

Introduction

Accountability is a cornerstone of democratic governance, ensuring that elected officials and governing bodies remain answerable to their constituents. In parliamentary systems, electoral systems significantly influence the mechanisms of accountability by determining how votes are translated into seats and shaping the dynamics of government composition. This paper investigates the relationship between electoral systems and accountability, focusing on how these systems affect voter behaviour and the clarity of responsibility attributed to governments. The importance of this analysis lies in understanding how the institutional design of electoral systems impacts democratic outcomes, particularly in holding governments accountable for their performance.

This process, however, is complicated by the structural differences between majoritarian (plural) and proportional representation (PR) systems. While plurality systems foster clearer voter-representative links and decisive governments, PR systems prioritise proportionality and inclusivity, which result in coalition governments. These structural differences therefore, create different answers for accountability, with PR often seen as diluting votes due to the diffusion of responsibility among multiple parties. This paper argues that accountability is less prevalent in PR systems due to institutional and contextual factors that mediate this relationship. The essay begins by discussing theoretical perspectives with examples across different countries, and then delves into a linear regression analysis of empirical data gathered from 36 countries on government and comparative electoral systems.

Accountability

Electoral systems play a critical role in shaping accountability in parliamentary systems. By determining how votes are accurately translated into seats and influencing government composition, electoral systems establish the structural conditions for holding representatives accountable (Ashworth, 2012). In order to understand and answer the research question, we must define what ‘accountability’ means in electoral systems. According to Lundell, the accountability model (also known as the retrospective voting perspective) can be defined as ‘voters who hold those responsible for their achievements in the last term’ (2011, p. 147). Lundell highlights that if voters are satisfied with the actions of the government, they would vote for the incumbent government; however, if voters are dissatisfied, they would ‘punish’ by voting for opposition parties. Kam et al. similarly define accountability by assuming that voters vote and evaluate “based on their assessment of government policies, performance, conduct, and or character” (2020, pg. 745). It is important to point out that accountability does not only apply to incumbent governments, but individual

accountability of representatives is equally important to consider. As Rudolph and Daubler highlight, issues such as the 2013 Bavarian Employment scandal involved representatives across different parties, hence viewing accountability and electoral systems through party politics can overlook the electoral dynamics of voters voting individuals into parliament (2016). Through accountability, voters have the ability to place clear responsibility on incumbent elected officials or governing parties to know who is to blame or reward for specific outcomes.

This paper seeks to investigate the relationship between electoral systems and accountability, which is hypothesised as follows:

H1: Accountability is less prevalent in proportional representation systems, due to the diffusion of responsibility among coalition partners.

H0: Accountability in parliamentary systems is not affected by the type of electoral system

Or

H0: Accountability is more prevalent in proportional representation systems than in pluralistic systems.

Although mixed systems are also used in several countries, this paper aims to primarily focus on accountability between plurality and PR as it will allow us to empirically focus on two pure forms of electoral systems. Using mixed systems as examples will provide nuance, however it may obscure the theoretical distinctions and make it harder to identify accountability between plurality and PR.

The Plurality System

The majoritarian system is the oldest electoral system and can be divided into several subgroups of majoritarian styles of elections: plurality, majority run-offs, and alternative votes. The plurality system (also known as first past the post, FPTP) is the most well known and widely used majoritarian system where it aims to create a “manufactured majority” through single-member constituencies based on the size of the electorate, (Norris, 1997, pg. 301). A candidate wins a seat by receiving the most votes even if they don’t have a majority. However, a drawback of the plurality system is the disproportionate representation in relation to the popular vote. In this ‘winner

takes all' situation, it often favours larger parties while minority parties become sidelined and earn less seats than what they proportionally earn (Dreef, Wagner, 2013; Johnston, Pattie, 2006).

This is explained by Duverger's law, which asserts that first-past-the-post (FPTP) elections foster two-party dominance due to mechanical and psychological effects (1959, pg. 224). The *mechanical effect* occurs when third parties fail to secure seats without a plurality of votes, which is psychologically anticipated by voters and pushes their preferences to larger parties to avoid "waste" votes (Moser, Scheiner, 2012). This means that the share of parliamentary seats matters more to form a government, not the share of the popular vote. In terms of accountability, there is a direct electoral connection between voters and representatives under single-member districts (SMD) in FPTP.

Proportional Representation (PR)

Proportional representation (PR) systems, in contrast, aim to translate vote shares into seat shares more accurately, promoting inclusivity and reducing disproportionality. Formulas are used such as the largest remainder, the d'Hondt highest average, and St Lague highest average to ensure that votes are accurately distributed and represented in seats (Harrop, Miller, 1987, pg. 48). Votes follow an open-list system or a closed list system. In a closed-list system, voters cast a ballot for a party while open-list include a preference vote for a certain candidate within the list (Moser, Scheiner, 2012). Therefore, by broadening party representation, it offers voters more meaningful programmatic choices, despite weaker personal responsibility links (Blais, 2008). Prioritising representation of votes means that voters would want to reflect the best of their opinions on their ballot. As LeDuc et al. (2002) notes, PR systems encourage parties to campaign on distinct policy platforms, aligning with voter preferences. Thus, coalition governments are a common feature of PR systems, as no single party typically secures a majority. In terms of accountability, both majoritarian and PR systems strongly depend on the polarities in the party system, with accountability found to be less in non-bipolar PR systems because of the broad party representation in government (Kam et al., 2020). This means that this inclusivity often comes at the cost of diluted accountability. The diffusion of responsibility among coalition partners complicates voter attribution of outcomes, which may weaken clarity of responsibility.

We also must consider that the relationship between electoral systems and accountability is not direct, but mediated by several institutional and contextual factors that shape how voters attribute responsibility for governance outcomes. These mediating factors include the clarity of responsibility, and party system dynamics, both which determine the extent to which electoral systems influence accountability in parliamentary systems.

Mediating Factors in the Electoral System-Accountability Relationship

Clarity of Responsibility

A mediating factor we can look at is the voter perceptions on the economy, which is arguably “an essential component” in electoral accountability (Hobolt, Tilley, Banducci, 2013). Powell and Whitten’s *Clarity of responsibility* is a useful concept that we can use to understand how voters place accountability because of economic performance: “the greater the perceived unified control of policymaking by the incumbent government, the more likely is the citizen to assign responsibility for economic and political outcomes to the incumbents” (Powell, Whitten, 1993, pg. 398). For instance, the Labour Party’s defeat in the UK’s 2010 election was attributed (but not limited) to growing public dissatisfaction following Brown’s decision to not call an early election, and the party’s handling of the 2008 financial crisis, with 39 percent blaming him for exacerbating the crisis (Karwatoska, 2010; Quinn, 2011). Through the plurality system, it fosters strong retrospective voting because voters can easily associate governance outcomes, such as economic performance, with a specific party. Hence, plurality provides a direct clarity of responsibility and allows voters to regularly hold governments accountable through retrospective voting tied to economic performance, public services, public safety, and other aspects of government, for example.

In contrast, proportional representation (PR) systems often produce coalition governments, where responsibility for policy outcomes is shared among multiple parties, complicating voter attributions. This is evident in Germany’s 2005 federal election, where Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU) formed a grand coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) because the election results were close to a tie (35.2% CDU CSU, and 34.2% SPD) (Hough, 2006, pg. 79). The ideological compromises required to govern in PR blurred distinctions between the parties which make performance evaluation difficult for voters. As Anderson highlights, both the SPD and CDU saw a decrease in support in the 2009 federal election, particularly among voters who suffered the 2007-08 economic crisis (2012, pg. 15). This highlights how PR systems, by facilitating the formation of coalition governments, dilute electoral accountability by obscuring the lines of responsibility.

Party Dynamics

Party dynamics, particularly the number and behavior of parties, serves as another key mediator in understanding the electoral system-accountability relationship. Plurality systems, by fostering two-party dominance, simplify electoral competition and provide voters with clear alternatives, as

posited by Duverger's Law. For example, the Canadian 2015 federal election saw voters decisively shift from the Conservative Party to the Liberal Party, clearly signaling dissatisfaction with Stephen Harper's economic policies. In PR systems, multi party coalitions often blur accountability, as the presence of numerous small parties can dilute voter understanding of which party is driving governance outcomes. For example, in Israel's Knesset, PR produces high party fragmentation, resulting in ideologically diverse coalitions where competing agendas complicate voters' ability to attribute responsibility (Rahat, Hazan, 2005, pg. 344). As a cost to representation, Israeli elections have often resulted in deadlocks, which leads to the question of whether the divisions under the PR system have made things ungovernable (Moisi, 2021).

However, research by Lijphart highlights how high levels of trust in political institutions mitigate the accountability deficits typically associated with PR systems (2012). As Lijphart views PR as a double-edged sword, the trade off in accountability for inclusivity should not be seen as a weakness but a strength to encourage consensus building, depending on institutional and cultural factors. In such contexts, voters prioritize collective governance over individual party responsibility, reflecting a cultural preference for compromise rather than adversarial politics. Nils-Christian Bormann critiques Lijphart's relatively optimistic view of PR systems, arguing that their inclusivity often comes at the cost of governance efficiency and voter clarity (Bormann, 2019). While Lijphart highlights the legitimacy of coalition governments under PR, as seen in Sweden, Bormann emphasizes the importance of contextual factors—such as high trust in political institutions—to mitigate accountability deficits (Lijphart, 2012; Bormann, 2019). In cases like the Netherlands, where party discipline is weaker, Bormann's critique aligns with evidence of exacerbated voter confusion over governance responsibility. Ultimately, while PR systems prioritize inclusivity and collective representation, Bormann underscores the trade-off with streamlined governance and accountability, a contrast that plurality systems manage more effectively through simpler party dynamics.

An empirical analysis of the relationship between accountability and parliamentary systems will provide further insight and consideration of mediating factors that can influence electoral accountability.

Section 3: Empirical Evidence & Analysis

This study investigates how unemployment, GDP growth, coalition governments, and electoral systems influence changes in vote share for incumbent governments. The results offer significant insights into how institutional frameworks mediate voter accountability mechanisms. The data derives from a comparative political data set, a study by Klaus Armingeon, Sarah Engler, Lucas

Leemann, and David Weisstanner of 36 countries (from Australia, Japan to Ireland, and the United States). A linear regression analysis was used to identify the relationship between the vote share change of governments (dependent) and multiple variables such as: GDP growth, unemployment, and coalition governments. An interaction between coalitions and electoral systems was also conducted to better represent the mediating factors that jointly influence accountability in parliamentary systems. However, this paper acknowledges that there could be more mediating factors influencing accountability.

The findings reveal that proportional representation systems are associated with significantly higher levels of vote share volatility compared to plurality systems ($B = 3.389$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that proportional systems amplify voter responsiveness, likely due to their inclusivity and ability to reflect diverse voter preferences. However, this increased volatility does not necessarily enhance accountability. Instead, proportional systems appear to diffuse responsibility, complicating the clear attribution of success or failure to governing parties. These results align with prior literature, including Powell and Whitten (1993), which emphasise that coalition dynamics in PR systems reduce the clarity of responsibility, hindering effective voter evaluations. Coalition governments do not independently exhibit a significant effect on vote share changes ($B = 0.222$, $p = 0.713$). However, the interaction between coalition governments and proportional systems produces a significant negative effect ($B = -0.740$, $p = 0.024$). This supports the hypothesis that proportional systems dilute accountability further in coalition settings, where the diffusion of responsibility across multiple parties obscures voters' ability to assign blame or reward effectively. These findings align with existing theories that coalition dynamics in proportional systems reduce the clarity of government performance evaluations.

Unemployment exhibits a significant and positive relationship with vote share changes ($B = 0.174$, $p = 0.003$), underscoring its role as a salient economic indicator for voters. The findings suggest that voters hold governments accountable for rising unemployment levels, which are often seen as direct reflections of policy effectiveness. This aligns with the retrospective voting model, where voters reward or punish incumbents based on economic performances (Lundell, 2011). However, the interaction between unemployment and proportional systems show a significant negative effect ($B = -0.079$, $p = 0.046$), indicating that the impact of unemployment on vote share change is weaker in proportional systems. This finding highlights a critical limitation of PR systems as it dilutes economic accountability by spreading responsibility across coalition parties. Conversely, GDP growth was found to be insignificant in influencing vote share changes ($B = -0.014$, $p = 0.839$). This suggests that unemployment, as a more immediate and visible measure of economic conditions, holds greater weight in shaping voter perceptions and behaviors. Additional research could

investigate whether the salience of GDP growth varies across different political or cultural contexts, potentially influencing its role in accountability mechanisms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has demonstrated that electoral systems significantly shape accountability in parliamentary systems, with majoritarian and proportional representation systems offering distinct mechanisms for voter responsibility attribution. While plurality systems foster clearer accountability due to direct voter-representative links, proportional representation often dilutes responsibility, especially in coalition governments, making it harder for voters to hold incumbents accountable. The empirical analysis supports this argument, revealing that PR systems tend to increase vote share volatility while reducing the clarity of responsibility, particularly in coalition contexts. However, as the analysis highlights, contextual factors such as party dynamics, voter perceptions, and institutional trust can mitigate the accountability deficits in PR systems. Overall, the findings underscore the trade-offs between inclusivity and clear accountability, suggesting that while PR systems promote broader representation, they may compromise voter clarity in attributing blame or reward. Future research should explore the potential for institutional reforms to strengthen accountability within these systems.

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