



Government Accountability

Government accountability means that public officials — elected and un-elected — have an obligation to explain their decisions and actions to the citizens. Government accountability is achieved through the use of a variety of mechanisms — political, legal, and administrative — designed to prevent corruption and ensure that public officials remain answerable and accessible to the people they serve. In the absence of such mechanisms, corruption may thrive.

⇒ The primary political accountability mechanism is free and fair elections. Fixed-terms of office and elections force elected officials to account for their performance and provide opportunities for challengers to offer citizens alternative policy choices. If voters are not satisfied with the performance of an official, they may vote them out of office when their terms expire.

⇒ The degree to which public officials are politically accountable is a function of whether they occupy an elected versus appointed position, how often they are up for reelection, and how many terms they can serve.

⇒ Legal accountability mechanisms include constitutions, legislative acts, decrees, rules, codes, and other legal instruments that proscribe actions that public officials can and cannot take and how citizens may take action against those officials whose conduct is considered unsatisfactory.

⇒ An independent judiciary is an essential requirement for the success of legal accountability, serving as a venue where citizens bring claims against the government.

⇒ Legal accountability mechanisms include:

- Ethics statutes and codes of conduct for public officials, outlining unacceptable practices;
- Conflict of interest and financial disclosure laws, requiring public officials to divulge the source of their income and assets so that citi-

zens may judge whether the actions of those officials are likely to be influenced improperly by financial interests;

- “Sunshine” laws, providing the press and the public access to government records and meetings;
- Citizen participation requirements, dictating that certain government decisions must include input from the public; and
- Judicial review, providing courts the power to review the decisions and actions of public officials and agencies.

⇒ Administrative accountability mechanisms include offices within agencies or ministries and practices within administrative processes designed to ensure that the decisions and actions of public officials account for the interest of the citizens.

⇒ Administrative accountability mechanisms include:

- Agency ombudsmen, responsible for hearing and addressing citizen complaints;
- Independent auditors who scrutinize the use of public funds for signs of misuse;
- Administrative courts, that hear citizens’ complaints about agency decisions;
- Ethics rules protecting so-called whistleblowers — those within government who speak out about corruption or abuse of official authority — from reprisals.