American Political Science Review (2026) 120, 4, 1250–1265
doi:10.1017/S0003055426101488 © The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Political Science Association.

Scrutiny and Recall: Rousseau on Controlling the Executive

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In recent decades, political theorists have drawn on historical thinkers to explore how political elites can be held accountable. Rousseau, however, is often dismissed as reducing accountability to elections and participation to occasional ratification referenda. This article challenges that view. While Rousseau expected an elective aristocracy to execute laws ratified by the people, he also identified two mechanisms—scrutiny and recall—through which citizens could control these representatives. After reconstructing Rousseau's account, I consider how these mechanisms could be adapted to contemporary democracies. Focused on executive accountability, the model is particularly suited to presidential systems with directly elected presidents. It combines a national jury—a citizens' assembly chosen by lot and tasked with examining presidential actions—with the possibility of a recall referendum. By uniting deliberative scrutiny with the power to remove the head of state, this approach offers an underexplored complement to recent anti-oligarchic institutional innovations based on sortition.

Political accountability remains a central concern in contemporary democratic theory and practice (Mansbridge 2014; 2019; Pitkin 1967; Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999). Over the past three decades, political theorists have increasingly turned to the history of political thought to better understand how political elites can be held accountable. In doing so, they have drawn on a range of thinkers, including Plato (Landauer 2019), Machiavelli (McCormick 2006; 2018), Condorcet (compare Urbinati 2006 and Vergara 2020), John Stuart Mill (Urbinati 2002), and Marx (Leipold 2020).

According to a prominent line of interpretation, one major theorist does not belong on this list, as he denied citizens meaningful mechanisms for holding elected representatives accountable beyond elections. That theorist is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. On John McCormick's reading (2018, 142), Rousseau endorsed the rule of an elective aristocracy and "confin[ed] elite accountability to elections alone." In the *Social Contract*, McCormick argues, "Rousseau prescribes institutions that inhibit political participation by common citizens and that enable rather than constrain the prerogative of elites within republics and popular governments" (2018, 109). Several other interpreters support McCormick's view that Rousseau's magistrates, once elected, wield broad discretionary power and that his conception of popular oversight was, in fact, minimalist. Richard Tuck (2016; 2024) interprets Rousseau as a theorist of a "sleeping sovereign" who reawakens only at long intervals to ratify constitutional changes. Philip Pettit (2013; 2016) contends that Rousseau failed to grant citizens a right of resistance, while Nadia Urbinati (2006, 77) argues that, in Rousseau's model, "the delegated power plays the greatest role in the life of the state and is kept out of citizens' sight and control."

This article concurs with these interpretations on one key point: that Rousseau regarded what he called an "elective aristocracy" as the best form of government for administering a state. According to the *Social Contract*, although the people must exercise sovereignty themselves by ratifying laws, they should preferably entrust the *execution* of those laws to a small group of upright and competent representatives, selected through elections.[1] However, I challenge the claim that Rousseau failed to provide citizens with significant tools to hold this elite of executive magistrates accountable between elections.[2] That claim rests largely on a selective reading of Rousseau's most famous political treatise, the *Social Contract* (*SC*). Here, I draw attention to neglected parts of that text, and interpret them alongside arguments found in the *Second Discourse* (*SD*), the *Letter to d'Alembert* (*LA*), the *Letters from the Mountain* (*LM*), and the *Considerations on the Government of Poland* (*GP*).[3] Taken together, these works reveal that, in Rousseau's ideal republic, the people held elected

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Handling editor: Alison McQueen.

Received: December 13, 2024; revised: May 05, 2025; accepted: January 21, 2026. First published online: March 03, 2026.

[1] The *Social Contract* (*SC*) opposed *legislative* representatives, who passed laws in the people's name, as in England, but not *executive* representatives, whose mandate consisted solely in administering the state on a day-to-day basis within the legal framework ratified by the sovereign people themselves (*SC* III, 1). As Rousseau explained, "Since the Law is only the declaration of the general will, it is clear that the People cannot be represented in the Legislative power. But it can and should be in the executive power, which is only force applied to the Law" (*SC* III, 15). In other words, the executive magistrates who composed the government did not represent the people as sovereign. They only represented them in their executive capacity when citizens were not formally assembled, as we will see. References to the *Social Contract* use Roman numerals to indicate books and Arabic numerals to indicate chapters.

[2] Rousseau often used the term "magistrate" to designate members of the executive body tasked with administering the laws (e.g., *SC* III, 1). I have kept his term throughout this article.

[3] References are to the *Collected Writings of Rousseau* (1990-2009), except for the *Letter to d'Alembert*, which is cited from Allan Bloom's standalone translation (Rousseau 1959).

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executive magistrates accountable between elections through two primary mechanisms: censorship (which had a different meaning than today's understanding of the term) and recall.[4]

To fully grasp Rousseau's theory of accountability, we must understand how, in his view, the people not only exercised sovereignty by ratifying laws that addressed general matters, but also acted *qua* government when assembled to decide matters concerning particular individuals. Acts such as censoring and recalling magistrates fell within this governmental function. I begin the article by addressing this question. I then examine how Rousseau envisioned a combination of censorship and recall as mechanisms for holding executive magistrates accountable in his ideal republic.

At periodic assemblies, convened at least every six months, citizens scrutinized the actions of their magistrates. Magistrates were required to present a detailed report of their administration, which citizens could then challenge. Following this deliberative exchange, the assembly issued a public statement declaring whether the magistrate had governed to their satisfaction. That statement—an act of censorship—served as either public praise or public reproach, shaping the magistrate's prospects in subsequent elections, held annually, as we will see. In addition, at least once between these annual elections, the popular assembly voted on whether to recall one, several, or all elected magistrates. In Rousseau's view, censorship, which influenced a magistrate's reputation, and recall, which legally compelled him to resign, mutually reinforced one another. The prior scrutiny and discussion of a magistrate's conduct helped citizens make a more informed decision when voting on recalls. Conversely, the threat of recall compelled magistrates to take their reporting duties seriously, thereby improving the quality of deliberation and justifications offered during the censorship process.

In reconstructing Rousseau's arguments, my aim is to restore his relevance to contemporary political theory debates about elite accountability. In recent years, democratic theorists have proposed a variety of institutional innovations involving sortition to counter oligarchic tendencies in representative democracies, including a second legislative chamber selected by lot (Abizadeh 2021; Gastil and Wright 2019), a plebeian tribunate (McCormick 2011; Prinz and Westphal 2024; Vergara 2020, chapter 9), and constituency juries overseeing members of the legislature (Leipold 2025). In the final section, I argue that a Rousseau-inspired model could be added to this toolbox of sortition-based institutions by exploring how his conception of censorship and recall might be adapted to today's democracies. Such a model, focused on controlling members of the executive, would be most readily applicable in presidential systems with directly elected presidents. It would combine a *national jury*—a citizens' assembly chosen by lot and tasked with scrutinizing presidential actions—with the possibility of a presidential recall referendum. By bringing these two instruments together, we come closest to realizing Rousseau's vision, in which scrutiny by a citizens' assembly informs the use of recall, and in which the ever-present option of revocation compels presidents to justify their actions with care.

THE PEOPLE AS EPISODIC DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT

The claim that Rousseau lacks a robust theory of elite accountability beyond elections rests on a narrow reading of his conception of political agency, one that centers exclusively on popular sovereignty. While these interpreters acknowledge that Rousseau vests sovereignty in the people, they argue that limiting citizen power to infrequent votes on fundamental laws leaves them unable to contest the day-to-day administration of the state (Urbinati 2006, chapter 2; McCormick 2018, 142; for a positive take on the "sleeping sovereign," see Tuck 2016). But this view overlooks a crucial aspect of Rousseau's thought. As Dorina Verli (2018) has persuasively shown, Rousseau did not confine the people to a sovereign role alone; he also held that, when assembled, they could act as a *body of government.*

Rousseau drew a sharp distinction between sovereignty and government: sovereignty is the power to decide general matters (legislative power), while government refers to the power to decide particular cases (executive power) (*SC* III, 1). At one level, this distinction was a safeguard against the tendency of executive magistrates to overstep their mandate by usurping legislative authority. For Rousseau, in an ideal republic, citizens must exercise sovereignty themselves—voting in person on laws that concern general matters. By contrast, between popular assemblies, they could—and indeed should, as we will see in more detail shortly—delegate the execution of those laws to a distinct "agent" or "body" (preferably an elective aristocracy) charged with applying them to specific cases (*SC* III, 1 and 15). This division of powers made clear that magistrates were not sovereign; their role was purely administrative, confined to implementing the general will as expressed through law (*SC* III, 1).

At another level, the distinction clarified what kinds of acts the people could undertake when assembled. According to Rousseau, "the instant the People is legitimately assembled as Sovereign body, all jurisdiction of the Government ceases, the executive power is suspended…because where the Represented person is [the people as executive force], there is no longer any Representative [magistrates representing that executive force]" (*SC* III, 14). When assembled, citizens recover their executive authority alongside their sovereign

[4] In addition to arguing that Rousseau confined elite accountability to elections alone, McCormick (2018, 117–8) charges that Rousseau celebrated the fact that elective aristocracies tended to bring the wealthiest citizens to the magistracy. But rather than endorsing the emergence of wealth as the main criterion through which citizens chose their representatives, Rousseau *lamented* this development, attributing it, in the *Second Discourse*, to the uncontrolled rise of property, the accumulation of wealth, the ever-widening inequality of fortunes it precipitated, and the oligarchies it ultimately facilitated. On this point, see Williams (2024, chapter 4). In this article, I take issue with McCormick's first criticism of Rousseau.

power. In other words, they recover the ability to enact particular measures alongside the power to legislate on general matters. In this framework, popular assemblies are not merely lawmaking bodies; they are also occasions for the people to act *qua* government. To illustrate this point, Rousseau wrote: "When the people of Athens, for example, appointed or dismissed its leaders, awarded honors to one or imposed penalties on another, and by means of a multitude of particular decrees performed indistinguishably all the acts of Government, the people then longer had a general will properly speaking. It no longer acted as Sovereign, but as magistrate" (*SC* II, 4). This observation is not, as McCormick (2018, 119) suggests, a condemnation of the fact that Athenian citizens acted as both sovereign and government. Rather, Rousseau intended it as a reminder that sovereignty and government remain distinct prerogatives, even when exercised by the same agent, the assembled people. The Athenians, in his view, failed to maintain this distinction. As Verli (2018, 426) observes, Rousseau was "not arguing that the coincidence of both powers in the same body is illegitimate." What he found problematic was not the Athenian people's decisions *qua* government, but their mistaken "belief that such acts were acts of sovereignty, that is, legislative acts."

That acts of government were central to Rousseau's conception of citizenship is further confirmed in chapter 4 of Book IV of the *Social Contract* on the Roman *comitia*, whose importance McCormick rightly notes, though he misreads Rousseau's intent (Rousselière 2024). In addition to examining how the Romans delayed decline through electoral innovations (Oprea 2024), Rousseau emphasized that, even amid growing corruption, the Roman assemblies continued to perform both sovereign and governmental functions. He found this so remarkable that he returned to it in the chapter's conclusion: "what is unbelievable is that in the midst of so many abuses, by virtue of its ancient regulations this immense people did not cease to elect its Magistrates, pass laws, try cases, and expedite private or public affairs" (*SC* IV, 4). McCormick (2018, 115) wonders why Rousseau "does…not reproach the Roman *comitia centuriata* for exercising both sovereign and governmental functions." The answer is that Rousseau viewed the people's exercise of governmental functions as essential to curbing the ever-present threat of magistrates usurping sovereign power. As the passage on Athens suggests, the people's prerogatives as government included not only electing magistrates, but also recalling them ("appointed or dismissed its leaders") as well as exercising censorship ("awarded honors to one or imposed penalties on another"). As we will see, far from treating these mechanisms as relics of ancient republics, Rousseau saw them as crucial instruments of elite accountability in modern republics.

Rousseau was critical of democracy as a *permanent* form of government. A regime in which all or a majority of citizens were constantly assembled to execute laws themselves was, in his view, impractical, overly demanding, and politically unstable. In fact, Rousseau even doubted that such a system had ever existed: "It is unimaginable that the people remain *constantly assembled* to attend to public affairs, and it is obvious that it could not establish commissions to do so without changing the form of administration" (*SC* III, 4, emphasis added). Out of necessity, between assemblies, the people delegated executive functions to a distinct body, ideally an elective aristocracy. At the same time, Rousseau believed that when the people were assembled, they could, through an act of sovereignty, temporarily convert themselves into a democracy. In this capacity, they could perform executive functions, that is, decide particular matters. "The Sovereign can … entrust the charge of Government to the entire people or to the majority of the people.… This form of government is given the name *Democracy*" (*SC* III, 3, emphasis in original).

The *Social Contract* devotes a chapter to explaining how this conversion from sovereignty to democracy works. To describe this "complex" act, Rousseau used the example of instituting a government (*SC* III, 17). When establishing a new government, the people first act as sovereign by determining the form of government —for instance, an elective aristocracy. Through a subsequent act of sovereignty, they convert themselves into a democracy. In this role, they can act as a body of government, for example by appointing individuals to executive offices. The key conceptual difficulty, Rousseau admitted, lies in understanding how the people "can become Prince or Magistrate in certain circumstances." Yet for Rousseau, this capacity to switch roles—to move from legislating to governing—was a defining feature of a well-constituted republic. As he put it, "Here, again, is revealed one of those amazing properties of the body politic, by which it reconciles apparently contradictory operations. For in this case, the operation is accomplished by a sudden *conversion of Sovereignty into Democracy*, so that without any noticeable change, and solely by a new relation of all to all, the Citizens, having become Magistrates, pass from general to particular acts" (*SC* III, 17, emphasis added).

This temporary conversion of the popular assembly into a democracy, far from being exceptional, was in fact a regular feature of Rousseau's ideal republic. It occurred not only when the people instituted a new government, but also at each election—an act concerning particular individuals, which Rousseau classed as an act of government (*SC* IV, 3)—as well as during each nonelectoral periodic assembly (more on this soon), when citizens could censor and recall magistrates. At these periodic assemblies, the people exercised their sovereign authority to turn themselves into a democracy, in which capacity they could censor and recall magistrates. Once these executive functions (censorship and recalls) had been performed, ideally, the people would suspend their democratic form and leave the administration of the state to elected magistrates until the next assembly. As Rousseau explained, "The peculiar advantage of Democratic Government is that it can be established in reality by a simple act of the general will. After this, the provisional government remains in office, if such is the form adopted [i.e., the people remain a democracy—an ill-conceived idea], or establishes in the name of the Sovereign the Government prescribed by law [i.e., ideally, the people elect or confirm in their

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position executive magistrates, if elective aristocracy is the form of government the people have previously chosen by law]" (*SC* III, 17).

In short, although Rousseau regarded a *permanent* democracy—one in which citizens were perpetually assembled to execute laws themselves—as a chimera, he considered an *episodic* form of democracy viable: one realized in periodic assemblies where citizens exercised governmental functions before delegating executive power to an elective aristocracy until the next convening of the people.[5]

Rousseau was aware that having the assembled people perform both acts of sovereignty and acts of government carried significant risks, the most serious being the confusion between these two forms of action. When citizens ratify laws in assembly, Rousseau expected them to set aside factional interests and vote solely with regard to the general interest of the body politic. "When I say that the object of the laws is always general, I mean that the law considers the subjects as a body and actions in the abstract, never a man as an individual or a particular action" (*SC* II, 6). As scholars have noted, Rousseau's sovereign was "blind to all individuals" (Simpson 2006, 51). By contrast, elections, recalls, and acts of censorship targeted specific individuals and were *intuitu personae*: decisions made in consideration of a person's identity and qualities. In such cases, individual dispositions and personality inevitably came into play, and the risk of partiality was unavoidable (*SC* II, 4).

When the popular assembly acted both as sovereign and as government, the challenge was to prevent the partisan logic of particular cases from contaminating votes on laws, which ought to express only the general will (Manin 1997, 75). As Rousseau warned, "Nothing is more dangerous than the influence of private interests on public affairs; and the abuse of laws by the Government is a lesser evil than the corruption of the Legislator, which is the inevitable consequence of private considerations" (*SC* III, 4). As we will see, to safeguard the people's capacity to act *qua* sovereign, Rousseau insisted that general and specific matters be treated separately within the assembly, each requiring a distinct vote. Sequencing acts of sovereignty (voting on a law) and acts of government (such as a recall) helped citizens distinguish between decisions that should reflect only the general interest and those in which particular considerations were permitted.

DELIBERATION AND PERIODIC ASSEMBLIES

Highlighting the people's capacity to act as a body of government is crucial, as it restores deliberation to the heart of Rousseau's conception of political agency. To support his claim that Rousseau sought to minimize popular agency, McCormick (2018, 132) contrasts Machiavelli's deliberative popular assemblies with Rousseau's allegedly "silent" ones. Yet this reading overlooks a key distinction in the *Social Contract.* Rousseau's prohibition on public discussion applies only to *legislative* votes, those meant to express the general will (Schwartzberg 2008): "If, when an adequately informed people deliberates, the Citizens were to have no communication among themselves, the general will would always result from the large number of small differences, and the deliberation would always be good" (*SC* II, 3). This passage clearly concerns laws, which must be impersonal and reflect only the general interest. Because public deliberation tends to surface factional interests, Rousseau believed it compromised the people's capacity to discern the general will and should therefore be excluded from legislative decision-making.

But this logic does not extend to acts of government such as elections, censorship, or recalls, which concern specific individuals and do not require abstraction from particular interests. In such cases, discussion does not pollute the vote; it clarifies the very preferences relevant to the decision. Thus, while citizens must remain silent when voting on laws, they can—and arguably must, as we shall see—deliberate when engaging in executive functions. Rousseau insisted that in a well-constituted republic, laws would be few, as they concern only fundamental political principles (*SC* IV, 1). Most citizen activity would therefore consist not in sovereign acts but in governmental ones. If this is the case, then public deliberation is not a marginal or suspect practice: it becomes central to Rousseau's vision of citizenship. To decide whom to elect, censor, or recall, citizens must be able to debate the qualifications of candidates and assess the conduct of magistrates currently in office.

In the *Letters from the Mountain*, Rousseau explicitly stated that, in matters of government, public discussion should not only precede voting but should also be clearly structured: "In a State that governs itself as a Republic…a separate language would have to be made for the Government. For example, *To Deliberate, To Give an Opinion, To Vote*, are three very different things… *To Deliberate* is to weigh the pro and the con; *To Give an Opinion* is to state one's advice and to give the reasons for it; *To Vote* is one's suffrage, when nothing is left to do but to collect the votes. First, the matter is put into deliberation. On the first round, one gives one's opinion; one votes on the last round" (*LM*, 253). Here, Rousseau not only drew a distinction between internal ponderation of different solutions, voicing and substantiating an opinion, and voting. He also indicated that well-ordered public discussion was essential for proper decision-making on governmental (i.e., particular) matters.

Rousseau reemphasized that point when he criticized the executive magistrates in his native Geneva for silencing the General Council, the city's popular assembly. Reflecting on the Council's diminished authority, Rousseau lamented: "one cannot propose anything in these assemblies, one cannot discuss anything in them, one cannot deliberate over anything in them" (*LM*,

[5] This distinction between two forms of democratic government complicates the view that Rousseau was merely offering a "critique of democracy as *self-government*" (Spector 2024, 256).

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250–1). This passage has been interpreted as evidence that, for Rousseau, the people, alongside magistrates, retained the right to debate policy proposals (though not bills once they are put to the vote) and to submit their own policy proposals in the assembly (Scott 2005; compare Putterman 2010, chapter 2). Such initiative, according to Rousseau's typology, is a particular (governmental) function, performed either by citizens themselves or magistrates. Further textual evidence in the *Letters from the Mountain* suggests that Rousseau also endorsed deliberation prior to other governmental actions by citizens, such as censorship and recall. Evoking a time when Geneva's popular assembly was free to speak openly, Rousseau portrayed such deliberation not as a threat to order, but as a sign of a healthy republic: "everyone spoke in [the General Council] then…Sometimes they shouted; but the people was free, the Magistrate respected, and the Council was frequently assembled" (*LM*, 251). That magistrates were "respected" despite—or perhaps because of—these impassioned debates suggests that they were often their subject.

Understanding the people's dual role as both sovereign and government also clarifies why the *Social Contract* advocated for frequent popular assemblies. If Rousseau's notion of political agency is limited to acts of sovereignty, once the constitution and key laws are established, it is difficult to see why he expected citizens to "rush" to assemblies (*SC* III, 15). However, if citizens must regularly perform acts of government, such as elections, censorship, and recalls, then his injunction makes sense. Revealingly, when discussing the frequency of assemblies, Rousseau pointed to ancient Rome, where citizens met regularly to perform both acts of sovereignty and government. He suggested that it was the governmental functions that required a higher frequency:

> One could imagine the difficulties of calling frequent assemblies of the immense population of that capital and its environs. Yet few weeks went by in which the Roman people was not assembled, and even several times. It exercised not only the rights of sovereignty, but a part of those of Government as well. It handled certain matters; it tried certain cases; and at the public assembly, this entire people was nearly as often magistrate as Citizen. (*SC* III, 12)

The *Social Contract* argued that assemblies should be "fixed and periodical," meaning that they would be automatically convened at regular intervals without requiring a summons from the magistrates. The frequency of these assemblies, Rousseau added, should be proportional to the risk of usurpation of sovereignty by the magistrates: the greater the danger, the more frequently the people must gather (*SC* III, 13). Rousseau scholars disagree on how often he envisioned citizens assembling (Lenowitz and Schwartzberg 2019; Tuck 2016). His conception of the people's agency as government helps clarify this issue. In the *Dedication* to the *Second Discourse* (6), Rousseau proposed that in an ideal small republic, elections should occur "from year to year." Accordingly, there would be annual *electoral assemblies* at which citizens, acting as government, appointed individuals to particular offices. But Rousseau also called for a second kind of assembly: *maintenance assemblies*, whose function was to uphold sovereign authority, that is, to remind magistrates that they merely executed the people's will and were not themselves sovereign (*SC* III, 12–4, titled "How the Sovereign Authority is Maintained"). As we will see, the *Social Contract* stipulated that, at these maintenance assemblies, citizens should be asked whether they wished to recall their magistrates. Holding such a vote at the annual electoral assembly would be redundant: why recall a magistrate you could simply choose not to re-elect? For the recall to function as an effective accountability mechanism, at least one maintenance assembly must occur between two elections, providing citizens the opportunity to revoke magistrates mid-term. At a minimum, then, there would be one maintenance assembly roughly every six months to consider potential recalls.[6] For simplicity, I adopt the six-month benchmark in the following discussion of censorship and recalls.

CENSORING MAGISTRATES

One of the functions Rousseau believed the people could exercise as government was the censorship of magistrates. Today, the term *censorship* carries a negative connotation, as it is associated with the repression of free speech. Rousseau, however, used it in a different, positive sense. In his ideal republic, magistrates were expected to report on their administration both at annual electoral assemblies and at mid-term maintenance assemblies. Citizens then engaged in deliberative exchange with them, scrutinizing their conduct and challenging their justifications. This process culminated in a public statement—an act of censorship—declaring whether the magistrate had administered the state satisfactorily. That statement served either as a form of public praise or public reproach. These declarations affected the magistrates' public standing and, consequently, their prospects for reelection. Because censorship enabled the people to hold executive officials accountable, Rousseau described it as one of the "ways to strengthen the constitution of the State" (*SC*, Title of Book IV).

According to Rousseau, elected magistrates should be competent and virtuous. In the *Dedication* to the *Second Discourse* (6), he described his ideal republic as a state where citizens annually elect "the most capable and most upright of their Fellow Citizens to administer Justice and govern the State." Similarly, in the *Social Contract* (III, 5), Rousseau argued that in an elective aristocracy, citizens "become magistrates only through election, a means by which probity, enlightenment, experience, and all the other reasons for public preference and esteem become so many new guarantees of

[6] Evidence from both the *SC* (III, 12) and the *LM* (273, 275–6) suggests that, at most, Rousseau envisioned the possibility of assemblies convening as frequently as twice a month.

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being wisely governed." Since integrity and capacity were the main criteria for selecting magistrates, their opposites, corruption and incompetence, were the chief grounds for public censure. This is evident in Rousseau's remarks about how figures like Cromwell and the Duke of Beaufort would have been treated in well-constituted republics. Cromwell, a symbol of corruption, "would have been condemned to hard labor by the people of Bern," while Beaufort, a seventeenth-century French noble known for his lack of organizational and military skill (Bély 2015), "would have been sentenced to the reformatory by Genevans" (*SC* IV, 1).

Depending on the context, Rousseau believed that censorship could be exercised either by a dedicated tribunal or by citizens themselves. As examples of censorial tribunals, he mentioned the Ephorate in Sparta and the Censorate in Rome. He described these institutions as guardians of mores, empowered to punish dishonest or immoral behavior through a range of sanctions, from public reproach to demotion to a lower social class. At the same time, he emphasized a key challenge of entrusting censorship to a tribunal (*SC* IV, 7): the potential discrepancy between their public statements and the people's judgment of their magistrates. As Rousseau explained, the effectiveness of the tribunal of censors' declarations depended on their alignment with "public opinion" (Williams 2014, 186–91).[7] If public opinion finds certain behavior reprehensible and the tribunal fails to act, or conversely, if the censors blame a conduct that does not offend public sentiment, the tribunal loses credibility, and its decisions become ineffective (*SC* IV, 7).

The alternative was to have citizens themselves act as censors (*SD*, 95). As discussed earlier, in outlining the governmental acts the people could perform, Rousseau noted that in Athens, the people not only elected magistrates but also "awarded honors to one or imposed penalties on another" (*SC* II, 4). The *Second Discourse* (95) also praised Athenian citizens for being particularly effective censors: they drew sharp distinctions between "the wicked and the virtuous," and rewarded or blamed magistrates "according to their merit." Geneva provided a similar example. In the *Letter to d'Alembert* (59), Rousseau remarked that, in small communities like his native city, citizens "are born censors of one another." Entrusting censorship to citizens rather than to a tribunal had the advantage of avoiding potential mismatches between public perceptions of a magistrate and the proclamations of a censorial tribunal.

Rousseau did not dismiss censorship as an outdated practice best relegated to antiquity. Rather, he sought to modernize its implementation. Notably, he believed that censorship must be practiced with "no vestige of constraint" (*SC* IV, 7). As Melissa Lane (2015, 98) puts it, "Whereas the ancient Censors had powers of sanctioning persons, limited though they were to demoting men from the Senate or equestrian order, Rousseau envisages a variety of new models of Censorship that all abstain from any use of coercive force." In this spirit, the *Second Discourse* (95) observed that "Only morals as pure as those of the Ancient Romans can bear Censors; such tribunals would soon have overthrown everything among us." This was not a condemnation of censorial *tribunals* per se, but rather a critique of the coercive power they wielded in antiquity. In modern societies, Rousseau believed that censorship should involve only *symbolic* sanctions: public statements declaring either that a magistrate had administered the state well (a form of public praise), or that he was incompetent, corrupt, or both (a form of public reproach). In other words, censorship functioned as a power of *influence*, shaping a magistrate's reputation in the eyes of public opinion and, consequently, their re-election prospects.

To understand how modern censorship works, it is helpful to consider Rousseau's comments about its role in the Polish Dietines, the local assemblies where citizens elect deputies and entrust them with binding mandates to pass legislation in the Diet (by contrast, the *Social Contract* focused on accountability mechanism for executive representatives, who, in small city-states, are tasked with executing the laws that the people ratify in person). Upon returning from the Diet, Rousseau explained that legislative deputies should "giv[e] a strict account to their constituents of their conduct at the Diet" in light of the instructions they had received. This was followed by a censorship exercise—an "examination…of the utmost importance" (*GP*, 190), which culminated in an "act of approbation" or "disapprobation": a public statement declaring whether the deputy had faithfully carried out the Dietine's instructions (*GP*, 224–5). That judgment affected the deputy's career prospects: without a favorable evaluation, he would be unable to seek re-election. As Rousseau insisted, whenever a deputy arrived in the Diet, he had to envision the impeding censorship judgment of his Dietine in six weeks' time: "With each word that the Deputy says at the Diet, with each step he takes, he must see himself in advance under the eyes of his constituents, and feel the influence that their judgment will have both over his plans for advancement and over the esteem of his compatriots, which is indispensable for their execution" (*GP*, 190).

In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau suggested that censorship statements similarly affected the people's perception of executive magistrates, which in turn impacted electoral results. In a previously quoted passage on the merits of elective aristocracy (*SC* III, 5), Rousseau reemphasized the role that "public esteem" (his other term for public opinion) played in determining who was deemed eligible or re-eligible for office. In this form of government, citizens "become magistrates only through election, a means by which probity, enlightenment, experience, and *all the other reasons for public preference and esteem* become so many new guarantees of being wisely governed [emphasis added]."

In Rousseau's ideal republic, censorship exercises took place both at mid-term maintenance assemblies and at annual electoral assemblies. At maintenance assemblies, where citizens were required to vote on

[7] The complex relationship between opinion and *amour-propre* in Rousseau's political thought is explored in Dent (2006), Neuhouser (2008), Rousselière (2021), and Douglass (2024).

whether to recall magistrates, the censorship procedure provided citizens with relevant material to inform their vote, as will be discussed below. Even if not recalled, a magistrate who received a negative assessment at a mid-term assembly would, in theory, be less likely to be re-elected than one praised for effective administration. Another censorship exercise also likely occurred at the annual electoral assembly, immediately before elections. This can be deduced from the fact that the scrutiny of candidates prior to appointment was an established practice in mid-eighteenth-century Geneva, which Rousseau commented on. This practice was known as the *grabeau*, "a Genevan term referring to the examination and censure" of members of executive councils (Bernardi, Guénard, and Silvestrini 2005, 308). By the 1760s, the *grabeau* had come to denote the right of the assembled citizenry to reject magisterial candidates before annual elections (Whatmore 2012, 85). In the *Letters from the Mountain* (241), Rousseau lamented that the *grabeau* had become an "empty ceremony," with no real impact on the selection of magistrates. By revisiting ancient models of censorship, Rousseau aimed to revive the close scrutiny once characteristic of the *grabeau* and to restore its power to influence electoral outcomes.

For censorship to be effective, Rousseau believed it had to be (1) targeted, (2) preceded by a reporting exercise, and (3) followed by a deliberative exchange between magistrates and citizens. First, censorship should be directed not at the government as a whole but at specific individuals. This aligns with the division of labor he associated with sound administration. As he observed, in a well-constituted executive body, "each magistrate is almost always responsible for some function of the Government" (*SC* III, 2). Specialized functions imply distinct responsibilities and, accordingly, targeted acts of censorship (and recalls, as we will see in the next section). Second, as we have just seen with the Polish Dietines, Rousseau expected elected representatives to deliver a thorough report on their administration to citizens, detailing specific actions. In the *Letters from the Mountain*, Rousseau emphasized that reporting duties also extended to executive magistrates. In fact, Rousseau argued that it was the gradual disappearance of these duties that paved the way for the executive councils' usurpation of sovereignty in Geneva. In his idealized account, when Genevans first entrusted the power of executing laws to a distinct body, they did so under the conditions of temporary elective mandates and close oversight. In this ideal republic, at each assembly, magistrates reported on clearly defined commissions: they were "simple procurators established by the Community in order to attend to this or that piece of business, [who] accounted to it for their Commission with hats off, and instantly returned into the order of private individuals" (*LM*, 239). Over time, however, magistrates succeeded in spacing out elections before eventually eliminating them almost entirely. Concurrently, the practice of reporting to the assembly on specific actions disappeared. "Insensibly a body forms that always acts. A body that always acts cannot account for each act: it no longer accounts for any but the principal ones; soon it reaches the point of accounting for none of them" (*LM*, 238). This, according to Rousseau, was how Genevans lost their freedom. By contrast, in the early days of the republic, magistrates had specialized functions and were held accountable for them through regular reporting to the assembly, making their conduct easier to scrutinize. Ideally, Rousseau insisted, public officials, "after having fulfilled their commission, account for it and return into the common equality" (*LM*, 238).

In both *Considerations on the Government of Poland* and the *Letters from the Mountain*, Rousseau assumed that reports would be followed by deliberation. As noted earlier, while the *Social Contract* prohibited discussion before voting on laws, it did not forbid debate prior to performing acts of government, such as issuing a statement on a magistrate's conduct. The *Letters from the Mountain*, where Rousseau emphasized the importance of reporting duties, are also the text in which he outlined how deliberation before acts of government should function. Thus, in Rousseau's ideal republic, before issuing a statement of approval or disapproval, citizens could deliberate on whether the magistrate had executed the laws in accordance with the people's will and critically assess the justifications offered in his report. This combination of reporting and deliberation enabled citizens to evaluate magistrates more precisely and adjust their censorship statements accordingly.

RECALLING MAGISTRATES

Censorship influenced magistrates' reputations, which in turn affected their prospects for re-election. However, it did not have the legal authority to compel a magistrate to resign. To address this limitation, Rousseau proposed an additional, binding mechanism for holding magistrates accountable.

Although the recall has received little attention in recent debates about Rousseau's conception of political agency, he was clear in the *Social Contract* that magistrates responsible for executing laws could be subjected to revocation whenever citizens saw fit. In the chapter discussing the means to prevent the usurpation of sovereignty by the government, Rousseau emphasized the importance of recall from the outset: "the trustees [*dépositaires*] of the executive power are not the masters of the people, but its officers; that the people can establish and depose…when it pleases" (*SC* III, 18; see also *SC* III, 1). This argument aligns with Rousseau's belief that the people hold both legislative power, which cannot be alienated, and executive power, which can be delegated. By appointing magistrates, the people make them agents or trustees (*dépositaires* in the original French) of executive power. Since governmental power belongs to the people by right, they can reclaim it whenever they choose.

The recall mechanism was so central to Rousseau's theory of accountability that he expected the people to vote on whether to recall members of the government at every maintenance assembly. In his view, the primary

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safeguard against the usurpation of sovereignty was to require the people, at the outset of each of these assembly, to vote on two key questions:

> These assemblies, whose only object is the maintenance of the social treaty, should always be opened by two propositions that can never be omitted and that are voted on separately: The first: *Does it please the Sovereign to preserve the present form of Government.* The second: *Does it please the People* [acting as government] *to leave the administration in the hands of those who are currently responsible for it.* (*SC* III, 18, emphases in original)

Rousseau's conception of the recall was consistent with his belief that the popular assembly could perform both acts of sovereignty and acts of government. At each maintenance assembly, the people would be asked to vote first on a general question, settled through law—whether to confirm or change the form of government—and second on a particular question—whether to recall or retain the magistrates in office. The former was an act of sovereignty, the latter an act of government.

In the opening section, I mentioned Rousseau's concern that, when the people alternately act as sovereign and as government, their ability to discern the general will could be compromised by the intermingling of votes on general and specific matters. This is why he stipulated that these two questions, which required citizens to act in different capacities, must be "voted on separately" (*SC* III, 18). This sequencing helped prevent confusion, in the minds of citizens, between votes concerning general matters and those concerning the magistrates' administration.

It is striking that the two questions put to the vote at each maintenance assembly mirror the two distinct questions Rousseau believed were involved in instituting a government: first, the question of form; and second, once that decision is made, who to appoint to executive offices. As noted earlier, this institution required a complex act. The people first acted *qua* sovereign by choosing their form of government. Through a second act of sovereignty, they then transformed themselves into a democracy. In this capacity, they could act *qua* government and select officeholders (*SC* III, 17). Once a separate governing body (preferably an elective aristocracy) had been instituted, the same logic applied at each maintenance assembly. At those assemblies, the people were asked not whether to *institute* a new government, but whether to *maintain or dissolve* the existing one. This, too, involved a complex act: first, the people decided whether to maintain the existing form of government through an act of sovereignty; second, through another act of sovereignty, they transformed themselves into a democracy, in which they could act as government to decide whether to retain the magistrates in office. Since Rousseau believed that citizens should adhere to an elective aristocracy to avoid anarchy and preserve administration by a competent and virtuous elite between popular assemblies, the crucial question was the second one: whether to recall the magistrates.

This was a radical method of ensuring accountability, and its significance was not lost on Rousseau's contemporaries. Among them was the Genevan General Prosecutor Jean-Robert Tronchin, who would later write the *Letters from the Countryside*, to which Rousseau's *Letters from the Mountain* responded. Tronchin also authored the conclusions on the *Social Contract* and *Emile*, which led to both works being condemned and burned in the public square of Geneva. In these conclusions, Tronchin singled out the passage from the *Social Contract* (III, 18) on the two initial votes in maintenance assemblies as evidence of Rousseau's intent to destroy all governments. As he accurately observed: "he knows no other way of preventing usurpations than by fixing periodic assemblies, during which the government is suspended, and where, without the need for a formal convocation, discussions are held separately and by majority vote on whether to preserve the established form of government and the magistrates in place."[8]

Did Rousseau favor collective recalls only, or did he also allow individual recalls? Recalls are acts of government aimed at particular individuals, and both revoking a whole governmental team or removing a single magistrate fall within this scope. This question is crucial because individual recalls provide citizens with a more targeted and effective means of holding magistrates accountable. If a magistrate is judged based on the collective actions of the entire government or the misdeeds of a peer, the disciplinary power of the recall vote is significantly weakened.[9] Furthermore, if recalls apply only to an entire governing body, citizens may hesitate to activate such a mechanism, given its potential to trigger a significant political overhaul. In contrast, targeting individual magistrates allows other members of the government to remain in place, ensuring continuity in the administration of the state.

Several elements indicate that Rousseau favored individual recalls. First, as seen earlier, his vision of a well-functioning elective government involved specialized functions, each with corresponding reporting duties on distinct actions (*SC* III, 2). Specialized functions, in turn, call for individual recalls just as they necessitate targeted censorship. Second, individual recalls align with Rousseau's theory of censorship, which focuses on individual conduct and employs a deliberative procedure that directly facilitates recall decisions. Third, Rousseau's description of the duties of Diet deputies in Poland further reveals his endorsement of individual responsibility for elected representatives. As previously mentioned, Rousseau expected deputies to undergo intense scrutiny in their Dietines upon returning from the Diet. He was adamant that post-Diet censorship should focus on the deputies individually, rather than as a collective. Discussing whether deputies sent by the same Dietine should vote as a group in the Diet, Rousseau argued that such a practice would allow deputies to avoid

[8] Quoted by Robert Derathé in a footnote to the Pléiade edition of Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1964, 436, note 1).
[9] I thank the reviewer who pointed this out.

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individual responsibility: "It is better for each Deputy to have to answer for himself alone in his Dietine, so that none use the others as an excuse, so that the innocent and the guilty will not be mixed up, and so that distributive justice will be better observed" (*GP*, 197). Additionally, Rousseau stipulated that, ideally, deputies should vote aloud in the Diet rather than by secret ballot, "so that the conduct and opinion of each Deputy at the Diet can be known, and so that he might answer for it in his own and personal name" (*GP*, 197). For Rousseau, individual responsibility was key to targeted accountability through case-specific censorship. Once the censorship examination was completed and a decision was made regarding the deputy's conduct, members of the Diet would proceed with a distinct vote to determine whether the deputy should be re-eligible for the next Diet (*GP*, 190). By analogy, in the framework of the *Social Contract*, once the maintenance assembly has scrutinized an executive magistrate, it would proceed with a separate vote, also with binding consequences—in this case, a recall vote (rather than a re-eligibility vote).

For Rousseau, combining censorship, which influenced representatives' public standing, with recall, which legally compelled them to step down, ensured that both mechanisms worked effectively to hold executive magistrates accountable. On the one hand, censorship supported the recall process: close scrutiny of a magistrate's conduct, along with the public hearing of his explanations, enabled citizens to make more informed decisions about removing him from office. On the other hand, the possibility of recall strengthened censorship: the threat of removal compelled magistrates to take their reporting duties seriously and to offer convincing justifications.

ROUSSEAU TODAY: THE NATIONAL JURY AND PRESIDENTIAL RECALL REFERENDUMS

So far, I have reconstructed Rousseau's theory of accountability by focusing on the people's agency not as a sovereign body, but as a government body making particular decisions about their magistrates—decisions of censorship and recall. In this final section, I explore how Rousseau's theory of accountability might be adapted to today's representative democracies.

In recent years, political theorists have interpreted Rousseau as a forerunner of the contemporary theory and practice of constitutional ratification referendums in large states (Colón-Ríos 2020, chapter 2; Tuck 2016; 2024). Considering my argument, Rousseau can also be understood as anticipating the theory and practice of the recall referendum—a practice on the march in an increasing number of countries around the world (Vandamme 2020; Welp 2018; Welp and Whitehead 2020a; 2020b; 2023; Whitehead 2018)—albeit with a specific scope and procedure.

The scope of recall in the *Social Contract* is limited to *executive* magistrates: those responsible for implementing the laws ratified by the sovereign. It also applies to executive officials *elected* by the people. In Rousseau's logic, the people could revoke those magistrates whom they had appointed themselves. Recent scholarship has emphasized that Rousseau refrained from advocating uniform political and institutional arrangements across contexts (Hanley 2008; Oprea 2019; Schaeffer 2012; Williams 2010). Bearing this in mind, in today's democracies, the most obvious corresponding application of Rousseau's conception of the recall would be in *presidential regimes* where the head of the executive is directly elected, such as in the United States or France. In Mexico, a presidential recall was introduced in 2019 in the constitution and held for the first time in April 2022. The provision is also in place in Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Taiwan, and the idea has been proposed by the left in France without becoming law (Welp and Whitehead 2023, 50–1).[10]

In contemporary democracies, including presidential regimes, ordinary lawmaking is entrusted to representatives, unlike in Rousseau's ideal small republic, and these representatives are not bound by imperative mandates, as Rousseau believed they should be in large countries. At the same time, executive officials often wield greater power and responsibility than members of the legislature (Rosanvallon 2018), which, by Rousseau's standards, increases the risk of usurpation by the executive. What follows is thus an exploration of what a Rousseauian recall could look like in what is, by Rousseau's own criteria, a nonideal context. In presidential systems, a recall referendum targeting the head of the executive could still provide citizens with a powerful, binding accountability tool, in line with Rousseau's intention. As Pierre-Etienne Vandamme (2020, 10) rightly emphasizes, "with the current shift of power from the legislative to the executive witnessed in most democracies, the *control* of the executive by the society becomes the key issue."

There are two important differences between presidential recalls and Rousseau's conception. First, presidential recall referendums, as in Mexico, take place without primary assemblies. A purely Rousseauian application of the presidential recall referendum in contemporary democracies, by contrast, would entail the institutionalization of localized gatherings in which citizens could debate before voting, a practice briefly adopted during the French Revolution (Crooke 1996, 111–4). Drawing on Rousseau, Joel Colón-Ríos (2019) sees primary assemblies as particularly promising for constitution-making practices, including the ratification of constitutional changes. While Rousseau clearly

[10] Of course, important differences remain between those presidential systems. While it is true that Rousseau made specific institutional recommendations for particular cases such as Poland and Corsica, it is also noteworthy that the *Social Contract* did not associate the practice of recall with any specific national setting. Recalls did not exist in his native Geneva, even though a form of censorship, the *grabeau*, did. This suggests that he regarded recall as a mechanism potentially applicable across different types of well-constituted republics where the people elect their executive magistrates. Granted, those were ideally small-state republics; the purpose of this section is to explore how a Rousseauian recall mechanism might be *adapted* to large-scale presidential regimes, considering that such a mechanism would need to be tailored, in each context, to the existing political culture and institutional apparatus.

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favored decision-making through assemblies (Frank 2021, chapter 2), as seen earlier, he nevertheless prohibited deliberation prior to voting on laws. However, integrating deliberative primary assemblies into the recall process would be consistent with his acceptance of discussion prior to performing acts of government. While I recognize the mobilization and deliberative potential of such assemblies (as highlighted in Muldoon 2020 and Vergara 2020), given the difficulties involved in establishing them in large states, and following Rousseau's own realist approach to institutional design, I propose that an updated Rousseauian model in nonideal conditions could initially be introduced through presidential recall referendums without primary assemblies.[11] These could then be introduced at a later stage, if presidential recalls are satisfactorily implemented (in combination with a national jury, as we will see) and after careful design work.

The second major difference lies in the object of accountability. Presidential recalls target a single individual, the most powerful member of the executive, rather than members of a collective executive council, as in Rousseau's ideal republic. This distinction matters. In Rousseau's model, citizens could recall either the entire executive council or individual magistrates—a measure that, by leaving other magistrates in place, helped reduce the risk of political instability. By contrast, a presidential recall, which removes the head of state, creates a power vacuum that heightens the risks of instability and polarization (Whitehead 2018, 1350; 2020, 240). In times of popular dissatisfaction, the presidential recall could also be used impulsively to signal general resentment toward elected representatives by targeting the most prominent public official.

This creates the need for a specific procedure that combines presidential recall referendums with an *ad hoc* institution performing what Rousseau called "censorship": a 150-member national jury, selected by lot, tasked with periodically reviewing the president's conduct, engaging in deliberative exchanges with them, issuing public statements assessing their performance, and determining whether to initiate a recall referendum. In Rousseau's ideal small republic, during maintenance assemblies, the same actor, the assembled people, performed both censorship and recall in sequence: after hearing reports and questioning magistrates' justifications, citizens would vote on whether to revoke them. In contemporary representative democracies, however, where it is difficult to assemble the people as a whole but the citizenry can still vote easily in referendums, these functions would be delegated to distinct actors: a national jury would conduct scrutiny, while the people themselves would make binding decisions on removal.[12] When these two mechanisms work in tandem, they most fully embody Rousseau's vision of elite accountability, in which oversight by a citizens' assembly guides the people's exercise of recall, while the possibility of revocation encourages the president to account for their actions with care. In what follows, I further examine, through a Rousseauian lens, the promises and challenges of implementing such a combination of a national jury and presidential recall.

The National Jury

As we have seen, Rousseau believed that censorship could be exercised either directly by the people, as in Geneva, or through a dedicated tribunal. Rousseau himself suggested the latter might be a viable solution for large states when he praised the authority of the Roman Censorate, despite the vastness of the Republic (*SC* IV, 7). This institutionalized body monitored officials on behalf of the people, preserving the function of citizen-led scrutiny that operated more directly in smaller communities. A contemporary equivalent would not wield the coercive powers of the Roman Censorate, which, as noted earlier, could demote citizens to a lower social class, but would instead be tasked with scrutinizing the president and issuing public evaluations of their performance. By providing an intimate setting in which ordinary citizens, selected by lot, engage in deliberative exchanges with the president, such a jury would aim to recreate the kind of face-to-face scrutinizing process Rousseau envisioned for his ideal republic.

Because *censorship* now carries pejorative connotations, it is preferable to use a more neutral label for this scrutinizing assembly, such as a *national jury*. Indeed, this was the term Nicolas de Condorcet (hardly an advocate of impulsive political procedures) used during the French Revolution to describe and endorse an institution not unlike what Rousseau had in mind with his concept of a censorial tribunal. In his 1793 constitutional plan, Condorcet (1847, 370) proposed that a national jury scrutinize the conduct of elected ministers, assessing whether they were responsible for "breach of duty" (*forfaiture* in French), "high treason," "incompetence," or "negligence."[13] The idea of a *jury* evokes a citizens' assembly selected by lot and tasked with passing judgment. *National* is also apt: it designates a jury representing the whole nation to scrutinize the conduct of the president, as opposed to constituency-based juries, advocated by Leipold (2025), in which each MP is held accountable by a panel of constituents.

[11] Note that Tuck's (2016) Rousseauian democracy, in which the people ratify constitutional changes, appears to be one without primary assemblies, although he does recognize Rousseau's "strong preference for mass citizen assemblies if they could be held" (Tuck 2024, 26).

[12] Concentrating both "censorship" and recall powers in the hands of the national jury would raise significant legitimacy concerns. If a jury selected by lot were to revoke a president elected by universal suffrage, the move would likely be perceived as "robbing" the people of the official they have chosen. This may help explain why, although Rousseau allowed for censorship to be delegated to a tribunal, he never entertained the idea that recall could be exercised by a separate institution on behalf of the people.

[13] Condorcet's proposal for a jury did not pair it with recall referendums; instead, the jury itself had the power to dismiss ministers. During the same constitutional debate (April–June 1793), Robespierre, for his part, advocated a combination of moral censorship and recalls that was strikingly Rousseauian in outline, though it applied to members of the National Assembly endowed with legislative power rather than ministers. See Ghins (2026, chapter 2).

Scrutiny by a national jury would follow a logic similar to Rousseau's conception of reporting and deliberation within the popular assembly. The president would report to this body at regular intervals, such as every six months, in line with Rousseau's model of periodic maintenance assemblies, and would have the opportunity to justify their decisions in a structured exchange with citizens. This timeframe would ensure continuous scrutiny and repeated deliberative exchanges. It would also be long enough for the president to implement and test policies, yet short enough for jury members to form judgments about key actions during the period. Following the deliberation, the jury would issue a report summarizing the president's key actions, the justifications provided, and the ensuing dialogue. If, after the public hearing and deliberation, the national jury concludes that the president has acted incompetently, negligently, or dishonestly, it would indicate this in its statement, providing clear reasons, which would then inform, if applicable, its decision on whether to recommend holding a recall referendum, as I discuss shortly.[14] These statements would be disseminated through media outlets, ensuring transparency and reinforcing the president's accountability to the public.

This proposal for a national jury partly overlaps with recent theorizations of a distinct role for mini-publics. Traditionally, mini-publics have been cast as advisory bodies, assisting elected representatives in policy decision-making (Sintomer 2023, chapter 4). In recent years, however, scholars have proposed that they could also serve a *scrutinizing* function, aimed at strengthening accountability through deliberative exchange (Leipold 2025). As Maija Setälä (2021, 7) puts it, "the opportunity of mini-publics to exercise *ex post* scrutiny of elective representatives enhances deliberative accountability of elected representatives by 'forcing' them to justify their views to a deliberative body representing a diverse group of citizens." Although Setälä (2021, 7) is open to using such mini-publics to evaluate deputies, she sees them as particularly well-suited to monitoring the executive, suggesting they "could be routinely used to evaluate the work of the government." The purpose of such scrutiny is to establish a form of accountability that is both deliberative and recursive. As Jane Mansbridge (2014; 2019) has argued, the opportunity to provide justifications and engage in a deliberative process with a diverse citizen body reduces the risk of antagonism while fostering mutual understanding and responsiveness. The idea of a national jury pursues a similar objective: enhancing the accountability of the head of the executive through repeated and structured deliberative engagement. In this spirit, deliberation with the president every six months could last one week, with independent experts providing the jury with relevant background information beforehand.[15]

To avoid elite capture of the national jury, each scrutiny exercise would involve a new set of citizens selected by lot, a method that, by relying on chance, reduces the risk of corruption (Bagg 2024, 99–100; Guerrero 2024, 59–66). To further mitigate this risk, the national jury would comprise roughly 150 members, reflecting Rousseau's observation that large assemblies are less susceptible to corruption than small ones (*SC* II, 3; IV, 1; *GP*, 189), while still remaining compact enough to enable meaningful deliberative exchanges between the president and the jury members.[16]

Selection by Lot: Citizens' Control and Cross-Partisanship

Alongside diminishing the risk of corruption, having members of the national jury chosen by lot offers two key advantages. First, the lottery gives ordinary citizens a direct role in overseeing elected representatives, rather than leaving such oversight solely in the hands of other elected officials (Leipold 2025, 8; Setälä 2021, 7), as in, for example, the U.S. impeachment procedure (Cronin 1989, 135; Vandamme 2020, 2). Second, an assembly chosen by lot from a wide population enhances representativeness, giving the assembly a diverse, cross-partisan perspective that can improve the decision's epistemic quality (Landemore 2013; Vandamme and Verret-Hamelin 2017, 4–8)—in this case, a decision on the president's actions. Both concerns appear in Rousseau's political theory, which not only assigned an important role to sortition but also regarded it as a worthy alternative to elections for appointing citizens to public office (Manin 1997, 74–9).

[14] The legal text establishing the national jury and recall procedure could specify what charges might warrant the jury's decision to endorse a referendum, such as serious breaches of duty, negligence, or incompetence, as in Condorcet, thereby framing the jury's judgment. The problem with specifying charges, however, is that it risks limiting the jury's oversight capacity and the very rationale of the scrutiny process: what counts as reprehensible political conduct triggering a recall changes with the political context and evolving political culture, and is precisely what must be debated within the national jury. In Rousseau's language, standards of political conduct shift with what public opinion considers blameworthy or valuable. This is likely why Rousseau did not specify exactly which grounds would justify a recall, beyond indicating in broad terms that, in an ideal republic, magistrates should be virtuous and competent.

[15] Bruno Leipold (2025, 11–2) describes in detail how a week-long deliberation between elected representatives and constituency juries drawn by lot could be organized in contemporary representative democracies. A similar procedure could be applied to the national jury, with deliberative sessions with the president held in the morning to allow both the president and jury members to address pressing matters in the afternoon. Note, however, that the scope of Leipold's constituency juries differs from the Rousseauian accountability model presented here: his juries oversee elected representatives tasked with passing legislation, whereas the Rousseauian model concerns directly elected members of the executive, presidents in particular. Both models could coexist in presidential regimes, though I believe that in those regimes where legislative chambers have become mere registration assemblies for executive initiatives, priority should be given to establishing a national jury to ensure accountability of the official who wields the greatest share of political power.

[16] The exact number of jury members could vary from one country to another. In federal presidential regimes like the United States, the sortition procedure could be adapted in such a way as to ensure that 3 jury members, for example, come from each state.

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For Rousseau, the choice between sortition and election depended on the qualities required of the selected citizens. Elections were appropriate for positions demanding "special talents," such as magistrates responsible for specific functions, whereas sortition was "suited to those for which good sense, justice, and integrity suffice" (*SC* IV, 3). These, Rousseau argued, are common attributes in well-functioning republics, that is, republics in which education equips citizens with the tools to develop "good judgment" (Schaeffer 2014). Scrutinizing the conduct of representatives was precisely the kind of task Rousseau believed ordinary citizens, endowed with such qualities, could undertake (*SD*, 95). If, in a well-functioning republic, citizens themselves could hold representatives accountable, some of them could be selected by lot to perform this role as members of a censorial tribunal. By analogy, ordinary citizens drawn by lot can perform the scrutinizing role of the national jury.

Like other mini-publics, the national jury would be composed of members selected by random sampling, with stratification or quota methods applied to ensure representativeness across diverse socio-demographic backgrounds and perspectives. At first glance, this may appear to clash with Rousseau's well-known hostility toward partial associations and his much-debated endorsement of social engineering aimed at fostering cultural homogeneity. Yet, on closer examination, it is plausible that Rousseau would have viewed stratified random sampling in a positive light.

To start, Rousseau's opposition to "partial associations" applies specifically to the context of voting on laws (*SC* II, 3). In such instances, when citizens cast their votes to advance the interests of a particular group rather than the general interest, the resulting laws fail to express the general will. However, following Rousseau's typology, a national jury is not a legislative body. Rather, it is a governmental institution tasked with taking particular measures. Examining the conduct of a president and issuing a public statement in response is one such measure. As such, it is inevitably shaped by partisan perspectives. Prohibiting partial associations in such a context would be as ineffective as banning deliberation. Rousseau's prohibition on both, applicable to votes on laws, does not extend to this kind of governmental function.

Moreover, recent scholarship has convincingly argued that Rousseau endorsed forms of social engineering intended to promote a unified cultural identity only in specific contexts, namely, in societies such as Sparta, Poland, or Corsica, where a strong sense of patriotism rooted in shared traditions already existed. In states characterized by religious, cultural, ethnic, or economic diversity, Rousseau proposed a different strategy: multiplying partial associations to prevent any single group from dominating the political process (Kimlee, Conti, and Selinger 2023). This perspective shaped his conception of institutional design. As Alexandra Oprea (2019, 576) has shown, in the chapter on the Roman *comitia* in the *Social Contract* (IV, 4), Rousseau praised how Servius, acting as a Lawgiver, "manag [ed] pluralism through political institutions" by reorganizing the Roman people into voting blocs with cross-cutting cleavages, thereby preventing any single faction from concentrating political power. Further, Bryan Garsten (2021) has argued that Rousseau's arrangements in the Roman assemblies also served an epistemic purpose: to ensure that citizens' votes on laws more accurately reflected the general interest. In an assembly dominated by two rival factions, citizens are more likely to vote along party lines. By contrast, an assembly composed of multiple, overlapping interest groups encourages voters to consider how their own interests intersect with those of others, rather than simply aligning with a dominant bloc.

The stratification and quota methods used in mini-publics operate according to a similar logic. Using Rousseau's categories, these mechanisms can be seen as institutional interventions by a Lawgiver, designed to enhance representativeness and balance competing interests within a deliberative body—again, with an epistemic aim. Like the electoral reforms Rousseau commented on in the *Social Contract* (IV, 4), stratified sortition seeks to foster impartiality through inclusion and diversity. In both cases, institutional design increases the likelihood that deliberation will be oriented toward the public good.

As already noted, Rousseau acknowledged that decisions on particular matters are inherently susceptible to partisanship. However, from his perspective, this is no reason to forgo institutional efforts to reduce factionalism in both legislative and executive decision-making. Significantly, the same Roman assemblies Rousseau admired for their pluralist structures were also praised for their ability to alternate between exercising sovereignty and performing governmental function (*SC* IV, 4). One could argue, then, that their capacity to accurately judge the conduct of public officials was strengthened by the very same institutional arrangements that, in Rousseau's view, enabled them to express the general will.

In short, a Rousseauian case can be made that stratified random sampling would empower ordinary citizens to examine elected representatives as impartially as possible—even if the questions at hand, involving matters of conduct and political actions, are intrinsically prone to partiality. At the same time, a cross-partisan mini-public would compel public officials to justify their actions not merely to their partisan base, but to an assembly of citizens reflecting the full spectrum of civil society.

Balancing Accountability and Stability

In Rousseau's model, censorship and recall occurred automatically every six months on average. At each maintenance assembly, citizens scrutinized their magistrates and voted on whether to recall them. In contemporary large-scale democracies, where policy issues are increasingly complex, automatically holding presidential recall referendums every six months would jeopardize the feasibility of long-term policy. Because the recall referendums considered here target the highest executive authority, the president, rather than

members of an executive council, as in Rousseau, frequent recalls could also threaten political stability.

To address this, it is necessary to carefully determine who should have the prerogative to trigger a presidential recall referendum in a contemporary Rousseauian accountability framework. One solution would be to assign this decision to two consecutive national juries, meeting at six-month intervals, each composed of a different set of citizens drawn by lot. Under this arrangement, a first national jury could, after a negative review and by supermajority vote, notify the public that, in its considered opinion, a recall referendum should be held. However, this would not immediately trigger a referendum: six months later, a second jury would need to reach a similar conclusion for the referendum to proceed.[17] This two-step process allows the president time to adjust policies in response to criticism and provides an opportunity to defend their record before a new jury. By involving two separate, randomly selected assemblies, this sequencing reduces the risk of recalls being too easily triggered, thereby preserving both long-term policy planning and political stability.

In cases where a first national jury has recommended a recall, the risk of elite capture on the follow-up jury increases, as this jury ultimately decides whether the recall referendum will be held. If partisans of an unpopular president attempt to influence the second jury and successfully dissuade it from recommending a recall to protect the sitting president, a corrective could take the form of a citizens' initiative: a large number of citizens could petition the legislature to hold the recall referendum, thereby overriding the second jury.[18] To prevent frivolous recalls, a high threshold of signatures would be required. In all cases, the principle remains that two actors—either two consecutive juries or one jury and the citizens through the initiative—must be involved in the decision to hold a presidential recall referendum. This two-actor procedure also makes it more difficult for presidents to initiate a plebiscitary recall to consolidate power and silence the opposition (Vandamme 2020, 3; Welp and Whitehead 2023, 45–8): a citizens' initiative instigated solely by the president's partisans, without the prior recommendation of a randomly selected national jury, would be insufficient to trigger a recall.[19]

In addition to this complex initiating process, other safeguards could be implemented to reconcile presidential accountability with the need for stability, drawing on recent scholarship on the theory and practice of recalls. Quorum and approval requirements, such as minimum voter turnout or a supermajority, could ensure that presidential recalls reflect broad-based support rather than narrow partisan interests (Whitehead 2018, 1351). Clear post-recall succession rules, as in Mexico's presidential recall (Cortés 2020, 209), could also specify who assumes office if removal occurs, thus minimizing uncertainty. Finally, timing restrictions could limit recalls to specific periods, such as after the first year in office, to avoid early disruption (Welp 2018, 454; Whitehead 2018, 1350). In the Rousseauian framework presented here, scrutiny exercises with national juries would already take place during the first year, but only from the second jury onward could recommendations for a recall referendum be made. Given the six-month intervals of the national juries, a recall referendum would thus be possible only after at least one and a half years in office.

Scrutiny and Recall as Complementary Accountability Tools

Compared to the existing literature on recall referendums, it is worth emphasizing that Rousseau's originality lies in his insistence that recalls should be combined with prior scrutiny by ordinary citizens. Recalls without the prior examination of a national jury risk becoming impulsive reprimands, triggered and voted upon without due consideration of the president's actions and explanations. Just as the "censorship" Rousseau envisioned within the popular assembly aimed to clarify individual responsibilities, thereby facilitating the targeted use of recalls, the national jury equips citizens with the tools necessary to make informed decisions in a recall referendum.

Some contemporary democratic theorists argue that voters are often insufficiently informed to effectively monitor their representatives (Brennan 2016). The national jury helps address this issue while also reducing the risk of polarization in presidential recalls (Whitehead 2020, 240). It functions as an independent and pluralistic body specializing in political scrutiny and fostering deliberative exchanges between citizens and the president. The statements it issues provide cross-partisan information on the president's decisions and justifications, along with critical evaluations of their administration. In this way, the national jury enables citizens to develop a more nuanced understanding of presidential actions and their constraints. In short, by enhancing public understanding, the national jury reframes the recall process from a potentially reactive or impulsive mechanism into a more informed and deliberatively structured instrument of political accountability.

Conversely, a national jury without the power to initiate a recall risks being ineffective: a president receiving repeated negative assessments could simply disregard the judgments (even if their reputation suffers) and fail to take seriously scrutiny exercises that culminate only in a nonbinding public statement. Without the recall mechanism, citizens would possess only an

[17] A similar recall trigger process, implemented by two consecutive constituency juries, is advocated by Leipold (2025, 13) for members of the legislature.

[18] Rousseau himself endorsed the use of petitions to challenge the executive magistrates' administration of the state in *LM*, 263–72. See Ghins (2026, chapter 1).

[19] The national jury is thus an "empowered mini-public" (that is, a mini-public endowed with binding decision-making power) albeit with a specific, narrowly circumscribed scope: namely, to contribute to the two-step decision of whether to *initiate* a recall referendum. The decision to *recall* always remains with the people. For the case for and against empowered mini-publics, albeit on policy issues rather than the conduct of public officials, see Landemore (2020) and Lafont (2019).

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incomplete form of control over their representatives by Rousseau's standards—that is, censorship without revocation, or influence without legally binding power. By granting citizens controlling power over members of the executive through a final decision with binding consequences, the recall referendum supplements the deliberative accountability fostered by the national jury. Recalls also strengthen censorship in another key way. The "threat" of a recall incentivizes representatives to take deliberative interactions with the national jury seriously and to offer solid justifications to avoid being revoked.[20]

CONCLUSION

This article has challenged the prevailing view that Rousseau confined elite accountability to elections. I have highlighted his account of how citizens, acting *qua* democratic government, could hold executive representatives accountable through practices of censorship and recall. I then explored how Rousseau's theory might be adapted to contemporary representative democracies through a combination of a national jury and presidential recall referendums. By uniting deliberative scrutiny with the binding power to remove officials, this model offers a neglected yet potentially powerful framework for strengthening democratic oversight of executive authority. As such, it could co-exist with sortition-based institutions that have been recently proposed to counteract the oligarchic tendencies of the privileged few, including randomly elected second chambers (Abizadeh 2021; Gastil and Wright 2019), a people's tribunate (McCormick 2011; Prinz and Westphal 2024; Vergara 2020, chapter 9), and constituency juries overseeing legislators (Leipold 2025). Further research could examine in greater detail both the procedure and operationalization of a Rousseauian national jury/presidential recall combination, and how it might interact with these institutions.

Censorship and recalls were not Rousseau's only accountability tools. A fuller picture of his theory would also closely consider imperative mandates, which applied not to the executive but to members of legislative assemblies. Rousseau only endorsed what might be called *negative* imperative mandates: a deputy was to act freely so long as he did "nothing contrary to the express will of his constituents" (*GP*, 191; compare Vandamme 2026). Like executive officials, Rousseau's deputies were subject to reporting and censorship upon their return from the legislative assembly, but in this case, the process was facilitated by written instructions against which their actions could be assessed. These assessments did not lead to recall, which would have been impractical in the Polish case, where legislative assemblies were nonpermanent and lasted six weeks, but instead to votes on re-eligibility (*GP*, 190). A complete Rousseauian framework for mass democracies would therefore involve censorship and recall for the executive, and binding mandates backed by censorship and re-eligibility votes for legislators.

Implementing Rousseau's model, even when restricted to presidential accountability, encounters serious difficulties in today's democracies. As discussed, Rousseau recognized that the task of a tribunal of censors was inherently complex due to the potential mismatch between its declarations and public opinion. A national jury would face a similar challenge. Through direct deliberative engagement with officials, its members would be better positioned to form accurate judgments than citizens dispersed across a large country, often relegated to passive spectatorship through mediated channels (Manin 1997, 218–35; Green 2010). Still, such a body would need to be cautious in its conclusions. Public condemnation of a widely admired president, or the exoneration of a figure seen as corrupt, could alienate citizens. In his discussion of the French Tribunal of Marshals in the *Letter to d'Alembert* (67–75), Rousseau explained that a censorial tribunal, though dependent on public sentiment, could nonetheless guide it, nudging opinion through carefully framed judgments. Likewise, the national jury would need to issue statements that both resonate with and, when needed, gently challenge prevailing public views.

A second difficulty lies in ensuring that members of the jury and voters in presidential recall referendums make fair judgments. Rousseau warned that, in commercial societies, public opinion often values wealth and status over competence and integrity (Rousselière 2021). In such a climate, jury members and referendum voters risk exonerating unworthy officials or punishing upright ones. To counter this distortion of public judgment, Rousseau proposed two key measures in addition to institutional designs that foster impartiality through pluralism (Garsten 2021; Oprea 2019): context-specific policies aimed at reducing economic inequalities (Neuhouser 2013; Rousselière 2019) and education, in pluralistic commercial societies, oriented toward cultivating critical judgment (Rousselière 2016; Schaeffer 2014). With these measures, citizens selected by lot and voters in referendums would be more likely to judge based on merit and competence rather than wealth or prestige.

The third and perhaps most formidable obstacle is institutional resistance. Officeholders, particularly presidents, are unlikely to welcome mechanisms that increase scrutiny and accountability. Rousseau anticipated this dynamic: the *Social Contract* (III, 14) observed that magistrates often oppose citizen assemblies precisely because these gatherings demand justifications and impose checks. His advice to citizens facing such resistance can be gleaned from his critique of Geneva's mid-eighteenth-century oligarchy. Convinced that the city's magistrates had usurped popular

[20] Note one final advantage of combining a national jury chosen by lot with recall referendums. Critics of sortition worry that lotteries undermine citizens' political agency by bypassing mass parties and their role in political mobilization (Lafont and Urbinati 2024, chapter 6). In the Rousseauian model proposed here, judgment by citizens selected by lot in the national jury would indeed be as insulated from parties as possible to foster an impartial, cross-partisan judgment. Yet that judgment would subsequently inform votes during recalls, which would remain moments of intense party mobilization.

sovereignty, Rousseau urged citizens to mobilize in clubs (Kelly 2018) and to submit petitions (Verli 2018) to demand the establishment of accountability mechanisms. While Rousseau believed that even the best-constituted states tend toward corruption, he also believed that this drift could be resisted, not through violent revolution, but through public deliberation, civic mobilization, and institutional reform aimed at reinforcing elite accountability.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the editor, Alison McQueen, and to the anonymous reviewers, whose feedback and advice greatly improved this article. An earlier version was presented at the Cambridge University Intellectual History and Political Thought seminar, and I thank the audience members for their perceptive comments. I also thank those who engaged with this piece and helped me refine my arguments: Robin Douglass, Bruno Leipold, Stephen Sawyer, Pierre-Etienne Vandamme, and Yanina Welp.

FUNDING STATEMENT

This research was funded by the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique—FNRS.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human participants.

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