

Introduction to Social Accountability

Module 3, Topic 1

Public Opinion and the Public Sphere

Slide 1: Introduction

Public opinion processes matter deeply for the success of governance reform. In this presentation, we introduce the concepts of public opinion and the public sphere as dynamic elements in governance reform efforts. The understanding and application of these concepts is essential in ensuring genuine and effective citizen demand for accountability.

Slide 2: The Democratic Public Sphere

We will begin our study of public opinion processes through introducing the concept of the democratic public sphere. As shown here, stakeholders in the public sphere include the state at national, state, and local levels, and the private sphere of citizens, households, and firms. The public sphere, represented by information and communication processes, is the framework for relationships and interactions among different stakeholders. Effective communication among these stakeholders raises the voice of citizens, thereby strengthening accountability.

There are two key dynamics in the democratic public sphere. First, the state interacts with the democratic public sphere. Ideally, the government provides two-way communication between public servants and various stakeholders to facilitate an interactive exchange of information. Second, citizens and the private sector participate in the public sphere, and citizens convey their needs and preferences to the government.

Slide 3: Pillars of the Democratic Public Sphere

The public sphere is composed of five interacting pillars. The stronger these so-called “pillars,” the more effective citizens can be in holding their governments accountable. The first pillar of the democratic sphere represents laws and civil liberties, such as citizens’ right to assemble and the right to free expression. The second pillar is an independent media system, free from political pressure, that gives voice to all groups of society. The third pillar of the democratic public sphere is access to public information. Without widely accessible and reliable information, citizens cannot participate effectively. The fourth pillar is an empowered civil society, or people working actively and jointly to influence change. There is a two-way flow of information between government and civil society in which citizens exert influence and actively voice their concerns. Finally, the fifth pillar of the democratic public sphere is the space where citizens talk freely about public affairs and issues discussed in the media. It is important to recognize that the model presented here is an ideal case – a case that does not reflect the reality in many countries. However, social accountability mechanisms, including communication, can be designed to work toward this ideal by improving existing public spheres.

Slide 4: What is Communication and Why do we Care?

What is communication, and why do we care? Quite simply, we care because understanding communication processes is necessary to effectively support governance reform. Communication can

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be defined as the linkage of actors in a framework for national dialogue through which informed public opinion is shaped. It links government, citizens, civil society, and the media system. Beyond this definition, communication consists of the processes, principles, and structures that determine the way communication takes place. Spaces for public debate allow people to shape and influence public opinion and affect the flow of information between the government and citizens.

Slide 5: What is Public Opinion?

What is public opinion? Public opinion can be defined as the broad consensus that is reached among citizens as a result of discussion and debate. This consensus **represents a stance that most people can agree with**. Public opinion is created and shaped in discourse. It is affected by many factors, including opinion leaders, statistical records, polls and surveys, and people's opinions in their social and media environments. Through a process of consensus and deliberation, public opinion forms policy that is a critical force in governance.

Slide 6: Why does Public Opinion Matter?

Public opinion is important because it generates genuine demand for accountability. It is a critical force in governance and its power must be recognized by any movement that seeks to affect large-scale change. When public opinion has crystallized into a strong and mobilized force, it can be powerful in effecting change. Mobilized public opinion has the power to alter incentives for decision makers. Even authoritarians must take public opinion seriously. If governments ignore public opinion, hostility can build underground, and uninformed public opinion can grow.

Slide 7: Groups in the Public Sphere

In the public sphere, five distinct groups need to be considered when thinking about accountability. The first group is the **general public**. This group is the broadest of the five and includes the entire population. It is usually unorganized and largely disconnected. Members of the general public do not participate in politics, have little interest in political affairs, and do not actively demand accountability. The **voting public**, a smaller group, consists of the unorganized electorate. Elections, as the most visible manifestation of public opinion, are the means by which this group holds the government accountable. The voting public has a cyclical interest in political affairs, largely during election periods. The third group, the **attentive public**, is informed and interested in public affairs, keeping up with and frequently discussing politics. However, its political participation is erratic and involvement in organized action is rare. Despite a plausibly stronger demand for accountability, members of this group are still unlikely to take action to achieve it. The fourth group, the **active public**, regularly and effectively participates in politics and the policy process. Group members demand accountability through actions such as signing petitions or attending public meetings, but their participation remains unorganized and sporadic. Finally, the fifth group is the **mobilized public**. Its members, which include interest groups and advocacy organizations, are well informed and have long-term interests in specific issues. They have an active

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demand for accountability and regularly participate in civic forums – voicing opinions strongly and engaging in organized action to realize civic goals.

Slide 8: Stairway of Mobilization

This “Stairway of Mobilization” looks at the five groups in the public sphere that we just identified. It illustrates the way by which group members move up the stairway to become members of the mobilized public. While it is certainly important to move people up this ‘stairway,’ we must remember that active participation demands time and can mean taking risks. Institutional constraints such as a weak enabling environment or a repressive political culture may have to be overcome.

The mobilization process begins with members of the general public who are sympathetic to a specific cause. To move these members to the voting public, civil society organizations need to design information campaigns to highlight issues in the media and place them on the public agenda.

To turn the voting public into an attentive public, communication should be aimed at changing people’s attitudes by changing values, beliefs, and world views. Communication campaigns at this stage focus people’s attention on the “why,” looking at specific problems and moral evaluations.

Slide 9: Stairway of Mobilization, Continued

Beyond attitudinal change, a communication campaign aimed at behavior change can help persuade members of the attentive public to move up the stairway of mobilization to become members of the active public. Achieving behavior change requires translation of values into action. Communication must explain the “why” as well as the “how” by embedding a message in a comprehensive story. The ideal group for achieving and sustaining good governance is a mobilized public, who regularly participate and stand up for causes in an organized manner. To best maintain active engagement, a communication campaign must change incentives and norms by cultivating new behaviors. This requires long-term and multi-channel communication.

Slide 10: Review

In this presentation, we were first introduced to the concept of the democratic public sphere and its five pillars. Next, we defined communication and public opinion, learning about how these concepts are important in empowering citizens to demand accountability from governments. We then explored the five forms of the public: the groups of the general, voting, attentive, active, and mobilized publics that we need to consider separately when thinking about accountability agendas. Lastly, we were presented with the “stairway of mobilization” process, or the process of mobilizing citizens from one type of group to the next.