Syllabus
Can Voters Hold Politicians Accountable?

Instructor: Martin Vinaes Larsen

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A key normative justification for representative democracy is that citizens are able to constrain their representatives actions in a meaningful way. In this course we will examine to what extent and under what circumstances citizens are able to use elections as the instrument of constraint—what is conventionally called electoral accountability.

The course has three introductory session which lays out the basic theoretical framework (contract theory) and the methodological approach (design based inference) we will use to evaluate whether citizens are able to hold politicians accountable. Next, we will look at three important sets of independent variables that might affect the effectiveness of electoral accountability: (1) political institutions, (2) the availability of strong competence signals, and (3) behavioral limitations. Finally, we will have a single session on inequality in accountability.

I have four learning objectives for the course. First, you should be able to think structured about the concept of electoral accountability and evaluate whether certain psychological or organizational structures are likely to heighten or attenuate accountability. Second, you should be able to read, understand and critically assess the most advanced literature on this topic. Third, you should get a feeling for how to improve accountability in organizations that you might be a part of in the future. Fourth, you should get a feeling for how research in this area is done, so that you will be able to embark on an original research project related to electoral accountability.

**Student responsibilities.** Most important assignment is to read the studies carefully, think hard about them, be ready to answer questions about them, critique them, and finally consider possible follow-up studies. The reading load is light, you have few other assignments, and the exam should not take up your time during the semester. This is so that you can read carefully. To facilitate your reading, we will spend time in class preparing you for the next weeks reading, and I recommend that you form study groups. In addition to reading, you will have to prepare a solution to small ‘food for thought’ assignments that I give at the end of each class.

**A Note on the Readings.** Since we are interested in a fundamentally empirical question, there will be a heavy focus on the evidence presented for specific empirical facts, and how to interpret this empirical fact in light of the larger question about citizens’ ability to hold politicians accountable. This also means that we will spend quite some time discussing the studies’ methods in class. Be mindful of this when your read.

**Exam.** Six hour assignment set by instructor.
**Prerequisites.** Methods 1, 2, Microeconomics & Theories and Approaches to Political Science. Some training in statistics with a focus on causal inference is recommended.

**Classes.** 15 sessions from 14.15 to 16.45 on Tuesdays. No class on April 16 (Easter). There will also be a review/exam prep session a week or so before the exam.

**Questions.** Preferably in connection with class, but you can also write mvl@ps.au.dk.

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**Day 1. Introduction I: Welcome and a Methodological Brush Up**


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**Day 2. Introduction II: Retrospective Voting**


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**Day 3. Introduction III: Contract Theory**


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**Day 4. Institutions I: Term Limits**


Day 5. Institutions II: The Media


Day 6. Institutions III: Centralization of Executive Power


Day 7. Institutions IV: Open Economies


Day 8. Institutions V: Federalism


Day 9. Signals I: Information


→ Also read about Metaketa I on egap.org

Day 10. Signals II: Executive Action


Day 11. Signals III: Local Conditions


Day 12: Behavioral Limitations I: Biases in Retrospective Decision-making


Day 13: Behavioral Limitations II: Misattributions and Misperceptions


Day 14: Behavioral Limitations III: Irrelevant Events


**Day 15: Inequality in Accountability**

