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# Survey Article: Unfounded Pessimism about Electoral Accountability

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Faced with the failures of existing democracies, many democratic theorists conclude from recent empirical work in political science critical of the functioning of electoral institutions that citizens are too ignorant to hold officeholders to account and that representative democracies are not responsive to ordinary citizens. We argue that these conclusions are unwarranted. They hinge on highly contestable interpretations of the work in question and conflict with important contrary theoretical and empirical findings that democratic theorists have ignored. If our argument is convincing, it should weaken the case for alternative regime types (e.g., lottocracy or epistocracy), which rests in part on empirically grounding the assertion that representative democracies cannot deliver meaningful accountability. Our argument also highlights the importance of engaging with the social-scientific literature in a more careful and wide-ranging manner.

# Survey Article: Unfounded Pessimism about Electoral Accountability

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Over the last several decades, democracies have often disappointed, sometimes dramatically so. They face growing economic inequality, cronyism, political extremism, and an apparent inability to tackle important problems, from immigration and financial crises to the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change. These failures raise questions about the value of electoral democracy.

As democratic theorists have worked to understand the evident failures of many existing democracies, a handful of recent studies in political science have proven enormously impactful. Among them, the most important has been Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels' *Democracy for Realists*, which draws on and synthesizes a large body of scholarship on voter knowledge and behavior. Its central claim is that ordinary, common-sense understandings of how democracy works – that citizens have coherent and informed policy views and rely on those views to hold elected officials accountable – fly in the face of the empirical evidence. Achen and Bartels maintain, instead, that "Election outcomes turn out to be largely random events from the viewpoint of contemporary democratic theory."[1] Influential contemporaneous research by other scholars, notably Martin Gilens, appears to reinforce this conclusion by showing, for instance, that when the expressed policy preferences of low-income voters diverge from those of high-income voters, there is *no* relationship between policy changes and the preferences of the former.[2] If elections are largely random events, and ordinary

[1] Achen and Bartels 2016, p. 2.

[2] Gilens 2012.

citizens have no influence over public policy, it cannot be particularly surprising that electoral systems fail – sometimes spectacularly – to address important problems.

The basic claims of this empirical literature – that citizens are too ignorant to hold officeholders to account and that representative democracies are not responsive to ordinary citizens – are often taken as uncontroversial premises in the normative democratic theory literature and underlie radical suggestions for reform across the ideological spectrum.

From the libertarian right, we are offered schemes of plural voting meant to disproportionately empower a set of more sophisticated and knowledgeable voters. Jason Brennan argues as follows:

> Achen and Bartels say that elections 'turn out to be largely random events.' Far from being crucial junctures at which the will of the people is expressed, they are largely expensive ceremonies in which people express their fidelity to randomly allocated political tribes that have little to do with ideology, beliefs, or interests.[3]

It is skepticism about ordinary citizens' ability to hold officials accountable, grounded in the analysis of *Democracy for Realists*, that leads Brennan to support arrangements that would give more informed citizens more voting power than their less informed compatriots.

On the ideological left, the prescriptions are different, but the analysis much the same. Alexander Guerrero, for instance, describes the work by Achen and Bartels as delivering a "death knell" for retrospective voting theory.[4] The problem in modern electoral democracies, he argues, is that citizens do not know the causes of why they are doing well or poorly or the role of political actors in such outcomes. Thus, we can either have a government in which representatives are responsive to the ignorant views of citizens or give up on accountability and have a government in which officials are captured by the wealthy and powerful.[5] It is, in large part, the sense that voters cannot hold their representatives accountable and that, partly as a result, the wealthy have extraordinary power under existing democratic institutions that leads Guerrero to suggest doing away with elections and, instead, allowing randomly selected citizens to make policy.[6] Similarly, in arguing for a chamber of randomly selected officials, Arash

[3] Brennan and Landemore 2022, p. 45. See also Brennan 2016, pp. 29–30.

[4] Guerrero 2024, p. 57.

[5] Ibid., p. 8.

[6] See, relatedly, Landemore (2020, pp. 44–47; 2026).

Abizadeh – discussing Achen and Bartels' work – writes that, given voter ignorance, one cannot expect elections to be an effective tool for accountability: "blind retrospection is no more effective for selecting or sanctioning than voting randomly."[7]

The primary goal of this paper is to show that skepticism about the possibility of meaningful accountability derived from the empirical work described above overreaches. If our argument is convincing, it should weaken the appeal of radical proposals to replace representative democracy with alternative regime types (e.g., epistocracy or lottocracy), at least insofar as such proposals turn on the conviction that representative democracies cannot deliver meaningful accountability. A subsidiary goal of the paper is to encourage democratic theorists to engage with the social scientific literature more carefully.

Our argument unfolds in five steps. First, we describe a puzzle for the accountability skeptics that emerges when one compares the literature on voter ignorance, and the inferences made from it, with a broad body of empirical work in political economy that documents the important consequences of electoral pressure. Second, we provide a conceptual analysis of accountability that will ground our discussion throughout. Third, we explain why evidence that voters are influenced by seemingly irrelevant events is not necessarily evidence of accountability gone awry. Fourth, reviewing important results from formal models of electoral accountability, we show that it is a mistake to think that voters will systematically get better accountability if they are better informed about what their representatives are doing. Fifth, turning to empirical evidence that purports to show that representative democracies are accountable only to high-income citizens, we argue that the implications of such evidence are often exaggerated in normative democratic theory and, in particular, that such evidence is consistent with meaningful accountability to a broad cross-section of citizens.

## I. EMPIRICAL FACT PATTERNS

Evidence that voters are ignorant of public officials' choices or government policy, drawn from a substantial literature in political science, may seem particularly puzzling when juxtaposed with empirical results about accountability that have been broadly ignored in normative democratic theory.[8]

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7 Abizadeh 2021, p. 796.

8 See, for example, Converse (1964) and Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996). There is, to be sure, some disagreement about the precise shape that voter ignorance might take. We will return to this question below.

There is now a large body of work, based on explicitly experimental or quasi-experimental research designs, that provides powerful causal evidence that weakening mechanisms of electoral accountability exacerbates problems of corruption, while strengthening these mechanisms benefits voters. Consider the following examples:

- A study on Brazil explores the effects of introducing an electronic voting system that made it much easier for illiterate citizens to cast valid ballots. It finds evidence that this reform significantly increased redistributive programs, including spending on healthcare for the poor, substantially reducing low-weight births.[9]
- Evidence from a study on the Voting Rights Act in the United States suggests that the elimination of literacy tests led to higher public spending in counties with larger black populations, with the effect of substantially improving educational enrollment and services for black citizens.[10]
- A study on the expansion of voting rights to women in the United States shows that, within a year of suffrage extension, public health spending increased by 35%. This extra spending was linked to a significant drop in child mortality.[11]
- A study on term limits in Brazil shows that the incumbent mayors who could not run again because of term limits misappropriated 30% more funds than their (otherwise similar) counterparts who were eligible for re-election. The implication is that the absence of a reelection incentive for term-limited mayors led to the misappropriation of a substantial portion of the Brazilian budget for social spending.[12]
- A similar study in the United States finds that, controlling for other differences, term-limited governors in the U.S. preside over lower economic growth and higher taxes, spending, and borrowing costs than their similar, but non-term-limited, counterparts.[13]

Further findings from related literatures generate similar puzzles:

- Why, if elections are largely random events, is there extensive evidence of a strong feedback loop from policy change to public opinion and back to policy change?[14]

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[9] Fujiwara 2015.

[10] Cascio and Washington 2014.

[11] Miller 2008.

[12] Ferraz and Finan 2011.

[13] Alt, Bueno de Mesquita and Rose 2011.

[14] See, for example: Wlezien 1995; Erikson et al. 2002; Wlezien 2017; Caughey and Warshaw 2022.

- Why, if voters are so poorly informed about the candidates they vote for, do ideological extremists who win a coin-toss primary against a more moderate candidate go on to have a substantially lower chance of winning the general election than when such a primary is won by the more moderate candidate?[15]
- Why, if elections are largely arbitrary events, are incumbents apparently so obsessed with service to voters, legislative votes, etc?[16]

These results present a puzzle for democratic theorists who view the claims about elections being largely meaningless or ineffective as settled science. It is clear that, at least sometimes, it (a) matters that voters can hold elected officials accountable (because they are not term-limited, for example), (b) matters who (by being enfranchised) has the ability to hold them to account, and (c) matters whether there are obstacles (like literacy tests) to exercising this ability. These implications do not seem to sit well with the idea that elections are "largely random events," such that elected officials are essentially free to do as they please without fear of being held accountable.

We are not claiming that the empirical evidence uniformly supports the hypothesis of meaningful electoral accountability. As on virtually any empirical question in the social sciences, the evidence is mixed, and there is room for debating which interpretation is best. That is a part of our point – democratic theorists' treatment of Achen and Bartels' work as settled science is simply not correct. A more subtle point is that variation in empirical evidence on accountability suggests that there are important differences in contexts – in particular, in institutional detail within the large set of "institutions of representative democracy" – that may be driving this variation.[17] That is another reason to doubt sweeping generalizations about the limits of electoral accountability.

The skeptical position thus appears weaker once one broadens one's survey of the relevant empirical literature. In the rest of the paper, we explain why the empirical and theoretical foundations internal to the skeptical position are also shaky.

## II. A CONCEPTION OF ACCOUNTABILITY

In this section, we explain how we will understand the idea of accountability for the purposes of this paper. We will say that *a mechanism for holding an agent accountable*

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[15] Hall 2015.

[16] Christensen and Ejdemyr 2020; Carey et al. 2006.

[17] See, for example, Cox (1997, ch. 12) and Ezrow, Fenzl, and Hellwig (2024).

*for x* is an arrangement that gives the principal the ability to penalize or reward the agent for the observed value of *x*, where *x* can be an action (e.g., consistently voting for abortion rights) or an outcome (e.g., low inflation).[18]

The institution of periodic elections, within a broader democratic system that includes protections for basic political rights, freedom of the press, and so on, is an example of such a mechanism. It provides citizens (the principal) with opportunities to observe government action or measures of government performance and to remove incumbent officeholders from power on the basis of their observations. Citizens are thereby able to penalize (remove) or reward (retain) their agent (the incumbent officeholder) on the basis of the observed values of these measures.

Whether citizens exercise this ability—whether they actually hold elected officials to account—is a separate question. Whether they exercise it *well*—holding officials to account in a manner that advances their interests—is another matter still. For example, voters might hold a politician accountable for keeping their campaign promises in a strict fashion, thereby giving the politician incentives to keep campaign promises even in circumstances in which it would be better for the voters if the politician deviated from the promises. Or, as Achen and Bartels claim, they might penalize incumbent officeholders for outcomes beyond their control, like shark attacks or natural disasters. The mere fact that voters hold officials accountable is thus not by definition good for voters.

To delimit the scope of our inquiry, we will focus on two mechanisms by which elections might deliver accountability: through the provision of incentives to the elected official and through the selection of superior types of officials. By exercising their ability to hold elected officials to account for an array of important outcomes (e.g., the rate of unemployment), voters may provide officeholders with incentives to promote the outcomes that serve voters' interests (low unemployment). That is, the knowledge that voters will hold them accountable in the future may affect officeholders' behavior in a manner that promotes voters' expected welfare. With respect to the selection mechanism: by exercising their ability to hold elected officials accountable for an outcome like the rate of unemployment, voters select for the type of officeholder who might be better able, or more willing, to take actions that reduce unemployment.

[18] Discourse-based conceptions of accountability do not tie it to an explicit system of punishments and rewards (e.g., Montanaro 2012), but the definition given in the text better captures the notions of accountability underlying the arguments we are addressing.

In that case, elections could generate accountability even if officeholders were indifferent to the prospect of winning re-election.[19]

Of course, elections may have other benefits for voters, independent of accountability (e.g., the salutary effects of alternation in power on social peace, undermining unhealthy ossification of officeholders by bringing in new people with fresh ideas, etc.).[20] Because we want to focus the discussion on disputes surrounding the capacity of electoral systems to generate effective accountability, we set such other benefits aside, without denying their importance.

We will say that elections generate *minimally effective* accountability if the incentive or selection effects of holding officials to account make voters better off than they would be under the counterfactual scenario in which they voted at random and the behavior of prospective candidates and elected officials was based on the anticipation of random voting. Viewing elections as "largely random events" is tantamount to denying that electoral accountability clears even this rather low bar. We will say accountability is *more* or *less effective* according to how far it improves voter welfare beyond this baseline via the incentives or selection channels.

With these definitions in place, we can now distinguish between several skeptical claims about accountability. The first and strongest is that elections do not generate *any* accountability: voters do not exercise their ability to hold elected officeholders accountable for *any* actions or outcomes, much less exercise this ability effectively. That claim is prima facie untenable. The universe of actions and outcomes for which the electorate might, in principle, hold elected officials accountable is vast: if voters can observe an action or outcome, they can condition their voting behavior and the conferral of rewards on it. In principle, voters could hold officeholders accountable for the state of the economy, the outbreak of war, the occurrence of famines, or the number of deaths during a pandemic; the enactment of tax reform, individual roll call votes on proposed legislation, or other policies; but, also, for the frequency of hurricanes, wildfires, and natural disasters; or even for shark attacks, solar flares, and the outcomes of sporting events. Moreover, there are theoretical and empirical grounds for believing that voters do hold officeholders accountable for extremely and obviously poor governance. How could it be, for instance, that – as Amartya Sen famously documents – there has never been a famine in a democratic country if elections do not generate

[19] One can also think of this second mechanism in terms of agenda-setting or policy prioritization: by selecting candidates who have effectively advanced agenda items that voters care about (e.g., decarbonizing the economy or strengthening the military), voters may be able to select leaders who are particularly well-positioned to advance the voters' interests.

[20] Przeworski 1999; Cain and Kousser 2009.

*any* accountability?[21] Indeed, Achen and Bartels themselves allow that elections can prevent politicians from pursuing actions that a sufficiently broad coalition of voters regard as unacceptable: "No president will strangle a kitten on the White House lawn in view of the television cameras."[22] Moreover, according to them, there are events that voters *do* hold officials accountable for, such as shark attacks, droughts, and sporting events. As Achen and Bartels put their contention about "blind" retrospective voting, in "most cases, incumbents will pay at the polls for bad times, whether or not objective observers can find a rational basis for blame."[23] So the claim that elections do not result in *any* accountability at all is not only implausible, but also inaccurate as a statement of a skeptical thesis that anyone in the empirical literature appears to actually advance.

A more modest skeptical claim would be that elections do not produce the right *kind* of accountability. More specifically, the claim might be that elections do not produce minimally effective accountability, as defined above, or that they produce minimally effective accountability only in limited circumstances. The skeptic might concede that voters hold officials accountable for natural disasters beyond the elected official's control, but not for the official's actual conduct, with the implication that elections might as well be random events. Or the skeptic might concede that voters will hold officials accountable for extremely and obviously bad outcomes, like famines or catastrophically poor governance, but not for more mundane and subtle varieties of rent-seeking and incompetence. Such moderate skepticism is our primary focus. We will explain why neither theoretical considerations nor available empirical evidence provide strong support for it.

There is an even weaker skeptical claim that our argument does not directly address. One might concede that elections generate effective accountability but deny that they succeed at inducing elected officials to govern *as well as or better than* their counterparts in alternative regime types like lottocracy or epistocracy. For example, a skeptic might assert that voters hold officials accountable for certain important outcomes (e.g., economic growth, unemployment rates, etc.), but that, due to putative pathologies, like recency bias or unreflective partisanship, the benefits from such accountability are not sufficient to justify electoral democracy, at least under the existing institutional forms, when compared to the benefits from having a more diverse chamber generated by lottocracy. Evaluating that kind of claim would require a full specification of the relevant alternative regime types and a broad comparative analysis, including quantifying and

21 Sen 1999.

22 Achen and Bartels 2016, pp. 18, 19.

23 Ibid., p. 118.

comparing measures of the relevant effects under electoral accountability and under the alternative regime type. It is not clear how this could be done empirically since many of the alternative proposed regime types do not exist. Furthermore, it's not clear how to evaluate empirically the accountability effect associated with representative democracy, given the heterogeneity of forms of representative democracy. The implication is that, if critics allow that representative democracy can generate some accountability of the right kind, they would need – as a result – to make significantly more precise their constructive claims, in order for the overall comparative argument to go through.

## III. ACCOUNTABILITY & "IRRELEVANT" EVENTS

Having explained our conception of accountability for the purposes of the paper, we turn our attention to exploring the compatibility of representative democracy and effective accountability. We will assume, for the sake of argument, that critics of representative democracy are right that citizens are generally ignorant about policy issues as well as their representatives' conduct. This makes the key question whether it is right to infer from this that elections do not create effective accountability. This section argues that empirical evidence that democratic theorists commonly accept as undermining the possibility of retrospective accountability is much weaker than often thought. The following section argues that the relationship between voter knowledge and effective accountability is much more complex than typically appreciated in the democratic theory literature.

Many political scientists have doubted the significance of voters' policy ignorance, supposing that citizens could induce officials to deliver good policy just via retrospective voting—that is, by reelecting incumbents when times are good and voting them out of office when times are bad.[24] Retrospective voting would not require citizens to have policy preferences or to be aware of the specific policy decisions of incumbents. Achen and Bartels reject this theory, arguing that "Voters *consistently* and *systematically* punish incumbents for conditions beyond their control."[25] The thought is that if incumbents

[24] The idea that voters have relatively clear perceptions of broad economic conditions, alongside absence of detailed policy knowledge, has historically been deeply influential in studies of voting behavior in the U.S. See Key 1966 and Fiorina 1981. For more recent evidence consistent with this idea, see e.g.: Lewis-Beck et al. 2013; Ang et al. 2022; Anderson 2000; Duch and Stevenson 2010; Healy et al. 2017. We discuss more related evidence below.

[25] Achen and Bartels 2016, p. 128.

know that voters are just responding to events beyond their control, then there is little reason for officeholders to expend costly effort to improve the lives of their constituents.

The first piece of evidence that Achen and Bartels present in defense of their position relates to a spate of shark attacks that took place along the New Jersey coast in the summer of 1916 and decimated the tourism industry there. No government could have anticipated or prevented such attacks, but Achen and Bartels nevertheless provide evidence that – relative to the 1912 election – Woodrow Wilson fared particularly poorly in the coastal communities where they occurred.[26] They interpret this as evidence that voters punished Wilson for the shark attacks, despite his evident lack of responsibility for them. Their second piece of evidence is that, over twenty-six presidential elections and across all states, incumbents fared particularly poorly in states hit by droughts or floods.[27] It is this evidence of a systematic relationship between election outcomes and events that are beyond the control of politicians that underlies their claim that election outcomes are "in an important sense, *random*" and "from the standpoint of democratic accountability, essentially arbitrary."[28]

However, the evidence that voters are systematically responsive to outcomes beyond politicians' control is controversial in the broader political science literature.[29] In an influential paper studying the electoral consequences of the broader universe of shark attacks from 1872 to 2012, Anthony Fowler and Andrew Hall conclude that "there is virtually no compelling evidence that shark attacks influence elections, and any such effect–if it exists–must be substantively tiny."[30] A different paper finds that tornadoes, on average, have a negative effect on incumbent reelection rates, but the effects appear to depend on how incumbents responded to the disaster: while they suffer no penalty for tornado-related deaths (which seem more likely to be beyond an incumbent's control), there is a significant penalty for failing to deliver relief aid.[31]

For the sake of argument, set these empirical doubts aside and suppose that voters allow events beyond the incumbent official's control to influence their voting behavior. Is this grounds for inferring that, "from the standpoint of democratic accountability," elections are "essentially arbitrary"?

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26 Ibid., p. 127.

27 Ibid., p. 131.

28 Ibid., p. 176.

29 See, e.g.: Healy and Malhotra 2010; Fowler and Montagnes 2015; 2023; Fowler and Hall 2018; and Graham et al. 2023.

30 Fowler and Hall 2018, p. 1424.

31 Healy and Malhotra 2010.

Let us first dispense with a mistaken thought about effective accountability that might otherwise muddy our thinking. It is in general neither irrational nor counterproductive for a principal to hold an agent accountable for an outcome that the agent does not control—however "unfair" it might feel to the agent. A principal might hold an agent accountable for outcomes that indicate the agent's "type" – attributes of the agent that are outside the agent's control but that matter to the principal, such as the agent's deeply ingrained dispositions and character traits, values and preferences, intelligence and other natural talents, including those that affect how difficult it is for the agent to undertake costly actions (effort) on the principal's behalf. If the principal can observe an outcome that reliably indicates the agent's type, then the principal will rationally hold the agent accountable for the outcome, and profit from doing so, even though the agent has no control over the outcome.

So if natural disasters, shark attacks, sporting events and the like are "irrelevant" events, it must be true both that (1) the official has no control over them *and* (2) voters cannot infer anything about the official's type from them. So defined, the determination of whether an event is irrelevant can be somewhat subtle. That a region experiences a drought is an irrelevant event, but that the drought brings a certain amount of suffering or economic hardship in its wake is not—at least, not if the incumbent official's choices and type mediate the effects of the natural event, and so convey information about the incumbent's competence and other qualities.

This observation points to a more general and abstract distinction between two possible claims that one might entertain on the basis of the evidence Achen and Bartels and others have produced. The first claim is that irrelevant events have effects on voting behavior. The second is that voters hold officials accountable for irrelevant events, where this describes voters' observing that a certain event has occurred and treating its occurrence as a reason to vote for or against the incumbent. One cannot infer the second claim from the first. In fact, irrelevant events may influence voting behavior precisely because voters hold officials accountable for *relevant* events. (In the context of the drought example: if voters hold the official accountable for the costs of a drought, then the drought itself, an irrelevant event, should in expectation have nonzero causal effect on voting behavior.[32]) Thus, a relationship between irrelevant events and voting outcomes could emerge *because* voters are rationally holding officials accountable for

[32] For empirical evidence that voters hold officials accountable for their *responses* to severe weather, see e.g.: Healy and Malhotra 2010; Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011; Gasper and Reeves 2011.

outcomes they *do* partly control, and this accountability may effectively promote the voters' interests.

One might naturally wonder whether this can explain why incumbent officials would incur on average a penalty after events like droughts. Wouldn't a drought also provide an opportunity for rational voters to reward the competent incumbents if it reveals how well they prepared or responded? Not necessarily. If elections are effective as selection devices such that incumbents are, on average, more competent than challengers, then voters would be more likely to re-elect incumbent officials than not in the absence of new information. In such a setting, the revelation that a competent incumbent has prepared well or responded well can have only a limited positive effect on the re-election rate. In the extreme case where voters always re-elect incumbents in the absence of the information about his competence that the drought reveals, the drought creates an opportunity for voters to learn information that can only hurt the incumbent's reelection rate: either he is competent (as expected), in which case the outcome is the same as it would be in the absence of the drought (he wins), or he is incompetent, in which case the impact of the drought provides evidence of his incompetence and his probability of winning is less than it would have been in the absence of the drought.[33]

What about irrelevant events where the officeholders' actions do not plausibly mitigate their effects on voter welfare (say, in the proverbial example of shark attacks)? Even here, evidence that such events influence voting behavior is consistent with effective accountability. For the sake of argument, imagine, with Achen and Bartels, that voters take some satisfaction in punishing incumbents for irrelevant events, as a form of catharsis. If holding office is sufficiently valuable to the incumbent, the voter need not "promise" to retain the incumbent with certainty as a reward for taking good actions in office. Posit, notionally, that retaining with probability .7 would suffice to induce such actions retrospectively. This creates "slack" in retention that voters may, without undermining accountability, "spend" on expressing their subjective sense of how well their own lives are going in light of natural events even when officeholders cannot affect the marginal impact of such events. Thus, in the wake of an event that improves their subjective sense of happiness, voters might re-elect the incumbent with the probability of, say, .9, but following an unhappy event, might do so with probability of, say, .75. Assuming, just for the sake of argument, that there was persuasive evidence of incumbents being held responsible for shark attacks, this is an explanation that is perfectly consistent with effective accountability.

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33 See Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita, and Friedenberg 2018.

The preceding discussion makes clear that inferences about accountability in the context of seemingly irrelevant events are far more nuanced than critics of electoral democracy have appreciated. Evidence of a relationship between such events and voting outcomes is compatible with effective accountability. Still, even if one concedes this point, and grants that these studies are not evidence that voters are responding to what they ought to ignore, one might have the intuition that the real threat to effective accountability stems from their failure to acquire and respond to more straightforwardly relevant information. As we explain in the next section, in many pertinent contexts, this intuition turns out to be wrong: it is a mistake to assume that more informed voters will get more effective accountability.

## IV. ACCOUNTABILITY & VOTER INFORMATION

Work in contemporary democratic theory often assumes without argument that lower levels of information are bad, even disabling, from the perspective of facilitating effective accountability. For instance, in an influential article, Guerrero writes, "If I do not know what you are doing and have done, I cannot hold you accountable for it. And if I only know that you have done A (rather, perhaps, than B or C), but I have no idea what A amounts to (I know nothing about the issue for which A is a candidate proposal), or how it differs from B or C, I might as well not even know that you have done A—my ability to hold you accountable is equally impoverished."[34] The intuition that one cannot hold representatives accountable without substantial information about their actions, and that improving voters' information of those actions is beneficial, is straightforward.

Drawing on important work in political economy, we explain why this intuition about electoral accountability is not in general accurate.[35] Less information can, in an important range of realistic settings, lead to more effective accountability. The intuitive story implicitly takes for granted a number of restrictive conditions, including (a) voters' having *precise knowledge* of what policy/action is best, (b) separability of incumbent's actions, (c) absence of adverse selection in electoral choice, and (d) very special properties of random events' effects on social welfare. Individually, these

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[34] Guerrero 2014, p. 140; similarly 2024, p. 55. Hannon and Woodward 2025.

[35] The account we offer is distinct from, but not incompatible with, the view that relatively ignorant voters might use simple "cues" or heuristics (e.g., party labels, endorsements, etc.) to make more reliable voting judgments: Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Page and Shapiro 2010; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018, ch. 12. Note, though, that there are important challenges to extracting (credible) signals from cues – challenges that are exacerbated by the increasing complexities of the informational environment.

conditions are neither necessary nor sufficient to make the intuitive story work. But understanding their effects helps isolate mechanisms underlying the intuitive story. When these conditions fail, the argument that voters benefit from having more information breaks down.

We begin by introducing a useful distinction. Recall that in section 2, we said that a mechanism for holding an agent accountable for *x* is an arrangement that gives the principal the ability to penalize or reward the agent for an observed value of *x*, where *x* can be an action or an outcome. The ‘outcome’ could be a state of affairs that includes within it a range of important considerations — a level of unemployment, a level of inflation, a level of growth, relative peace or prosperity, and so forth. An outcome can be a noisy measure of inputs (e.g., particular legislative decisions, legislators’ competence, etc.) because, among other things, there may be forms of luck (such as exogenous events) that, along with those inputs, help determine the outcome. When employing *outcome-accountability*, the principal conditions the agent’s reward (re-election) directly on the outcome, and not on the inputs. In contrast, *action-accountability* depends upon the principal observing the inputs and conditioning the agent’s rewards directly on them.

We will next explain, with respect to each of the four conditions noted above, how less information and outcome-accountability may be more beneficial to the principal than more information and action-accountability.[36]

[36] As a reviewer pointed out, evidence for “thermostatic representation” – whereby as “policy increases (decreases), the preference for more policy will decrease (increase), other things being equal” (Soroka and Wlezien 2010, pp. 22–23; see also Grossmann and Wlezien 2024) – may appear to presuppose voter knowledge of representatives’ policy choices. The following simple setting shows that thermostatic representation is consistent with voter ignorance of policy choices, however. Suppose the voter does not observe their representative’s policy choices, but votes retrospectively on the basis of governance outcomes. The representative influences these outcomes by moving policy in a liberal or conservative direction. What the voter learns about these outcomes is a function of the resources expended by two interest groups, which have opposite policy preferences and diminishing marginal returns to moving policy from the status quo X in their preferred direction. When an incompetent or ideologically extreme incumbent moves policy by an increment D > 0, say from X to X+D, the marginal gain to the interest group that preferred that move from pushing even further decreases, while the marginal gain to the other from pushing back increases. A likely result is that the group that opposes the direction of policy change invests more in the effort to persuade voters, and voters’ induced preferences over the direction of policy change may respond to this net difference in investment. We should then observe voter policy preferences responding in a thermostatic fashion. Although voters’ responsiveness to interest group pressure may, naturally, be tracking some notion of their real interests (as determined by, for example, voters’ expected pocketbook considerations), in this account, voters need have little, if any, knowledge of the policies they are implicitly induced to support or oppose.

### A. Knowledge of Best Action

If the principal knows well enough (or can learn at little cost) what action is best—or, at the very least, if the informational asymmetry between the principal and agent is not too great—action accountability can be highly attractive. It allows the principal to create strict incentives for the agent, and there is no danger of losing out from failing to defer to the agent's expertise.

On the flipside, action-accountability can backfire in a straightforward way when this condition does not hold. As an example, consider the scenario in which voters ultimately care about some outcome (say, low inflation) and the policymaker knows which policies most effectively bring about the desired outcome, but the voters have potentially mistaken beliefs about the merits of different policies. In this kind of case, having more information about the precise policies that the incumbent chooses will make voters worse off than they would be if they simply used outcome-based accountability.[37]

### B. Action Separability

Consider a setting in which an agent performs multiple tasks. The condition of action separability ensures that the principal can incentivize the agent "task by task"—in effect creating separate independently enforceable moments of accountability and avoiding dangers of negative spillovers on the allocation of effort across different tasks. The condition has wide-ranging implications that undermine the intuitive more-information-is-better story.

In the multitask settings where only some actions are observable, accountability for the observable actions incentivizes the agent to re-allocate effort toward these and away from the unobservable tasks. The result may be a suboptimal effort allocation from the principal's standpoint.[38] The principal is best off when there is transparency with respect to all tasks, but if that is impossible, then rather than learn about some of the actions in a way that induces the multitask problem, the principal may be better

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[37] It is important to see why the voters cannot just focus on outcome accountability in order to get a superior outcome. Once voters have information about inputs to the outcome, the rational action is to condition on that information (as well as, possibly, on the information contained in the outcome), even if they know that it may be imprecise (noisy). Furthermore, if voters observe the action well enough, have relatively strong views about which action is best, and the outcome is a sufficiently noisy function of effort, then action-accountability becomes unavoidable, and with it, a potential loss of voter welfare.

[38] Holmstrom and Milgrom 1991.

off not observing *any* of the agent's actions and holding the agent accountable only for their outcomes.

As an example, consider the public response to recent violence on the New York City subway. The Governor dispatched members of the National Guard to help police stations. Those Guardsmen are easily observable, standing just outside the entry turnstiles. While this likely has some deterrence effect, other actions, far less easily observable – such as more funding for and better approaches to providing mental healthcare in the city – would also have an important effect on the safety of public transit. While neither approach provides guarantees, it is likely that Guardsmen and improved mental healthcare are both complementary and substituting in their effects on the outcome, and that the socially optimal response will include both, in some measure. If the pivotal voter is aware of the Guardsmen's presence, the Governor is incentivized to double-down on the Guardsmen at the expense, on the margin, of a more effective, but less observable, policy. By contrast, if the pivotal voter is unaware of the Governor's deployment of Guardsmen (e.g., because the voter does not use the relevant stations), she would condition her vote on observed outcomes (e.g., press coverage of the incidents), which may improve efficiency of policy allocations between the two responses, and may ultimately improve the outcomes.

Apart from the difficulties presented by cases in which some actions are observable and others not, multitask settings where action choices are sequential give rise to another mechanism undermining the claim that voters are better off with more information. When the principal observes each of several actions that are taken in sequence, she faces a commitment problem. She would like, in effect, to promise to retain the agent only if all action choices are good. But at any given point in time she prefers switching to a retention rule that conditions only on the actions that have not yet been taken, in order to maximize the power of the accountability mechanism. A consequence of this commitment problem is that the agent's allocation of her effort (or of a budget she might control) across tasks is, in expectation, inefficient. (Alternatively, if the principal were somehow to stick with the initial promised retention rule, and a random event or a mistake led to an imperfect action early in the sequence, the principal's rule would motivate the agent to minimize her remaining effort choices.) If earlier actions are sufficiently important for policy outcomes, the principal is best off not knowing the agent's action choices and seeking outcome-accountability.[39]

[39] Bueno de Mesquita and Landa 2015. A somewhat different interpretation of this result is that ignorance of the agent's actions enables the principal to avoid falling prey to the recency bias (aka the "what have you done for me lately" effect), a bias discussed in Achen and Bartels (2016, ch. 6).

The following example illustrates the mechanism. Imagine an incumbent who promises a labor union, which has considerable sway with voters, that she will deliver three key actions. If the incumbent knows that the union will observe each action in turn, she will recognize that she can fail to deliver on the first promise and then re-approach the labor union and promise to follow through on the remaining two actions in exchange for its support in the next election. Given that the first action is in the past, the union will be best off if it renegotiates with the politician. By contrast, if the union cannot observe separate actions, and this is known to the politician, then it will issue an endorsement, at the end of the term, based on outcomes. In this case, the politician will be unable to renegotiate and may have to deliver on all the union's preferred actions in order to secure the union's endorsement. In short, the fact that the union is observing all the actions it cares about can prevent it from getting its optimal result.

### C. No Adverse Selection in Electoral Choice

This condition requires that there be no significant differences between possible types of agents (e.g., between agents who are highly competent and agents who are not). When this holds, the principal can commit to a retention rule that rewards the agent if and only if the agent's action choice is "right," creating retrospective accountability. Alas, when there are significant differences between possible types of agents that directly affect the principal's welfare, the principal's ability to create such accountability breaks down, and with it the intuition that more information and action accountability are better for the principal.

To see this, consider a setting in which the policy outcome in a given electoral cycle, which is equivalent to voter's welfare in that cycle, $u$, is given by some additive function of incumbent effort, $e$, and incumbent "competence" (type), $t$; for example, $u = f(e) + g(t)$, where $f$ and $g$ are increasing functions of the effort and type, respectively. (Recall that the type variable $t$ can represent a long list of choice-independent characteristics of the incumbent, including how personally costly, on the margin, the relevant effort choice would be to the incumbent.) At election time, past effort choices are bygones, but the officeholder's type is not – it will influence the incumbent's future performance if he is re-elected. Rational voters will thus cast their votes based on their assessment of the incumbent's competence: If the voter believes the incumbent to be more competent than the expected replacement, she should retain the incumbent, but if she believes the incumbent to be less competent, then she should replace him.[40]

[40] Banks and Sundaram 1993; Fearon 1999. We are assuming here, as is standard, a simplified model with two policy-making periods separated by an election, with the discussion focusing on how the election influences what happens before it.

If the voter is uninformed – if her only clue of the incumbent's effort choice is whatever the policy outcome tells her – then the incumbent whose competence is a bit below the expected value of the replacement distribution may choose effort in a way that allows him to "pool" with high-competence types: by exerting additional compensatory effort, he delivers the same outcome as would a high-competence representative, and thereby prevents the voter from inferring his true (inferior) competence. In anticipation of this, the performance threshold that would, for a rational voter, guarantee the incumbent's re-election may shift upward, putting pressure on the incumbents whose type is a bit higher than the expected value of the replacement distribution to increase effort as well. In equilibrium, the voter will rationally expect a positive effort, and will be able to make only a somewhat "noisy" assessment of the incumbent's competence due to the type pooling.

By contrast, if the voter knows how much effort the incumbent is choosing to exert then she can infer the incumbent's type from the policy outcome, and she will re-elect only high-competence types. Anticipating this, however, the incumbent has little reason to exert effort prior to the election. Incumbent officeholders with below-average as well as those with above-average competence will know that no matter what effort choice they make, it will have no effect on their re-election—the voter will rationally choose to re-elect the incumbent if and only if he is above-average—and given that the effort is costly to them, they will not undertake it.[41]

It is clear that if the marginal value of effort in determining the outcome – that is, the value induced by the function $f(e)$ – is sufficiently high compared to the marginal value of the improvement in officeholder competence (as induced by the function $g(t)$), then the voter will be better off in the scenario in which she is uninformed. More generally: the benefits of type-pooling by the officeholders can be helpful in inducing their effort; and if selection does not trump effort in determining outcome, then voter ignorance may be a good thing for the voter.[42]

A different mechanism points to another way heterogeneity of agent types undermines the conventional intuition that better information leads to more effective accountability. Consider a setting with two types of officeholders, one whose preferences are congruent with what the voter's would be if the voter were fully informed about

[41] Similar to the argument above, rational voters cannot ignore the information about the type of representative and effect outcome-accountability in order to get a superior outcome. If they observe the action well enough, have a strong enough belief about how the action contributes to outcome, and so a strong enough belief about the incumbent type, then outcome-accountability becomes untenable.

[42] Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2014) analyze an alternative modeling framework that supports a similar conclusion.

all policy-related matters and another whose preferences are non-congruent. Imagine there are two possible states of the world, and the officeholder must choose a policy appropriate for the state. Suppose that the voter has beliefs about how likely the officeholder is to be congruent and how likely a given state of the world is, but is, nonetheless, uncertain about each. A voter who is paying attention to the officeholder's actions is, in effect, creating incentives for the officeholder to take actions that correspond to the voter's prior beliefs about which state is more likely as a means of strengthening their reputation for being a "good type." In other words, the voter is creating incentives for the officeholder to "pander." If the ability to set policy after the election is sufficiently important to the officeholders, then even the congruent type may choose to pander for the sake of ensuring that she, rather than her possibly non-congruent replacement, is the one making the post-election policy choices.

"Pandering" by officeholders, of course, means that policies that would advance voter welfare, but are unpopular because voters are under-informed, are set aside. Such pandering results from the combination of the voter's not knowing enough about the state of the world and knowing the action choices of the representative.[43] It is an example of what may be perfect action-accountability, but conditional on the voter not knowing a lot about the state of the world, the voter is better off not knowing the actions of the officeholder, as this ignorance allows the voter to induce the incumbent to use her expertise to choose better policies.

### D. Irrelevant Random Events

The fourth condition that ensures that better information generates more effective accountability is that random events are, in expectation, so impactful that the agent, unless her actions are being monitored, would have no incentive to perform well. An example of such events here may be an economic downturn caused by externalities from the actions of another state's government, or an impact of climate change, such as massive droughts or other natural disasters, or technological breakthroughs that increase the return on government's investment (e.g., into subsidizing EV charging stations). When the magnitude of the welfare impact of such events is, in expectation, great, and it is sufficiently independent of the actions taken by the current incumbent, better knowledge of the action can, indeed, allow the principal to incentivize the agent

[43] Among others, see: Canes-Wrone et al. 2001; Maskin and Tirole 2004.

more closely and improve the outcome on the margin.[44] But consider a somewhat less extreme circumstance where feasible effort may still, in expectation, have a significant enough impact on the outcome that it would not be swamped by the impact of random events. To appreciate the change in the effect of greater information about effort that this would create, consider a variation on the model with heterogeneous officeholder types that we describe above, now amended by introducing random events (shocks) affecting the policy outcomes, so the outcome function becomes $u = f(e) + g(t) + s$, where $s$ is the realized value of a shock in a given period. In this setting, a welfare shock from a random event is not a consequence of the actions taken by the current incumbent, or her type, but whatever the incumbent does, the shock either decreases or amplifies by some fixed amount of social utility what would have been the outcome without it.

While for the outcomes determined by this function, the marginal impact of random events is independent of the agent's type, the *net* causal impact of random events on the outcome is not generally independent of the agent's choice, with important consequences for understanding the social impact of better voter information.[45]

To see this, observe that the effect of learning the precise details of the shock may improve voters' ability to pin down the officeholder's effort by reducing a source of noise. But, in so doing, it would also, and by the same mechanism we described above, decrease the effective ability of lower-types of officeholders to pool with higher types, weakening the officeholder's incentives to exert effort. As before, if the value of determining the outcome is sufficiently high compared to the value of ensuring that the officeholder's competence is greater than that of her expected replacement, then the voter will be better off if she is uninformed.

### E. In Short

It is natural to assume, as much of the literature in democratic theory does, that electoral accountability will increase in effectiveness as voters gain information about

[44] Indeed, if the magnitude of the effects of such events is sufficiently large and voters lack information about officials' actions, then voters will be unable to effectively motivate officeholders just by reelecting them when times are good and voting them out of office when times are bad.

[45] This setting differs from the one we discussed in the previous section, where the marginal impact of random events was assumed to depend on the officeholder's choice or characteristics (which could, for example, potentially mitigate the impact of a drought). In both cases, random events affect factors that could be positively influenced via accountability mechanisms.

the behavior of their representatives. However, as we have explained, this intuitive assumption holds only under a relatively restrictive set of conditions. The posited relationship between information and effective accountability can break down when voters have potentially misguided views about the effects of particular policies; observe some but not all of the incumbents' actions; serially observe the actions of incumbents; want to use elections to select for competence; and when exogenous shocks give less capable representatives a chance to deliver outcomes similar to those delivered by more capable representatives. Because these conditions are quotidian features of political life, it is a mistake to assume that voters will get more effective accountability when they have better knowledge of their representative's actions in office. The opposite may often be true.

## V. RESPONSIVENESS TO THE WEALTHY

We have explained why it is a mistake to conclude from the research on voter ignorance that elections cannot generate effective accountability. There is a related skeptical thesis about electoral democracy that, like the claim about accountability, has become a piece of received wisdom among democratic theorists. This is the *oligarchy thesis*, according to which policymakers are responsive mainly to a small segment of (wealthy) citizens. There is an extensive empirical literature on the thesis, and we cannot do it justice, given space constraints. With this in mind, we focus our discussion on considerations, parallel to those raised in the discussion of voter ignorance and accountability, that suggest that the thesis deserves more skepticism than democratic theorists typically appreciate. Like the problematic inferences from voter ignorance discussed above, the uncritical acceptance of the oligarchy thesis reflects a failure to think through the possible mechanisms of accountability, as well as an incomplete and one-sided reading of the empirical literature.

Two studies from the literature on biased policy responsiveness, in particular, have influenced democratic theorists. First, in *Affluence & Influence*, Martin Gilens examines correlations between survey respondents' expressed policy preferences and enacted policies. He concludes that:

> The American government does respond to the public's preferences, but that responsiveness is strongly tilted toward the most affluent citizens. Indeed, under most circumstances, the preferences of the vast majority of Americans appear to have essentially no impact on which policies the government does or doesn't adopt.[46]

[46] Gilens 2012, p. 1. See also Gilens 2012, pp. 81–83 and Gilens and Page 2014.

Gilens thinks a campaign finance mechanism may explain the finding since "donating money is the only component of political participation that mirrors the patterns of representational inequality revealed" by the book.[47]

Second, in *Unequal Democracy*, Larry Bartels, using roll call votes of U.S. Senators in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, finds that Senators "were vastly more responsive to affluent constituents than constituents of modest means."[48] Indeed, like Gilens, he (a) finds no evidence of responsiveness to the policy views of poorer citizens and (b) observes that the documented pattern of responsiveness is broadly consistent with the shape of campaign contributions.[49] Largely on the basis of these two studies, democratic theorists often treat it as an uncontroversial fact about modern democracies that their policymakers, by and large, respond only to the policy views of their affluent citizens.[50]

The science is far from settled, however.[51] The extent of disproportionate responsiveness to high-income citizens is far more contested and uncertain than democratic theorists typically acknowledge. For instance, one recent study of the U.S. finds that for 90% of issues, a majority of middle income citizens agree with a majority of high-income citizens and when they do not, the majority opinion of middle-income citizens prevails 47% of the time.[52] This is perhaps not as often as perfect political equality would require, but certainly more than what Gilens's claim of "essentially no impact" predicts. More generally, an excellent recent review reports that although the literature "collectively points to a positive income gradient in political responsiveness, there is considerable divergence in results across models and studies," and key early studies "overestimate inequalities in political responsiveness."[53] It's also noteworthy that the extreme version of the oligarchy thesis, according to which policy is *simply* driven by the preferences of the most advantaged, sits uncomfortably with the strong

47 Gilens 2012, p. 10.

48 Bartels 2008, p. 253.

49 Ibid., p. 280.

50 For influential work in democratic theory drawing on these empirical studies, see for example: Guerrero 2014, p. 143; Landemore 2014, p. 208; and 2017, p. 53; Brennan 2018, pp. 66, 67; Scanlon 2018, ch. 6; Wilson 2019, p. 241; Abizadeh 2021, p. 798; Bagg and Bhatia 2022, p. 349; Kolodny 2023, p. 349. The overall conclusion they draw is that the empirical evidence supports the view that there is, at least, a dramatic skew in public policy in the direction of the well-to-do and, perhaps, a complete disempowerment of the lower-income citizens.

51 For example, see: Bhatti and Erikson 2011; Tausanovitch 2016; Elsässer et al. 2021; Mathisen 2023; Persson and Sundell 2024, table 1 on p. 520.

52 Branham et al. 2017, pp. 46, 53. Cf. Enns and Wlezien 2011, ch. 1; Enns 2015.

53 Elkjær and Klitgaard 2024, pp. 319, 320. For a similar conclusion from a large comparative analysis, see Persson and Sundell (2024).

persistence, across advanced democracies, of middle-class-oriented fiscal policies, including programs like progressive tax codes, public pension, and healthcare systems.[54]

Even setting aside the preceding empirical concerns for the sake of argument, there are reasons for skepticism about the proffered *causal* interpretation of Gilens' and Bartels' results. Overall, (a) the evidence does not seem to support the claim that disproportionate responsiveness to high-income citizens is more pronounced in more inegalitarian countries; and (b) at least in the United States, there is no evidence that the results are driven by responsiveness to the rich in those policy domains that particularly affect the distribution of economic resources.[55] Finally, it has been notoriously difficult for political scientists to empirically pin down a causal relationship between campaign contributions and elected officials' voting behavior.[56]

This causal identification issue is important for democratic theory for at least two reasons. First, if there is a causal relationship, not understanding the underlying mechanism puts in doubt the kinds of comparative institutional claims that the empirical work has been called upon to support. For example, if the correlation reflects the fact that the affluent are more likely to take cues from elected leaders, who are themselves the captured servants of special interests that might also capture lottocratic representatives, then the correlation might persist even if representatives were selected by lottery rather than elections. If the explanation for the correlation is instead that the wealthy extract *quid-pro-quos* through campaign contributions, then the implications for the comparison between elections and lotteries are different. The bottom line is that without knowledge of the underlying causal mechanism, it is difficult to know how the empirical evidence provided in support of the selective responsiveness thesis bears on central debates in normative democratic theory.

The second reason that the underlying causal story is important is that the normative implications of the observed correlation depend on whether it reflects some incidental

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54 Elkjær and Iversen 2020.

55 On (a), see: Bartels 2017, p. 40; Persson and Sundell 2024; Elkjær and Klitgaard 2024, pp. 322–325. On (b), see: Elkjær and Klitgaard 2024, pp. 330–331 and, relatedly, Elkjær and Iversen 2020. These considerations have led some scholars to embrace the view that the observed association between the views of high-income citizens and policy outcomes may be better explained by differences in information levels than by a story about crony capitalism; see for example Elkjær and Iversen (2020) and also Stimson (2011). Such accounts may be consistent with the perspective that we elaborated above, in which high-income citizens are disproportionately likely to get action, as opposed to outcome, accountability.

56 For the classic skeptical account in a large literature, see Ansolabahere et al. (2003).

feature of recent American politics (e.g., its rules of campaign finance and lobbying, its high level of economic inequality, or its particular electoral rules) or, instead, some relatively unavoidable feature of representative democracy (e.g., the fact that the affluent are more likely to run for elected office). While critics of representative democracy often seize upon this literature to make arguments for quite dramatic institutional reforms, without a better understanding of the underlying causal mechanisms, the implications are unclear.

Even if one sets aside questions about the robustness of the findings, as well as the mechanisms driving them, such findings would *still* not support the implications that democratic theorists often derive from them. In light of the well-documented ignorance of citizens on policy questions, it need be neither surprising nor unfortunate that correlations between citizens' immediate policy opinions and actual policy outcomes are weak. That is insufficient to rule out the possibility that low-income voters are, in fact, getting effective accountability — just via outcome-accountability, rather than action-accountability. This could be the case if voters cast ballots primarily based on their sense of well-being (rather than holding incumbents accountable for enacting particular policies). Indeed, as we have seen, it is possible that they could be better off, as a result, than they would be with action-accountability.[57]

A related possibility is that, for the electorally pivotal bulk of voters, there is, in fact, considerable outcome-accountability in place, but it is realized alongside accountability failure, from the perspective of the same voters, on some number of issues on which representatives also feel pressure to deliver action-accountability to their wealthy constituents (perhaps, as Gilens and Bartels suggest, for reasons related to the need to raise campaign funds). This interpretation would generate the reported empirical pattern, and in light of it, it would be correct to say that high-income citizens were getting a measure of accountability not available to their poorer counterparts. But it would not follow that representatives were unaccountable to low-income citizens, nor that some other regime type could do better for them.

In sum, while many democratic theorists have concluded that representative democracies are really only responsive to high-income citizens, the empirical evidence

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[57] This suggestion might seem objectionably paternalistic if it were the case that policy choices (and/or roll call votes) broadly matched the expressed preferences of wealthy voters (for the implication would then be that the wealthy know better than the poor what is in the latter's interests). That, however, is not what either Gilens or Bartels find. In both studies, even the correlation between the policy preferences of high-income voters and the relevant policy choices is relatively weak.

for this claim is highly controversial, the claimed underlying causal mechanism is not well-supported, and the evidence is ultimately compatible with effective accountability to poorer citizens.

## VI. CONCLUSION

It is common in democratic theory to assert that empirical political science supports an extremely skeptical view about elections' capacity to generate effective accountability. Theorists cite influential studies that highlight voters' relative ignorance of policy issues, their apparent tendency to punish politicians for events that are beyond the control of those politicians, and the disproportionate correlation between the policy preferences of wealthy citizens and policy outcomes. This skeptical view about the potential of electoral accountability often underpins relatively radical reform proposals, including lottocracy and epistocracy.

But the skeptical consensus in the democratic theory literature ignores a large body of important empirical work on electoral accountability suggesting that competitive electoral environments reduce corruption and deliver important benefits to voters. It also ignores findings from formal work on electoral accountability, which reveal – *contra* the assumption in much of the democratic theory literature – that citizens can often do better when they have less information. Meanwhile, the evidence of voters' punishing politicians for events beyond their control as well as the disproportionate correlation between the preferences of high-income citizens and eventual policy changes are open to a wide variety of interpretations, including ones that are consistent with effective accountability.

The paper's key implication is that the interpretation of the empirical picture underlying some prominent arguments for radical reform in the democratic theory literature is not well-supported. The case for reforming electoral systems, rather than doing away with them, may be stronger than is often thought.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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