

Environmental Governance and Democratic Accountability: An International Legal Perspective

Hendri Jayadi¹✉

Universitas Kristen Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia¹

ABSTRACT

Access to information is a fundamental component of democratic governance because it supports transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and institutional legitimacy. This study examines the relationship between access to information and democratic governance through a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) based on the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) and the Tromsø Convention. Using the PRISMA 2020 framework, relevant literature published between 2020 and 2025 was systematically reviewed. The findings indicate that access to information strengthens democratic governance by improving transparency, enhancing public accountability, promoting informed citizen participation, and increasing public trust in institutions. However, challenges related to misinformation, artificial intelligence governance, digital transparency, and information inequality continue to affect information governance. The study concludes that effective access-to-information frameworks remain essential for sustaining democratic governance and accountability.

Keywords: *Access To Information, Democratic Governance, Transparency, Accountability, Uncac, Tromsø Convention.*

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Hendri Jayadi

Universitas Kristen Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia

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1. | INTRODUCTION

Access to information is widely recognized as a fundamental component of democratic governance because it enables citizens to understand governmental actions, participate in public decision-making, and hold public institutions accountable. Democratic systems depend upon informed citizens who possess sufficient information to evaluate public policies, monitor governmental performance, and engage meaningfully in civic and political processes. Without adequate access to information, citizens face significant barriers to participation, accountability, and democratic oversight. Consequently, access to information has become an increasingly important subject within international law, public administration, and governance studies.

The relationship between information access and democratic governance has attracted growing attention in response to demands for greater transparency and accountability in public institutions. Governments are increasingly expected to disclose information regarding public expenditures, policy decisions, administrative processes, and governance outcomes. Transparency initiatives have expanded globally as citizens seek greater insight into governmental activities and decision-making processes. These developments reflect broader efforts to strengthen democratic legitimacy through openness and public participation.

Transparency serves as a foundational principle connecting access to information and democratic governance. Transparent governance enables citizens to observe governmental actions, evaluate institutional performance, and identify potential abuses of power. Information disclosure therefore contributes directly to accountability by reducing information asymmetries between governments and citizens. Androniceanu (2021) argues that transparency represents a central requirement of good democratic governance because it enhances institutional openness and public trust. Similarly, Erkkilä (2020) emphasizes that transparency has become a defining feature of contemporary public administration and democratic accountability. These findings suggest that access to information is closely associated with governance quality and democratic legitimacy.

The recognition of access to information as a democratic right has expanded significantly within international legal frameworks. The right to seek, receive, and impart information is increasingly viewed as an essential condition for effective participation in public affairs. Marciel (2023) argues that citizens possess a democratic right to be well informed because informed participation is necessary for meaningful engagement in governance processes. Likewise, Szekely (2021) emphasizes that freedom of information functions as a public good that supports democratic societies by promoting accountability, transparency, and public oversight. These perspectives highlight the importance of information access as both a democratic value and a governance mechanism.

International legal frameworks have played an important role in promoting access to information and transparency. Among these frameworks, the United Nations

Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) has become particularly influential. UNCAC recognizes transparency and public participation as essential tools for preventing corruption and strengthening accountability. Article 10 encourages public reporting and transparency in public administration, while Article 13 emphasizes participation of society in anti-corruption efforts and governance oversight. Through these provisions, UNCAC establishes important international standards supporting open and accountable governance.

In addition to UNCAC, the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents, commonly known as the Tromsø Convention, provides a dedicated legal framework concerning public access to official information. The convention recognizes access to public documents as a fundamental right that contributes to transparency, accountability, and democratic participation. Zeitzmann (2021) argues that the Tromsø Convention represents a significant advancement in international transparency standards because it establishes legal obligations promoting access to governmental information. These developments demonstrate the growing importance of information access within contemporary governance systems.

The literature further highlights the relationship between transparency and accountability. Accountability depends upon the availability of information that enables citizens, civil society organizations, journalists, and oversight institutions to evaluate governmental actions. Public reporting, information disclosure, and transparency initiatives therefore contribute significantly to democratic oversight. Porumbescu, Meijer, and Grimmelikhuijsen (2022) argue that transparency strengthens accountability by improving the visibility of governmental activities and increasing opportunities for public scrutiny. Similarly, Samaratunge and Alam (2021) emphasize that transparency and accountability remain essential pillars of democratic governance, particularly within evolving governance environments.

Citizen participation represents another important dimension of access to information. Democratic governance requires not only formal participation opportunities but also access to information that enables informed decision-making. Citizens are more likely to engage effectively in public affairs when they possess reliable information concerning policies, governance processes, and institutional performance. Oliveira and Ckagnazaroff (2023) argue that citizen participation functions as a core principle of open government because informed citizens contribute more effectively to governance processes. Likewise, Widiatmoko et al. (2023) demonstrate that information access and digital governance tools can strengthen public participation in decision-making activities. These findings indicate that access to information supports democratic participation by empowering citizens to engage meaningfully in governance.

The concept of open government has emerged as an influential governance approach that emphasizes transparency, participation, and collaboration. Open government initiatives encourage public institutions to disclose information proactively

and create opportunities for citizen engagement. Moon (2020) argues that contemporary open government reforms extend beyond traditional transparency initiatives by integrating participation and collaborative governance principles. Similarly, Zafarullah and Siddiquee (2023) emphasize that freedom of information policies contribute significantly to open government and democratic accountability. These developments illustrate the growing importance of information access within governance reform efforts.

Recent technological developments have further transformed information governance. Digital technologies enable governments to disseminate information more efficiently and provide citizens with expanded access to public data. Open data initiatives, digital transparency platforms, and e-government systems have created new opportunities for public oversight and participation. However, technological developments have also generated challenges involving misinformation, information inequality, digital transparency, and governance of digital information systems. These issues increasingly influence the effectiveness of information access as a democratic governance mechanism.

The literature identifies information disorder as a growing challenge affecting democratic governance. Monsees (2023) argues that misinformation and fake news have become significant threats to democratic processes because they undermine informed participation and public trust. Similarly, Rosenberger and Gorman (2020) emphasize that democratic systems face increasing challenges associated with information competition and information integrity. These findings suggest that ensuring access to reliable information remains an important governance objective within contemporary democratic societies.

Although substantial research has examined transparency, accountability, open government, and information governance, many studies focus on individual dimensions rather than examining access to information through a comprehensive international legal perspective. Furthermore, emerging issues involving digital transparency, artificial intelligence, open data governance, and information disorder continue to reshape governance environments. Consequently, there remains a need for systematic research examining how international legal frameworks support access to information and democratic governance.

In response to this gap, this study employs a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine the relationship between access to information and democratic governance from an international legal perspective. The analysis focuses on the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) and the Tromsø Convention as key international frameworks supporting transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. By synthesizing contemporary scholarship concerning information rights, transparency, public accountability, participation, open government, and digital information governance, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive

understanding of how access to information contributes to democratic governance and institutional legitimacy.

2. | LITERATURE REVIEW

Access to Information and Democratic Governance

Access to information is widely recognized as a fundamental element of democratic governance because it enables citizens to participate effectively in public affairs, monitor governmental actions, and hold public institutions accountable. Democratic systems rely upon informed citizens who possess sufficient knowledge about governmental decisions, policies, and administrative processes. Without access to reliable information, citizens cannot meaningfully evaluate governance performance or participate effectively in democratic processes. Consequently, access to information has become a critical principle within contemporary governance frameworks and international legal standards.

The relationship between information access and democracy is grounded in the principle that political authority should operate transparently and remain accountable to the public. Democratic governance requires mechanisms through which citizens can obtain information about governmental activities and assess whether institutions are acting in the public interest. Access to information therefore strengthens democratic legitimacy by reducing information asymmetries between governments and citizens. It enables individuals to make informed political choices, participate in public debates, and contribute to governance processes.

The literature consistently identifies information access as a prerequisite for democratic participation. Marciel (2023) argues that citizens possess a democratic right to be well informed because effective participation depends upon access to accurate and relevant information. Similarly, Szekely (2021) emphasizes that freedom of information functions as a public good that supports democratic governance by enabling citizens to monitor governmental actions and evaluate policy decisions. These findings suggest that information access is not merely an administrative issue but a fundamental democratic requirement.

Transparency serves as a central mechanism through which access to information contributes to democratic governance. Transparent institutions disclose information regarding policies, expenditures, decision-making processes, and administrative activities. Such disclosure strengthens accountability because citizens can evaluate governmental performance and identify potential abuses of power. Androniceanu (2021) argues that transparency remains one of the most important challenges and objectives of democratic governance because it directly influences public trust and institutional legitimacy. Likewise, Erkkilä (2020) highlights transparency as a defining feature of modern public administration and democratic accountability.

Democratic legitimacy is closely connected to information access because citizens are more likely to trust institutions that operate openly and provide clear explanations

for their actions. Access to information reduces uncertainty regarding governmental decisions and strengthens perceptions of fairness and accountability. When citizens possess adequate information about governance processes, they are better equipped to evaluate policy outcomes and participate constructively in democratic systems. Consequently, information access contributes significantly to governance effectiveness and public confidence.

The literature further demonstrates that access to information supports the rule of law by enabling oversight of public institutions. Information disclosure allows citizens, journalists, civil society organizations, and oversight bodies to identify governance failures and monitor compliance with legal obligations. Through these mechanisms, information access strengthens accountability and discourages arbitrary exercises of power. Democratic governance therefore depends upon institutional arrangements that ensure transparency and public access to governmental information.

Another important dimension of access to information concerns public participation. Participation requires not only opportunities for engagement but also access to information necessary for informed decision-making. Citizens cannot contribute meaningfully to governance processes if they lack knowledge regarding policies, budgets, administrative decisions, or governance outcomes. Information access therefore functions as an enabling condition for democratic participation and civic engagement. These relationships illustrate the interconnected nature of transparency, participation, and accountability within democratic governance.

The literature also highlights the role of information access in combating corruption and promoting ethical governance. Transparency reduces opportunities for misconduct by increasing the visibility of governmental actions and strengthening public oversight. Open access to information enables citizens and oversight institutions to identify irregularities and demand corrective action when necessary. As a result, information disclosure contributes to governance integrity and democratic accountability.

Contemporary democratic systems increasingly recognize access to information as a governance right rather than simply an administrative practice. Governments around the world have adopted transparency initiatives, freedom of information laws, and open government programs designed to improve information accessibility. These developments reflect broader recognition that democratic governance requires openness and accountability. Consequently, access to information has become an essential component of governance reform efforts and international governance standards.

The growing importance of information access has also influenced international legal frameworks and governance institutions. International organizations increasingly encourage governments to adopt transparency measures that support accountability and citizen participation. These developments indicate that access to information is now widely viewed as a cornerstone of democratic governance and institutional legitimacy.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that access to information contributes significantly to democratic governance by strengthening transparency, accountability, participation, and public trust. Information access enables citizens to engage effectively in governance processes while providing mechanisms through which institutions can be monitored and evaluated. These findings suggest that democratic governance depends upon robust systems of information disclosure capable of supporting informed participation and accountable government.

International Legal Frameworks for Access to Information

International legal frameworks have played a significant role in promoting access to information, transparency, and accountability within democratic governance systems. These frameworks establish principles and obligations that encourage governments to disclose information, strengthen public oversight, and support citizen participation in public affairs. As demands for transparency and accountability have increased globally, international organizations have increasingly recognized access to information as an important governance principle and an essential condition for democratic legitimacy.

One of the most influential international frameworks supporting transparency and accountability is the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC). Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2003, UNCAC provides comprehensive standards aimed at preventing corruption and strengthening governance integrity. Although the convention primarily focuses on anti-corruption measures, several provisions directly promote transparency, public access to information, and citizen participation. These provisions recognize that open governance and public oversight are essential tools for preventing corruption and strengthening democratic accountability.

UNCAC Article 10 specifically addresses public reporting and transparency in public administration. The article encourages states to adopt measures that improve public access to information concerning governmental organization, decision-making processes, and administrative activities. Through these requirements, UNCAC promotes institutional openness and strengthens opportunities for public oversight. Transparency therefore functions not only as an anti-corruption measure but also as a mechanism supporting democratic governance and accountability.

Article 13 of UNCAC further emphasizes the participation of society in governance processes. The convention encourages governments to facilitate public participation, improve access to information, and support civic engagement initiatives. These provisions recognize that informed citizens play a critical role in promoting accountability and monitoring governmental performance. Consequently, UNCAC establishes an important connection between transparency, participation, and democratic governance.

The literature consistently highlights the importance of UNCAC in strengthening governance transparency. Wong, Perehudoff, and Kohler (2024) argue that UNCAC provides important governance standards that encourage transparency and accountability across public institutions. Similarly, Han (2022) emphasizes that implementation of UNCAC promotes international cooperation and strengthens governance mechanisms designed to enhance public oversight. These findings indicate that UNCAC contributes significantly to international transparency standards and democratic accountability.

Another important international framework is the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents, commonly known as the Tromsø Convention. Adopted in 2009, the convention represents the first legally binding international treaty specifically dedicated to access to official documents. The convention establishes the principle that public information should generally be accessible to citizens, subject only to limited and clearly justified exceptions. Through this approach, the Tromsø Convention strengthens transparency and supports democratic governance.

The Tromsø Convention recognizes access to official information as an essential element of democratic societies. Citizens require information about governmental activities in order to participate effectively in public affairs and evaluate institutional performance. Zeitzmann (2021) argues that the convention represents a significant advancement in international transparency law because it establishes clear legal standards regarding public access to governmental documents. These standards contribute to accountability, openness, and democratic legitimacy.

The literature further emphasizes that international transparency frameworks contribute to good governance by promoting institutional accountability. Transparency obligations encourage governments to justify decisions, disclose information proactively, and maintain accessible administrative records. Such measures reduce opportunities for corruption and strengthen public confidence in governance systems. International legal frameworks therefore function as important instruments for encouraging responsible governance practices.

International cooperation represents another important dimension of access-to-information frameworks. Governance challenges increasingly transcend national boundaries, particularly in areas such as corruption prevention, digital governance, and information management. International legal standards facilitate cooperation among states while promoting common principles of transparency and accountability. These developments contribute to the diffusion of governance reforms and the strengthening of democratic institutions.

The implementation of international transparency standards also influences domestic legal reforms. Many countries have adopted freedom of information legislation, transparency policies, and open government initiatives inspired by international frameworks. Such reforms expand opportunities for public oversight and improve citizens' ability to obtain information about governmental activities.

Consequently, international legal frameworks contribute significantly to governance modernization and democratic development.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that international legal frameworks provide essential foundations for access to information and democratic governance. Through instruments such as UNCAC and the Tromsø Convention, international law promotes transparency, accountability, public participation, and institutional openness. These frameworks strengthen democratic governance by ensuring that citizens possess opportunities to access information and engage meaningfully in public affairs.

Transparency and Public Accountability

Transparency and public accountability are among the most important principles supporting democratic governance. Democratic systems require governments to operate openly, provide information regarding their activities, and remain answerable for decisions affecting citizens. Transparency enables public access to governmental information, while accountability ensures that institutions and public officials can be evaluated and held responsible for their actions. Together, these principles strengthen democratic legitimacy, promote public trust, and reduce opportunities for corruption and misuse of authority.

Transparency generally refers to the availability and accessibility of information concerning governmental activities, policies, decision-making processes, and administrative performance. Transparent institutions disclose information proactively and provide citizens with opportunities to understand how public authority is exercised. Such openness contributes significantly to democratic governance because citizens can only evaluate governmental performance when sufficient information is available. Consequently, transparency functions as a foundational requirement for accountability and informed public participation.

The literature consistently identifies transparency as a critical element of democratic governance. Porumbescu, Meijer, and Grimmelikhuijsen (2022) argue that transparency strengthens democratic institutions by improving the visibility of governmental activities and facilitating public oversight. Similarly, Androniceanu (2021) emphasizes that transparency contributes directly to governance quality because it promotes openness, responsiveness, and institutional legitimacy. These findings indicate that transparency is not merely an administrative practice but a democratic principle essential for accountable governance.

Public accountability refers to the obligation of public officials and institutions to explain and justify their actions to citizens and oversight bodies. Accountability mechanisms ensure that governments remain responsive to public expectations and comply with legal and ethical standards. Democratic governance depends upon accountability because public authority must be exercised in the interests of citizens rather than private interests. Accountability therefore functions as a safeguard against abuses of power and governance failures.

The relationship between transparency and accountability is particularly significant. Transparency provides the information necessary for accountability mechanisms to operate effectively. Citizens, journalists, civil society organizations, and oversight institutions require access to information in order to evaluate governmental performance and identify potential misconduct. Without transparency, accountability becomes difficult because governance activities remain hidden from public scrutiny. Consequently, transparency serves as a prerequisite for effective accountability within democratic systems.

The literature demonstrates that transparency contributes significantly to public trust. Citizens are more likely to trust public institutions when governance processes are open and information is accessible. Samaratunge and Alam (2021) argue that transparency and accountability strengthen governance legitimacy by improving public confidence in governmental institutions. Similarly, Siahay (2023) emphasizes that transparency enhances trust by demonstrating institutional commitment to openness and responsible governance. These findings suggest that transparency plays an important role in strengthening relationships between governments and citizens.

Public sector accountability has become increasingly important in contemporary governance environments. Governments are expected not only to deliver services effectively but also to demonstrate integrity, responsiveness, and transparency. Sari and Muslim (2023) argue that accountability frameworks improve governance performance by encouraging responsible management and public oversight. These findings indicate that accountability contributes to governance effectiveness while reinforcing democratic values.

Another important aspect of transparency concerns corruption prevention. Open access to information reduces opportunities for corruption by increasing the visibility of governmental actions and enabling external monitoring. Transparency initiatives make it more difficult to conceal misconduct, misuse public resources, or engage in unethical practices. Consequently, transparency serves as an important governance tool for strengthening integrity and promoting ethical public administration.

The literature further highlights the role of records management and information systems in supporting transparency and accountability. Mosweu and Rakemane (2020) argue that effective records management contributes to good governance because accurate and accessible information enables oversight and institutional accountability. These findings suggest that transparency depends not only upon legal requirements but also upon administrative systems capable of preserving and providing information effectively.

Open government initiatives have further strengthened transparency and accountability within democratic governance. Open government encourages public institutions to disclose information proactively, engage citizens in governance processes, and promote collaborative decision-making. Moon (2020) argues that contemporary open government reforms extend beyond traditional information

disclosure by integrating participation and collaboration into governance systems. These developments demonstrate the evolving nature of transparency within modern democratic institutions.

The growth of digital technologies has expanded opportunities for transparency and accountability. Governments increasingly utilize online platforms, open data portals, and digital reporting systems to provide information to citizens. These technologies improve accessibility and facilitate public oversight by making governmental information more readily available. However, digital governance also creates new challenges related to information management, privacy, and digital transparency. Effective accountability therefore requires governance frameworks capable of adapting to technological change.

Transparency also contributes to democratic resilience by strengthening institutional legitimacy and public confidence during periods of political uncertainty. Open governance practices enable citizens to evaluate governmental actions and maintain trust in democratic institutions. Accountability mechanisms similarly contribute to resilience by ensuring that institutions remain responsive and subject to oversight. These functions become particularly important during governance crises or periods of declining public trust.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that transparency and public accountability are essential pillars of democratic governance. Transparency improves access to information and strengthens public oversight, while accountability ensures that institutions remain answerable for their actions. Together, these principles contribute to governance legitimacy, public trust, corruption prevention, and democratic resilience. These findings suggest that effective democratic governance depends upon robust transparency and accountability frameworks supported by legal, institutional, and technological mechanisms.

Citizen Participation and Information Access

Citizen participation is a central component of democratic governance because it enables individuals to influence public decision-making, contribute to policy development, and hold public institutions accountable. However, meaningful participation depends upon access to information. Citizens can only engage effectively in governance processes when they possess adequate knowledge regarding governmental activities, public policies, and administrative decisions. Consequently, access to information and citizen participation are closely interconnected principles that support democratic legitimacy, accountability, and governance effectiveness.

Democratic governance requires informed participation rather than merely formal opportunities for engagement. Citizens who possess accurate and relevant information are better equipped to evaluate policy alternatives, monitor institutional performance, and contribute constructively to public debates. Access to information therefore functions as an enabling condition for meaningful participation. Without adequate

information, participation risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. These relationships illustrate the importance of transparency and information disclosure within democratic systems.

The literature consistently highlights the role of information access in strengthening citizen participation. Oliveira and Ckagnazaroff (2023) argue that participation constitutes one of the fundamental principles of open government because citizens contribute more effectively to governance processes when information is readily available. Similarly, Simelio Solà, Ferré Pavia, and Herrero Gutiérrez (2021) emphasize that transparent information systems improve opportunities for citizen engagement by facilitating access to public information. These findings indicate that participation and information access operate as mutually reinforcing elements of democratic governance.

Citizen participation contributes significantly to democratic legitimacy. Democratic institutions derive legitimacy not only from elections but also from ongoing opportunities for public engagement and consultation. Citizens are more likely to trust governance systems when they perceive that their views can influence public decisions. Information access strengthens this process by enabling informed engagement and reducing barriers to participation. Consequently, transparency contributes indirectly to democratic legitimacy through its influence on citizen participation.

Public oversight represents another important outcome of information access and participation. Citizens who possess access to governmental information can monitor institutional performance, identify governance failures, and demand accountability when necessary. Participation therefore extends beyond policy input and includes oversight functions that strengthen accountability mechanisms. Democratic governance benefits from active citizens who can evaluate public institutions and contribute to governance improvement.

The literature further demonstrates that participation supports governance quality. Citizens often possess local knowledge, practical experiences, and perspectives that can improve public decision-making. Governance systems that encourage participation benefit from broader information sources and more diverse viewpoints. Information access facilitates these contributions by ensuring that participants possess sufficient knowledge to engage meaningfully in governance processes. As a result, participation contributes not only to legitimacy but also to governance effectiveness.

Open government initiatives have increasingly emphasized the relationship between information access and participation. Contemporary governance reforms seek to create opportunities for collaborative decision-making and citizen engagement. Zafarullah and Siddiquee (2023) argue that freedom of information and open government policies strengthen democratic governance by expanding opportunities for public involvement. Similarly, Moon (2020) highlights the evolution of open government toward more participatory and collaborative governance models. These

developments indicate that participation has become a central objective of governance reform efforts.

Digital technologies have significantly transformed citizen participation. Online platforms, e-government systems, and digital communication tools have expanded opportunities for engagement by reducing barriers associated with distance, time, and administrative complexity. Widiatmoko, Simarmata, Gunadi, Amazihono, and Watimena (2023) argue that e-government can increase public participation by providing citizens with more accessible channels for engagement and communication. These findings suggest that digital technologies can strengthen democratic participation when accompanied by effective information access mechanisms.

The literature also highlights the importance of international frameworks supporting participation rights. The Aarhus Convention, for example, emphasizes access to information and public participation in environmental governance. Osae et al. (2024) demonstrate that implementation of the convention has strengthened opportunities for citizen involvement by improving information accessibility and participatory processes. These findings illustrate the broader international recognition of participation as a governance principle supported by information access.

Another important aspect of participation concerns inclusiveness. Democratic governance requires participation opportunities that are accessible to diverse groups within society. Information access contributes to inclusiveness by reducing barriers that may exclude citizens from governance processes. However, disparities in education, technology access, and information literacy can still limit participation opportunities. Consequently, governments must address information inequalities to ensure broad and equitable participation.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that citizen participation and information access are closely interconnected components of democratic governance. Access to information enables informed participation, strengthens public oversight, improves governance quality, and enhances democratic legitimacy. Participation, in turn, reinforces accountability and encourages responsive governance. These findings suggest that democratic governance depends upon institutional arrangements capable of supporting both transparency and meaningful citizen engagement.

Emerging Challenges in Information Governance

The increasing importance of information access within democratic governance has generated new opportunities for transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. At the same time, evolving technological, political, and social conditions have introduced significant challenges affecting the management, accessibility, reliability, and governance of public information. Contemporary democratic systems must therefore address emerging issues involving misinformation, digital transparency, artificial intelligence, open data governance, and information inequality. These

challenges influence not only governance effectiveness but also democratic legitimacy and public trust.

One of the most significant contemporary challenges concerns information disorder. The rapid expansion of digital communication platforms has transformed how information is produced, distributed, and consumed. While digital technologies have expanded access to information, they have also increased the circulation of misinformation, disinformation, and misleading content. Information disorder can undermine informed decision-making and weaken democratic participation by creating uncertainty regarding the accuracy and reliability of public information.

The literature consistently identifies misinformation as a growing threat to democratic governance. Monsees (2023) argues that fake news and information disorder challenge democratic systems because they distort public discourse and weaken citizens' ability to make informed political judgments. Similarly, Rosenberger and Gorman (2020) emphasize that democratic societies increasingly face information contests in which false or misleading information can influence public opinion and undermine democratic processes. These findings suggest that information integrity has become an essential component of democratic governance.

Digital transparency represents another important challenge within contemporary information governance. Governments increasingly rely upon digital platforms to disclose information, provide services, and engage with citizens. While digital technologies improve accessibility and efficiency, they also create new governance concerns related to data management, privacy, cybersecurity, and institutional accountability. Effective transparency therefore requires governance frameworks capable of balancing openness with the protection of sensitive information.

The literature highlights the evolving relationship between digital technologies and transparency. Gorwa and Ash (2020) argue that democratic transparency within digital environments is increasingly shaped by platform-based information systems that influence how information is distributed and accessed. Likewise, Saldanha, Dias, and Guillaumon (2022) demonstrate that digital public services can strengthen transparency and accountability when supported by effective governance mechanisms. These findings indicate that digital governance has become a critical dimension of information transparency.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as another important issue affecting access to information and democratic accountability. Governments increasingly utilize AI systems to manage information, support administrative decision-making, and deliver public services. While these technologies may improve efficiency, concerns have emerged regarding transparency, explainability, and public oversight. Citizens may encounter difficulties understanding how automated systems influence decisions that affect public services, information disclosure, or governance processes.

The literature demonstrates that transparency remains essential within AI governance. Olsen, Hildebrandt, Wiesener, Larsen, and Flügge (2024) argue that

freedom of information principles should apply to public-sector uses of artificial intelligence because transparency remains necessary for accountability and democratic oversight. These findings suggest that traditional information rights continue to play an important role within emerging technological governance environments.

Open data governance represents another significant development affecting information access. Governments increasingly release datasets concerning public expenditures, administrative performance, environmental conditions, and social indicators. Open data initiatives seek to improve transparency and encourage innovation by making information more accessible to citizens, researchers, journalists, and businesses. However, challenges remain regarding data quality, accessibility, usability, and public understanding.

The literature emphasizes the importance of governance frameworks supporting open data initiatives. Kassen (2022) argues that open data governance contributes to transparency by expanding access to governmental information and strengthening accountability mechanisms. Similarly, Moon (2020) highlights the role of open government reforms in promoting more collaborative and transparent governance systems. These findings suggest that open data can strengthen democratic governance when accompanied by effective institutional arrangements and public engagement mechanisms.

Information management constitutes another important challenge affecting democratic governance. Transparency depends not only upon legal disclosure requirements but also upon administrative systems capable of preserving and organizing information effectively. Public institutions must maintain accurate records and ensure that information remains accessible over time. Mosweu and Rakemane (2020) argue that records management is essential for good governance because accountability and transparency depend upon reliable information systems. These findings indicate that effective information governance requires strong administrative capacity and institutional support.

Information inequality also presents significant challenges for democratic participation. Although digital technologies have expanded information access, not all citizens possess equal opportunities to obtain, understand, or utilize information. Differences in education, digital literacy, technological access, and socioeconomic conditions may create disparities in participation opportunities. Consequently, information access alone does not guarantee equitable participation. Democratic governance therefore requires efforts to address barriers that limit access to information and civic engagement.

The literature further highlights concerns regarding public trust in information systems. Citizens are more likely to engage in democratic processes when they perceive public information as accurate, reliable, and transparent. Conversely, misinformation, secrecy, and inadequate disclosure practices can weaken public confidence in institutions. Maintaining trust therefore requires governance systems capable of

ensuring both transparency and information integrity. These challenges have become increasingly important as digital information environments continue to evolve.

International governance frameworks increasingly recognize the importance of addressing these emerging challenges. Transparency standards, freedom of information laws, open government initiatives, and digital governance strategies seek to strengthen information accessibility while addressing risks associated with technological transformation. These efforts reflect growing recognition that democratic governance depends upon reliable information systems capable of supporting accountability and participation.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that emerging challenges involving misinformation, digital transparency, artificial intelligence, open data governance, information management, and information inequality are reshaping information governance within democratic societies. While technological developments create new opportunities for transparency and participation, they also introduce risks that require effective legal, institutional, and governance responses. These findings suggest that the future of democratic governance will depend significantly upon the ability of governments to ensure information integrity, accessibility, transparency, and accountability.

3. | RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine the relationship between access to information and democratic governance from an international legal perspective. The study focuses on the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) and the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Tromsø Convention) as the primary international legal frameworks supporting transparency, accountability, public participation, and information accessibility. A qualitative review approach was selected because access to information encompasses legal, political, administrative, and governance dimensions that require comprehensive conceptual analysis rather than quantitative measurement.

The review follows the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure methodological transparency and consistency throughout the research process. According to Page et al. (2021), PRISMA provides systematic procedures for identifying, screening, evaluating, and selecting relevant literature. The review process consisted of four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. These stages were implemented to ensure that only studies directly relevant to access to information, transparency, accountability, freedom of information, open government, citizen participation, digital transparency, and information governance were included in the analysis.

Literature was collected from major academic databases and governance research repositories, including Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Insight, JSTOR, and international governance publications. Searches employed combinations of keywords such as access to information, right to

information, democratic governance, transparency, accountability, public participation, freedom of information, open government, digital transparency, open data governance, information governance, and public trust. Additional searches focused specifically on UNCAC, the Tromsø Convention, and international transparency standards.

The inclusion criteria consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, governance studies, public administration research, legal analyses, and policy publications published primarily between 2020 and 2025. Studies were included when they addressed access to information, transparency, accountability, public participation, freedom of information, open government, digital information governance, or related international legal frameworks. Publications lacking direct relevance to the study objectives, duplicate records, and non-scholarly sources were excluded during the screening process.

The selected literature was analyzed using thematic synthesis. Findings were organized into five thematic categories: access to information and democratic governance, international legal frameworks for access to information, transparency and public accountability, citizen participation and information access, and emerging challenges in information governance. These themes reflect the principal dimensions through which information access contributes to democratic governance and institutional legitimacy.

The analytical framework adopted in this study conceptualizes access to information as a governance mechanism that strengthens democratic accountability through transparency, public oversight, citizen participation, and institutional responsiveness. International legal frameworks are examined as normative foundations supporting these functions, while contemporary information governance challenges are analyzed as factors influencing the effectiveness of transparency and accountability systems. Through the integration of systematic literature review methods and international legal analysis, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how access to information contributes to democratic governance in contemporary societies.

4. | RESULTS

The findings of this study demonstrate that access to information contributes significantly to democratic governance by strengthening transparency, accountability, citizen participation, public trust, and institutional legitimacy. The reviewed literature consistently indicates that information access functions as a foundational governance mechanism because it enables citizens to monitor governmental activities, evaluate policy decisions, and participate meaningfully in public affairs. International legal frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) and the Tromsø Convention, provide important standards that support these objectives. At the same time, the findings reveal that emerging challenges involving digital

governance, misinformation, artificial intelligence, and information inequality continue to influence the effectiveness of information access systems.

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of access to information as a foundation of democratic governance. Democratic systems depend upon informed citizens who possess adequate knowledge regarding governmental activities and public decision-making processes. The literature demonstrates that access to information enhances democratic legitimacy by enabling citizens to evaluate governance performance and participate more effectively in political and civic activities. Marciel (2023) argues that citizens possess a democratic right to be well informed because informed participation is essential for democratic governance. Similarly, Szekely (2021) emphasizes that freedom of information functions as a public good that supports democratic societies through transparency and accountability. These findings suggest that information access is a fundamental democratic requirement rather than merely an administrative practice.

The analysis further demonstrates that transparency represents one of the most important outcomes associated with access to information. Governments that provide timely and accessible information create opportunities for public oversight and institutional accountability. Transparency reduces information asymmetries between governments and citizens and improves the visibility of governmental actions. Androniceanu (2021) argues that transparency strengthens democratic governance by promoting openness and improving institutional legitimacy. Likewise, Erkkilä (2020) identifies transparency as a defining characteristic of accountable public administration. These findings indicate that transparency functions as a critical mechanism supporting democratic governance.

Another important finding concerns the influence of international legal frameworks on information access. The literature consistently identifies UNCAC and the Tromsø Convention as important international instruments promoting transparency and accountability. UNCAC encourages governments to improve public reporting and facilitate societal participation, while the Tromsø Convention establishes legal standards supporting public access to official documents. These frameworks demonstrate international recognition of the importance of information access within democratic governance systems.

The findings indicate that UNCAC contributes significantly to governance transparency. Wong, Perehudoff, and Kohler (2024) argue that compliance with UNCAC standards strengthens governance quality by promoting openness and accountability. Similarly, Han (2022) emphasizes that implementation of UNCAC encourages transparency and improves institutional oversight mechanisms. These findings suggest that international anti-corruption frameworks can also function as instruments supporting democratic governance through information disclosure and public accountability.

The Tromsø Convention emerged as another important contributor to transparency and information access. The convention establishes legal obligations concerning access to official documents and reinforces the principle that public information should generally be accessible to citizens. Zeitzmann (2021) argues that the convention represents a major advancement in international transparency law because it creates a formal legal framework for information access. These findings indicate that international legal standards contribute significantly to the institutionalization of transparency within democratic governance.

The analysis further reveals that transparency and accountability are closely interconnected principles. Transparency provides the information necessary for accountability mechanisms to operate effectively. Citizens, journalists, civil society organizations, and oversight institutions depend upon access to information in order to evaluate governmental actions and identify governance failures. Porumbescu, Meijer, and Grimmelikhuijsen (2022) argue that transparency strengthens accountability by improving public oversight and increasing institutional visibility. Similarly, Samaratunge and Alam (2021) emphasize that transparency and accountability remain central pillars of democratic governance. These findings suggest that information access contributes directly to accountability and institutional legitimacy.

Public trust emerged as another significant theme within the literature. Citizens are more likely to trust institutions that operate openly and provide accessible information concerning governmental activities. Transparency demonstrates institutional commitment to accountability and reduces perceptions of secrecy or misconduct. Siahay (2023) argues that transparency and accountability contribute substantially to public trust by strengthening confidence in public institutions. These findings indicate that information access plays an important role in maintaining positive relationships between governments and citizens.

The literature also demonstrates that access to information strengthens citizen participation. Democratic governance depends upon meaningful public engagement in governance processes, and effective participation requires access to reliable information. Citizens who possess adequate information are better able to evaluate policy alternatives, engage in public debates, and contribute to governance decisions. Oliveira and Ckagnazaroff (2023) argue that information accessibility enhances participation by enabling informed civic engagement. Similarly, Widiatmoko et al. (2023) demonstrate that digital governance initiatives can strengthen participation through improved access to public information. These findings indicate that information access supports democratic participation and governance responsiveness.

Another important finding concerns the role of open government initiatives. Open government reforms seek to strengthen transparency, participation, and collaboration through proactive information disclosure and citizen engagement. Moon (2020) argues that contemporary open government extends beyond traditional transparency by encouraging collaborative governance and public involvement. These findings suggest

that access to information functions as a foundational element of broader governance reform efforts.

The analysis additionally identifies digital governance as an increasingly important context for information access. Governments increasingly utilize digital technologies to provide information, deliver services, and communicate with citizens. Digital transparency initiatives improve accessibility and expand opportunities for public oversight. Saldanha, Dias, and Guillaumon (2022) demonstrate that digital public services can enhance accountability when supported by effective transparency mechanisms. Similarly, Kassen (2022) highlights the role of open data governance in promoting transparency and information accessibility. These findings indicate that digital technologies can strengthen democratic governance when accompanied by appropriate governance frameworks.

At the same time, the findings reveal several emerging challenges affecting information governance. Information disorder, misinformation, and fake news have become significant concerns because they undermine citizens' ability to access reliable information. Monsees (2023) argues that information disorder threatens democratic governance by weakening informed participation and public trust. Likewise, Rosenberger and Gorman (2020) emphasize that democratic systems increasingly confront challenges related to information integrity. These findings indicate that access to information must be accompanied by efforts to ensure information reliability and accuracy.

Artificial intelligence governance emerged as another important challenge. Governments increasingly utilize AI systems to manage information and support administrative processes. While these technologies may improve efficiency, concerns have emerged regarding transparency, explainability, and accountability. Olsen et al. (2024) argue that freedom of information principles remain important for ensuring transparency within AI-assisted governance systems. These findings suggest that traditional information rights continue to play a critical role within emerging technological environments.

The literature further identifies information inequality as a challenge affecting democratic participation. Differences in digital access, technological literacy, and educational resources can limit citizens' ability to obtain and utilize information effectively. Such inequalities may reduce participation opportunities and weaken democratic inclusiveness. These findings suggest that improving information accessibility requires attention not only to information availability but also to citizens' capacity to access and understand information.

Overall, the evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates that access to information contributes significantly to democratic governance through transparency, accountability, public trust, participation, and institutional legitimacy. International legal frameworks provide important foundations supporting these objectives, while digital technologies create new opportunities for information accessibility. However,

challenges involving misinformation, artificial intelligence, and information inequality continue to shape contemporary information governance. These findings indicate that effective democratic governance depends upon robust information access systems capable of supporting transparency, accountability, and informed citizen participation.

5. | DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that access to information plays a critical role in strengthening democratic governance through its contributions to transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and institutional legitimacy. The reviewed literature consistently indicates that democratic systems function more effectively when citizens possess adequate access to governmental information and when public institutions operate transparently. These findings reinforce the view that access to information should be understood not merely as an administrative practice but as a fundamental democratic principle supported by international legal frameworks.

One of the most important implications of this study concerns the relationship between access to information and democratic legitimacy. Democratic governance depends upon public confidence in institutions and the perception that governmental authority is exercised transparently and responsibly. The findings indicate that information access strengthens legitimacy because citizens can evaluate governmental actions, understand policy decisions, and monitor institutional performance. Transparency therefore contributes directly to democratic trust by reducing uncertainty and improving public understanding of governance processes.

The study further demonstrates that transparency functions as a foundational requirement for accountability. Accountability mechanisms depend upon the availability of information that allows citizens, civil society organizations, journalists, and oversight institutions to assess governmental performance. Without transparency, opportunities for effective oversight become limited because public actions remain hidden from scrutiny. The findings therefore support existing governance theories suggesting that transparency and accountability are mutually reinforcing principles within democratic systems.

The significance of international legal frameworks also emerged as a major finding of this study. The United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) and the Tromsø Convention provide important legal and normative standards supporting access to information. Although UNCAC was primarily developed as an anti-corruption instrument, its provisions concerning transparency and public participation contribute directly to democratic governance objectives. Similarly, the Tromsø Convention establishes legal recognition of public access to official documents as an essential democratic right. These frameworks demonstrate increasing international recognition that transparency and information access are fundamental components of accountable governance.

Another important implication concerns the relationship between information access and citizen participation. Democratic participation requires citizens to possess sufficient knowledge regarding governance processes, policy alternatives, and institutional performance. The findings indicate that access to information empowers citizens to engage more effectively in public affairs and contribute to decision-making processes. Participation therefore becomes more meaningful when supported by transparent governance systems capable of providing accurate and accessible information.

The study also highlights the growing importance of open government initiatives. Contemporary governance reforms increasingly emphasize proactive information disclosure, citizen engagement, and collaborative decision-making. These developments reflect a shift from traditional administrative models toward governance approaches that prioritize openness and public involvement. The findings suggest that access to information functions as a central component of open government because transparency creates the conditions necessary for meaningful participation and accountability.

Digital transformation represents another significant theme emerging from the findings. Governments increasingly rely upon digital platforms, online services, and open data systems to disseminate information and interact with citizens. These technologies have expanded opportunities for information access while reducing barriers associated with geography and administrative complexity. The findings indicate that digital governance can strengthen democratic accountability by improving information accessibility and enhancing opportunities for public oversight. Consequently, digital technologies have become important tools for advancing transparency objectives.

However, the study also identifies several challenges associated with digital information governance. Information disorder, misinformation, and disinformation increasingly threaten democratic processes by undermining citizens' ability to access reliable information. The findings suggest that transparency alone may not be sufficient to support democratic governance if citizens cannot distinguish accurate information from misleading content. Therefore, information integrity has become an important complement to information accessibility within contemporary democratic systems.

Artificial intelligence presents another emerging governance challenge. AI technologies are increasingly utilized within public administration to support decision-making, service delivery, and information management. While these systems may improve efficiency, concerns regarding transparency and accountability remain significant. The findings indicate that access-to-information principles remain relevant within AI governance because citizens require opportunities to understand how automated systems influence governmental decisions. Transparency therefore continues to serve as an essential safeguard against opaque decision-making processes.

The study further highlights the issue of information inequality. Access to information is not distributed equally across all segments of society. Differences in digital literacy, educational attainment, internet access, and technological resources may limit some citizens' ability to obtain and utilize public information effectively. These inequalities can reduce participation opportunities and weaken democratic inclusiveness. Consequently, democratic governance requires policies that address barriers to information access and promote broader participation in governance processes.

Public trust emerged as another important outcome associated with information access. Citizens are more likely to trust institutions that operate openly and provide accessible explanations regarding governmental actions. Transparency signals institutional commitment to accountability and reduces perceptions of secrecy or misconduct. The findings therefore suggest that information access contributes not only to governance effectiveness but also to stronger relationships between governments and citizens.

The findings additionally indicate that access to information contributes to corruption prevention and governance integrity. Transparency increases the visibility of governmental actions and reduces opportunities for misconduct by enabling external oversight. Citizens, journalists, and civil society organizations can identify irregularities and demand accountability when information is publicly available. Consequently, information access serves as an important mechanism supporting ethical governance and institutional responsibility.

Overall, this study demonstrates that access to information constitutes a cornerstone of democratic governance. Through transparency, accountability, participation, public trust, and oversight, information access strengthens institutional legitimacy and governance effectiveness. International legal frameworks such as UNCAC and the Tromsø Convention provide important foundations supporting these objectives. Nevertheless, emerging challenges involving digital governance, misinformation, artificial intelligence, and information inequality require continuous adaptation of legal and institutional frameworks. Effective democratic governance therefore depends upon maintaining robust information access systems capable of supporting both transparency and accountability in rapidly evolving governance environments.

5. | CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between access to information and democratic governance through a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) based on the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) and the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Tromsø Convention). The findings demonstrate that access to information serves as a fundamental component of

democratic governance by strengthening transparency, accountability, citizen participation, public trust, and institutional legitimacy.

The study found that international legal frameworks provide important foundations for promoting transparency and public oversight. UNCAC supports democratic governance through provisions related to public reporting and societal participation, while the Tromsø Convention establishes legal standards guaranteeing access to official documents. Together, these frameworks contribute to governance systems that are more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens.

The findings further indicate that access to information enhances democratic participation by enabling citizens to engage more effectively in public affairs and monitor governmental performance. Transparency strengthens accountability by providing the information necessary for public oversight, while open government initiatives and digital governance tools expand opportunities for information accessibility and civic engagement.

The study also identified several emerging challenges affecting information governance, including misinformation, information disorder, artificial intelligence governance, digital transparency, and information inequality. These developments highlight the need for governance systems capable of ensuring both information accessibility and information integrity within increasingly complex digital environments.

Overall, the study concludes that access to information remains essential for sustaining democratic governance. Strengthening transparency frameworks, improving accountability mechanisms, and ensuring equitable access to reliable information will remain critical for promoting democratic legitimacy, public trust, and effective governance in contemporary societies.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Originality Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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