

Accountability and trust in government: what's next?¹

Rendición de cuentas y confianza en el gobierno: perspectivas para el futuro *Accountability e confiança: perspectivas para o futuro*

Kathryn E. Newcomer²

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Abstract: During the last four years, the need for trustworthy leaders who possess both integrity and courage to address societal needs and inequities in the U.S. was highlighted, as has been the need for a trustworthy government. A global pandemic and weakened economy have made it highly unlikely that governments across the world will return to the old normal, but where do we go from here? Drawing upon the experience in the U.S., I discuss what efforts are needed to rebuild accountability, trustworthy governments, and trust in public institutions across the globe. I also discuss how the exercise of accountability and credible evidence-building can move us forward in a positive way, and potentially increase trust in government. I present what the exercise of accountability involves, and describe how authentic evidence-building may support both accountability and trust-building. I also highlight some challenges and opportunities to build trustworthy government and increase trust in government.

Key-words: *accountability*; evidence-building capacity; trust in government

Resúmen: Durante los últimos cuatro años, se destacó la necesidad de líderes confiables que posean integridad y coraje para abordar las necesidades sociales y las desigualdades en los EE. UU., al igual que la necesidad de un gobierno confiable. Una pandemia mundial y una economía debilitada han hecho que sea muy poco probable que los gobiernos de todo el mundo vuelvan a la normalidad, pero, ¿a dónde vamos desde aquí? Basado en la experiencia en los Estados Unidos, analizo qué esfuerzos se necesitan para reconstruir la rendición de cuentas, los gobiernos confiables y la confianza en las instituciones públicas en todo el mundo. También analizo cómo el ejercicio de la rendición de cuentas y la construcción de evidencia confiable puede hacernos avanzar de manera positiva y potencialmente aumentar la confianza en el gobierno. Presento lo que implica el ejercicio de la rendición de cuentas y describo cómo la creación de evidencia auténtica puede apoyar tanto la rendición de cuentas como la construcción de confianza. También destaco algunos desafíos y oportunidades para construir un gobierno confiable y aumentar la confianza en el gobierno.

Palabras-clave: rendición de cuentas, capacidade de creación basada en evidencias, confianza en el gobierno

Resumo: Durante os últimos quatro anos, foi destacada a necessidade de líderes confiáveis que possuam integridade e coragem para lidar com as necessidades e desigualdades da sociedade nos EUA, assim como a necessidade de um governo confiável. Uma pandemia global e uma economia enfraquecida tornaram muito improvável que os governos em todo o mundo voltem ao velho normal, mas para onde vamos a partir daqui? Com base na experiência nos Estados Unidos, discuto quais esforços são necessários para reconstruir a accountability, governos confiáveis e a confiança nas instituições públicas em todo o globo. Também discuto como o exercício da accountability e a construção de evidências confiáveis podem nos fazer avançar de maneira positiva e, potencialmente, aumentar a

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2 George Washington University

confiança no governo. Apresento o que o exercício da accountability envolve e descrevo como a construção de evidências autênticas pode apoiar tanto a accountability quanto a construção de confiança. Também destaco alguns desafios e oportunidades para construir um governo confiável e aumentar a confiança no governo.

Palavras-chave: *accountability*, capacidade na elaboração de políticas públicas baseadas em evidências, confiança nas instituições

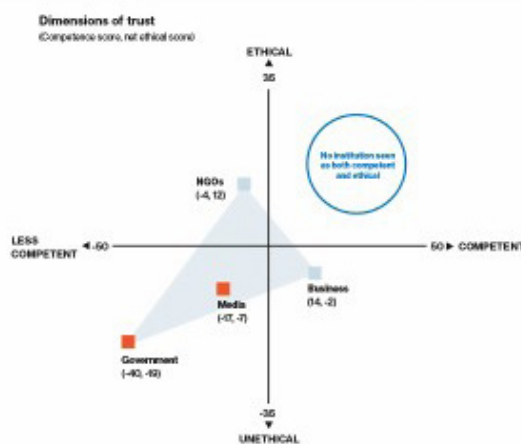
The world-wide Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the lack of capacity, and sometimes the political will, of some governments to respond effectively and in an equitable manner to all communities. Existing inequities in the quality of life conditions across races and income levels have been underscored in the United States by the differential Covid-19 infection and death rates.³ The structural racism in the United States, and continuing inequities in the quality of life across races also have been underscored by the striking accumulation of cases of police brutality against people of color, and statistics about a racially biased criminal justice system that simply cannot be denied (For example, see Anderson, 2016; Kendi, 2016; and Kendi, 2019).

Trust held by society members toward institutions across the world was at an all-time low before the Covid-19 pandemic hit in early 2020.⁴ Trust in both the competence and ethical dimensions was lower for governments than for other institutions according to the Edelman Trust Barometer taken in late 2019 as shown in Figure 1. Trust in the national government in the U.S. was similarly at an all-time low. While trust in government rose somewhat after the Covid-19 pandemic hit, concerns about inequitable treatments of members of society by government increased.⁵

³ See <https://voxeu.org/article/racial-disparity-covid-19-deaths>.

⁴ See <https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer>.

FIGURE 1. STATUS OF TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS IN SOCIETY



Source: Edelman Trust Barometer 2020, 2020.

The need for trustworthy leaders who possess both integrity and courage to address societal needs and inequities in the U.S. once again has been highlighted, as has been the need for a trust-worthy government (Newcomer, 2007). A global pandemic and weakened economy have made it is highly unlikely that we will return to the old normal, but where do we go from here? While I can only speak to the challenges and prospects in the U.S., efforts are needed to rebuild *accountability*, trustworthy governments, and trust in public institutions across the globe.

Drawing upon the U.S. experience, I will discuss how the exercise of *accountability* and credible evidence-building can move us forward in a positive way, and potentially increase trust in government. First I discuss what the exercise of *accountability* involves, and then describe how authentic evidence-building may support both *accountability* and trust-building. I then highlight some challenges and opportunities to build trustworthy government and increase trust in government.

Accountable to Whom for What?

Accountability in government involves reporting for behaviors undertaken both **upward** and **outward** – upward to executive branch leaders and to the legislature, and outward to the “the people” (See Newcomer and Ritter, 1998). *Accountability* is sought by overseers for both **past** behavior such as review of past actions or expenditures, e.g., waste, fraud and abuse, and for **future** performance, e.g., strategic plans, regulations based on *ex ante* evaluation, and inclusive and equitable planning like the King County Social Justice Strategic Plan in the Seattle area of Washington state (<https://kingcounty.gov/elected/executive/equity-social-justice/strategic-plan.aspx>) (See Light, 1993; Newcomer 1994; Newcomer, 1998; Hilliard, 2017; and Johnson and Newcomer, 2020).

There are four core elements needed to facilitate the effective exercise of *accountability* in government: political commitment, independence, evidence-building capacity, and transparency. Politicians in both the executive branch and the legislature need to demonstrate their commitment to both asking for and reviewing relevant data to judge the quality of policies and government actions. The provision of data should be provided by actors who are independent of political influence, thus “appropriately insulated from any political and other undue influences that may affect their objectivity, impartiality, and professional judgement” (OMB, 2020, page 13). And the relevant data, i.e., evidence, must be

provided about past and planned government actions, and shared in an open and transparent fashion.

Ensuring that independent and nonpartisan actors provide the evidence needed in the exercise of *accountability* is vital. Independence can be ensured through legislation. For example, in most countries legal institutions are established by law to protect whistle blowers and others who report fault with governmental actions, like National Audit Institutions. In the U.S. the Government *Accountability* Office (GAO) and the federal Inspector General offices located in federal agencies are protected by law, and have earned the trust of the public in their reporting (Newcomer, 1994; Newcomer, 1998, Newcomer and Grob, 2004; and Johnson and Newcomer, 2020). For example, the U.S. Congress required the GAO to provide public reports on the federal response to the COVID 19 pandemic, and it has provided a trusted voice amidst a crisis of confidence in the U.S.⁶ Fortunately there are governmental institutions in the U.S. such as the GAO and Inspector General offices that are protected by law from being silenced by even the most aggressive executives, or legislative or judicial actions.

In addition to governmental bodies, there are some highly respected civil society institutions in the U.S. that provide respected, nonpartisan voices about the performance of the government. For example, the National Academies of Sciences and the National Academy of Public Administration, and independent foundations, like the PEW Charitable Trusts. Reputable universities typically provide independent voices and credible evidence to inform *accountability* processes. For example, university researchers are frequently asked to testify to the U.S. Congress.

Evidence-building capacity (EBC) within government includes both the demand for and supply of evidence to inform deliberations about past and future government action. The concept of EBC was promoted by the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, a bipartisan body of 15 experts established by the Commission on Evidence-Based Policy Making Act of 2016 to deliberate for 18 months on how to promote the use of evidence in government. The Commission’s final report offered eleven recommendations on how the U.S. federal government could enhance its EBC if they are implemented (<https://cep.gov/cep-final-report.html>). Many of the commission’s recommendations were then established in law in the Foundations for

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See <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-20-625>.

Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act; Pub.L. 115–435).

Evidence-building capacity might be defined as:

The motivation and infrastructure to:

- develop relevant questions about an organization's programs and policies,
- collect and generate (or access if already collected by other agencies) data to address the questions, manage and protect data, analyze and interpret the data, and
- provide relevant insights from the evidence to inform management and stakeholders for policymaking.

Motivation means that leaders in public organizations (at all levels) demonstrate interest in framing questions about how policies and programs are operating, and achieving desired results. Infrastructure refers to staff, data, data systems, and analytical capacity to collect, analyze and interpret data to address questions in the exercise of *accountability*. Demand for evidence about government operations affects supply, that is, political commitment to collecting and sharing data in a transparent fashion is needed for politicians to commit resources needed, such as human resources and technology, to collect and share credible data.

Evidence-building to Demonstrate Accountability and Build Trust

While there are many factors that affect the trust that individuals have in government (For example see Lee, Keeter and Perine, 2019), the actual performance of government constitutes at least one important element that affects the level of trust members of society have in their government. Sharing credible data about the performance of government via transparent *accountability* exercises presents an opportunity for govern-

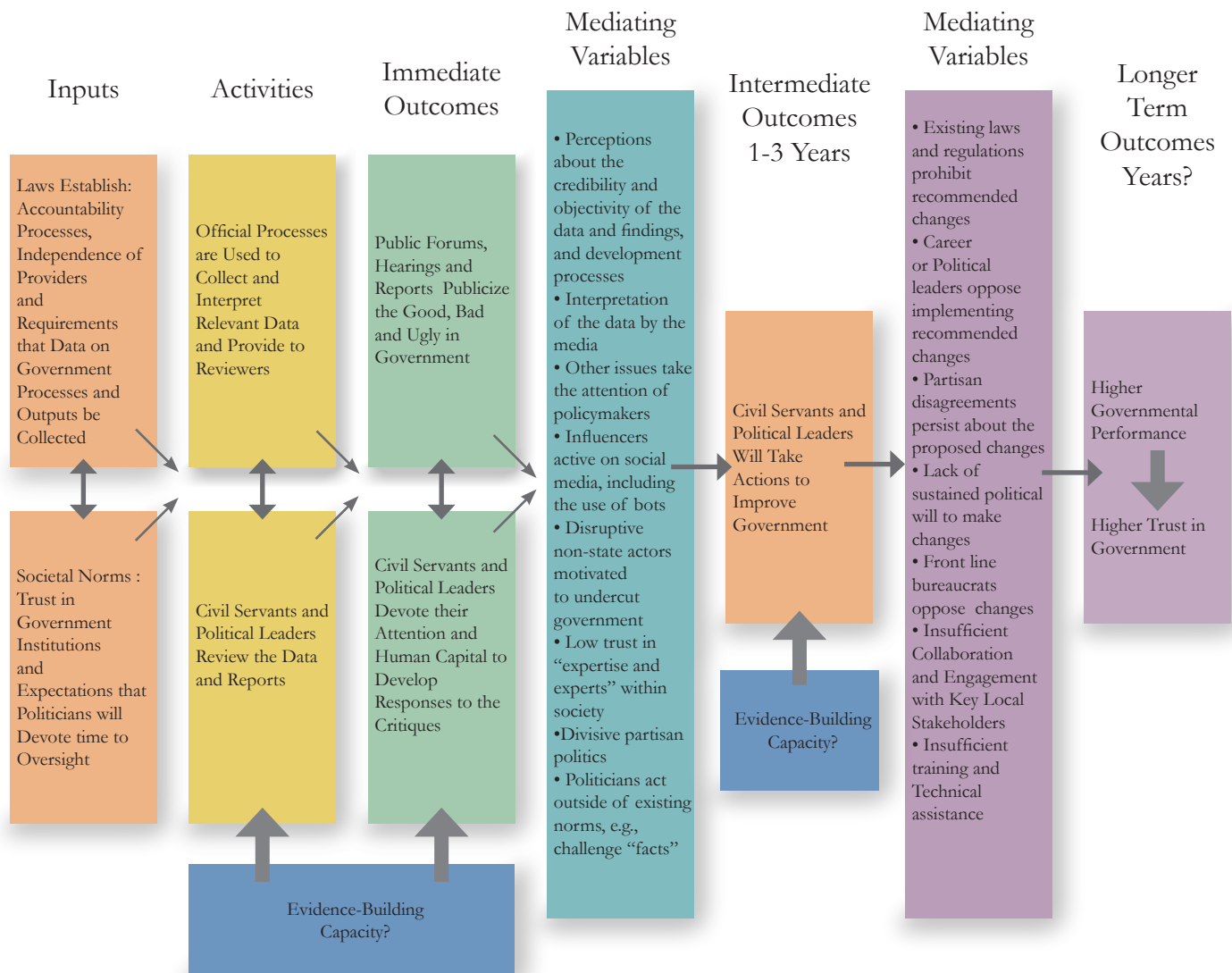
ment officials to take relevant actions and to inform the public about the performance of government.

The way in which the exercise of *accountability* operates is portrayed graphically in **Figure 2**. Legal bases governing the exercise of *accountability*, e.g., maintaining independence, and existing societal norms, including pre-existing trust in government, present important inputs. The activities and immediately visible results involved in the exercise of *accountability* include actions undertaken to request relevant evidence, provide and interpret the relevant evidence, transparently review the evidence in public forums, and determine what actions need to be taken to address wrong doing or low performance. All of the activities and desired results are affected by the evidence-building capacity of the relevant agents, including oversight agencies such as the GAO and Inspectors General, and the government agencies whose actions are scrutinized.

The road to improving both how government performs and perceptions of government is not clear or smooth, again evidence is needed by decision-makers on how to address weaknesses and improve outcomes, and then communicate that to the public. In addition to an ever present need for evidence-building capacity, there are variety of other factors that can constrain the ability of government actors to improve agency operations. For example, mediating factors include: the

availability of data relevant to the issues addressed – especially an issue in a federal system with many powers and data collection authorities delegated to states; the credibility and perceptions about the credibility and objectivity of the data and data development processes; the media; influencers active on social media, including the use of bots; disruptive non-state actors motivated to undercut government and trust in government; low trust in “expertise and experts” within society; and politicians who willingly undercut the exercise of *accountability*.

FIGURE 2: THEORY OF CHANCE FOR ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESSES IN GOVERNMENT



Source: Author

Building Trustworthy Government in the U.S.: Challenges and Opportunities

What is the status of legal frameworks and support for *accountability* mechanisms and evidence-building and in the U.S. federal government? As of October 2020 there were concerns in the U.S. about whether there is adequate political commitment to both transparent and effective *accountability* and evidence-building capacity. In 2019 the Congress passed the Good Accounting Obligation in Government Act, or the GAO-IG Act, (Public Law No: 115-414 (01/03/2019) to direct agencies to implement recommendations given to them from GAO and Inspectors General, or explain why

they had not done so to Congress. The GAO-IG Act was passed due to perceptions that agencies were not doing their part in making needed improvements that had been identified. And in early 2020 many bills were introduced in the U.S. Congress to strengthen the independence of federal Inspectors General in response to actions President Trump had undertaken to undercut their independence (See GAO, 2020).

While The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 established many mechanisms to support building capacity to collect and analyze relevant data to inform learning and *accountability*, the U.S. Congress has not allocated adequate resources to support building evidence capacity outside of the agen-

cies where data have been collected already, such as the Departments of Education and Labor, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Federal laws governing the collection of data to improve government operations have been passed before with little impact on the actual use of data, such as the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, and the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (For example, see GAO, 2018). Observers have been vocal in noting that required performance measurement exercises in the U.S. have not been conducive to promoting learning and improvement (Moynihan, 2008, 2009, 2011; Moynihan and Lavertu, 2012; Radin, 2006, 2009, and 2012; and Dubnick and Frederickson, 2011).

What scholars and practitioners alike have recognized for many years is that political and organizational norms and cultures are hard to change (Mayne, 2007). Pushing politicians to exercise *accountability* over government in a transparent and meaningful way can be difficult. Similarly, pushing managers in public bureaucracies to collect and use feedback, and be more risk accepting when striving to innovate, may be daunting.

We all also recognize that cultures are shaped by leadership. Leaders who embrace and reward learning, and ‘walk the talk’ through visible allocation of their time and attention, and of their agencies’ resources are needed to empower leaders throughout their organizations to learn. Leadership – both political and career – presents the essential ingredient needed to build evidence capacity and improve the work of public bureaucracies. Establishing centrally located strategic evaluation offices, as required by the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018, represents a worthy step forward, but they will not enhance bureaucratic processes or structures if top leadership does not support them with commitment and resources.

Convincing current and upcoming public sector leaders of the value of both transparent, impactful *accountability* transactions and building evidence capacity is the key challenge and opportunity. Operating effective, adaptive, and equitable government agencies is never easy, and is only likely to become increasingly challenging given the global environmental challenges, and man-made and natural crises that civil servants will continue to face. Building the capacity of government

agencies to collect and process feedback to improve is not an option, but an imperative.

Looking Forward

The election of Joseph Biden in November 2020 presents an important turning point in the context for governance in the U.S. The majority of voters rejected the disinformation campaigns, denial of man-made climate change, attacks on the news media, and racism that President Trump had perpetuated. President Biden recognizes the importance of using evidence to inform efforts to address the many problems he inherits. He faces huge challenges to repair damages made by the Trump Administration to government as well as to relationships among Americans divided by political views – and the pandemic continues to challenge the healthcare infrastructure and economy of the country as well.

Structural racism provides the ever present backdrop for governance in the U.S., and while President Biden and the leaders he will bring into his Administration are likely to have the will to make needed changes, there are no quick and easy fixes to address institutions and practices that have perpetuated racist policies and practices for many, many years. Fortunately President Biden has the needed determination, knowledge and experience as he helped lead the federal government as Vice President under President Barrack Obama, and he brings pertinent experience as a U.S. Senator who was highly involved in the exercise of *accountability*. President-Elect Biden has always been clear in his values and priorities, and his rejection of racism of any sort, as well as his belief in the need for transparency in government.

Writing in November 2020 this author is filled with optimism that governance in the U.S. will once again earn and inspire trust from the American people. However, as the voting tabulation processes for the 2020 election in the U.S. illustrated, patience is needed. Top leadership support for action is a necessary but not sufficient ingredient now, repairing hurtful policies and practices requires inclusive engagement, authentic collaboration and perseverance by public servants at all levels of government.

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Kathryn Newcomer

George Washington University, U.S.A.
kathryn.newcomer@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1431-6634>

Kathryn Newcomer is a professor in the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration at the George Washington University where she served as the School director for over 12 years, until August 2019. She is a Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration, and serves on the Comptroller General's Educators' Advisory Panel. She served as an elected member of the Board of Directors of the American Evaluation Association (AEA) (2013-2015 and 2016-2018), and as AEA president for 2017. She served as President of the Network of the Association of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) for 2006-2007. She earned her PhD in political science from the University of Iowa.