
CIVIL SOCIETY, POWER, AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

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ABSTRACT:

Democratic accountability is often understood as a function of constitutional design and institutional checks. While these mechanisms remain essential, political experience suggests that formal institutions alone are insufficient to restrain power or ensure responsible governance. Here we see that public accountability is sustained not merely through legal and administrative arrangements, but through the continuous engagement of civil society as a democratic space of vigilance, critique, and moral evaluation.

Here the paper conceptualizes civil society as a sphere situated between state authority and private life, where citizens collectively monitor, question, and respond to the exercise of power. Drawing on classical and modern political thought, it examines how civic associations, social movements, media, and citizen networks contribute to democratic accountability by subjecting authority to public scrutiny. This analysis further considers how digital governance has transformed traditional modes of accountability, expanding opportunities for participation while simultaneously introducing new challenges such as fragmentation, misinformation, and performative activism.

The central argument advanced is that accountability cannot be secured through institutions alone. It requires an active civic sphere capable of translating public concern into sustained political pressure. By foregrounding the relationship between civil society, power and accountability, the paper contributes to contemporary debates on democratic governance and highlights the enduring relevance of civic engagement in preserving democratic legitimacy.

KEYWORDS:

Democratic Accountability, Responsible Governance, Civic Sphere, Legitimacy, Digital Governance.



Introduction: Power and the Problem of Accountability

In political theory power is always a central concern. The question of how power is merely acquired, how it is restrained, justified, and made answerable to the public is seen from classical philosophy to modern democratic thought. Democratic systems believed that authority derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed, yet history has demonstrated that power tends to concentrate, evade scrutiny, and operate beyond the reach of formal controls repeatedly.

Constitutional arrangements, legal frameworks, and institutional checks such as legislatures, courts, and regulatory bodies have been addressing these problems in modern democracies. While these mechanisms are indispensable, they do not exhaust the meaning of accountability. Informal practices, bureaucratic discretion, through digital technological systems the power is often operated, which remain opaque to ordinary citizens. As governance becomes more complex, the gap between authority and public oversight widens. It is within this gap that civil society assumes critical importance.

Power is observed, questioned, and morally evaluated outside the formal structures of the state through space provided by civil society. And the civil society is not merely a supplementary feature of democracy, but a constitutive element of public accountability. The institutional mechanisms risks becoming hollow, procedural safeguards detached from lived political experience without active civic engagement.

Conceptualizing Civil Society in Political Thought

The idea of civil society has evolved across different traditions of political thought. Political community is recognized as a space sustained by civic participation and shared norms by classical thinkers like Aristotle. In modern political theory, civil society came to be conceptualized as a distinct sphere located between the state and the market, comprising voluntary associations, social movements, professional organizations, and informal network of citizens. Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of American democracy is considered as the foundation to this understanding. Tocqueville understood that the vitality of democratic dependency is not only on the institutions, but on the habits of associations engraved in the citizens. Voluntary organization played an important role for individuals to act collectively, oppose arbitrary authority, and participate meaningfully in public life. Civil society started to function as a school of democracy,

sowing seeds of civic responsibility and public spirit.

By emphasizing civil society's mediating role, later theorists expanded this view. Civil society influences governance by shaping public opinion, mobilizes collective action, and articulating moral claims rather than exercising authority directly. Civil society focuses on persuasion rather than coercion, and through legitimacy rather than command. This distinct way of influencing makes civil society indispensable to democratic accountability. At the same time, civil society is not inherently virtuous. It reflects the reality of civil society which has problems like social inequalities, different ideologies, and power relation with the society. Understanding this complexity should be done through contested and dynamic democratic space rather than an idealized entity.

Accountability Beyond Institutions

Accountability in institutional terms seen as checks and balances, judicial review, legislative oversight, and administrative procedures, yes, these mechanisms are necessary but they are insufficient to address the full range of ways in which power works. Adapting to constraints, shifting to informal or less visible arenas is the special character of authority that escapes institutional scrutiny. Political power majorly works through bureaucratic discretion, policy implementation, agenda-setting, and technological governance, and rarely exercised through formal decision-making process. And these forms of power are difficult to regulate through just legal mechanisms alone. So, accountability must be seen not only through legal obligation, but as a social practice sustained through public vigilance.

Civil society creates conditions under which power must justify continuously to contribute to the broader understanding of accountability. Civil society subjects authority to moral and political evaluation through public debate, protest, advocacy, and critique. Accountability can be achieved through sustained public engagement too, not only by institutional enforcement. This perspective reframes accountability as an ongoing democratic process rather than a static institutional outcome. It shows that the importance of civic participation in changing political behavior and maintain democratic legitimacy.

Civil Society as a Watchdog of Power

The role of watchdog is the most visible function of civil society

in contemporary democracies. Exposing wrongdoing, and mobilize public attention around issues of injustice, corruption, and abuse by those who are in power are monitored by civic organizations, advocacy groups, independent media and citizen movements. Civil society does not enforce compliance through coercion like state institutions, it relies on credibility, public trust, and moral authority. Civil society reduces the information gap between the state and citizens by gathering information, translating complex policy decisions into accessible language and amplifying marginalized voices. Even the watchdog role has its limitations, there are chances where civil society can become politicized, co-opted, or aligned with particular interests. Their effectiveness can be seen through maintenance of independence and ethical integrity. So, a mature analysis of civil society must balance recognition of its democratic contribution with awareness of its vulnerabilities.

Beyond exposure and mobilization, the watchdog function of civil society focuses on accountability by shaping the norms through which power can be judged. By repeatedly asking authority, civil society helps establish expectations of transparency, justification, and responsiveness. With time, these expectations focus on how power is going to get exercised, even when no immediate legal actions follow. From then accountability not only operates through punishment, but also through reputational costs and the demand for public legitimacy. Civil society plays a preventive role also, the awareness that decisions and actions will be subjected to public scrutiny often deters abuse before it even occurs. When the people in authority anticipate investigation by civic organizations or independent media, power will be exercised with greater caution. This type of anticipatory accountability is especially significant in matters where institutional oversight is slow, politically constrained, or selectively applied. The effectiveness of this role however, depends on the strength and diversity of civil society. A plural civic sphere makes sure that scrutiny is not monopolized by a narrow set of actors, where civil society is going to get weakened, silenced, or fragmented, the watchdog function deteriorates, allowing power to operate with reduced visibility. Therefore, accountability is closely tied to the vitality of civil society itself. In this sense, the watchdog role is not episodic, but structural, embedded in the everyday function of democratic life.

Digital Governance and Changing Forms of Accountability

The digital transformation of governance has played an important role in reshaping the conditions in which accountability operates. Digital platforms have made way for participation, enabling rapid mobilization, real-time scrutiny, and wider dissemination of information. The other contributors for lowering barriers to civic engagement are social media, online campaigns, and transparency initiatives. With this the digital governance brings its own challenges like the proliferation of information, which does not make sure informed deliberation. Meaningful accountability can be undermined by misinformation, polarization, and performative activism. The rising of digital surveillance and algorithmic decision-making increases concern about new types of power operation beyond people's understanding. The role of civil society here is both easy and complicated. Digital tools help in visibility and participation, with this they also demand greater responsibility, critical engagement, and ethical restraint. Accountability in this digital age needs not just access to platforms, but also the capacity to sustain rational critique and collective judgement.

The expansion of digital governance has also changed speed and reach of accountability. But in traditional mechanisms, it was often responded to decisions only after implementation. Digital platforms enable near-instant scrutiny. Citizens can give opinion on policies, administrative actions, or political statements as they unfold, bringing new expectations of quick response from authorities. This has increased public pressure in political actors to justify their actions continuously rather than in delayed or neglectful manner. However, speed does not automatically change to meaningful accountability. Instant circulation of information often leads to emotion over deliberation, reducing complex political decisions to public attention without addressing the real concerns. Therefore, civil society plays an important role in digital spaces and its responsibility goes beyond amplifying voices to sustaining informed critique, contextualizing information, and maintaining public attention time to time. Accountability in this digital age requires long time engagement as well as quick reaction. Without sustained civic engagement and critical reflection, digital scrutiny becomes fleeting, which allows authority to outlast public concern. Digital governance thus rewrites accountability, but does not throw away the need for organized, reflective civil society action.

Limits and Tensions within Civil Society

Internal tensions are marked within civil society, it is often fragmented, reflecting bigger social inequalities and ideological divisions. Availability of resources, platforms, and networks shapes whose opinions are heard, and raises questions about representation and inclusion. With this civil society may reproduce power relations which seeks to challenge. Organizations may focus on visibility over substance or even adopt confrontational strategies which undermine deliberation. Recognizing these limits helps in avoiding romanticized accounts of civil society. Sustaining pluralism, inclusivity, and ethical engagement are dependent on civil society's contribution to accountability this should be acknowledged by the realistic democratic theory. The other limitations of civil society lies in the unequal distribution of its capacity. Even civil society is often seen as an inclusive arena, participation frequently reflects existing social hierarchies. Groups with greater access to education, technology, and organizational resources are better kept to influence public debate, while marginalized communities struggle to make their voices heard. This inequality complicates claims that civil society automatically enhances democratic accountability.

In addition, civil society may reproduce the very power relations it wants to challenge. Competition for visibility, funding, and influence can encourage organizations to prioritize symbolic action over sustained engagement. In some cases, confrontational strategies may mobilize attention but kills deliberation, leading accountability to moral accusation rather than constructive democratic practice which is much needed. These types of dynamics risk polarizing public discourse and reduces the willingness of political actors to respond meaningfully. Recognizing these tensions does not hurt the democratic importance of civil society, but it strengthens analytical clarity. Accountability is more effective when civic actors remain self-reflective and attentive to their own forms of power. A realistic democratic theory must accept that civil society contributes to accountability not by just its presence, but through practices that promote inclusivity, reflexivity, and ethical responsibility.

Conclusion: Accountability as a Democratic Practice

Here the paper argues that public accountability cannot be secured only through institutions; while constitutional and legal systems remain essential, they are insufficient to handle power in complex and evolving

democracies. Accountability should always be understood as a continuous democratic practice sustained through civic engagement. Civil society plays a very important role in this process by enabling citizens to act collectively, question authority, and articulate moral claims. In doing this, it leads to transformation in accountability from a procedural requirement to a lived political experience. In an era of digital governance and expanding state capacity, the role and importance of civil society become more pronounced day by day. Ultimately, democracy not only depends on institutional design, but also on the willingness of citizens to perform the difficult and ongoing work of holding power to account.

Getting to know accountability as a democratic practice shifts attention beyond institutional design to the day-to-day role of citizens. Accountability depends on a civic culture in which citizens are willing to question authority, demand justification, and remain attentive to the exercise of power. Civil society gives the primary place for which these democratic habits are formed through associations, movements, and public debate, citizens learn to collectively articulate shared concerns, and recognize their responsibility in sustaining democratic norms. In this process, accountability shifts beyond a procedural requirement and becomes a lived political experience. In the era of expanding state capacity and digital governance, the role of civil society becomes more significant. As power grows more complex and less visible, continuous public scrutiny becomes indispensable. Democracy survives not because power is perfectly controlled, but because it is persistently questioned time to time. Accountability, therefore, must be considered as an ongoing democratic task renewed through sustained civic participation.

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