

PART III

ASSESSING ACCOUNTABILITY

It is one of the ironies of accountability that it is rarely held to account. Implied in the “promises of accountability” perspective is the need for us to determine the impacts, consequences, and implications of accountability. But such efforts require framing accountability within a context of criteria, measures, and metrics—in essence, developing or adopting an appropriate theory of governance within which such assessments can occur.

Paul Posner and Robert Schwartz use John Kingdon’s policy-streams framework to describe and assess the many ways that accountability can and has been applied in various governance contexts. Their focus is on three “accountability institutions” (or mechanisms) designed to play important roles in the policy process: performance measurement, performance auditing, and program evaluation. They find that the role and significance of each varies depending on which policy stream (i.e., problem, solution, or politics) is being examined. Reviewing the limited empirical evidence, they find that these mechanisms are playing significant roles in all three streams, and perhaps are most involved in the problem stream, despite the expectation that they would be of greatest value in the solution stream. It is also clear that, despite efforts to keep out of the political realm, these institutions or mechanisms invariably get drawn into partisan debates by the very nature of their work.

Richard Ghere takes on the task of assessing the claims by advocates of e-government technologies that IT (information technology) and related innovations are accountability-enhancing (and performance-improvement) mechanisms. Grounding his analysis in Jane Fountain’s examination of technology “enactment” and Dubnick’s 2005 critique of the assumed relationship between accountability and performance found in the New Public Management literature, Ghere examines 28 case studies (found in 27 articles) and finds the assumed connection between IT-based accountability reforms and performance to be contingent on a “normative” dynamic that alters the form of—and reshapes expectations about—both accountability and performance. Under the right conditions and with strategic acumen that is attentive to the power and role of norms, he concludes, accountability’s promise of performance can be achieved.