Nobody Gets a Pass: Why Accountability Gets Fought

By Matthew Coley · October 28, 2026

Bring up accountability, and watch how fast people fight it. Not argue with it. Fight it, tooth and nail, like you tried to take something from them.

I've watched it happen at every level. A kid on a four-wheeler. A pack of cyclists in the middle of the road. A man who made it big and decided the rules were for everybody else.

Different people, same move. Each one takes a freedom, stretches it past where it was meant to go, and treats anyone who objects as the enemy.

Psychology has names for every step of it.

Why accountability feels like an attack

When people believe they have a freedom and feel it threatened, they push to take it back, often harder than before. Psychologist Jack Brehm named this **psychological reactance** in his 1966 book *A Theory of Psychological Reactance*.

The experiments are almost funny. In one 1966 study, Brehm and Thomas Hammock let children pick from several candy bars. When an adult told them not to choose a certain one, they went for it. In a 1970 study, Stephen Worchel and Brehm found that telling an audience they *could not* hold a position made them more likely to adopt it.

The theory adds three details that matter here:

- The more important the freedom feels, the harder people fight for it.
- The freedom only has to be *believed* in. It doesn't have to be real.
- People can feel threatened just watching someone in their group get restricted.

That last one explains the pile-on. Tell one rider to get off your property, and his friends take it personally too.

Reactance explains the fight. It doesn't excuse it. The question is how these people came to believe the freedom was theirs in the first place.

Example 1: The four-wheeler on the road

When I was younger, the lines were clear. Everybody knew driving a four-wheeler in the street was illegal.

But in the communities out in the national forest, ATVs on the road are considered normal. Everybody does it.

Now the kids who grew up with that are young adults, and they're pushing it further. They ride to the store. They ride to the gas station. They ride down the middle of the road like it's appropriate. They cut through other people's ditches and property for no reason except that they can. Try to talk to one of them about it, and suddenly *you're* the problem.

What the law says. Texas Transportation Code §551A.051 allows an off-highway vehicle on a highway *only* as that chapter provides. The exceptions are narrow: farm and utility work, short daytime golf trips on slow roads, master planned communities, crossing a road, or roads a city or certain counties approve by ordinance. A run to the gas station isn't one of them. Riding through someone's property after being told to stay off is criminal trespass under Penal Code §30.05, usually a Class B misdemeanor: up to 180 days and a $2,000 fine.

How it got normal. Sociologist Diane Vaughan called it **normalization of deviance**: when a rule gets broken again and again with no consequence, people stop seeing it as a rule. She built the idea studying the 1986 Challenger disaster and has said it applies down to the size of a family. Robert Cialdini's 1990 littering research explains why it spreads. People follow what others visibly *do* over what's *approved*. In 2008, Kees Keizer's team in the Netherlands showed one broken rule invites others. Where an alley wall was covered in graffiti, 69% of people littered a flyer, versus 33% when the wall was clean.

So the rider believes the road is his because everybody he grew up around acted like it was. Tell him otherwise, and reactance kicks in.

Example 2: The cyclist who uses his rights to block the road

Cycling laws were written to protect cyclists. Some riders use them to impede traffic instead, and make the road less safe for everyone. It's a total thumbing of the nose.

What the law actually says. Texas Transportation Code §551.103 is more on the driver's side than most people know:

The rule	What it means
Ride as near as practicable to the right edge when slower than traffic	The default is to stay right
Two abreast is allowed, but riders two abreast **may not impede the normal and reasonable flow of traffic**	Two-wide holding up a line of cars is illegal
Two abreast on a laned road must stay in **a single lane**	Spreading across lanes is illegal
No more than two abreast, except on a part of the road set aside only for bikes	Packs spread across the road are illegal

So the pack spread across a two-lane road, holding up traffic, isn't exercising its rights. It's breaking the law while claiming the law's protection.

The one place the law does let a cyclist slow you down is taking the lane. A rider can leave the right edge to pass, turn left, avoid a hazard, or when the lane is under 14 feet wide with no bike lane, or too narrow to share safely. It's legal. In my opinion it's also wrong: a protection turned into a weapon.

The pattern. In 2004, W. Keith Campbell and colleagues published nine studies building the Psychological Entitlement Scale. They defined entitlement as a stable belief that you deserve more than others and are entitled to more. High scorers took more for themselves in a shared-resource dilemma and got aggressive when their ego was threatened. The authors concluded entitlement has a broad and mostly destructive effect on how people treat others.

That's the rider who treats a shared road as his road, because a law once said he had a right to be there.

Example 3: The achiever who decides he's the exception

Some people achieve real things, and then start believing they *are* the example. They take small liberties. The liberties grow. Eventually some of them turn criminal. Politicians are the clearest case, and it crosses party lines.

The Bathsheba Syndrome. In 1993, management professors Dean Ludwig and Clinton Longenecker published "The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders" in the *Journal of Business Ethics*. They named it after King David, who was at the

height of his success when he took another man's wife and arranged her husband's death. Their argument: success itself sets the trap. As a leader rises, he gets four things at once:

- **Complacency.** Success breeds a loss of focus on the actual job.
- **Privileged access.** More reach to people, information and things others can't touch.
- **Control over resources.** Room to use them without anyone checking.
- **An inflated belief that he can control outcomes**.

They argued the real problem is that good people are often unprepared for the power success brings.

Hubris syndrome. In 2009, David Owen, a physician and former British Foreign Secretary, and Duke psychiatrist Jonathan Davidson published a study in the journal *Brain* on US presidents and UK prime ministers over the previous 100 years. They proposed **hubris syndrome**: a personality change *acquired* by holding power, not something the person was born with. Its signs include contempt for advice and criticism, recklessness, and a moral certainty that overrides cost and consequence. They found repeated election wins made it more likely. Their remedy was accountability itself: term limits and climates where leaders answer for what they do.

That's the man who built something and decided the rules were for the people beneath him. To him, accountability isn't a standard. It's an insult. Reactance again, at the top of the ladder.

The common move: you become the problem

In all three examples, the moment you object, *you* get recast as the bad guy. That's not a coincidence.

Most people feel guilty when they do wrong. People who keep doing wrong have to switch the guilt off, and they use predictable tricks. Albert Bandura called this **moral disengagement**. In a 1996 study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Bandura and colleagues measured eight such mechanisms in 799 children. Kids who used them more were more aggressive and more delinquent. Two did the most work: dressing up harmful conduct as justified, and blaming the victim.

You've heard all of them:

- **Minimizing the harm:** "It's just a ditch." "You can wait thirty seconds." "Nobody got hurt."
- **Spreading the blame:** "Everybody rides out here." "They all do it in Washington."

- **Justifying it:** "I have every right to be here." "I've done more for this town than you ever will."
- **Blaming the victim:** "Why are you so uptight?" "Road rage much?" "This is a political attack."

The last one is the tell. If you're the problem, they don't have to be.

What actually changes it

The research agrees on one thing: accountability works when it's clear, visible and held. It doesn't work when it's mumbled once and dropped.

- **Vaughan:** the cure for normalized deviance is clear standards that people actually enforce.
- **Cialdini:** when attention is pulled back to what's *approved*, behavior follows.
- **Keizer:** order spreads the same way disorder does.
- **Owen and Davidson:** leaders stay grounded where systems make them answer for what they do.

Reactance means the first person who speaks up will catch heat. Expect it. That doesn't make him the problem. The neighbor who tells the rider to get out of his ditch, the driver who says the road isn't a private lane, the voter who says no man is above the rules. They're the only part of this story working the way it should.

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