’s nation will often affect oneself, especially if taxes must be increased to pay for more social support. So, it may ultimately not be possible to entirely separate egoistic and sociotropic considerations.

To return to the main point, the problem egoistic voting raises in the hypothetical case of China is that there could be close to one billion eligible voters in China, making the Uyghurs only 0.1 percent of the voting public. With so many voters external to the plight of the Uyghurs, it could well be that unaffected voters would not factor their plight into their voting decisions. One reason we could give for why the wider voting Chinese public would not reject the Chinese government because of the harms they have done to the Uyghurs is because there are current democracies where other harms committed to minority groups are not rejected at the ballot box—where people vote egoistically in spite of these problems. Consider the case of Hungary, which, under leader Viktor Orbán, restricts LGBT rights, but which has a functioning electoral system. In 2012, same-sex marriage was made illegal in Hungary, and yet Orbán was reelected with a considerable majority in both 2014 and 2018.⁶³ So, we have a case of substantially bad effects upon the people governed, but where the government is still retained. Similar issues have been flagged in recent years by scholars documenting “white ignorance” of pervasive injustices against Black people in the US.⁶⁴ Here, racially based injustices in the criminal justice system are overlooked by white people who form a majority group. So, we cannot just assume that because some rulers produce substantially bad effects, that those effects will lead to their de-election, or even to knowledge of those effects.

Now, the examples we have discussed might be different if the legislation removing LGBT rights in Hungary, or racist justice systems, affected a majority

62 Bechtel and Liesch, “Reforms and Redistribution,” 2.

63 A number of additional restrictions have been made to LGBT rights in Hungary since 2012, and in particular since 2020, but the electoral effects will not be evident until the next election. For data, see <https://www.equaldex.com/region/hungary>.

64 Mills, “White Ignorance.”

of the people—for instance, if the majority in Hungary wanted same-sex marriage, the majority in the US were Black, or the Uyghur people were a majority group. If that was the case, then we might expect that these groups would remove the government from power, so long as they had voting rights.

What it seems to take, then, to make 2 plausible, is that a government acts in such a way that those actions bring about substantially bad effects and *pervasive consequences* on those governed, in the sense that they affect either a majority, or at least a substantial minority of people in the state—enough people to alter the course of an election. For instance, if the government revoked the right to free speech, that would affect all people. Or if they added a 50 percent tax to all workers, that would affect a majority of people (only excluding the retired, unemployed, and minors). If such bad effects are felt so pervasively, why then would the people in these circumstances look to remove a government from power in an election? Presumably, because they recognize that their own interests are being severely hampered, and so would seek to preserve those interests. So, when we have substantially bad effects whose consequences are pervasive enough to affect a group large enough to change the course of an election, then we seem to have a situation in which 2 becomes plausible.

Why is this response not available to the objection from section 2, in which those who know about political affairs do not base their votes on such knowledge, but stick to entrenched political affiliations? Because in this counterfactual situation, the government is acting in ways that are far more damaging than in current democracies, and so it is reasonable to assume that voter behavior would change as well. When rights are being revoked across the board, or huge numbers of people are detained, indoctrinated, or murdered, or corrupt governments inflict massive taxation on their citizens to line their own pockets, then the voters will, it seems likely, vote differently from how they currently vote in, say, France or the UK. Political affiliations are stronger when governments are generally working in the best interests of the public, rather than inflicting the sorts of harms I have mentioned.

We can now provide a revised formulation of COUNT that focusses, not on tyrannical governments, but on the bad effects brought about by some political rulers:

If political rulers were to bring about substantially bad effects with pervasive consequences for the people they govern, then the electorate would be very likely to (1) know of the ruler's actions, and (2) base their votes on that knowledge by de-electing the rulers.

So far, we have assumed that the bad actions are likely to be known by the people who are governed—that is, that 1 would be true in these counterfactual

scenarios. We have also assumed that because of these posited negative and wide-ranging effects, the people will acknowledge the harms done to their own interests, and respond by removing their rulers from power. But to assume that 1 would be true is to assume that the bad actions are *high salience*, in the sense that they are easily noticeable to the electorate.⁶⁵ High-salience issues, like crippling tax rises, denials of rights, or widespread forced indoctrination, would seem to be known to the people. It would be unusual if such actions would go by unnoticed. However, in theory, some such events could be hidden from the view of the electorate. For instance, if the government sends its people away to a just foreign war, then even if most of those sent to the war die in battle, the people may accept the bad effects as justified, and so not de-elect the government on that basis. But if they die unnecessarily due to mismanagement, or if the war was unjust, then if the salient facts in either of these cases became known, it would likely show up at the ballot box. That would only be the case, though, if the voters knew about the mismanagement or unjustness, which could theoretically be hidden from the voters through media control and propaganda. In that kind of case, we would have actions with substantially bad effects and pervasive consequences, but which are *low salience*.

In general, though, hiding such issues from the electorate will not be realistic. The kinds of issues we have been talking about include what David Estlund calls “*primary bads*: war, famine, economic collapse, political collapse, epidemic, and genocide.”⁶⁶ Issues such as these have such substantially bad effects and are so pervasively felt that not only (a) will the people almost certainly know about them, but they will also (b) de-elect their rulers in the cases where such issues are brought about either directly by their rulers, or indirectly through political mismanagement. It would require an extremely unusual situation for an electorate to fail to know they are experiencing genocide or famine. But as I have indicated, it could be theoretically possible, though also quite unlikely today, to hide from the government’s mismanagement of an overseas war that affects many of those voters.

So, perhaps where issues would have substantial and pervasively felt consequences *and* be high salience, then in those cases, the voters would very likely know about their ruler’s actions and would likely choose to de-elect them. Although the effects of such a position on electoral accountability are invisible to social scientists for the reason that this view concerns counterfactual scenarios, we can point to current democracies to provide some evidence to justify it. For instance, as Amartya Sen has indicated, there have been no famines

65 Guerrero, “Against Elections,” 149.

66 Estlund, *Democratic Authority*, 163.

in modern democracies, and perhaps the reason why is because, if there was, the electorate would know about it, and de-elect its rulers.⁶⁷ Some political scientists have also touted the role of accountability in preventing different democratic nations from going to war with one another.⁶⁸ So, we can use the fact that these problems have not occurred as support for the invisible effects of counterfactual accountability.

According to the full theory proposed, then:

Counterfactual Theory of Electoral Accountability (COUNT): If political rulers were to bring about (a) highly salient, (b) substantially bad effects with (c) pervasive consequences for the people they govern, then the electorate would be very likely to (1) know of their ruler's actions and (2) base their votes on that knowledge by de-electing the rulers.

This account explains many of the examples considered so far. For instance, consider an unfair justice system that targets only Black people, who form a small minority. This issue would have substantially bad effects for some, but may be *low salience* because of problems that Mills points to, such as “white ignorance,” and would only have *localized* consequences. In this case, conditions a and c fail, and so, being somewhat pessimistic (or perhaps grimly realistic) about voter knowledge and behavior, we would conclude that electoral accountability would not normally succeed. The voters would need to overcome their ignorance, and choose to vote altruistically, to hold their rulers to account in this scenario. That may well happen, but to be confident of making electoral accountability work, we would normally expect all three conditions a–c to be achieved.

The account can also explain why there is, or would be, a lack of accountability when there are even high-salience issues with bad consequences, but that hit minority groups. We considered the possible case of the Uyghurs earlier, but we could also point to actual instances, such as LGBT rights in Hungary, or even Jews in Nazi Germany. In both cases, there might be widespread knowledge of the bad effects, but because they affect minority groups, we have seen elections where the political rulers gain or retain power in spite of the harms they bring. Hence, to make COUNT plausible, the harms it would need to check at the ballot box would need to be felt more widely.

The final point worth noting is that COUNT retains the two features of STAN—*electoral power* and *the electoral incentive*—but narrows the range of

67 Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 178–80, and *The Idea of Justice*, 342–45.

68 Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs”; Moaz and Russett, “Normative and Structural Causes of Democratic Peace, 1946–1986.”

what it is to perform well or poorly to the bringing about of highly salient, substantially bad effects with pervasive consequences. In terms of electoral power, COUNT holds that voters would very likely de-elect rulers who brought about these effects, and in terms of the electoral incentive, it holds that, since voters would very likely vote in this way, political rulers are strongly incentivized to resist bringing about these effects.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued against viewing electoral accountability in terms of voters judging the ongoing performance of their political rulers on a range of complex sociopolitical issues. That position suffers from well-known issues of voter ignorance and motivated reasoning. But that does not mean we should abandon electoral accountability. Instead, we should think of electoral accountability as providing a backstop on political rulers engaging in actions that would have terrible effects on the people they govern. To avoid the problems found in STAN, and with egoistic voting, these actions must be felt pervasively by, and be highly salient to, the voters. This account is supported by the fact that such actions do not seem to happen in current democracies, and so the effects of counterfactual electoral accountability would be invisible to political scientists.

Nevertheless, an important upshot of this proposal is that universal suffrage is still absolutely critical. People who acknowledge the limitations of the electorate, such as those outlined in section 2, often despair at the state of current democracies, and propose alternative systems with stronger electoral accountability. We noted some of these at the end of section 3. That may help to secure accountability under the standard conception (STAN). But it is not necessary for the counterfactual theory, which delivers extremely valuable controls on the actions of political rulers. Without voting rights, political rulers could bring about substantially bad effects on all of their citizens without fear of losing power. So, while electoral accountability can no doubt be improved, it still delivers an extremely positive outcome, in spite of the very real limitations voters have.

But is the counterfactual theory I have developed overly restrictive or pessimistic? Have I cornered electoral accountability to such an extent that it becomes entirely impoverished, or, indeed, meaningless? Not at all. As just noted, it prevents political rulers from bringing widespread terrible harms on the people they govern. This is a significant advantage. But it is also realistic by taking seriously the limitations with voters and their behavior. And further still, there are other forms of accountability that provide checks and balances on political power outside of voting, which were noted at the outset of section 1.

It might also be objected that voters generally take into consideration a range of factors when making their voting decision that are completely unrelated to whether or not their political rulers have harmed them—for instance, manifesto pledges, problems and achievements within one's local constituency, or the likeliness a candidate will do well on the global stage. My account does not deny that any of these reasons are key to determining an agent's voting decision. It simply separates these reasons out from those of *accountability*: to keep political rule to account is to check actual or potential abuses at the polls. Beyond that, voting decisions have other effects, like trying to secure a better deal for oneself on local or national policies.⁶⁹ My suggestion is that these are not about electoral accountability and should be distinguished as appropriate.

The epistemic claim that follows from COUNT is that it is not the role of the electorate to keep up to date with everything the government does, and nor would it be rational to do so. That role is fulfilled by other, mainly horizontal controls on accountability. The only epistemic obligation the counterfactual theory places on voters is to know when widespread terrible harms occur, or seem likely to occur, on themselves and others, and reject political rule that enacts, or would enact, these harms. Accountability beyond this would be supererogatory on the part of voters. But such an obligation would not be difficult to satisfy, and is consistent with the limits of the electorate. Electoral accountability may be limited in scope, but its purpose is of deep importance, and is critical for ensuring democracies function justly and effectively.⁷⁰

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