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Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics

by

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Since any power can be abused, systems of relationships involving power must contain constraints in order to be acceptable. Although constraints in world politics have always been less institutionalized than those of well-functioning polities, they have been no less important. In the classical European system, conventionally dated from 1648, the principal mechanism of constraint was the *balance of power*. “Balance of power” has had many meanings, but for our purposes it can be regarded as “a type of system for the conduct of relationships among states” that operates to restore equilibrium when it is threatened by a single state, or bloc of states, becoming overwhelmingly powerful (Claude 1962: 41-43). The principal means of constraint under the balance of power system was, ultimately, coercion or the threat of coercion, and states were the exclusive sources of legitimate authority. States could legally bind themselves through international treaties, but if treaties were broken, states had to resort to self-help to assert their rights.

States remain central to world politics, but the globalization of business, the expansion of the scope and authority of multilateral organizations, and rapid increases in the number of non-governmental organizations have created a more complex system of power relationships and heightened concern about abuse of power by these organizations. There is no global government but there is global governance: authoritative rule-making with expectations of obedience and anticipated negative consequences of disobedience.

A common response to these new patterns of global governance is to call for greater accountability (Held 1995, Young 2000, chapter 7). Accountability is the central

concept analyzed in this paper. It is therefore important for us, at the outset, to indicate clearly what we mean by it, and to distinguish it from other measures to limit abuses of power.

Accountability as we use the term implies that some actors have the right to hold other actors to a set of standards, to judge whether they have fulfilled their responsibilities in light of those standards, and to impose sanctions if they determine that those responsibilities have not been met. Accountability presupposes a relationship between power-wielders and those holding them accountable where there is a general recognition of the legitimacy of 1) the operative standards for accountability and 2) the authority of the parties to the relationship (one to exercise particular powers and the other to hold them to account). By contrast, unilateral uses of force, even if they are described as “holding someone accountable,” do not qualify as accountability mechanisms in our sense.

Consider, for instance, the former president of Serbia, Slobodan Milosovic. There is substantial evidence that in his official capacity, Milosevic ordered ethnic cleansing on a large scale, abusing the human rights of millions of people and leading to thousands of deaths. Responses by NATO, led by the United States, included waging war in 1999 to force Serbian forces from the province of Kosovo. This war may have been motivated by concerns about Serbian abuses of power, but it did not constitute an accountability process in our sense: it was punishment through coercion. As an indirect result of Serbian defeat, Milosovic became very unpopular, and when he fraudulently tried to claim victory in an election he had lost, he was removed from power. The United States

then put great pressure on the Serbian government to deliver Milosevic for trial in The Hague, and he eventually went on trial there in 2001.

In this sequence of events, domestic accountability, through elections, played a role. So did international legal accountability, when Milosovic appeared in court in The Hague. But the NATO war in Kosovo and the coercive pressure put on Serbia by the United States to deliver Milosevic for trial, were not accountability processes in our sense. They fall into a different category: the use or threat of force to punish an adversary or accomplish a goal of the state. There are also other modes of constraining the powerful that do not involve accountability, “Checks and balances.” for example, are mechanisms designed to *prevent* action that oversteps legitimate boundaries by requiring the cooperation of different actors to produce an authoritative decision.¹ Accountability mechanisms, on the other hand, always operate after the fact; exposing actions to view, judging and sanctioning them.²

The crucial point is that not all constraints on abuses of power in world politics constitute mechanisms of accountability. Military action against Milosovic’s Serbia is best seen as a coercive measure. States in a balance of power system are not “held accountable” in any meaningful sense, although they may be constrained by coercion or the threat thereof. Nor are states that are bargaining for advantage on economic issues necessarily held accountable to one another. States in the 19th century engaged in bilateral tariff negotiations, confronting limits on their ability to achieve their objectives.

¹ The executive veto power in the U.S. Constitution is part of a system of checks and balances. The impeachment power is an accountability mechanism.

² Of course, though they always have an *ex post* component, accountability mechanisms can exert effects *ex ante*, since the anticipation of sanctions may deter the powerful from abusing their positions in the first place.

But since they had undertaken no prior obligations by joining multilateral institutions, they were not accountable to one another. The concept of accountability implies that the actors being held accountable have obligations to act in ways that are consistent with accepted standards of behavior, and that processes widely accepted as legitimate are used to gather information about their behavior and impose sanctions.

As international organizations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund become more important, and rules governing transactions become more highly elaborated and binding, as in the WTO, questions about the accountability of these institutions are more insistently raised. Indeed, the acceptance of obligations implies accountability in one form or another. Moreover, other entities that are structured quite differently from multilateral organizations – multinational corporations, NGO's, transnational organizations – are recognized increasingly as powerful forces in world politics as well. Calls for accountability mechanisms to contain them have also grown.

In the modern world, the prevailing normative language is that of democracy, and the discussion of global accountability has relied on conceptions drawn from democratic domestic politics. Democratic theory asks two key questions about abuses of power and accountability: 1) what constitutes an abuse, and why? 2) Who is entitled to hold power-wielders accountable and why? These questions have clear answers within the confines of domestic democratic politics. Not surprisingly, therefore, when commentators discuss the need for greater accountability in world politics, they begin with an analogy between domestic and global governance, and they refer to democratic concepts of accountability. For example, Robert A. Dahl criticizes international organizations for being non-democratic, in the sense that these organizations fail to incorporate effective systems to

ensure popular control of their actions (Dahl 1999: 20). The standards of accountability used in this literature, and the literature on the “democratic deficit” in Europe, are essentially democratic standards.³

Unfortunately, the validity of the analogy between global and domestic power structures is rarely scrutinized, which leads observers to overlook a variety of important non-democratic accountability mechanisms. The prevailing discourse unnecessarily narrows the discussion of accountability to exclude forms of constraint on power that do not meet the standards of democratic control. Identification of accountability with participatory democracy in particular blinds observers to the variety of accountability mechanisms that can potentially operate in world politics. Not all of these mechanisms are distinctively democratic or participatory, but in some cases they may be more effective than imaginary democratic controls that can never be implemented. The ironic result is that the best becomes the enemy of the good. Commentators who genuinely seek to constrain abuses of power by multilateral organizations, multinational firms and non-governmental organizations, as well as by states, fail to point out how to do so, because they are unable to think outside the democratic box.

We see greater possibilities for constraining abuses of power in world politics than commentators, such as Dahl, who limit themselves to the conception of democratic accountability as popular control. Our aim in this paper is to uncover these possibilities in order to increase the options available to citizens, and leaders of international

³ For analysis of the literature on the democratic deficit in Europe, see Siedentopf 2000, and Moravcsik 2002.

organizations, both to hold power-wielders accountable and more broadly, to constrain them from abusing their power.

We begin our analysis in Section I by presenting two general models of accountability, one based on *participation* and the other on *delegation*. Although both models are consistent with electoral accountability in modern democracies, they rely on very different justifications and employ very different mechanisms to ensure that rulers behave in accordance with standards of legitimacy. In Section II, we point out the weaknesses of the analogy between these models, developed in domestic politics, and situations facing people seeking to increase accountability at the global level. Section III elaborates an approach to global accountability that focuses on seven accountability mechanisms that operate in different areas of world politics. A major theme of this paper is that accountability mechanisms in world politics are not limited to those that are emphasized in participatory models of democracy, and that even these mechanisms should be viewed, not in isolation, but in the context of other constraints on the abuse of power.

I. Two General Models of Accountability for Nation-States

Standard definitions of accountability emphasize both information and sanctions. “To be accountable means to have to answer for one’s action or inaction, and depending on the answer, to be exposed to potential sanctions, both positive and negative”(Oakerson 1989: 114). In politics, ensuring accountability requires establishing institutions that provide information to those people trying to hold power-wielders accountable and that enable them to impose sanctions on the power-wielders.

Information and sanctions are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for accountability. They presuppose norms of legitimacy, which establish not only the standards by which the use of power can be judged, but also who is authorized to wield power and who is properly entitled to call them to account. Accountability functions to expose and sanction two sorts of abuses: 1) the unauthorized or illegitimate exercise of power; and 2) decisions that are judged by accountability holders to be unwise or unjust.

In an effort to clarify different forms of accountability, we describe two models of accountability, each of which represents a schematic distillation of a line of argument that has been developed over centuries. One can find similar views competing in debates between Federalists and Antifederalists over the U.S. Constitution, for example, as well as in contemporary debates over whether international organizations such as the World Bank should be held accountable to the states that authorized their creation or to poor people who are most affected by their policies. We have labeled the models a “participation” model of accountability and a “delegation” model of accountability.⁴ The distinction between them is grounded in alternative conceptions of the legitimacy of political authority, which have different implications for how accountability is understood.⁵

⁴ These terms are a kind of “shorthand,” and the reader should take their meaning from the discussion that follows. Our usage differs from the terminological distinctions in some discussions of models of democracy or representation, for example. Contrast Dahl (1956) who speaks of “Madisonian democracy” and “populist democracy.” See also Krouse (1982) for the tension between “elite” and “participatory” democracy in J. S. Mill’s writings.

⁵ Both models are designed to be essential elements of a *general system* of authorization, which gives power-wielders broad authority. The United States Constitution, for instance, in its preamble includes the following purposes: “to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” The generality of the purposes to which these models apply contrasts with narrow

Our two basic models differ fundamentally in their answer to the question: “Who is entitled to hold the powerful accountable?” In the participation model, the performance of power-wielders is evaluated by those who are affected by their actions. In the delegation model, by contrast, performance is evaluated by those entrusting them with powers. In addition, each model has two variants distinguished by different understandings of the relation between the powerful and the publics they are meant to serve. Power-wielders are viewed either as instrumental agents of the public or as authorities with discretion. The result is a 2 x 2 table as follows:

	<i>Who judges whether power-wielders are acting legitimately?</i>	
<i>Power-wielders regarded as:</i>	<i>Those affected by their actions – Participation</i>	<i>Those entrusting them with powers – Delegation</i>
<i>Instrumental agents</i>	Ia “ Direct ” Democracy Actions of power-wielders are what those affected (the people) instructed them to do in this contingency.	IIa Principal-Agent : Power-wielders act as faithful agents of principals who empower them.
<i>Discretionary authorities</i>	Ib Populist : Policies followed by the power-wielders lead to outcomes approved by those affected; which leads those affected to confer additional powers.	IIb Trustee : Power-wielders perform the duties of their offices faithfully.

Both distinctions in the table are significant. The columns reflect the familiar distinction between democratic participation and populist theories, on the one hand,

authorizations – for example, authorizing courts to hold individual office-holders accountable to legal standards. In contemporary global governance, no entities are given broad grants of authority such as that in the United States Constitution; all authorizations are much more limited.

and theories emphasizing consent, legal authorization and office on the other. In the latter theories, it need not be the people as a whole, but could be some elite group or institution, that entrusts power-wielders with power. The rows distinguish between direction and control. As emphasized above, all institutional arrangements for accountability include an element of *ex post* control. In the second, “discretionary authorities,” row, reliance is placed entirely on such *ex post* mechanisms. Those who entrust authority to others do not expect to direct the power-wielders’ behavior beyond defining official duties. Instead, they expect to limit the abuse of power and control the power-wielders either through a system of checks and balances or through *ex post* monitoring and imposition of penalties (such as loss of office) when performance is not satisfactory. In the “instrumental agent” row, on the other hand, mechanisms to direct the actions of power wielders *ex ante* are also employed. Only when the instructions given to agents are not obeyed is there a need for accountability mechanisms.⁶

We begin with the participation model in the first column of the table. A fundamental principle here is that, ideally, individuals ought to be free to make decisions for themselves, since nobody can both know and care for your interests as well or as much as you do. A second principle is that people should be treated equally. It follows that where collective decisions are required, each person ought to have an equal say. Legitimacy depends upon full participation. Further, public power is legitimate only to the extent that decisions serve the interests of the people as a whole, which is interpreted to mean to the extent that the outcomes of decisions reflect

⁶ Pitkin (1967) makes a similar distinction between mandate and independence theories of representation, pp.146-47.

what individuals desire. For these reasons, people with power ought to be accountable to those who are affected by their decisions

On the basis of these principles, direct democracy could be defended as the ideal form of government, preferable to representative government in principle, though that is impossible in most circumstances. For this reason, we refer to this model as “direct” democracy (Ia). In this model, as the closest approximation to the ideal, representatives ought to reflect their constituents’ interests and beliefs, and this is most likely when representatives are similar to their constituents demographically and when representative assemblies are large.⁷ Representatives ought to be closely tied to their constituents and can be directly instructed by them. Referenda are desirable tools in this model, as are term limits and frequent elections. Executive officers of government are often seen as mere instrumental agents of the legislature with little leadership role. High levels of participation in politics and in governing institutions are considered highly desirable and serve as a direct accountability mechanism. Representatives and officeholders need to be called to account by the governed, who can have some control over the decisions that affect their lives through political participation.⁸

⁷ Similar ideas were expressed by the antifederalists during the contest over ratification of the U.S. Constitution; see Melancton Smith, Brutus, and the Federal Farmer, in Storing (1981) pp. 39, 114-15, 336-37, 340-41, 344-45. For a contemporary description see Cook and Morgan (1971) pp.1-42.

⁸ See The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, 1962. An internet search for “the decisions that affect their lives” produced 5300 items and confirmed the prevalence of this understanding of accountability. It appears in the mission statements of many political organizations. For a clear statement of this view in the context of the global discussion of accountability see the Australian Council of Trade Unions background paper, July, 2002. “But there is also an alternative movement that is growing against the power and influence of undemocratic bodies like the WTO. Communities right around the world are beginning to say that they too want to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives and their futures. There is a growing realisation amongst the people affected by globalisation that they need a voice to counter the powerful self-interest and lack of accountability of global capital.”

The populist alternative (Ib) is also a form of government consistent with the underlying principles of the participation model, but one in which there is a much greater role for the political leader. In this model, the people entrust a leader or a party to speak for the interests of the people as a whole against groups in society that are understood to be “special interests.” Direct participation of the people in governing institutions is not seen as a primary goal. But the legitimacy of the party and its leader depends upon the extent to which they can credibly speak for the people. Thus, the populist leader and party are held accountable to the public through frequent appeals to mobilized public opinion and through elections that serve as referenda on the leader’s or the party’s performance in office (Taggart, 2000, esp. pp. 65-66).

The delegation model and its variants (IIa and IIb), on the other hand, are grounded in the notion that power is legitimate only where it is authorized by the legitimating consent of those who delegate it. And since power is always delegated for a reason, it is legitimate only so long as it serves its original purposes, which in the case of the nation, are the protection of rights and the pursuit of the public good. The act of delegation is what distinguishes authority from raw power. Nobody can claim authority over another on the basis of personal privilege, wealth, hereditary right or superior force. Those in power hold offices with specified duties so that power is not personal, but instead is associated with the authority of office. The central principle of accountability here, implied by this conception of political legitimacy, is that people with power ought to be accountable to those who have entrusted them with it. And the standard for recognizing abuses of power will be violations of that trust; acting beyond

the authority of the office or in violation of its purposes (Locke, 1980, esp. par. 149, 151).

According to the delegation model but not the participation model, representation is superior to direct democracy. One reason is that representation has advantages for accountability. It is often said that representation is advantageous because people can delegate their power to those most able to govern. It is less often noted that representation allows for a separation or distance between the governed and their governors that allows the former to call the latter to account. When particular powers are delegated to officeholders and representatives, it is clear whom to blame. And when the people are distanced from their representatives, they can judge their actions without being implicated in them themselves.⁹

There are two ways in which accountability is conceived consistent with the principles of the delegation model. The first, borrowed from economic models of employer/employee relations, is called the principal-agent model (IIa).¹⁰ Political officials (including elected representatives) are understood to be “employees” (“agents”) of their constituents or their executive superiors (“principals”). In principal-agent models, the principal’s preferences are taken as given, and the relationship is judged a failure if the agent deviates from them. In this understanding, accountability is ensured when agents have incentives to do what the principals want them to do. Agents are seen as instruments of the principal’s will, and they ought to act as the principal himself would if he held the position (Maraball, 1999:155).

⁹ Hamilton, et. al. (1982) , nos. 10 and 49. See Grant and Grant (1981), pp. 35-6.

¹⁰ For a discussion of principal-agent theory see Pollack 1997.

Yet the relations of representative/constituent and officeholder/public differ in important respects from the employee/employer relation. First, once appointed or elected, officeholders make decisions that govern members of the public; employees remain the subordinates of their employers. The power relations in the case of politics are more complex.¹¹ Second, when an employee is given a job, he or she is generally given a set of tasks to accomplish.¹² When a politician is given a job, he or she is generally given a great deal of power and considerable discretion as to how to use it. Often, officeholders are entrusted with power on account of their superior expertise or judgment. They *ought* to exercise their discretion in performing their duties.¹³ Principal-agent models are inappropriate, for example, when calling judges to account. Power is certainly delegated to judges, but they are not responsible for enacting the will of those who empower them; they have different sorts of official duties. In fact, one might say that among their duties is the duty to resist enacting the will of those who empowered them when to do so would bend or violate the law.

In other words, the principal-agent model sharply restricts the scope for leadership. A faithful agent, especially where she has multiple constituencies, or multiple principals, can exercise leadership in the form of coordination, or creating focal points on which agreement is possible. However, other forms of leadership are not consistent with the principal-agent model. These presume that there is a meaningful distinction between preferences or interests and true interests, or even duties, and that the role of a leader includes defying the transitory popular will or forming people's

¹¹ See Rousseau (1988), I.6.

¹² Actually, principal-agent models are as inapplicable to some kinds of employment, professional employment in particular, as they are to political office, and for some of the same reasons.

preferences in the direction of their true interests, obligations or long term good. Such forms of leadership are inconsistent with the presupposition of the principal-agent model that preference orderings or utility functions are to be taken as given.

The trustee model of delegation (IIb), in contrast, presupposes that officials will use discretion. Hence, the implicit standard for abuse of power differs from that implied by the principal-agent model. Deviations of the agent's actions from the principal's desires would not necessarily constitute abuse of power. A representative or officeholder could defend an unpopular exercise of power as legitimate by showing that it was both within the officer's jurisdiction and actually served the purposes for which he or she was authorized to act (Burke, 1949). Accountability mechanisms consistent with this model are designed to ensure that officials exercise their discretion, which might be considerable, in accord with their official duties.

The two basic models, participation and delegation, because they are grounded in different notions of legitimacy, lead to different strategies and mechanisms for accountability. In the participation model, those affected hold power-wielders accountable directly through participation, whereas in the delegation model, those delegating power hold power-wielders accountable through a variety of mechanisms for judgment after the fact.

The two basic models of accountability can also lead to conflicting political judgments. For example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank were created by governments, which delegated their powers to them, provide funding, and ensure creditworthiness. In their weighted voting systems, the major financial powers control the executive boards of these organizations. When senior officials of

¹³ For an interesting discussion of "two logics of delegation," agency and fiduciary, see Majone (2001).

the World Bank, such as former chief economist Joseph Stiglitz, severely antagonize the United States Government, they are forced to resign.¹⁴ This is at it should be where the delegation model of accountability operates. Yet at the same time, the World Bank proclaims the virtues of “empowerment” of poor people in order to increase the “accountability and responsiveness” of public sectors to them (World Bank 2001: 9). The language of empowerment suggests a participatory model of accountability, the logic of which could easily be extended to imply more empowerment within the Bank itself for the people who are affected by its policies.¹⁵ It is very clear that there is a tension between the concept of a World Bank that is accountable to poor people and one that is accountable to the United States Secretary of the Treasury. Similarly, the IMF might be considered accountable to those whose money it is lending to take only reasonable risks, which leads to a policy of requiring structural adjustments. But they are also called to account for the effects of those structural adjustments within the countries accepting the conditions of IMF loans. Are the World Bank and the IMF primarily responsible to those who are the source of their power and authority, according to the delegation model or to those affected by their policies, according to the participation model?

The frequent confounding of these two basic models of accountability, and the two major variants of each, is quite understandable in political discourse at a national level, since in liberal democracies they are often fused in practice. For instance, democratic elections are examples of both accountability through participation and accountability through judging the performance of one’s delegates. Thus, the process of

¹⁴ *Financial Times* June 16, 2000. Stiglitz 2002.

democratic elections can be endorsed readily as an effective mechanism for accountability by anyone holding any one of the four views articulated here. This convergence, however convenient in the context of liberal democracies, does not apply in contemporary world politics, since democratic elections are not viable mechanisms for accountability at the global level. A convenience in liberal democratic politics becomes a source of confusion for the analysis of accountability in world politics.

II. The Failure of the Nation-State Analogy

Conventional discussions of accountability have relied heavily on the nation-state analogy. But it is a poor analogy, which breaks down in three distinct ways.

First, the problem of abuse of power is particularly serious in world politics, because even the minimal types of constraints found in domestic governments are absent on the global level. Not only is there no global democracy, there is not even an effective constitutional system that constrains power in an institutionalized way, through mechanisms such as checks and balances. An institutional system of checks and balances is an attempt to limit the power of any one actor by making cooperation necessary between actors with different institutional interests. When these systems are successful, abuses are prevented and there is no need for exposure and sanctions. Yet even highly institutionalized systems of checks and balances are not successful all of the time. Lacking systems, either of institutionalized checks or of accountability, world politics relies on constraints imposed by potential coercion (as in the balance of power) and on negotiation constraints, produced by the desire of states and other

¹⁵ “Empowerment” is ambiguous with respect to who is entitled to represent the poor: the leaders of their own governments or activist non-governmental organizations.

actors for mutually beneficial agreements. Since these constraints are obviously quite weak in restraining strong states and hardly address the problems of abuse of power by non-state actors, accountability mechanisms of all kinds – whether strictly democratic or not – are also required if abuses of power are to be limited. Demanding mechanisms that meet strict democratic standards is a recipe for futility.

The second crucial problem with the analogy is that many power-wielders in world politics acquired their power without delegation. Only international organizations had their authority explicitly conferred on them – in this case by states. States, sub-units of states, multinational firms and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were all created without having been authorized to act by any set of entities even remotely representative of the world population as a whole. Thinking of accountability strictly in terms of domestic models – in particular, delegation models -- can lead observers to overemphasize the significance of the accountability deficits of international organizations, and to overlook the more serious accountability deficits of other power-wielders, such as states, multinational firms, and NGOs. In Section III we will emphasize the role of these other entities, too often ignored in commentary about accountability in world politics.

The third problem with the domestic analogy is that participation models of accountability suffer, when applied to world politics, from the absence of a coherent, representative, and well-defined global public. At the domestic level, those affected by the power-wielders are generally understood to be those subject to the laws of the polity, so it is fairly easy to determine who has a right to participate. But having the right to participate in politics as an affected party is ambiguous at the global level. For example,

if being affected by a decision were sufficient to support a right to participate in decision-making, anyone who buys gasoline would be entitled to participate in OPEC's deliberations, and anyone affected by world interest rates to participate in discussions at the Federal Reserve or the European Central Bank. In the absence of a public whose boundaries are defined by participation in a polity, it is impossible to specify either who should be entitled to participate or how they would do so.

Today, there is no large and representative global public, even in the relatively weak sense of a global "imagined community" (Anderson 1991) – a transnational community of people who share a sense of common destiny and are in the habit of communicating with one another about issues of public policy. Particular global publics are indeed emerging – for instance, in issue-areas such as human rights and environmental protection (Keck and Sikkink 1998) – but the numbers of people involved are very small compared to the human population, they are surely not representative of the world's people, and they are by no means coterminous with the sets of people affected by the policies of states, multinational firms, or multilateral organizations. Unlike the situation in domestic politics, there is a disjunction between those who are affected and the public, whose members communicate with one another sufficiently that they are capable in some sense of expressing a collective view.

To resolve this ambiguity, at least two developments would be necessary. First, there would need to be some political structure that would help to define who was entitled to participate, and on what issues. Second, many more people would have to identify transnationally and be willing to participate as members of a global public. This is not to say that everyone, or even a majority of people, would have to do so: in many

otherwise well-functioning democracies, only a minority of people are active in politics. But the number of participants would have to be sufficiently large and representative, and the means of participating sufficiently open, that the views of the active public could be seen as to a significant extent reflective of the opinions of people in the world as a whole.

Currently, we are far from such a situation. The World Values Survey, taken in 70 countries at two different periods of the 1990s, indicated that only fifteen percent of respondents viewed themselves as identifying primarily with their continental regions or the world as a whole. 47 percent had principally local and regional attachments, while 38 percent listed their nation-state as their principal affiliation (Norris 2000: 161-166). If the survey had asked what proportion of respondents regularly communicate with a substantial number of counterparts living on other continents, much less principally focus their attention on events taking place outside their continents, the proportions would surely have been much smaller than fifteen percent. There are fragmentary global publics, but a genuine global public comparable to publics in well-established democracies, does not exist.

Another way of making this point would be to say that world politics today lacks a public in two distinct senses. There is no juridical public on a global level, since no legal institutions define a public with authority to act globally. There is no sociological global public, because only a very small minority of people in the world identify with other people on a global basis, or even follow world events very closely.¹⁶ This analysis

¹⁶ It could be objected that our argument makes global institutions a precondition for a global public, and a global public a precondition for global institutions, hence preventing change or at least the recognition of change. However, institutions can be created by means other than the formation of a public and the expression of its will – for instance, the European Union has been created as a largely elite project.

suggests that proposals for global participatory institutions, such as that of Richard A. Falk and Andrew Strauss (2000) are premature at best. There is no global *demos*, and “if there is no *demos*,” as J. H. H. Weiler has pointed out, “there can be no democracy” (Weiler 1999: 337).¹⁷

Irrespective of our skepticism, much contemporary discourse revolves around calls for a radically transformed system of increased global participation. While frequently couched in the language of accountability, these appeals are often, at bottom, arguments against the legitimacy of contemporary global governance and calls for a different structure of global power. The more radical “anti-globalization” voices criticize the United States, transnational corporations and the World Bank not on account of their lack of accountability, but on account of their fundamental illegitimacy. Our point here is not to dismiss such radical critiques - there is much about contemporary structures of power to criticize - but only to distinguish them from arguments about accountability *per se*. Debates over accountability proper are debates over how to prevent illegitimate exercises of power by states and institutions that are not *ipso facto* fundamentally illegitimate.

These debates will end in a cul-de-sac if they proceed by attempting to apply the domestic analogy to world politics. In democratic nations, the existence of a clearly defined public provides the responses to the fundamental questions raised initially about

Furthermore, a public can come into being without coherent governmental institutions, although usually this occurs through struggles such as wars fought for statehood. A global public could come into being, but it is unlikely to do so easily.

¹⁷ David Held (1995: 232) has notably made the case for “cosmopolitan democracy” as an ideal, in which associations of democratic states would lead to people learning “the theoretical lesson that democratic legitimacy can ultimately only be redeemed transnationally.” We are more sympathetic with Held’s argument for an eventual cosmopolitan democracy than with the institutional proposals of Falk and Strauss,

accountability: 1) what constitutes an abuse and why? and 2) who is entitled to hold power-wielders accountable and why? Power is abused whenever it is used for private of partial interests contrary to the interests of the public. And the public is entitled to hold power-wielders accountable in a democratic nation for abuses of power, either as the source of that power or as the body affected by it or both. On the global level, there is no public that serves to ground the justification for accountability mechanisms of a democratic type.

This analysis should help to clarify why the concept of accountability, when simply transposed from domestic to international politics, seems to fit so poorly. Nonetheless, there is a temptation to reach for this concept in the face of the emergence of powerful new entities on the world stage. Other mechanisms for constraining abuses of power, such as an institutional system of checks and balances, do not exist at the global level, or are very weak. Seeking desperately to prevent abuses of power, critics of the powerful call for “democratic accountability.” But they are demanding that democratic accountability do much more work, filling a larger gap, on the world scale than it does domestically. The result is a mismatch between concept and reality.

Recognizing the inapplicability of domestic democratic concepts of accountability to world politics need not be cause for despair. Instead, it can be liberating, by focusing our attention on the variety of mechanisms, not all of which are democratic, that might be used to improve accountability on a global scale. The absence of *democratic* accountability does not necessarily render international

but such a democracy seems so far in the future that it is futile at this time to try to build specific institutions to implement this ideal.

organizations unaccountable. They may be accountable to the “wrong entities” – this can certainly be contested – but they are in many ways quite accountable.

We turn now to examine specific structures of global power and various mechanisms that might be employed to prevent abuses of power on the global level. As our discussion so far suggests, we will not be able to rely on the general models of accountability borrowed from domestic politics. In the fragmented domain of world politics, partial arrangements, crafted to fit distinctive situations, are likely to be more feasible.

III. Legitimacy and Accountability at the Global Level

As we have argued throughout this paper, comprehensive systems of democratic accountability presuppose established norms of legitimacy. That a system of governance is legitimate means, among other things, that people subject to it regard actions taken according to accepted procedures as properly authoritative. But world politics is characterized by sharp conflicts of interests and values, and by potential or real violent conflict in the absence of a common government. The chief sources of legitimacy at the domestic level, such as constitutional mandates, electoral processes, legality, tradition, and the services provided by effective government, are not available to transnational organizations or to states when they exert coercive effects on non-citizens. Hence claims to legitimacy are highly contested. Without clarity on the sorts of actions that are legitimate, or the procedures that would legitimate them, it is impossible to construct a comprehensive system of global accountability – by which the continuation of legitimacy could be assured.

In view of this situation, the main conclusion of the previous two sections is not surprising: accountability on the global level cannot resemble accountability on the level of the nation-state. Focusing only on general models of accountability firmly rooted in democratic theories of legitimacy could lead us to ignore other accountability mechanisms and other means of containing power, even if they are less general, and in some respects less democratic. Fortunately, participatory accountability is not the only form of accountability. Nor do delegation models, as actually applied, need to depend on comprehensive principal-agent relationships. Partial principal-agent systems of accountability are feasible in limited spheres; so are trusteeship models, as in the example of international courts. And in some domains, checks and balances or similar structures requiring cooperation among diverse parties before action can take place may work to moderate the use of power at the global level. The real question is not whether comprehensive systems of democratic accountability can be constructed in contemporary world politics, since the answer to that question is clearly, “no.” Instead, the question is whether abuses of power can be restrained by means that are appropriate to the real conditions of global politics.

Standards for Accountability in World Politics

We have emphasized that accountability presumes standards of legitimacy, against which power-wielders can be held accountable, but we have not yet said where these standards of legitimacy come from. In general, it appears to us that they have three major sets of sources.

For international organizations, to whom authority is formally delegated, the standards by which they are judged are usually embedded in the treaties establishing

them. These charters or articles of agreement specify the procedures by which they have to act to make their rulings authoritative, defining what is often referred to as “input” or “process” legitimacy. For instance, for a resolution to constitute a valid decision in different organizations, different proportions of their membership must vote for it, and in some cases, such as the United Nations Security Council, a veto by a single state may prevent such a decision. Equally important, however, the charters of international organizations typically specify, in general terms, their purposes. The United Nations was formed “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” as well as to promote fundamental human rights, create the conditions for justice, and promote social progress (United Nations Charter, Preamble). These purposes change over time. The World Bank was designed in 1946 to assist in postwar reconstruction, promote private foreign investment, and promote the growth of international trade; only a subordinate clause in its Articles of Agreement refers to “the encouragement of the development of productive facilities and resources in less developed countries.” Its website now declares that “today's Bank has sharpened its focus on poverty reduction as the overarching goal of all its work.”¹⁸

As we have noted, many power-wielders in world politics, including states, did not have authority delegated to them at all. In traditional international law, those entities that are neither states nor international organizations – such as firms and private associations – are subject to the laws of the states possessing jurisdiction. But states, and in some instances non-state actors, can be held to standards articulated in international

¹⁸ International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Articles of Agreement, Article 1; website (<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/EXTARCHIVES>) visited September 30, 2003.)

law. Human rights treaties and the statute of the International Criminal Court constitute obvious examples: states and their leaders can be held accountable for violations of their provisions. The World Trade Organization issues rulings binding on states, which must often, in order to comply, enact or alter domestic laws or regulations applying to firms and their transactions. Even if no treaty provisions cover a situation, international law includes a category of *jus cogens* – peremptory norms, such as norms against piracy, whose violation justifies legal accountability. Finally, customary international law reflects state practice “accompanied by the conviction that it reflects a legal obligation,” known as *opinio juris* (Malandzuk 1997: 44).

In a less institutionalized way, power-wielders may be held accountable to standards of conduct articulated in transnational civil society, even though there is no applicable international law. When Nike was criticized in the late 1990s for hiring contractors using “sweatshop” labor, it had not necessarily broken any laws. Activists complained not of legal violation but of the inequity of workers in the Dominican Republic or Vietnam being employed in miserable conditions, and paid badly, to produce luxury goods that would be sold for many times their production costs, in rich countries. Although some of the human rights norms used to hold former leaders accountable in Latin America are legalized, they operated also through non-legalized social processes involving elites’ desires for legitimacy and esteem (Lutz and Sikkink 2000: 658-9). When standards are not legalized, we would expect accountability to operate chiefly through reputation and peer pressure, rather than in more formal ways.

Power-Wielders and Accountability Mechanisms in World Politics

With the goal of restraining abuses of power in mind, we now proceed to describe seven accountability mechanisms that operate in world politics, providing illustrations of each. These accountability mechanisms are summarized in Figure 1.¹⁹

Hierarchical accountability is a characteristic of bureaucracies and of virtually any large organization. Superiors can remove subordinates from office, constrain their tasks and room for discretion, and adjust their financial compensation. Hierarchical accountability as we use the term applies to relationships within organizations, including multilateral organizations such as the United Nations or the World Bank.

Supervisory accountability refers to the practice of authorizing one collectivity to act as principal with respect to specified agents. For instance, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are subject to supervision by states, who are clearly the principals.²⁰

Fiscal accountability describes mechanisms through which funding agencies can demand reports from, and ultimately sanction, agencies that are recipients of funding. This form of accountability was fundamental to the emergence of parliamentary power in England during the 17th century, and is particularly important for international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank, which rely on government appropriations to fund substantial parts of their activities.

¹⁹ For earlier discussions of accountability mechanisms, see Keohane and Nye 2003 and Keohane 2003. The latter article contains a table that is very similar to Figure 1 here, although Figure 1 omits electoral accountability, as not relevant to contemporary global institutions.

²⁰ In this context, the principal-agent model (IIa) can be useful in illuminating the various ways in which states can control international organizations. Yet its very usefulness in these contexts is indicative of the constraints on these international organizations. As we have noted, principal-agent models cannot deal well with situations of leadership in which leaders affect their constituents' judgments of their own interests. A marked feature of international organizations is the weakness of their political leaderships – in particular, their inability to make direct contact in a sustained way with constituents, and thereby to affect their views of their own interests. Insofar as political leadership is weak, our criticism of principal-agent models for not taking strong leadership into account becomes irrelevant. See Nielson and Tierney 2003.

Legal accountability refers to the requirement that agents abide by formal rules and be prepared to justify their actions in those terms, in courts or quasi-judicial arenas. Public officials, like anyone else, can be “held accountable” for their actions in courts of law. These courts do not have the broad general authority of governments or of electorates in democracies. Instead, the courts apply a narrow version of the trusteeship model (IIb), asking whether the power-wielders performed the duties of their offices faithfully in a limited sense: whether they obeyed the law. Legal accountability has long been important in constitutional democracies, and has become increasingly important in world politics during recent years (Goldstein et al., 2001). The operations of the Hague Tribunal on the Former Yugoslavia, and the creation of a new International Criminal Court, illustrate the incursions that conceptions of legal accountability have made in world politics during recent years.²¹

Market accountability is a less familiar category, but an important one. It is important to emphasize that this form of accountability is not to an abstract force called “the market,” but to investors and consumers, whose influence is exercised in whole or in part through markets. Investors may stop investing in countries whose policies they dislike, or at least demand higher rates of interest (Mosley 2003). Consumers may refuse to buy products from companies with bad reputations for labor standards or other practices, as well as from companies with inferior or costly products.

Peer accountability arises as the result of mutual evaluation of organizations by their counterparts, to which they have undertaken obligations of reciprocity or otherwise.

²¹ The example of legal accountability illustrates the point that there can be accountability without participation. When an international court of human rights passes judgment, it calls people to account without any participatory element.

NGOs, for example, evaluate the quality of information they receive from other NGOs, and the ease of cooperating with them. Organizations that are poorly rated by their peers are likely to have difficulty in persuading them to cooperate, and therefore to have trouble achieving their own purposes.

Public reputational accountability. In a sense, this category could be misleading, because reputation is involved in all the other forms of accountability. Superiors, supervisory boards, courts, fiscal watchdogs, markets, and peers all take the reputations of agents into account. The category of public reputational accountability, however, is meant to apply to situations in which reputation, widely and publicly known, provides a mechanism for accountability even in the absence of other mechanisms as well as in conjunction with them.

There are also processes that do not meet the standards for accountability but that serve to constrain power. As in a system of checks and balances, overlapping jurisdictions or interest areas may require actors to compromise with one another to secure the cooperation necessary to define or implement policy. Such a situation is characterized by *negotiation constraints*. Since our ultimate goal is to provide greater restraints on the abuse of power, negotiation constraints are properly included in this analysis, though they are not accountability mechanisms, and therefore do not appear in Figure 1.

How do these mechanisms constrain the major otherwise legitimate (or not *ipso facto* illegitimate) power-wielders in world politics? The most accountable of these power-wielders are probably those toward which, ironically, the most accountability-criticism is directed: multilateral organizations such as the World Trade Organization,

IMF, World Bank, European Commission, and United Nations. State officials closely supervise all of these entities. Indeed, these organizations are constrained from the start since the legitimacy of their actions is often judged simultaneously by three different sets of potentially conflicting standards: by whether they serve the interests of their member states, the purposes for which they were established, and evolving standards of benefits and harms.

The criticisms of these organizations on grounds of accountability refers not to lack of accountability *per se*, but to weaknesses in *democratic* accountability as in Dahl's argument (1999), discussed above. Even then, often the version of democratic accountability that is contrasted with actual institutional practice is a highly idealized one. As Andrew Moravcsik argues with respect to the European Union:

“Most critics compare the EU to an ideal plebiscitary or parliamentary democracy, standing alone, rather than to the actual functioning of national democracies adjusted for its multi-level context. When we conduct the latter sort of analysis, we see that EU decision-making procedures, including those that insulate or delegate certain decisions, are very much in line with the general practice of most modern democracies in carrying out similar functions.” (Moravcsik 2002: 621-22.)

If we focus not solely on democratic accountability, but on accountability more broadly, we can see that *supervisory accountability*, with states as the accountability holders, is quite strong for multilateral organizations. So is *fiscal accountability*, since multilateral organizations depend on subventions from states. Multilateral institutions are, indeed, highly constrained by accountability mechanisms.²²

²² This is not to say that accountability is perfect by any means. For thoughtful discussions of the accountability of the World Bank, see Woods (1998) and Woods (2001).

NGOs are often seen as the entities to which power-wielders such as the World Bank should be held accountable. In this view, they are the “virtual representatives” of publics adversely affected by other global power-wielders. However, international NGOs are not legitimated by ties to a defined public. In practice, few NGOs have well-defined procedures for accountability to anyone other than financial contributors and members – quite a small set of people. They can identify elements of what they consider to be “the public interest,” but what constitutes the public interest is contested. Unlike in domestic politics, there is no general electoral process, involving the public that adjudicates between different conceptions of the public interest.

Even NGOs whose members may see themselves as pure-spirited guardians of the public interest can abuse their power – which for NGOs is limited to their ability to provide information and mold public opinion. Greenpeace, for instance, demanded in 1995 that Shell not dispose of its Brent Spar drilling rig in the North Sea, alleging that it contained 5000 tons of oil, vastly more than Shell estimated. After a huge media campaign, very costly to Shell’s reputation, Greenpeace had to admit that it had greatly overestimated the oil on board. Eventually, an independent marine certification body broadly confirmed Shell’s original estimates (BBC 1998).²³

As long as NGOs are weak, their lack of formal accountability mechanisms does not create much potential for the abuse of power, because *peer accountability* and *reputational accountability* are sufficient. Too many false alarms lead such NGOs to be ignored or scorned by other NGOs with which they compete, by the press, and by individuals in various societies, on which they depend for contributions and political support. However, as NGOs become stronger, with credibility that is not easily shaken

even as they make false or prejudicial claims, their lack of formal mechanisms of accountability, apart from legal provisions within states against fraud, becomes a more serious issue.²⁴

Firms, including media firms, may be limited in some ways by their own stockholders, but there is little reason to believe that stockholders will object to behavior that benefits the firm at the expenses of outsiders. So stockholders do not substitute for effective external accountability. Firms are subject to domestic supervisory and legal accountability, but at the global level they are only subject to *market* and *reputational* accountability, in the absence of effective international regulation. The latter forms of accountability are linked. Firms with brand names to protect may be quite vulnerable to consumer boycotts, as the movement against sweatshops, focused for a time on Nike, demonstrated. Media firms are particularly subject to reputational accountability. Commenting on the resignations of the two top editors of the *New York Times* in June 2003, a commentator observed: “They, of course, had to resign. Any company has to sell the credibility of its product, but a media company has nothing else to sell.”²⁵ Firms whose reputations suffer because of their real or alleged behavior are likely also to suffer in the marketplace. They may therefore have incentives to adopt codes of conduct in order to protect both their reputations and their market share (Garcia-Johnson 2000).

A recent systematic analysis of accountability by the One World Trust (2003) rates various multilateral organizations, multinational firms, and NGOs on eight criteria,

²³ The judgment of the independent marine certification body is a good example of peer accountability.

²⁴ For thoughtful discussions of the “democratic accountability of international organizations,” see the symposium, “The Democratic Accountability of Non-Governmental Organizations,” in the *Chicago Journal of International Law*, vol. 3, no. 1 (spring 2002).

²⁵ The quote is from Warren L. Batts, Adjunct Professor at the University of Chicago School of Business. *New York Times*, June 6, 2003, p. A 28.

four each relating to “internal stakeholder accountability” and “external stakeholder accountability.” The internal dimensions include member control, procedures for appointment of senior staff, compliance mechanisms, and evaluation processes; the external dimensions include external stakeholder consultation, complaints mechanisms, corporate social responsibility; and access to information. Seven NGOs, six firms, and five multilateral organizations were evaluated, using the same standards. In the summary graphs provided in the report, scores for member control and access to information were combined. Interestingly, there were no significant differences in composite accountability ratings among these three types of organizations. Organizations of all three types ranked toward the top, and toward the bottom, of the list.²⁶

In many issue-areas, harmonized policies are worked out among functionally-defined units of different governments, such as securities regulators, central bankers, and anti-terrorist units (Keohane and Nye 1974; Slaughter 2000; Reinecke 1999-2000). These *transgovernmental networks* do not provide mechanisms for public accountability. The general public is not involved, and transparency is minimal. Abuses of power might in some instances be controlled by the fragmentation of power and conflicts of interest between the participants, but cooperation among the members of such networks could easily become collusion against the interests of outsiders. The construction of transgovernmental networks therefore does not confer legitimacy in a democratic sense. They provide a perfect venue for transnational conspiracies against the public interest. Here, policies can be set by the cooperation of groups, organized by industry or sector rather than nationally, with interests that conflict with those of less elite groups.

²⁶ The average ranking for all three types of organization was between 9 and 10.

In our terms, there is some *peer accountability* within transgovernmental networks, since the entities involved may demand information from one another and sanction other entities for perceived misbehavior. But there are no clear mechanisms of accountability, because accountability requires that there is a public standard of legitimacy to which political actors are held. On the other hand, there is the potential here for negotiation constraints. The power of an entity in the network may be checked insofar as abuses are against the interests or principles of the other entities within the transgovernmental networks. Diversity among the parties is a precondition for constraint; without it, collusion is the more likely possibility.

Finally, what about constraining abuses of power by states? States vary a great deal in their susceptibility to accountability mechanisms, so we consider separately three categories of states: 1) weak, dependent states, such as those poor countries that rely heavily on foreign aid for budget support; 2) independent states that are not great powers; and 3) great powers, particularly hegemonic states. With respect to the latter two categories, it is important to distinguish between autocracies and democracies.

Weak and dependent states may be subject to *fiscal* and *supervisory accountability*, often through international organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, or WTO. To defy the powerful states that largely control these organizations may risk severe sanctions. Even weak states often succeed at evading the mandates of the World Bank and IMF; but the overall structure of power guarantees a substantial measure of accountability.²⁷

For states that are fiscally and legally independent but not great powers, much depends on their internal regimes as well as the extent to which they are enmeshed in

networks of interdependence. It was extraordinarily difficult even for the great powers, acting through the UN Security Council, to hold Saddam Hussein's Iraq accountable for its weapons of mass destruction, and in 1998 Iraq expelled the UN inspectors from the country. Self-financing autocracies that do not depend much on the rest of the world, such as North Korea and Myanmar, or that have ample sources of funds with which to purchase goods illegally, such as Iraq under Saddam Hussein, are very hard to hold accountable.

For democratic states involved in multiple relationships of interdependence, control of abuses of power is easier. Negotiation constraints are most important for these states, since even quite powerful states need cooperation from others, even in the absence of institutionalized accountability mechanisms (Keohane and Nye 2001). The more they are enmeshed in networks of interdependence, the more they are likely to try to avoid being out of step with most of their peers, as the example of members of the European Union certainly illustrates (Moravcsik 1998). However, the more powerful the state, the less constraining may be negotiation constraints on any individual issue.

The most complex issues arise with respect to very powerful states with constitutional democratic governments, such as the United States. Such governments are accountable to their citizens and to an array of domestic interests and institutions, but as we have noted, this does not assure accountability to outsiders. Large and powerful states do not depend on subventions from others or on markets, and there is no strong international legal structure governing their actions, despite the incipient International Criminal Court. The only forms of external accountability to which they are subject, therefore, are *peer accountability* and *reputational accountability*. These attempts at

²⁷ For a discussion of accountability on environmental issues, see Fox and Brown 1998.

accountability, however, depend on efforts, often *ad hoc*, to establish a basis of legitimacy on which to hold a state accountable. In the debates over war with Iraq in the winter and spring of 2003, for example, France, Germany and Russia engaged in “soft balancing” – seeking to constrain the United States by denying legitimacy to its attack on Iraq. However, as this episode shows, it is difficult to impose peer or reputational accountability without a firm consensus on what constitutes legitimate behavior. If the powerful acting state controls substantial material resources, including force, and if it has strong internal legitimacy – so that its public does not react negatively if its leaders are criticized abroad – it may be largely immune from sanctions, as the United States was in 2003.

This discussion is summarized in Figure 2, which lists the five types of power-wielders that we have discussed, and the constraints that seem most significant for each..

Nothing in our discussion is meant to imply that accountability mechanisms in world politics work optimally, or even very well. First, accountability is relatively haphazard. Nothing guarantees that the issues brought to public view are the most important actual or potential abuses of power in the world at a given time. There is not a working torts system that would promote consistent legal accountability, nor any sort of world “ombudsman.” Second, accountability mechanisms may actually foster “sins of omission” that may go unnoticed. Strict accountability to heterogeneous sets of accountability-holders may discourage bold action that could save lives and otherwise promote human values. That is, strict accountability can provide institutional incentives for failing to take action that could accomplish purposes that an organization is supposed

to carry out.²⁸ Having been lambasted for building big dams, the World Bank is likely to be very reluctant to build any big dams again, even if some such projects would be beneficial for development.

As we have emphasized, however, in world politics accountability for most power-wielders is likely to be less constraining than is optimal. Power-wielders certainly cannot be expected to hold themselves accountable – in general, they resist accountability because it restricts their autonomy. But the answer is not simply “more accountability.” It is more intelligently designed accountability systems sensitive to the variety of possible mechanisms of constraint, the shortcomings of existing accountability mechanisms and the normative claims of those adversely affected by global entities.

Conclusions

The main thrust of our argument is to reorient discussions of accountability and global governance away from unrealizable democratic ideals based on the domestic analogy toward a variety of more or less feasible ways to constrain abuses of power in world politics. To assume that global accountability is analogous to domestic democratic accountability leads to theoretical incoherence and practical futility. Furthermore, the attempt to increase global accountability in a manner that conforms to abstract, maximal democratic principles can prevent us from recognizing specific opportunities for limiting abuses of power.

The contemporary discussion of global accountability has been unnecessarily narrow. Improved accountability is taken to be the exclusive method of controlling abuses of power. Accountability is identified with democratic accountability. And finally, democratic processes are exclusively associated with increased participation. If

²⁸ We are indebted to Peter Feaver for making this point to us.

global participation then appears infeasible, there is a temptation to despair of the possibilities for control of abuses of power altogether. We suggest instead that accountability is only one way of constraining power, that there are many forms of accountability that are not particularly unique to democracy, and that there are various ways of conceiving of democratic accountability, including delegation models as well as participation models. Participation is an important value – and efforts should be made to facilitate greater participation in global governance, particularly through transparency – but it is not the only value. Establishing minimal standards for the accountability of power-wielders to those that delegated power in the first place can achieve positive results by limiting corruption, fraud, and abuse of power, even if broad participation is not achieved.

We should be seeking to create processes for checking abuses of power with the full recognition that every type of power is subject to abuse. Improved accountability mechanisms should be explored, but other means of constraining power ought to be considered as well. And finally, we must recognize that there is no single “problem of global accountability;” there are many. The point is not to design a comprehensive, ideal accountability system, but rather to figure out how to limit abuses of power in a world with a wide variety of power-wielders and without a centralized government.

If we focus on the conditions for operation of a variety of accountability mechanisms, rather than on pure democratic accountability, there is some room for optimism. Each of the components of accountability at the global level -- *standards of legitimacy, sanctions, and information* – already exists to some extent, and there are in each case prospects for improvement.

There is an increasing global consensus – at least nominally – that democracy is a universal standard of legitimacy. Over a decade ago, United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992) declared that “respect for democratic principles at all levels of social existence is crucial: in communities, within States and within the community of States.” It is this consensus that generates the accountability discussion in the first place: the very demand for accountability above the level of the nation-state would have been almost unimaginable in a non-democratic age. Global mechanisms of accountability will become more feasible insofar as agreement increases on at least some non-trivial values. To some extent, such a consensus has been emerging on certain human rights issues, such as that of torture and war crimes, although contention remains on key points.

The second condition for accountability is the availability of sanctions. Any effective sanctions in a feasible global accountability system will have to be decentralized, since there is no central government to impose them. But decentralized sanctions are quite feasible where incentives are strong to impose them, as the history of the international trade regime – both GATT and especially the WTO – demonstrates (Barfield 2001). Indeed, many people worry that the ability of WTO to impose sanctions has recently become *too strong*, insofar as WTO rules override local democratic control.

The final component of accountability, information, may be the easiest to achieve. Crucial to the efficacy of an information system for controlling abuses of power is that control over it not be limited to power-wielders and the entities that originally authorized their actions. On the contrary, the system should be open to new groups, seeking to provide information relevant to the question of whether power-wielders are meeting

appropriate standards of behavior. The decentralization and diversity of world politics makes such a condition relatively easy to meet, since (unlike repressive societies of the 20th century) it is impossible for a single power-wielder to suppress all dissenting voices. The diversity of views in world politics means that ideological hegemony is rarely attained, and the means of modern communication, and their diffusion across societies, give a wide variety of voices the capacity to express themselves. Arguably, therefore, it may be more feasible to establish an effective information system for accountability in world politics, than to establish it in many national states – either in those with repressive governments or in those with uniformity of opinion on a set of important issues.

A pre-requisite to improving accountability in world politics is to think about it clearly. The key issue is not one of “more accountability” as much as one of creating effective accountability mechanisms within the context of broader constraints on the abuse of power. Both delegation and participation models are important: an effective accountability system should combine elements from both. But analogies from domestic democratic politics should be regarded with skepticism, and we should resist the temptation to narrow the issue of accountability to that of democratic control. Ingenuity in devising effective mechanisms, and the ability to synchronize their operation, will be more important for controlling abuses of power than a single-minded devotion to the ideal of democracy.

Figure 1. Seven Mechanisms of Accountability in World Politics

<i>Mechanism</i>	<i>Accountability holder</i>	<i>Power-wielder</i>	<i>Cost to power-wielder</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<i>Hierarchical</i>	Leaders of organization	Subordinate official	Loss of career opportunities	Authority of UN Secretary-General
<i>Supervisory</i>	States	Multilateral organization and its executive head	Restraints on ability to act, loss of office	World Bank and IMF governance by their executive boards
<i>Fiscal</i>	Funding agencies	Funded agency	Budget restrictions	Withholding of UN dues
<i>Legal</i>	Courts	Individual official or agency	From restriction of authority to criminal penalties	International Criminal Court
<i>Market</i>	Equity and bond-holders	Firm	Loss of access to, or higher cost of, capital	Refusal of capital markets to finance developing country governments during world financial crises
<i>Peer</i>	Peers organizations	Organizations and their leaders	Effects on network ties and therefore on others' support	Judgments of NGOs by other NGOs
<i>Public Reputational</i>	Peers and diffuse public	Individual or agency	Diffuse effects on reputation, prestige, self-esteem	Effects on US "soft power" of unilateralism

*Reputational effects are involved in all issues of accountability, as mechanisms leading to punishment through hierarchy, supervision, fiscal measures, legal action, the market, and peer responses. The category of public reputational effects refers to situations where the other means of accountability are not available, but reputational effects are widely known and significant.

Figure 2. Power Wielders and Constraints

<i>Power-wielder</i>	<i>Relevant international and transnational accountability mechanisms</i>	<i>Strength of constraints</i>
Multilateral organization	Supervisory, fiscal, hierarchical	Strong
NGOs	Peer, reputational	Strong when NGO is weak; weaker when NGO is strong
Transgovernmental networks	Peer	Quite weak; more a matter of checks and balances
Firms	Market, reputational.	Stronger for brand-name firms in consumer markets and media firms than for more anonymous firms
States	Peer, reputational. Supervisory and fiscal accountability only for weak, dependent states.	For relatively powerful states, negotiation constraints are more important than accountability mechanisms. Such constraints vary with degrees of enmeshment in networks of interdependence and state power.

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