

History of Transparency and Accountability Between Citizens and Power

Introduction

Transparency and accountability are cornerstones of democratic governance, ensuring that those in power (whether state officials, monarchs, or business elites) are answerable to the citizenry ¹. **Accountability** means government officials (or other power-holders) are responsible to the people for their actions and must act in the public interest ¹. **Transparency** means that decision-making and actions are open to public scrutiny, with citizens having the right to access information on how decisions are made ². Together, these principles allow citizens to monitor power and prevent abuses. From the Renaissance onward, the struggle for transparency and accountability has been a driving force behind political reforms, revolutions, and social movements around the globe. This report provides a comprehensive historical overview – including key theories, events, policies, and examples – of how citizens have gained leverage to demand accountability, how such concessions reinforce democracy, and cases where lack of transparency leads to failure.

Early Milestones: Renaissance and Reformation

By the late Middle Ages and Renaissance (c. 14th–16th centuries), cracks in absolute authority began to appear, laying groundwork for modern accountability. One early milestone was **Magna Carta** (1215) in England, often seen as a precursor to accountable governance. Magna Carta obliged King John to accept that taxes (for war, in this case) could not be raised without the realm's consent – effectively introducing the idea of **“no taxation without representation”** ³ ⁴. This concession, extracted by feudal barons, planted the seed for a more *constitutional monarchy*: over subsequent centuries, the English Parliament steadily asserted control over taxation and expenditures, checking royal power ³. Another pivotal moment came with the **Protestant Reformation**. In 1517, Martin Luther – a German theologian – publicly challenged the Catholic Church's corrupt practice of selling indulgences (payments for absolution of sins). Luther's act of nailing his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the church door symbolized an ordinary citizen (or in this case, a monk) demanding moral accountability from a powerful religious institution ⁵. His defiance ignited the Reformation, asserting believers' rights to scrutinize and reform authority. The Church eventually abolished the sale of indulgences in 1567, showing that sustained public pressure could force even the mighty papacy to concede some accountability ⁶. These early experiences established two guiding principles for the future: rulers should not abuse power to extract unjust payments from people, and there should be no taxation without representation ⁷.

Martin Luther hammers his 1517 Ninety-Five Theses to a church door in Wittenberg, challenging the Church's abuses. His actions asserted the right to demand accountability from powerful authorities ⁵.

During the same era, **Renaissance city-states** like Florence and Venice experimented with republican governance. Although often oligarchic, they had councils and administrative checks that stood in contrast to absolute monarchies. Renaissance political thinkers also began articulating ideas about accountable

governance. For instance, **Niccolò Machiavelli** (in *Discourses on Livy*, 1517) praised the Roman Republic's mixed constitution and citizen militias as models of a republic where leaders are checked by law and civic virtue, a theoretical foundation for accountability. Meanwhile, the invention of the **printing press** (15th century) dramatically improved transparency by enabling faster spread of information. Printed pamphlets and gazettes in the 16th and 17th centuries circulated political ideas and exposed malfeasance, creating an informed public that could question authority. The cumulative effect of these developments was to slowly erode the notion of divine-right, opaque rule and replace it with an expectation (at least among the educated classes) that power should justify itself to the people.

Enlightenment Theories and Revolutionary Accountability (17th–18th C.)

The 17th and 18th centuries saw the rise of **Enlightenment** philosophy and democratic revolutions, which provided both theoretical frameworks and practical mechanisms for transparency and accountability. **Social contract theory** emerged as a key framework: political philosophers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that government authority derives from an implicit contract with the governed – individuals consent to be governed in exchange for protection of their rights, and if rulers break this contract (for example, by ruling arbitrarily or oppressively), citizens are justified in withdrawing consent ¹. Locke, in particular, posited that when governments fail to protect life, liberty, and property, the people have a right to alter or abolish that government. This idea placed **accountability to citizens at the heart of legitimate government**, since the governed could hold rulers to the terms of the social contract. Rousseau further argued in *The Social Contract* (1762) that sovereignty resides with the people (the “general will”), implying that rulers are merely delegates of popular will and must remain transparent and answerable to that will.

Enlightenment thinkers also developed structural ideas to prevent abuse of power. **Baron de Montesquieu's** theory of **separation of powers** (1748) recommended dividing government into branches (executive, legislative, judicial) so that each could check and balance the others. This framework was meant to *institutionalize accountability* by ensuring no single ruler or body could rule unchecked. Montesquieu's ideas strongly influenced the design of modern constitutions that incorporate checks, balances, and oversight mechanisms (e.g. legislative scrutiny of the executive) ⁸ ⁹.

These theories found concrete expression in the **age of revolutions**. The **American Revolution (1775–1783)** was fueled by demands for representation and accountability – colonists protested “taxation without representation” and the arbitrary rule of King George III. When the United States formed its government, it embedded accountability and transparency provisions into its founding documents. The U.S. Constitution (drafted 1787) not only created an elected legislature and fixed-term presidencies (ensuring regular accountability via elections), but explicitly required transparency in governance. For example, the Constitution mandates that Congress publish a journal of its proceedings (the basis of today's Congressional Record), and that the President must report to Congress on the state of the union annually ¹⁰. These clauses guaranteed that government activities and finances would be open to public knowledge, preventing secret lawmaking or hidden budgets ¹¹. As another safeguard, the U.S. Constitution's **Emoluments Clause** barred officials from accepting gifts or payments from foreign states – an early anticorruption rule to ensure officials serve the public interest, not personal gain ¹². Shortly after, the **French Revolution (1789)** reinforced these ideals in Europe. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) proclaimed in Article 15 that “Society has the right to ask a public official for an accounting of his

administration", enshrining the principle that officials must answer to the public ¹³. France's revolutionary government also fostered freedom of the press and popular political clubs, which enhanced transparency by publicly debating and criticizing policies. Even in **Sweden**, a remarkable early policy was the **Freedom of the Press Act of 1766**, which is considered the world's first freedom of information law granting citizens the right to access government documents ¹³. Although Sweden's experiment was temporarily rolled back by a coup, it set a precedent that government **openness is a right**, not a privilege.

In sum, by the end of the 18th century, the theoretical foundations of accountable government were firmly established and many were codified into constitutions and laws. Power was increasingly seen not as the divine right of kings but as a **trust from the people**: rulers were expected to be transparent stewards of that trust, subject to removal if they betrayed it ¹ ¹⁴.

19th Century: Expanding Accountability and the Public Sphere

The 19th century carried forward the momentum of democratic accountability, albeit unevenly across the globe. In Europe and North America, reforms and revolutions broadened citizen participation and oversight of government, while the idea of accountability began extending to economic power as well.

Expansion of Suffrage and Parliaments: One major trend was the expansion of voting rights. In Britain, the Reform Acts (starting in 1832) gradually extended the parliamentary franchise beyond the aristocracy, meaning more citizens could elect representatives and thus hold government to account at the ballot box. Other countries followed, and by the late 19th century many Western states had embraced near-universal male suffrage (with women's suffrage coming in the early 20th). As the electorate grew, **governments became more accountable to public opinion and needs**, not just to elites. Additionally, parliaments gained strength in overseeing governments. For example, in the United Kingdom, **Parliamentary Committees** and procedures like the Prime Minister's "Question Time" (which fully developed in the 19th–20th centuries) forced ministers to answer publicly for their policies on a regular basis – a transparent accountability exercise. Likewise, many constitutional monarchies that emerged (e.g. in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and later Japan's Meiji Constitution of 1889) established that **ministers are accountable to elected legislatures**, effectively neutering autocratic power.

Civil Service and Legal Reforms: To curb corruption and patronage (practices that undermine accountability), countries introduced civil service reforms and legal oversight in the 19th century. The United States, after scandals like the "Spoils System," passed the **Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act (1883)** to ensure government jobs were awarded by merit rather than political favoritism, increasing bureaucratic accountability and integrity. Similarly, many European states professionalized their bureaucracies to answer to laws and auditors rather than personal whim. **Ombudsman** institutions – independent offices to hear citizens' grievances against the government – trace their roots to this era: Sweden created the first Parliamentary Ombudsman in 1809 as a watchdog over public officials ¹⁵. This model (an independent commissioner empowered to investigate and address complaints of maladministration) slowly spread; it was adopted in a few other countries by the early 20th century, providing citizens a formal channel to challenge government actions and demand redress.

Public Sphere and Press Freedom: The 19th century also saw an explosion of newspapers, pamphlets, and later mass-circulation journals, which became crucial to transparency. A vibrant **free press** is often called the "Fourth Estate" for its role in scrutinizing the powerful. Throughout the 1800s, as literacy rose, journalists exposed official scandals and informed citizens, thereby creating pressure for accountability. In

the United States, for example, the 19th-century press investigated corruption like the Whiskey Ring scandal and mobilized public opinion to demand reforms. In Europe, newspapers often reported on parliamentary debates and government spending, making such information available to the broader public. By the late 19th century, **freedom of the press** was protected by law or constitution in many democracies (e.g. First Amendment in the U.S., various European constitutions), reflecting a consensus that transparency through media is essential to keeping power honest ¹⁶ ¹⁷ .

Accountability in Business and the Economy: As industrialization advanced, enormous private economic power concentrated in corporations and monopolies also raised concerns about accountability to the public. While the question focuses on citizenry vs. *state* power, it is worth noting that the late 19th century introduced checks on corporate power in the public interest. For example, **antitrust laws** like the U.S. Sherman Act of 1890 aimed to break up monopolies and hold businesses accountable to fair competition and consumers. Regulation of railroads and utilities began, forcing transparency in pricing and operations to prevent abuse. Shareholder activism and the rise of corporate governance principles introduced some accountability of managers to owners (shareholders), which parallels citizens holding public officials accountable. These steps acknowledged that unchecked private power can be as detrimental to society as unchecked state power, and that transparency (through financial disclosures, etc.) and legal accountability were necessary in the business realm too.

By 1900, the world had a growing patchwork of accountable governance: **constitutional regimes** with parliaments and elections in much of Europe and the Americas, albeit still often limited by class, gender, or racial exclusions in voting. On the other hand, large parts of the world remained under colonial rule or traditional monarchies where local citizen accountability was minimal. But even in those contexts, the ideals of the age – that governments exist to serve citizens and should openly justify their actions – were spreading, laying groundwork for future democratic movements.

20th Century: Institutionalizing Transparency and Global Norms

The 20th century – marked by world wars, the Cold War, decolonization, and technological leaps – greatly transformed the relationship between citizens and power, leading to stronger institutional guarantees of transparency and accountability on a global scale.

Post-World War II Reforms: In the aftermath of **World War II**, there was a profound recognition that lack of accountability had enabled catastrophic abuses (e.g. Nazi and Imperial Japanese regimes). The Allied victory was followed by unprecedented international **war crimes tribunals** (Nuremberg and Tokyo trials) to hold leaders accountable for aggression and atrocities ¹⁸ ¹⁹ . This signaled that even heads of state could not act with impunity. On the domestic front, defeated nations like West Germany and Japan were reconstructed with new constitutions emphasizing democratic checks: West Germany's 1949 Basic Law, for instance, embedded strong rule-of-law oversight and protected freedoms, ensuring *"never again"* would government be above scrutiny. Many other countries in Europe, having learned from the failures of the interwar period, adopted **transparency and anti-corruption measures** as part of modern governance. Western European democracies passed laws for financial auditing of government, independent courts, and protections for a free press. **Sunshine laws** (requiring certain government meetings and decisions to be open or announced to the public) began to appear. Over time, such mechanisms became the expected norm: *"accountability and transparency laws are basic qualifications for membership in both the Council of Europe and the European Union"* in today's era ²⁰ . In other words, by the late 20th century any aspiring

democracy – especially those seeking integration with Europe – had to implement legal standards for open government, anti-corruption statutes, and institutional checks ²¹ ²² .

Decolonization and New Democracies: The mid-20th century wave of decolonization birthed many new nations in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. These countries often inherited or adopted constitutional frameworks promising democracy, though actual practice varied. In India, for example, the post-independence constitution (1950) established a parliamentary democracy and later India enacted a robust Right to Information Act (2005) empowering citizens to request government data – a powerful transparency tool in the world’s largest democracy. In sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, many newly independent states initially included bills of rights and elected legislatures, but some succumbed to authoritarian coups where accountability eroded. Still, by the century’s end, **third-wave democratization** (the late 20th-century surge of democracy) brought greater accountability to countries that had long been under dictators. From Southern Europe in the 1970s (Spain, Portugal) to Latin America in the 1980s (e.g. Argentina, Brazil) and post-communist Eastern Europe in the 1990s, former authoritarian regimes transitioned to democracy, often explicitly as a response to popular demand for openness about past abuses and an end to unchecked power. Many of these new democracies created anti-corruption commissions, ombudsmen, and adopted **freedom of information laws**. For instance, South Africa’s 1996 constitution (after apartheid) enshrined the public’s right to government information and established mechanisms to expose the prior regime’s crimes (the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) – an example of transparency as a tool for both justice and trust-building.

Cold War Contrast – Openness vs. Secrecy: During the Cold War (1945–1991), the divide between democratic and authoritarian systems often came down to transparency and accountability. Western democracies, despite imperfections, generally maintained **free media, competitive elections, and checks and balances** that could expose and correct government wrongdoing. In contrast, the communist bloc (USSR, Eastern Europe, China) maintained strict secrecy and one-party rule, suppressing dissent and hiding information. The **Soviet Union** was notoriously secretive – historians describe it as one of the most secretive states ever, with rampant censorship and propaganda to mask government failures ²³ . Soviet leaders faced little accountability: there were no free elections or independent courts to check the Communist Party’s power. This led to systemic abuses (e.g. political purges, repression) and even practical disasters made worse by secrecy (the **Chernobyl nuclear accident** in 1986 was initially covered up by Soviet authorities, delaying evacuation and revealing how dangerous lack of transparency could be). Ironically, it was a Soviet leader, **Mikhail Gorbachev**, who introduced *Glasnost* (“openness”) in the late 1980s as a reform policy. *Glasnost allowed unprecedented freedom of speech and government transparency in the USSR, a drastic change from prior policies* ²⁴ . Once citizens got a taste of truth – learning about past government crimes, voicing criticism in media – it unleashed pent-up demands for accountability. Anti-Soviet dissidents and nationalist movements seized the opportunity to push for change ²⁴ ²⁵ . Gorbachev’s concessions thus unintentionally accelerated the collapse of the Soviet one-party system: by 1991, the Soviet republics broke away and Russia itself moved to hold its first competitive elections ²⁶ . This episode vividly illustrates that when authoritarian governments concede transparency, it can empower citizens to demand even greater accountability, ultimately reinforcing democratic values (albeit after turmoil). In **China**, by contrast, the ruling Communist Party learned a different lesson – after seeing the USSR’s fate and facing its own pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square (1989), the Chinese regime doubled down on **censorship and control**. To this day, China’s government censors the press and internet through the “Great Firewall” and harshly punishes whistleblowers or activists who expose corruption ²⁷ ²⁸ . For example, Nobel Peace Prize laureate **Liu Xiaobo** was sentenced to 11 years in prison in 2009 simply for authoring a manifesto (Charter 08) calling for democratic reforms and free speech ²⁹ . Likewise, a journalist, **Tan Zuoren**, was jailed in 2010

for investigating government corruption that led to shoddy school construction (which collapsed in a 2008 earthquake) ³⁰ . These cases show that in authoritarian contexts, citizen attempts to seek transparency or hold leaders accountable are often met with repression, maintaining an opaque system. The human and economic costs of this opacity are high: unchecked corruption in such countries flourishes under the cover of secrecy.

Institutionalizing Transparency in Policy: In established democracies, the latter half of the 20th century saw a wave of **institutional reforms to bolster transparency and accountability**. One hallmark policy type was the **Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)**. The United States passed the FOIA in 1966, giving any person the right to request access to federal agency records (with certain exemptions) ³¹ . This law proved transformative: it became a model for open-government legislation worldwide, empowering journalists and citizens to uncover everything from environmental hazards to political scandals. Many other countries eventually enacted similar laws (e.g. Australia 1982, Canada 1983, India 2005, Brazil 2011, etc.), making transparency a legal right. Another innovation was the creation of independent watchdog bodies *within* government. After the Watergate scandal (1972–1974) in the U.S. – where President Nixon's abuse of power and subsequent cover-up were exposed – Congress enacted a series of reforms: the **Ethics in Government Act (1978)** required financial disclosures by public officials and set ethical standards ³² ; an **Inspector General Act (1978)** placed independent inspectors in federal agencies to audit and investigate wrongdoing ³² ; and the **Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (1978)**, a response to revelations of illegal spying, established a special court to oversee and approve certain government surveillance activities ³³ . These were aimed at preventing future abuses by ensuring permanent structures for oversight and transparency in sensitive areas of government. Across the Atlantic, nations like **Sweden, Norway, and Finland** had long traditions of openness (Sweden re-established FOI in the 20th century), and by the 1970s–80s, more democracies implemented “*sunshine*” or open meeting laws, campaign finance disclosure rules, and public sector auditing requirements. By the 1990s, **Transparency International** (a global NGO) was founded to highlight corruption and advocate for transparency, creating tools like the Corruption Perceptions Index to compare countries’ accountability. International organizations (the United Nations, World Bank, OECD) also began promoting “good governance” – essentially pushing states to adopt transparent, accountable practices as prerequisites for development aid or trade benefits ³⁴ . For instance, the OECD developed anti-bribery conventions and recommended corporate transparency standards, recognizing that corruption in one country can affect many. Meanwhile, the **European Union** made government transparency part of its *acquis communautaire*: aspiring member states had to demonstrate press freedom, judicial independence, and anti-corruption measures as fundamental conditions ²⁰ .

Transparency in the Information Age: The late 20th and early 21st centuries have been dramatically affected by new communication technologies. The rise of the internet and later social media created unprecedented possibilities for citizen oversight – information can be disseminated globally in seconds, and whistleblowers can leak data anonymously. Initiatives like **Open Data** movements emerged, where governments voluntarily release data sets (e.g. budgets, procurement, parliamentary votes) online for public analysis. Additionally, civic tech tools allow crowdsourced scrutiny (for example, platforms where citizens track government spending or report bribes solicited, enhancing *social accountability*). The digital age has also seen bold new actors like **WikiLeaks** (founded 2006), which published leaked government and corporate documents, forcing transparency on unwilling institutions (though not without controversy over national security). Many democracies responded by strengthening legal protections for **whistleblowers**, acknowledging that insiders who expose wrongdoing perform a public service (e.g. the U.S. Whistleblower Protection Act 1989, and similar laws in EU and elsewhere). At the same time, however, the information age introduced challenges: misinformation and propaganda can muddy transparency, and authoritarian

regimes use surveillance technology to monitor citizens even as they hide their own abuses. Nonetheless, the general trajectory has been that citizens today *expect* far more transparency from both governments and businesses than in any prior era. Concepts like **corporate social responsibility** and ESG (environmental, social, governance criteria) pressure companies to be transparent about their operations and impact, due in part to citizen activism and investor demand. On the political front, multi-country initiatives such as the **Open Government Partnership** (launched 2011) bring governments and civil society together to promote concrete transparency commitments, reflecting a global norm that openness is integral to democracy.

How Citizens Gain Leverage to Demand Accountability

History demonstrates that *citizens have employed a variety of strategies and processes to gain leverage over those in power*, compelling transparency and accountability. These methods often work in tandem, and their effectiveness depends on political context (democratic vs authoritarian). Some key ways include:

- **Elections and Voting:** Regular free elections are the fundamental mechanism for citizens to reward or punish leaders. Knowing they must face voters provides an incentive for officials to act transparently and accountably. As James Madison famously noted, “a popular Government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy” ³⁵ – meaning informed voting is crucial. In practice, elected governments that perform poorly or engage in corruption can be voted out of office, which pressures incumbents to heed public demands. For example, numerous democracies have seen scandals become election issues (e.g. corruption revelations leading to government turnover in India in 1989, or in Italy’s 1990s “*Clean Hands*” elections).
- **Public Protest and Social Movements:** When formal channels fail or are unavailable, citizens often take to the streets. Peaceful mass protests have proven effective in forcing accountability. The **People Power Revolution** in the Philippines (1986) is a classic instance: millions of citizens rallied against President Ferdinand Marcos’s corrupt, repressive rule, eventually compelling the dictator to resign ³⁶ ³⁷. This movement succeeded where elections had been manipulated, showing that sheer popular pressure can leverage change. Similarly, the “**Color Revolutions**” in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), and Ukraine (2004 and 2014) saw citizens protest electoral fraud and abuse of power, ultimately toppling regimes and ushering in more transparent governance ³⁸. Even in established democracies, protests play a role – consider how the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s forced legal accountability for injustice, or how public demonstrations have led to resignations of ministers in European democracies when scandals break. The threat of civil unrest can coerce concessions: leaders might institute reforms (e.g. anti-graft drives, new oversight committees) to appease protesters and restore stability.
- **Free Press and Investigative Journalism:** A free and independent media is one of society’s most powerful accountability tools. Journalists act as watchdogs, uncovering hidden information and wrongdoing that the public would otherwise not see. Investigative reports can create public outrage that forces authorities to respond. The 1970s Watergate investigation by *The Washington Post* reporters is a prime example – their reporting on President Nixon’s secret abuses sparked congressional inquiries and a Supreme Court ruling that eventually forced Nixon’s resignation ³⁹ ⁴⁰. Across the world, media exposés have led to tangible outcomes: Britain’s *MPs expenses scandal* (2009) where leaked documents revealed politicians’ misuse of public funds led to resignations and

reforms; South Korean media's exposure of corruption contributed to President Park Geun-hye's impeachment in 2017; and countless local news stories result in officials being fired or prosecuted. To leverage this, citizens support press freedom and often **amplify** journalists' revelations through social media, petitions, and direct appeals to authorities for action. Without media spotlight, many issues would remain buried – so an informed and outraged public, armed with evidence from journalists, can demand corrective measures.

- **Legal Action and Courts:** In many countries, citizens or civil society groups use the court system to compel transparency and accountability. This can involve **freedom of information lawsuits** (when agencies refuse to release records, courts can order disclosure) or public interest litigation to hold officials responsible for unlawful acts. For instance, in India activists have used the courts to enforce the Right to Information Act when government bodies stonewall requests, resulting in orders to divulge data on budgets, environmental permits, and more. In democratic systems with independent judiciaries, citizens can challenge government secrecy or corruption – recent examples include South African civil society organizations winning court orders against President Zuma's administration, compelling release of a report on state corruption (2016) and eventually contributing to Zuma's resignation in 2018. Even in authoritarian settings, sometimes legal challenges happen (though often quashed); for example, Russian opposition figures have tried to sue for information on officials' undeclared wealth, and while outcomes are usually repressed, the very attempt raises public awareness. **Legislative Ombudsmen and Anti-Corruption Agencies** are quasi-legal avenues: citizens can report grievances to these bodies, which then investigate and can recommend prosecution. The presence of such institutions (like Hong Kong's ICAC, Indonesia's KPK, etc.) gives citizens leverage by ensuring there is a formal entity tasked with acting on their complaints.
- **International Pressure and Leverage:** Sometimes citizens gain leverage indirectly through international mechanisms. If domestic avenues are blocked (as often in repressive regimes), exposure via international media or appeal to organizations like the UN or human rights NGOs can embarrass a government into concessions. Authoritarian governments seeking foreign aid or legitimacy may yield to some reforms (e.g. creating an anti-corruption plan or allowing limited press freedom) under diplomatic or economic pressure. A modern example is how the European Union, in negotiating with accession countries or trading partners, often requires improvements in governance – local civil societies can use this as leverage, essentially saying “we need to meet these standards.” **Global civil society networks** also help: citizens in one country can appeal for solidarity from groups abroad, who might lobby their own governments to act (sanctions, resolutions, etc.) against a corrupt foreign regime. While this is an indirect form of leverage, it has made a difference in some cases (for instance, Western pressure helped push regimes in the 1980s Latin America and apartheid South Africa toward change; more recently, global anti-corruption initiatives pressured Nigeria to increase transparency in its oil revenues through the EITI – Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative).
- **Whistleblowing and Leaks:** Often, the leverage comes from insiders who decide to expose secrets, thus arming citizens with knowledge to act. When whistleblowers reveal hidden misdeeds (like Edward Snowden disclosing secret surveillance programs, or the Panama Papers leak exposing global elites' off-shore accounts), they bypass official gatekeepers and *force* transparency. The public and honest officials can then mobilize to demand accountability (e.g. reforms of surveillance laws, or investigations into tax evasion). Knowing that such leaks are possible can also deter would-be

corrupt actors – it creates an environment where those in power must assume that their actions **might become public** unexpectedly, thus encouraging better behavior.

By using these avenues, citizens **coerce concessions** from power-holders. The concessions might be specific (releasing a document, firing a minister, repealing a bad law) or systemic (adopting a new constitution, holding free elections). Notably, these mechanisms often reinforce each other – a protest might prompt media coverage, which sparks a court case, which in turn galvanizes more protest, and so on, creating a multiplying effect on pressure. Crucially, the effectiveness of citizen leverage often comes down to unity and persistence: when broad swathes of society unite behind a demand for accountability, even the most stubborn regimes have been forced to yield (as seen in Philippines 1986, or Sudan's uprising in 2019 that ended a 30-year dictatorship following mass protests over corruption).

Reinforcing Democratic Values Through Transparency

When power concedes transparency and accountability to citizens, it tends to reinforce and deepen democratic values in several important ways:

- **Legitimacy and Trust:** Openness in government builds public trust. If citizens can see how decisions are made and that wrongdoers are punished, they are more likely to view the government as *legitimate*. This trust is a bedrock of stable democracy. For example, after post-Watergate reforms in the U.S. increased transparency, trust in American institutions eventually rebounded because people felt checks were in place. Conversely, without transparency, citizens grow cynical and disengaged. As one democracy advocate put it, *“without accountability and transparency, democracy is impossible... elections lose their meaning as an expression of the people’s will”* ¹⁴. Thus, each concession to openness – be it publishing budgets or allowing a free press – affirms the democratic principle that government is *by the people and for the people*. It tells citizens their role is respected, enhancing the legitimacy of both leaders and institutions.
- **Informed Participation:** Transparency means citizens are better informed about public affairs. An informed electorate can more effectively participate – voting wisely, engaging in debate, and contributing to policymaking. When policy processes are transparent (open hearings, public comment periods, etc.), citizens can inject their voices and expertise, leading to decisions that reflect the popular will and public good. This inclusive participation is a core democratic value. For instance, participatory budgeting (used in some cities worldwide) lets citizens see and shape how funds are spent, melding transparency with direct democracy. Every time a government releases information (say, on school performance or environmental quality), it enables civic groups and individuals to advocate for improvements, reinforcing the idea that *“we the people”* govern collectively.
- **Accountability as Deterrence of Abuse:** Regular accountability checks (audits, investigations, independent media scrutiny) deter officials from abusing power in the first place. When officials know they **will be held to account**, they are likelier to abide by law and ethical norms. This self-restraint aligns governance with democratic values like equality and justice. For example, a transparent procurement system (where government contracts are public) deters cronyism because any citizen or journalist can spot favoritism. In countries with strong accountability, there is typically *less corruption and better public services* ^{41 42}. That means resources go where intended – benefiting citizens rather than filling private pockets – fulfilling the democratic value of serving the common interest. Indeed, Freedom House observes that government accountability and

transparency ensure malfeasance is exposed and harmful policies are swiftly corrected ⁴¹ . By contrast, secrecy allows corruption, which erodes public services and faith in democracy ⁴³ . So the very practice of accountability upholds democratic ideals by preventing power from being used arbitrarily or unjustly.

- **Institutional Strength and Rule of Law:** Each concession to accountability tends to strengthen institutions. For example, when a legislature successfully holds a head of state to account (through impeachment or questioning), it reinforces the principle of rule of law – that no one is above the law. Democratic values are reinforced when institutions function as intended: the police investigating political corruption, the courts convicting a former president for bribery (as happened to France's Jacques Chirac in 2011, for instance). Such events send a powerful signal that *the system works*. In recent years, several democracies have demonstrated this: South Korea impeached and removed its president over corruption in 2017; Brazil's judiciary prosecuted dozens of politicians in the “Car Wash” corruption probe. Each time an official is lawfully sanctioned, the public sees that justice and accountability trump impunity, reinforcing their faith in democratic norms. Furthermore, transparency initiatives like publishing judicial decisions or streaming legislative debates make institutions more **accessible and understandable** to citizens, which bolsters the rule of law and the perception of fairness.
- **Feedback and Continuous Improvement:** Transparency also allows society to learn from mistakes and demand improvements – a democratic culture of self-correction. For instance, the publication of government performance data (schools, hospitals, etc.) lets citizens identify failures and lobby for reform or alternatives (maybe elect different leaders or adopt new policies). Accountability mechanisms like **public inquiries** or truth commissions, though often about past wrongs, help democracies heal and improve. A notable case is South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s: by openly airing the crimes of apartheid, it provided a cathartic accountability that, while not jailing most perpetrators, did reinforce the new South Africa's commitment to human rights and “never again” ethos. In established democracies, when scandals occur, often a *commission* or *parliamentary inquiry* is set up to investigate publicly and make recommendations, ensuring the system learns and adapts. This iterative improvement is a hallmark of resilient democracies and is only possible when problems aren't swept under the rug.

In summary, every time citizens successfully pry open the workings of power – whether through access to information, oversight hearings, or public trials – it fortifies the scaffolding of democracy. Transparency and accountability transform the relationship between the governed and governors into one of mutual responsibility: leaders become *servants of the people* in practice, not just rhetoric. This reciprocal trust and responsibility are what democratic values are all about.

When Transparency Fails: Opaque Power and Its Consequences

Not all societies have achieved robust transparency and accountability. There are stark examples of when and where it goes wrong – often with damaging consequences to citizens and the state alike. Two often-cited contemporary examples are **Russia and China**, which are *notoriously opaque and unaccountable* in their governance, despite being major global powers.

Russia: After an initial burst of openness in the 1990s post-Soviet transition, Russia under Vladimir Putin's leadership (since 2000) has seen a marked erosion of accountability. Power has been centralized in the

presidency, independent media has been stifled or taken over by state-friendly interests, and critics of the regime (journalists, opposition politicians, activists) have faced harassment, imprisonment, or worse. Transparency International bluntly stated in 2022 that “*corruption is endemic in Russia*,” noting Russia received the lowest corruption-cleanliness score of any European country ⁴⁴. Under Putin, analysts characterize the system as a “*kleptocracy*” or “*crony capitalism*” where a small circle of insiders enrich themselves without oversight ⁴⁵. For citizens, this means public resources are siphoned off and policies serve the elite, not the people. Without free elections (Russian elections are heavily managed) or free press, citizens have little leverage to change course. When Russians have protested – for example, large anti-corruption rallies in 2011–2012 and 2019 – the state’s response was repression rather than reform. A tragic result of this opaqueness is policy blunders and human rights abuses that go unchecked: corruption in infrastructure leads to disasters (e.g. deadly mall fires due to violated safety rules), and military adventures (like the invasion of Ukraine) proceed with propaganda and no accountability for failures. Public trust in government is low in Russia, but fear and disempowerment keep citizens from effectively demanding change. The **rule of law** is undermined as courts serve the executive’s interests, not justice. In short, Russia exemplifies how a lack of transparency and accountability breeds *impunity*: officials act without fear of consequences. Freedom House has documented that such authoritarian leaders “*ignore due process, misuse the justice system to persecute critics, and perpetuate impunity for corruption and abuses of power*” ⁴⁶. The consequence is a vicious cycle – corruption and abuse reinforce the leadership’s hold on power, and that very power blocks the transparency that could expose it.

China: China’s one-party state under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is similarly characterized by extreme limits on transparency. The CCP tightly controls information as a means of maintaining its monopoly on power. China ranks near the bottom of global press freedom indices every year – the media and internet operate under heavy censorship. The government’s **Great Firewall** blocks many foreign news sites and social media platforms, and filters domestic content for sensitive keywords ²⁷ ⁴⁷. The apparatus of surveillance is massive; citizens know that criticizing the government can lead to swift punishment, so issues like high-level corruption or policy failures are often only known through rumor or not at all. Although China has laws on paper about information disclosure (and authorities do release some statistics), in practice the opacity is tremendous. Scandals usually surface only when they become too big to hide – for example, the initial cover-up of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan in late 2019, where whistleblower doctors were silenced, likely worsened the spread of the virus. Only after public fury (and global attention) did the government acknowledge problems, but even then, accountability was limited to a few local officials. Dissenters like Liu Xiaobo, mentioned earlier, or citizen journalists who reported on COVID conditions, are imprisoned to send a message that *demanding accountability is forbidden*. The lack of independent courts or opposition means there’s almost no formal way for citizens to redress grievances. This opaqueness allows large-scale human rights abuses – such as the mass detention of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang – to occur with minimal domestic scrutiny; Chinese state media simply doesn’t report the truth, and foreign reporters face obstruction ⁴⁸ ⁴⁹. Economically, while China has grown, corruption has been a persistent issue (President Xi Jinping’s well-publicized anti-corruption campaign ironically demonstrates how rampant the problem had become within party ranks). However, even the anti-corruption drive lacks transparency – it is conducted internally by the Party with selective targets, raising concerns it’s as much about consolidating Xi’s power as enforcing integrity. For Chinese citizens, one result of living under an unaccountable system is frustration and occasional unrest over issues like land seizures, pollution, or unsafe products – but protests are often local and swiftly suppressed. The absence of channels to peacefully demand accountability means grievances fester or lead to risky confrontations. In summary, China’s example shows that economic progress is not a substitute for political accountability: material gains aside, many Chinese feel alienated from decision-making, and the repression needed to maintain secrecy is itself a source of instability.

Other Examples and Consequences: Russia and China are prominent, but many countries suffer from the lack of transparency. Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East (e.g. Saudi Arabia, which has absolute monarchy and secretive government spending) or Africa (e.g. Equatorial Guinea, where oil revenues were long treated as a family asset of the ruler) illustrate how secrecy goes hand in hand with corruption and inequality. Even in some formal democracies, there has been **democratic backsliding** – Turkey in recent years, for instance, under President Erdogan has seen erosion of media freedom and judicial independence, making the system more opaque and less accountable, trending toward what analysts call competitive authoritarianism ⁵⁰ ⁵¹ . In such cases, the *form* of democracy (elections) might remain, but without transparency the elections themselves can be manipulated and citizens cannot make truly informed choices. The ultimate consequence where transparency fails is that *power perpetuates itself at the expense of the public*. Policies that benefit the few are pursued, human rights are often trampled (since abuses can be hidden or challengers silenced), and eventually, crises often emerge. Indeed, many revolutions or uprisings are triggered by the pent-up anger from lack of accountability – the Arab Spring in 2011 began with protests against corruption and police abuse in Tunisia, and quickly spread to other Arab states with closed, unresponsive governments. These events underline that while opaque regimes may appear stable, the absence of legitimate channels for accountability can lead to sudden, explosive instability. Additionally, in a globalized world, one country's opacity can harm others: for example, financial secrecy in one jurisdiction can facilitate corruption elsewhere, and lack of transparency about health or environmental issues can endanger international communities (think of pandemics or transboundary pollution).

Summary of “What Goes Wrong”: Opaque, unaccountable governance tends to produce high levels of corruption, poor public services, and abuses of power with impunity ⁴⁶ . Public faith in government erodes, often replaced by fear. These conditions are antithetical to democratic values and often self-perpetuating – without transparency, citizens struggle to mobilize, and without mobilization, the regime has no incentive to reform. Thus, countries like Russia and China serve as cautionary tales of how power, when not effectively checked by citizens, can become entrenched and corrupt, leading to governance that serves only itself. It highlights the preciousness of transparency and accountability: they are not just procedural niceties but literally can be matters of life and death (consider how an accountable government might handle a disaster vs. a secretive one). The contrast with open societies is stark – where transparency fails, democracy fails; where accountability is lacking, tyranny finds a foothold.

Conclusion

From the Renaissance to the present, the evolution of transparency and accountability between citizens and those in power has been a central narrative of political development. What began as isolated concessions wrested from kings or popes – a charter here, a reform there – has blossomed into a global norm: *that government (and even corporate) power should be answerable to the people it affects*. Citizens have continually pushed the boundary, leveraging ideas, protest, and institutions to demand that power not be exercised in darkness. Every gain, be it a more representative parliament, a freedom of information law, or the jailing of a corrupt official, has reinforced the notion that rulers are *not* masters but servants and trustees for the public.

History shows this progress was neither linear nor guaranteed. There have been regressions and ongoing battles – even today, established democracies must guard against secrecy and abuse, and activists worldwide risk much to pry open autocratic regimes. Yet, the overarching trend is clear: **transparency and accountability have expanded**, and with them, human freedom and dignity. The theoretical frameworks laid by Enlightenment thinkers gave moral weight to these demands, and each era provided new tools

(printing press, mass media, internet) that empowered citizens further. In functioning democracies, transparency and accountability form a virtuous cycle with democratic values: openness breeds trust and participation, which in turn produces more responsive and effective governance ¹⁴. Conversely, the absence of accountability, as seen in authoritarian contexts, underscores how crucial these principles are – without them, corruption and oppression proliferate, and eventually, the people pay the price in lost rights and opportunities.

In essence, the story of citizens versus power from the Renaissance onwards is the story of **democracy itself**: a continuous effort to align political life with the simple idea that *those who govern do so with the consent of the governed, and must prove worthy of that responsibility*. Whether through a monk challenging a church in 1517, revolutionaries declaring rights in 1789, journalists uncovering truth in 1974, or protesters on a street in 2023, the demand is the same: *“We, the People” have the right to know and the right to decide*. And when that demand is met, it is a triumph for democracy – making governments more effective, societies more just, and citizens truly free.

Sources: Historical and analytical information in this report was drawn from a variety of sources that detail the development of democratic accountability. Key references include the Democracy Web study guide on Accountability and Transparency ^{3 13 20}, which provides a historical overview from ancient precedents through modern case studies; Freedom House reports on global accountability trends and authoritarian practices ⁴⁶; Transparency International assessments of corruption and governance (e.g. on Russia's endemic corruption) ⁴⁴; and numerous documented examples of political processes – from the Magna Carta and Enlightenment philosophies, to modern Freedom of Information laws and international tribunals – that have shaped the norms of transparency. These sources collectively affirm the critical link between citizen leverage, accountable power, and the health of democratic values worldwide.

^{1 2 13 14 16 17 35} Accountability and Transparency: Essential Principles | Democracy Web
<https://www.democracyweb.org/study-guide/accountability/essential-principles>

^{3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 18 19 20 21 22 31 32 33 34 36 37 38 39 40 50 51} Accountability and Transparency: History | Democracy Web
<https://www.democracyweb.org/study-guide/accountability/history>

¹⁵ 'The role of the Ombudsman in strengthening accountability and the ...
<https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/speech/en/340>

²³ Secrecy and the Soviet State - University of Warwick
https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/centres/cage/news/11-07-23-secrecy_and_the_soviet_state/

^{24 25 26} The Fall of the Soviet Union | CES at UNC
<https://europe.unc.edu/iron-curtain/history/the-fall-of-the-soviet-union/>

^{27 28 29 30 47 48 49} Media Censorship in China | Council on Foreign Relations
<https://www.cfr.org/background/media-censorship-china>

^{41 42 43 46} Government Accountability & Transparency | Freedom House
<https://freedomhouse.org/issues/government-accountability-transparency>

^{44 45} Corruption in Russia - Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corruption_in_Russia