Accountability in Crises and Public Trust in Governing Institutions

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This book examines how efforts to exert accountability in crises affect public trust in governing institutions. Using Sweden as the case study, this book provides a framework to analyze accountability in crises and looks at how this affects trust in government.

Crises test the fabric of governing institutions. Threatening core societal values, they force elected officials and public servants to make consequential decisions under pressure and uncertainty. Public trust in governing institutions is intrinsically linked to the ability to hold decision-makers accountable for the crucial decisions they make. The book presents empirical evidence from examination of the general bases for accountability in public administration, and the accountability mechanisms of specific administrative systems, before focusing on longer-term policy changes. The author finds that within the complex web of bureaucratic and political moves democratic processes have been undermined across time contributing to misplaced and declining trust in governing institutions.

Accountability in Crises and Public Trust in Governing Institutions will be of interest to students, scholars, and practitioners of public policy, political leadership, and governance.

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Routledge studies in governance and public policy

To Hamilton

Sverige, Sverige älskade vän
En tiger som skäms
Jag vet hur det känns
När allvaret har blivit ett skämt
När tystnaden skräms
Vad är det som hänt

Kent 2002

Preface

In some ways it may seem ironic that I, a Swede by origin and culture, would be looking at accountability and Swedish crisis management at a time when the country I live and work in, the United States, is involved in two wars and has witnessed crises that make most modern day Swedish crises and crisis management seem pale by comparison. However, I believe as James March put it, that organizations can only really learn from people who do not adapt to the code. My hope is that by offering an outsider's view, politically and organizationally, on how accountability is exerted in Swedish politics and administration, this book will contribute to better crisis management and, ultimately, to a reversal of the trend of decreasing trust in Swedish governing institutions.

As a social scientist I believe strength lies in asking the right questions. And by that I mean good questions that matter. Bill Moyers expressed this well, "… my folks and I try and figure out the difference between the important … and the immediate. Because the immediate is not always the most important" (Stewart 2011). As a political scientist, I believe that it is our job to ask the hard questions about how to govern. Furthermore, as a crisis management expert through research and practice, I am increasingly aware of the importance of ethics in crisis management.

One of the hardest questions any elected official faces today is how to *legitimately* govern on behalf of the people at times when many structural features and incentives undermine that legitimacy. Plummeting voter turnout, decreasing public support of and participation in political parties, and a decreasing interest and attention paid by citizens to the more mundane issues of politics make it hard for politicians to stay connected to what citizens really think on many issues and to feel that their job is really to represent the people and not their own, perhaps better informed, points of view. Increased emphasis on individualized elections, the twenty-four hour news cycle, the unrelenting attention of the media hungry to expose a minister's every personal and professional misstep, make it hard for elected officials to not focus on what is right in front of them, what is happening right now (regardless of whether or not that situation is important or equally important to other things in a larger time perspective), and to not first and foremost try to protect themselves.

The increased interdependence of issues and the political and administrative bodies set to manage these issue, on behalf of the people, may also spur politicians

and administrators to feel like their real impact and power is being seriously curtailed, leaving them to follow along (to take a reactive stance) and do the best they can (satisficing, Simon 1947: 38–41) in situations that seem largely out of their control. However, the reality is that the impact of any situation and decision is first and foremost local. People who experience the exercise of power, who evaluate and judge the way politicians and administrators govern, do not live and experience this at an EU level, or even at a national level. Their experience is inherently personal and local, and the practical adaptation or resignation to the limits of power that national level decision-makers experience may not seem that understandable to them. Hence a perceptual gap is created between national politicians and civil servants perception of their role and reality, and the experience and perceptions that citizens have of their governing institutions.

No time tests the perceptions of legitimate governance and the values of democracy like crises (crises put the fabric of democracy and public institutions to the test, Beckman 2004; Olsson 2005).

The gap in perceptions between those who work in government and those who experiences government's power reach is one of the reasons why it is important to have well-functioning public accountability mechanisms. With well-working active accountability mechanisms it is possible to bridge this gap and have citizens start to feel that even though they are in many instances removes from the process and the everyday dealings of politics, there is a system in place that looks out for their best interest and holds those vested with power responsible for their use of that power, their actions and decisions that affect so many people. With well-functioning accountability mechanisms there can be a sense that *the system works*. That democracy, as we have come to cherish it, works despite its many limitations and imperfect conditions for legitimate governance.

There is a qualitative difference between doing the wrong thing for the right reasons and doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. From an ethical point of view I think we are more apt to forgive someone in power for doing the wrong thing for the right reasons than we are to forgive them for doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. The first instance seems to indicate a lack of tools, analytical ability, or failure to grasp an overwhelming picture of ambiguous and uncertain information. The importance lies in basing your decisions on the right values, prioritizing the values that people think are legitimate to prioritize in that situation regardless of how poorly you then performed the acts of advancing those values. The second instance suggest, by contrast, an understanding of the situation, the values involved, and the tools that may promote those values, but a discrepancy in the legitimacy perceived in terms of the values someone of power chooses to prioritize. The first instance can be written off as a mistake and may be remedied by implementing better tools and clarifying procedures or mandates. The latter, however, suggests a larger systemic problem where there is a discrepancy between the exercise of government and the people's wish, alternatively a corruption of those that make decisions in terms of on whose behalf they make those decisions, i.e., the difference between being self-serving and serving the people.

I believe this book asks the right questions; challenging and important questions about governments' management of crises, about accountability, and about the public's trust in our fundamental governing institutions. Is it a perfect book? Far from it. But I believe that the topic is important enough to publish, even if it could take someone a lifetime to research it and do it justice. Not least if one is to accurately portray how those that lived through each of the crises experienced in the situation. I have relied primarily on secondary sources in order to cover crises from the greater part of the twentieth century. As a case researcher my desire to delve deeper and deeper into each case and each aspect of accountability within each case has at times been overwhelming. I have pursued a fair amount of primary source research on several cases, primarily those that I deemed pertinent that have not been well documented and analyzed by crisis researchers yet. Most of these cases fall on the very early or very recent ends of the historical spectrum covered in the book. On countless occasions I have had to remind myself of the purpose of this study; to map out trends and changes over time, rather than to accurately describe the very details of each case. I have thus had to lay some material to the side in my "next project" pile. As is so often the case, parsimony (for the sake of comparison) competes in this book with the value (and desire) of providing a rich contextual account. I hope that you will enjoy the rough, but fascinating, picture it presents.

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1 Introduction

Crises test the very fabric of our governing institutions. They threaten core societal values and require decision-makers to take action under conditions of great uncertainty and intense time pressure. While the public generally accepts that decision-making in crises often is centralized and information is confined to a key few, public trust in government is intrinsically linked to the ability to hold decision-makers accountable for the crucial decisions they make in crises. For reasons of expediency and effectiveness, the mechanisms set in place for exerting accountability under *normal* administrative conditions are often suspended in crises. But what happens in the aftermath of the crisis? Who is held responsible and by whom? How is this accomplished? The ability to hold top-level decision-makers and public servants responsible for their actions, or lack of action, in situations that matter most is a crucial part of the ongoing relationship of trust between governing institutions and those governed.

This relationship is affected, in part, by the public's perception of decision-makers' reasonable risk taking, competent analysis, and timely action. If the public cannot make judgments about these things in relation to a crisis, its confidence in those decision-makers is often cast in shadows of mistrust. A lack of accountability makes crises linger in both public and political discourse and can create larger credibility crises that jeopardize political parties and leaders. This book provides a framework for thinking about critical links in the accountability process and for mapping out strategies for strengthening trust in government through crisis accountability processes.

In many ways, Sweden is a shining example of good governance and a refined administrative state; small but smart. Sweden measures up as one of the least corrupt countries in the world, with a strong sense of egalitarianism, and often at the forefront of gender equality. The country has a tradition of consensus building, political compromise, and collective nation building. The Swedish political and administrative state is well established, stable, and grants public access to information in a way that would make many civil liberties unions green with envy. The number of accountability mechanisms and venues for recourse available in the administrative system is impressive. Based on these cultural and administrative features Sweden has the potential to serve as a best case example of accountability in crises.

At the same time, Sweden, like many Western states, has witnessed a growing divide between politicians and the citizens they represent. There has been a decline in political party memberships, decreased public participation in most traditional political activities, and politicians now rank as one of the groups of professionals that the public has the least confidence in. Sweden, along with other Western democracies, has also seen a gradual, but persistent, decline in the overall trust that the public places in governing institutions. The growing apathy and disconnect between the governing and the governed has caused worry that democracy, as we know it, is becoming undermined but without any consensus on what caused it or what might fix it. Accountability mechanisms are an important part of the explanation and the solution to this puzzle.

Accountability and societal values

In an effort to address the issues surrounding accountability in crises, this book investigates a number of key societal values:

Crisis management and trust in government

The primary value underlining this study is the importance of accounting for public performance in situations when performance matters the most, i.e., in crises. Following from this is the democratic insight into the management of crises by top-level government officials, be they professional administrators or elected officials. The ability to hold decision-makers accountable for their critical decisions, actions, or inactions made during high-stake administrative situations is critical to the sustaining of public trust in governing institutions.[1]

Trust can be defined as "a psychological state comprising of the intention to accept vulnerability based upon the behavior of positive expectations of the intentions of or behavior of another" (Rousseau *et al.* 1998: 395). In the context of risks and crises, public institutions have been charged with the responsibility to keep their citizens safe, a charge that has its roots in the basic social contract between government and governed. Simply put, the people vest the government with a certain amount of taxes and power (including a monopoly on violence) in exchange for protection and order. The public thus expects, having met its part of the contract, that the government will keep it protected (from all sorts of things) under orderly conditions.

Linking the accountability mechanisms – *actors* seeking to exert accountability through *structures* in a domestic and international *environment* (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed account) – to trust in government is a considerable challenge.[2] However, attempts to empirically link accountability to trust in government have been made in the area of trust and risk regulation. Several studies have "examined what kind of evaluative judgments contribute to the creation or destruction of trust in risk regulation and other institutions" (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003: 962). Scholars have identified different dimensions of trust, i.e., what it is that makes us trust someone else, be they individual decision-makers,

groups, or institutions.[3] While these core components of what makes us trust others are interesting, it is also true, as Earle and Cvetkovich assert, that "most people will not have the resources or interest to make a detailed assessment of whether or not it is worthwhile to trust a particular institution" (Earle and Cvetkovich cited in Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003: 963) and that "it is more likely that under complex circumstances trust is based on agreement and sympathy rather than on carefully reasoned arguments or direct knowledge" (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003: 963). In these situations, Poortinga and Pidgeon state, people "base their trust judgments on whether they feel that the other person or organization shares the same values, i.e., is seen as having the same understanding of a specific situation" (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003: 963). Based on their quantitative empirical research, Poortinga and Pidgeon have come up with four types of public trust and distrust in government risk regulation: *acceptance (trust)*, *critical trust*, *distrust*, and *rejection (cynicism)* (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003: 971).

If we look at the dimensions of trust creation, its maintenance, and its destruction, the mechanisms of accountability relate to trust in a number of ways. The environment shapes a culture of trust or distrust of government and public institutions in general. This is important because being trusting or skeptical predisposes people to judge positive information as truthful if they are trusting and to primarily believe negative information if they are skeptical. Emotionally based mental associations, or affective heuristics, related to specific issues or risks have been shown to guide how acceptable people find risks as well as the level of trust they hold in regulating institutions. Consequently, the feelings that people have about issues and the institutions that govern them affect their evaluation and judgment of the performance of decision-makers and institutions with regard to the management of specific issues, such as materialized risks and the more complex nature of crisis situations.

Structures and agents are equally important because they embody the attributes that public trust is based on. Institutions and individual decision-makers are evaluated and judged as being either competent, objective, fair, consistent, and having good intentions (faith), or not. Speaking as individuals, elected officials are often the governmental decision-makers who either communicate competence, fairness, commitment, caring, and good intentions, or the opposite. Public servants, through their interaction with individual citizens or communicating as the face of institutions, are the ones demonstrating objectivity, consistency, and predictability, or who project the worst characteristics of bureaucracy. Structures and agents also embody the potential for sanctioning of public judgments, of righting perceived wrongs that could challenge the public's trust in its governing institutions.

Accounting for public performance

Scholars have shown how accountability and transparency can play a key role in avoiding economic and financial crises by promoting market stability, and enabling inflation targeting (Stasavage 2003; Walsh 2003). Historically, accountability and