

# The Web of Governance and Democratic Accountability

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## Abstract

*Developments in e-government are resulting in fundamental reorganizations of the ways in which democratic governments operate as well as in the ways in which citizens relate to their own and other governments and to each other. Of special relevance here are the manners in which institutions and citizens are becoming interconnected into a complex 'web of governance' via largely uncoordinated information networks.*

*This paper examines how this web of governance is simultaneously producing changes in individual citizen's senses of identity and challenges to conventional notions of accountability in liberal democratic systems. Together, it is argued, these suggest moving focus from e-government (the institutions of government) to e-governance (the larger web of formal and informal institutions, organizations, norms, traditions, authority structures, groups and behaviors within which individuals and groups live their lives). Such a refocusing holds the promise of developing citizen capacity and identity in balance with formal governmental transformations. Specific illustrative examples are provided including Seoul Metropolitan Government's OPEN System.*

## 1. Introduction

The term *e-government* encompasses a broad spectrum of activities involving the purposed deployment of modern communications and information technologies to improve government operations and services as well as to enable a more cooperative and meaningful relationship with citizens and other non-state actors. E-government initiatives have predominantly focused on changing government operations, structures, and services rather than redefining a new role and set of responsibilities for citizens or finding ways to transform governments to be better suited for the information age.

Several sorts of positive claims are frequently made in support of e-government efforts. First, it is argued, e-government can help to make government more *efficient*. That is, successfully deployed e-government applications

should result in either maintaining levels of government productivity at reduced cost or improving productivity at a relatively low increase in cost. In the US, renewing a driving license at a kiosk might be an example of increasing the quality of a government service while reducing the average cost of providing that service.

Second, it is frequently suggested that e-government applications can help to make government more *transparent*. Transparency here denotes exposing more of the internal workings of government to interested citizens. Examples include posting information about government hearings on the Web or providing Internet-hosted 'wizards' for showing citizens how to accomplish some task such as obtaining a passport. While from a democratic theory standpoint, transparency can be viewed as end in itself, it can also be argued from a market perspective that increases in transparency, by providing relevant information to citizens, will at equilibrium make for a more efficient government.

Finally, and perhaps most optimistically, e-government efforts are argued to have the potential to *transform* government by helping to bring about changes the way in which governments are structured. Often made argument in this regard include claims that the internal organization of governments make them ill-adapted to the realities of globalization and that the internal organization often exposes too much complexity to citizens and thus discourages citizen participation and involvement. Efforts intended to produce government transformation include the *eEurope* project (see [http://europa.eu.int/information\\_society/eeurope/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/index_en.htm)) and the National Performance Review Project (now National Partnership for Reinventing Government) initiated during the Clinton administration.

These various arguments generally presuppose the existence of either some form of democratic government (e.g., the US or the Republic of Korea (ROK) or a government in the process of attempting to become democratic). While nothing in the concept of e-government requires democratic political organization (indeed there is now considerable interest in e-

government applications in the People's Republic of China (PRC)), in this paper we want to focus on the implications of e-government, and more generally the increased importance of trans-national communications, for working democracies. More particularly we will argue that e-government applications, reinforced by global communications, are beginning to pose interesting practical and theoretical challenges to conventional notions of democratic accountability.

In this paper we will first discuss the concept of e-government and contrast it with a broader concept – that of e-governance – which highlights the increase in the numbers of salient actors in the international arena as well as the importance of new relationships that are forming in the context of the information age. Secondly, we propose that these changes are resulting in a new challenge for governments themselves; a sort of accountability paradox. This concept is illustrated by way of a discussion of Simon's notion of nearly decomposable systems. Third, we focus on the role of the information age in creating new relationships among and between various groups, thereby increasing social capital; facilitating the formation and strengthening of identity groups; and making possible the "cyber-diffusion" of social movements. The increasingly visible activity of these groups, made possible by expanded possibilities for communications and transfer of information, contributes significantly to the accountability paradox. Finally, we suggest some e-governance solutions which can support governments as they attempt to adapt to the changing environment.

In particular, there has been an ongoing discussion in the academic literature about whether governmental applications of information technology will ultimately be decentralizing or whether they will lead to increased centralization. While this large debate is beyond the scope of our paper, our argument can be viewed as compatible with the notion that the political impact of IT is, ultimately, decentralizing. More specifically, we will be claiming that the information decentralization associated with the information age is also producing a non-hierarchical decentralization of political authority and power (for a rigorous treatment of the concept of *decentralization* and the distinction between *information* and *authority* decentralization, see [1, 2]).

## 2. Accountability

Never before in human history have so many expected so much from their national governments. And never before have national leaders so consistently fed rising popular expectations with sweeping promises of government services. However, governments also find themselves having effective control over increasingly fewer of their overall responsibilities.

Among the joint consequences of these two observations has been the widely documented increase in citizens' cynicism about their government's capacity to deliver what it promises. Statistics indicate that civic involvement, public participation, and trust in the government have been on the decline. In 1969, 59% of the US public tuned into Presidential press conferences, whereas 30 years later that number was down to 6.5% [3]. Additionally, in the early 1960s roughly 75% of the US public stated they trusted the federal government to do what is right just about always or most of the time; that number dropped to 29% in July 2001 [4].

Low public participation is often associated with cynicism. In the 1998 midterm elections, US voter turnout was down to levels not seen since 1942 (nationwide) and since 1818 in the South [5]. Furthermore 60% of US adults indicated that they felt disconnected from the government, and that disconnection seems to be growing with each new generation [6]. While trust in government has increased slightly since September 11, 2001, this is expected to be a temporary surge [7]. Results such as these are troubling since conventional notions of democratic accountability and obligation rest in part upon large measures of public confidence in national government.

Consider these data from a more theoretical perspective. For nearly all of human history, the obligation of citizens has been to obey their rulers and, most often, rulers were accountable only to some higher being; most certainly not to 'their' citizens. Moreover, the scope of citizen obligation was circumscribed by, among other things, physical geography.

In the last three centuries, the experiments with liberal representative democracy have turned these obligation and accountability relations upside down. Now power is viewed as flowing from citizens to their governors, and the government is held to have a positive obligation to provide an environment in which citizens are generally free to pursue their preferences. However, in the contemporary information age the decisions that deeply affect citizens are often made by entities (such as other governments, NGO's, MNC's) that exist, at least in part, outside the citizen's home country. And, as we shall see, a citizen's sense of political identity may no longer be tied only to a particular country.

### 2.1. Agency

For this modern notion of accountability to make moral sense, there must be some reasonably tight connection between what a government does (or does not do) and the politically relevant quality of life experienced by citizens. In other words, a citizen's sense of well-being should in large part be conditioned by the broad set of activities of the citizen's government. The government

must be an *agent* whose (in)actions matter to citizens. If this were not the case, then in what sense should a government be held morally accountable for that over which it has only very limited control?

Yet, in today's world, the politically relevant quality of most people's lives is the consequence not of one government but rather of the joint effects of a number of loosely connected governments and other actors such as multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations and increasingly, both sustained and ad hoc groups of citizens themselves. Moreover, these governments and other entities are rarely arranged hierarchically or coordinated in any significant fashion. Indeed, they are often not even located physically 'near' the citizen whose life is affected by government actions. If this is correct, then the notion of agency upon which the modern notion of accountability rests is called into question. *Given this diminished control, who or what is to be held accountable and through what mechanisms is this possible?*

## 2.2. Accountability Paradox

To pursue this line of reasoning, it will prove useful to distinguish between *governance* and *government*. For our purposes, *government* denotes formal institutions of authority and power. Thus we speak of the *US government* and, in so speaking, are referring to institutions such as the president, congress, etc. *Governance*, on the other hand, denotes the larger non-hierarchical web of formal and informal institutions, organizations, groups, norms, traditions, authority structures, and behaviors within which individuals and groups live their lives. In this sense, a governance system, while it may well include particular governments, is a richer concept that includes such notions as non-governmental organizations, corporations, identity groups, civil society and, increasingly, a plethora of governments and quasi-governmental institutions. To name by way of example just a few specific players in this tangled web of governance, consider the United Nations, DaimlerChrysler, the WTO, the government of Peru, the Taliban, and the Kurds now living in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey.

Our claim then is that increasingly and throughout the world, webs of governance are mattering more while specific governments are mattering relatively less and that thus citizens sense that they cannot adequately hold their government accountable. While governments continue to be of primary importance on many issues, no single government is dominant over the entire range of politically relevant issues staked out by its citizens. Consider issue domains such as the environment, drugs, migration, and ethnic conflict. Even the US government cannot dictate outcomes in these areas. Further, in the

developing global economy, the issue of jurisdiction becomes very cloudy. For example, in late 2001 a US district court dismissed a case brought against Yahoo by several French groups, who charged Yahoo with violating French laws against selling Nazi-labeled WWII objects [8]. Prior to this, a French court ordered Yahoo to prevent French citizens from seeing the information. Such cases leave many questions concerning how governments can handle this kind of cross-border concern. (For a different though largely compatible argument coming to many of the same conclusions, see [9]).

At the same time that the moral plausibility of conventional notions of accountability is challenged, survey research technology has enabled the measurement of the politically relevant preferences of people and the assessment of the degree to which a person's government is perceived to be producing outcomes reflective of these preferences. However, if it is the web of *governance* that matters, as opposed to the particular *government*, then these surveys are providing only partial feedback. The mere act of conducting them and the report of their results is likely to increase the cynicism of citizens being surveyed since such polls reinforce the sense that a government, *their* government, should be primarily accountable for the quality of relevant aspects of their lives. This then is the modern *accountability paradox*. The paradox results from the fact that the more ubiquitous is public opinion and other information, the more that both the various institutions of governance and citizens 'know' what people want. And yet, given globalization, the less can any institution of government be expected to respond satisfactorily across the full range of constituent demands.

## 3. Web of Governance and Complexity

Herbert Simon in his *Sciences of the Artificial* [10] introduced the notion of a nearly decomposable system (NDS). An NDS is one which, while coupled to its environment, is only loosely so, and it can, for many analytic purposes, be treated as if it were an isolated system. For Simon, the NDS provides a nice way to hierarchically decompose complex systems into more analytically tractable subsystems.

Consider an apartment building consisting of many individual apartments. Assume that each of the apartments has its own thermostat for controlling room temperatures. The individual apartments may share common walls with other apartments and, of course, heat may flow across these common walls. However, for many purposes each apartment can be thought of as a nearly decomposable system in which individual thermostats can adequately control each apartment's temperature. For the purpose of climate control, each apartment can be considered to be a NDS. And, to the extent that this

assumption is accurate, a properly working thermostat (connected to a properly sized furnace) should be expected to maintain desired room temperatures. The point here is that while the temperature of one apartment may affect the temperature of neighboring apartments, this effect will be very modest. In an analogous sense we are arguing that during the industrial age nation states could be, for many purposes, thought of as NDSs. In such environments governments like thermostats can appropriately be held accountable for maintaining the state of their environments.

Now imagine that a mad carpenter is let loose in our apartment building. This carpenter has with him a drill that he uses to drill many holes in each of the interior walls (including the shared walls) of the building. Now heat will move fairly freely between apartments. No longer are the couplings between the apartments loose. Rather the temperature of an apartment will have considerable affect on its neighbors. Individual thermostats will no longer be able to control apartment temperatures. The Global Information Age has produced effects like those of our mad carpenter. What happens in one nation (or one NGO or one multinational corporation) may have dramatic external and interactive effects. The couplings are no longer (if ever they were) loose and it is thus problematic to hold an individual government solely accountable for the quality of life of its citizens. The web of governance notion suggests that the couplings between and among nation states, NGOs, identity groups, citizens, and so on are much tighter than they have been in the past, and this in turn calls into question conventional notions of democratic accountability. In particular, getting back to the original Simon argument, this would mean that managing complexity through hierarchical decomposition may no longer work in the case of governance. And this in turn may help to account for the well-documented secular trend for increased cynicism among citizens in democracies.

And the problem is even worse than suggested in the above paragraph. In the example, our ‘mad carpenter’ was randomly drilling holes throughout the apartment complex. In the case of the international system analogs to the holes include the various international agreements and organizations created after World War II. These ‘holes’ were not created randomly but rather were placed in a manner intended enhance particular views of international relations and to reinforce preferred power relations.

#### **4. Identity and the Web of Governance**

The new possibilities brought about through the information age have created a context in which an increasing number of politically relevant relationships and identities are beginning to develop. Rather than being

characterized by hierarchy, these relationships can be thought of as forming a web of governance, or a networked society Wellman [11-13] in which there are multiple sets of overlapping relationships. This is a clear example of an information age shift away from nearly decomposable systems. In such a society, according to Wellman, “boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, links switch among multiple networks, and hierarchies are flatter and organization structures more complex ([11], p. 91)”.

The remarkable growth of communications (in terms of its global nature, its pervasiveness, and its speed) and the networking it permits are fashioning a world in which new identities may be formed, existing identities may be strengthened, and interconnections among identity groups are growing, posing new challenges for governments and governance. The interconnections among identity groups (just as the holes in the walls of our metaphorical apartment building) are increasing dramatically. This, in turn, opens new possibilities for political action. The demands brought about by some of these new relationships, new identity groups, and the resulting non-hierarchical network or web of governance, are not of a type which governments are currently organized to handle. As pressure on governments to manage new conflicts rises, control and agency ebb – a clear instantiation of the accountability paradox.

We now offer some examples of the ways in which the Internet and other information technologies have increased social capital and strengthened and created new identities and new relationships. Further, some of the implications of these changes for the ability of governments to be responsive are addressed. The picture that is created supports the desirability of an analytical shift from e-government to e-governance based on a web-of-governance model.

#### **4.1. The Increase in Social Capital–Greater Participation and Strengthened Relationships**

As the Internet opened up in the 1990s, an oft-expressed fear was that people would become glued to their computers, and isolation from peers would result – promoting the continuation of a decline in social capital documented by Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone* [14]. Some warned of the negative consequences for civil society – a withering of family and community ties, a decrease in participation in voluntary organizations, and withdrawal from public deliberative processes. To the contrary, however, evidence is emerging that the use of the Internet has in fact contributed to an increase in social capital. Studies conducted by Wellman et al. [13] and by the Pew Internet and American Life Project [15-17] support the contention that, in general, use of the Internet either supplements interpersonal, social and political

participation or enhances it. For example, Internet use has been found to be associated with greater participation in voluntary organizations and politics, not less [13]. US women appear to use communications via the Net to enhance relationships with family and friends [15] while many Muslim women, particularly those who are isolated from the Muslim community, take advantage of their ability to interact with and support each other at a distance [18].

Another study found that 84% of Internet users in the US (approximately 90 million Americans) have gone online to contact some kind of group; they use the Net to deepen ties to their local communities and establish relationships with others who share characteristics such as lifestyle, beliefs or ethnicity [16]. In the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, more than 53 million people in the US searched for news, shared emotions, and engaged in political debate about the attacks and the response of the government to the threat of terror [17]. According to Jeffrey Cole, founder of the UCLA Internet Project that conducted a post-September 11<sup>th</sup> survey, “[t]ens of millions of Americans shared an emotional connection through e-mail after the attacks – communication that in almost all instances would not have occurred through telephone or letters... Equally importantly, people around the world used e-mail and the Internet to reach out to Americans to demonstrate support, compassion, and sympathy. We believe that most of this international correspondence represents a whole new kind of communication...” [19]

Also in direct contrast with the predictions of greater isolation resulting from Internet use are the findings from another study that looked at urban development and the Internet. From an investigation of five cities, it appears that when community development centers begin to offer Internet services, people from diverse groups tend to meet, support each other, discuss local issues, and contribute to the social and economic development of the community [16].

#### **4.2. New and Strengthened Identities**

Information technologies not only foster the building and enhancement of relationships, they also provide the opportunity for dispersed members of identity groups to strengthen themselves in a variety of ways, for example, through mobilization, recruitment of active members, fundraising, and preservation of cultural, ideas, customs, and language. Further, dispersed groups who have common goals are able to organize for action, at times establishing a new, superordinate identity. Greater visibility has been afforded to groups as diverse as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who attempted to find out what happened to their “disappeared” children [20], and

neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups (see The Hate Directory, [21]).

Ethnic groups that have a Web presence include, for example, Native Americans (e.g. [www.nativeweb.org](http://www.nativeweb.org)), the Banabans ([www.banaban.com](http://www.banaban.com)), the Aborigines of Australia ([www.aboriginalaustralia.com](http://www.aboriginalaustralia.com)), the Saami of Scandinavia ([www.sametinget.se/english/index.html](http://www.sametinget.se/english/index.html)), and the Kurds ([www.kurdistan.org](http://www.kurdistan.org)). Groups that have used the Web for political purposes and to garner support for their plight include Afghani women ([www.rawa.org](http://www.rawa.org)), Tibetan refugees ([www.tibet.org](http://www.tibet.org)), and the Zapatistas ([www.utexas.edu/students/nave.az.html](http://www.utexas.edu/students/nave.az.html)). As identity groups gain membership, financial resources, and sympathy from the world community, their ability to act politically increases, and their relevance as political actors increases as well. For these identity groups, the Internet provides the function of the mad carpenter, fashioning holes through which information, sympathies, and mobilization efforts can flow. Resulting political action largely ignores national borders, contributing to the shift to a web of governance. As Kurt Mills suggests, as identities are realigned and decreasingly are associated with geographical boundaries, the information revolution is “undermining state authority by helping to ‘relocate’ authority, making new loci of allegiance possible[22]”.

#### **4.3. The “Cyber-Diffusion” of Social Movements**

Much has been said about the digital divide, the gap between the information “haves and have-nots,” and the concern that inequities existing between groups, classes, and nations will be reproduced, or worse, exacerbated in the information age. There is, in fact, some evidence that this is the case in certain situations. At the same time, however, as discussed above, the new availability of information and communications technologies has provided the opportunity for many social movements not only to further their goals, but to expand the political context within which they operate. According to Ayres, the Internet is being used as a tool for rapidly and broadly diffusing protest ideas and strategies. “Less concerned with such constraints as time and geographic space,” he says, “[this situation] has caught policymakers off guard with its ease of public accessibility and immediacy of impact [23]”. Again we see the formula for the accountability paradox: increased visibility of contention and higher expectations for government intervention paired with a decreased ability for government’s to control outcomes.

As an example, in the wake of the 2000 US Presidential election, a former union organizer unintentionally facilitated a nationwide protest movement. A month before the election, “as a lark,” he published a Web site, [Countercoup.org](http://Countercoup.org), that urged people across the country to protest if Gore lost the election in

the Electoral College, in spite of having won the popular vote. An hour of initial work eventually fostered public action in at least 42 cities, with over 2,000 people coming out to protest in Los Angeles [24]. Exley reflects that before the advent of the Internet this kind of mobilization to action could not have occurred in the absence of an established organization.

Although democratic governments generally have fairly elaborated laws, policies and processes that allow for protest, the presence of the Internet has enabled action by protest groups to occur not only in spontaneous ways, but also in an organized, and more significantly, a much more rapid manner on a global basis. A good example is that of the protests that were organized in many cities around the world against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) that was to be completed at OECD headquarters in 1998. After three years of fairly quiet negotiations, a working draft of the agreement was published on the Web. A groundswell of opposition and public demonstration against the Agreement ensured, resulting in the decision by OECD ministers to suspend talks [23].

Ayres argues that the Internet is encouraging new ways of interacting collectively, thus significantly changing the rules of contention. Protest groups now have new ways of behaving, a new vehicle by which to become empowered, and an expanded playing field. Contentious political action in the information age has become transnational, allowing for coordination among various groups. This results in a situation in which governments' existing structures for dealing with protest may no longer be relevant [23]. The spread of information via the Internet can make secrecy more difficult and may more often encourage or demand transparency. When institutions cannot respond to such demands, as noted earlier, they may lose the confidence of their citizens.

It would seem that the draw of identity is a strong one, and the opportunities for mobilization, solidarity, and action for identity groups are enhanced by the existence of ever increasing communications modalities. As Ayres notes [23], p.568, "[i]nternational processes have straitjacketed the state's ability to perform many of the interventionist functions of the past. [These processes] have created new targets, new international allies, new issues, and new and common strategic repertoires around which nonstate actors are rallying. This is where the Internet and its plethora of resources come into play in the cyber-diffusion of protest."

## 5. The Role of e-Governance

Governments are not hamstrung in this new context. Just as information and communications technologies can be an accelerator which can rapidly spread information (good or bad), protests, or problems from one region to

another (for example the Asian financial crisis), so can it be a means of transforming political systems to make them more efficient and transparent. The Seoul (ROK) Metropolitan Government provides a number of nice examples of this point and we shall focus here on one of those examples—OPEN.

South Korea moved very quickly from shambles after the Korean conflict to, by the latter part of twentieth century, being among the world's twelve largest economies. A significant part of this 'economic miracle' was associated with, if not produced by, highly centralized and informational opaque bureaucratic regimes in Korea. This centralization was until recently both economic and political. One side effect of this centralization and informational opacity was, not surprisingly, considerable bureaucratic corruption.

In the 1980s democracy movements in Korea led to a number of political reforms. Among these was, beginning in 1995, that the mayor of Seoul city (the capitol and spiritual center of South Korea) was popularly and directly elected. Mayor Goh Kun (who had also served as an appointed mayor of Seoul) made anti-corruption a key component of his tenure as mayor. Among the most innovative of his many reforms was his Online Procedures Enhancement for Civil Applications (OPEN) initiative.

Most fundamentally, OPEN is an Internet-based application whereby residents of Seoul can track the process of such things as permit applications from any Internet enabled computer. As they track the process they can tell where in the bureaucracy their application is, how long it has been there and where it will be going next. At the same time the Mayor's office can similarly observe how rapidly applications are moving through the system and can also easily ascertain if there are any systematic 'choke' points in the approval system. In other words, OPEN is intended to transform what had been an opaque approvals system into a far more transparent one. It is also worth noting that this transparency is achieved by decentralizing information.

OPEN went on-line to the public in April of 1999 [25] and at present supports more than fifty categories of civil applications ranging from construction permits to government purchasing. When a resident makes an application through OPEN, he is issued a case ID and a password. From there he can monitor the process of the application from any Internet connected computer via the Seoul Metropolitan Government's homepage ([www.metro.Seoul.kr](http://www.metro.Seoul.kr)). At present, OPEN is being accessed by about 2000 visitors per day, and about 40,000 applications have been registered via OPEN [25].

Initial evaluations of OPEN suggest it has been successful in increasing transparency. It is also reasonable to expect that it has been a factor in reducing opportunities for corruption. In the pre-OPEN days, a

citizen who wanted to track an application would have to come to City Hall and speak to the bureaucrat who was then in possession of the application. This presented an opportunity to try to accelerate processing via the exchange of side-payments. Now there is reduced need to actually visit City Hall. Moreover, the Mayor can easily determine if particular bureaucrats (or offices) are being systematically slow in processing applications.

More generally, OPEN has been recognized by both the United Nations and Transparency International as an effective system for increasing transparency while at the same time reducing corruption. OPEN also provides a nice example of how a relatively straightforward application of information technology (basically order tracking) can be adapted to the public sector in such a way as to reengineer processes and, ultimately, transform government. In this case it not only adapts to a web-of-governance environment, but also takes advantage of it by adopting its principles – thus constituting an example of e-governance rather than e-government.

Transparency, at least to the extent that it permits a citizen both to (i) develop realistic expectations about what government can and *cannot* do and (ii) monitor the concrete performance of government, can play a major role in enabling citizen's to appropriately assign accountability. OPEN provides a nice example of how an e-governance system that focuses simultaneously on developing government *and* citizen competency can play precisely that role.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how formal institutions and citizens are becoming interconnected into a complex non-hierarchical 'web of governance' via largely uncoordinated information networks. This web of governance is simultaneously producing changes in individual citizen's senses of identity and challenges to conventional notions of accountability in liberal democratic systems. Together, it was argued, these suggest moving focus from e-government (the institutions of government) to e-governance (the larger web of formal and informal institutions, organizations, norms, traditions, authority structures, groups and behaviors within which individuals and groups live their lives). Such a refocusing holds the promise of developing citizen capacity, awareness and identity in balance with formal governmental transformations. The Seoul Metropolitan Government's OPEN System provided a concrete example of an e-governance effort that increased transparency and, importantly, also increased citizen competency as well as provided citizens with a more realistic awareness of what government could and could not do. It is, we suggest, e-governance's simultaneous emphasis on citizen competency and awareness that can

help to address the 'accountability crisis' described in this paper.

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