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DEVELOPING A CITIZEN-CENTRIC PERFORMANCE EVALUATION FOR STATE LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

This paper develops a conceptual framework for a citizen-centric performance evaluation system for state legislative representatives in Malaysia. This study does not present a finished scorecard. It does, however, clarify the framework's purpose, scope, and operational logic so that it can later be tested and adapted. The framework responds to a governance gap in which election-based accountability and formal

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oversight alone provide only episodic, incomplete, and weakly visible information about representative's responsiveness, constituency service, and transparency. Drawing on principal-agent theory, social accountability scholarship, participatory governance theory, and performance management literature, the paper integrates these perspectives into a four-dimension model organized around constituent service effectiveness, legislative responsiveness, transparency, and accountability. Citizen input is envisioned through structured surveys, public forums, and digital feedback channels, with responses aggregated and interpreted alongside formal legislative records and oversight findings. The paper concludes by outlining implementation, validation, and institutional design considerations for a citizen-led evaluation initiative.

Keyword:

Civic Engagement, Democratic Accountability, Legislative Representatives, Participatory Governance, Performance Evaluation



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Introduction

The accountability of legislative representatives is usually done through elections, party discipline, and institutional oversight. However, these mechanisms rarely provide continuous, citizen-facing assessment of how representatives perform between election cycles. For example, a study by Rogers (2023) finds that elections often fail to hold state legislators accountable since over one-third of incumbents face no challengers and only 11% of voters surveyed could name their representative. In Malaysia, recent studies on online political participation indicate growing civic engagement, but also persistent difficulty in translating that engagement into sustained offline political action, while research on public-service delivery shows that citizens still perceive gaps in follow-up and responsiveness (Abdul Manaf et al., 2023; Lokman et al., 2024). Modern reforms increasingly use citizen scorecards, open-data initiatives, and digital participation platforms. While these innovations promise greater transparency and public input, few frameworks explicitly integrate them into legislative performance evaluation.

This paper therefore develops a conceptual framework for a citizen-centric evaluation that is intended for the Malaysian state legislative context and that complements, rather than replaces, formal oversight. This paper's novelty lies in explicitly combining principal-agent accountability with participatory governance in a cohesive model for state legislators. We develop a sequenced accountability framework that maps how information flows from citizens to legislators and back, drawing on both *downward* (social) and *horizontal* (formal) accountability channels. The framework builds on and extends existing typologies, notably

Bovens's multi-dimensional accountability and Arnstein's ladder of participation by integrating these concepts into a single model and applying the model specifically to legislative representatives rather than executive agencies. Thus, the framework's contributions are threefold.

The first contribution is conceptual integration. The model combines principal-agent theory which treats representatives as agents of their constituents, with participatory governance, which treats citizens as active evaluators and co-producers of public value. The second contribution is accountability sequencing. The framework specifies how performance information moves from disclosure to citizen assessment to institutional follow-up, rather than treating these steps as isolated events. The third contribution is contextualization. By locating the framework in the state legislative setting, the paper shows how citizen scorecards and digital participation can be adapted to representative institutions with distinct accountability structures.

Existing evidence supports the need for this kind of integrated design. Citizen scorecards and participatory initiatives can improve perceptions of trust and accountability, but the effects are often modest when information is not paired with credible response mechanisms. For example, one study finds that Ugandan citizen scorecards modestly reduced perceived corruption (Hout, Wagner & Demena, 2022). Digital participation tools also increase the flow of information from citizens to government, yet many do not explain how input is processed or fed back into decisions. (Mabillard & Zumofen, 2025; Shin et al., 2024). The present framework addresses that gap by making the feedback loop explicit and by proposing a structure that can be empirically tested.

Literature Review

Citizen Scorecards and Performance Evaluation

Recent studies demonstrate both the potential and the limits of citizen-driven scorecards. Hout *et al.* (2022) shows that local scorecards in Uganda can affect perceptions of corruption and some service outcomes, but the effects are uneven. Similarly, Ardanaz *et al.* (2023) find that information about participatory budgeting can modestly increase political trust, while Fox (2015) argues that social accountability is most effective when citizen voice is linked to state response. Waddington *et al.* (2019) similarly conclude that citizen engagement programs produce mixed results with effectiveness varying by which combination of participation, inclusion, transparency, and accountability mechanisms is used. These studies support the argument that performance evaluation should be built around both information and response.

Table 1 compares recent studies on social accountability and digital participation. Together, they show that participatory tools are most credible when they combine performance data, citizen feedback, and a clear mechanism for response. This is the design logic adopted in the present framework.

Table 1: Key Empirical Studies Combining Citizen Feedback and Performance Data (Post-2020).

Study (Year)	Context & Focus	Data & Method	Key Findings
Hout <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Uganda local governments; scorecard accountability	District panel (2005–16) + Afrobarometer surveys; diff-in-diff	Small budget restraint, slight service gains under competition; citizens perceive less corruption in scorecard districts.
Ardanaz <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Buenos Aires participatory budgeting (info campaign)	Survey experiment on citizen trust; info vs. control group	Information on participatory budgeting increases perceptions of government honesty/benevolence, especially among initially distrustful citizens.
Shin <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Global digital participation tools	Content analysis of 116 e-participation tools (cluster analysis)	Digital tools improve citizen→govt info flow, but rarely report back accountability info; tech firms dominate.
Hemmen (2025)	US state legislators on social media	Survey experiment (simulated posts) on constituent attitudes	Legislators' social media posts increase approval/trust; no effect on turnout willingness.
Mabillard & Zumofen (2025)	Nordic municipal social media engagement	19 interviews + N=525 survey of comm managers	Engagement evaluation is heterogeneous; focus mostly on platform metrics; qualitative quality of exchange matters.
Abdul Manaf <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Malaysia local government service delivery and accountability	Citizen-perception data and accountability assessment	Perceived accountability is closely tied to responsiveness and follow-up, supporting citizen-based evaluation.

In the context of Malaysia, online participation has increased, especially among younger citizens, but recent reviews suggest that digital engagement still seldom translates into sustained offline political action (Lokman *et al.*, 2024). Related Malaysian research on local government service delivery also shows that perceptions of accountability depend strongly on whether public bodies respond to citizen concerns and report back on follow-up action (Abdul Manaf *et al.*, 2023). These findings reinforce the need for a framework that connects citizen input with legislative oversight.

Theoretical Framework

This citizen-centric performance evaluation framework combines the principal–agent theory, participatory governance theory, accountability theory, and performance management logic. Principal–agent theory (PAT) explains the delegation problem: once citizens delegate authority to elected representatives, information asymmetry and weak sanctions can reduce responsiveness. Bovens (2007) addresses this problem by defining accountability as a

relationship in which an actor must explain and justify conduct to a forum that can ask questions and apply consequences. In the present study, these ideas clarify why a citizen evaluation system is needed and what it must accomplish. Votes cast by citizens provide legitimacy to the legislators who in turn are accountable to the citizens. Recent work on consultative legislatures illustrates this: for instance, Yaghi et al., (2025) describe parliament as “an agent of the people (the principal) and the government” and emphasize that legislators are incentivized to serve public interests because their legitimacy depends on performance.

Participatory governance theory adds the second piece of the puzzle. The theory focuses on citizens as not only principals who delegate authority, but also participants who help generate public information about performance. Arnstein’s classic ladder of citizen participation (1969) frames engagement as ascending levels of power. It distinguishes between tokenistic forms of participation and forms that give citizens genuine influence. For example, Alasiri *et al.* (2025) adapt Arnstein’s ladder to evaluate urban planning participation in Saudi Arabia, highlighting the ladder’s continuing relevance. Fischer (2012) similarly emphasizes deliberative engagement, while more recent work shows that digital participation tools and citizen-engagement platforms can widen access to feedback, although the quality of response varies (Mabillard & Zumofen, 2025; Shin et al., 2024). In participatory governance, accountability emerges through citizen deliberation and collective input rather than solely through elections. Here, information flows horizontally among citizens and officials, and citizens actively shape policy content. This is supported by Binti Abu, Ahmad Zazili, Nordin, Hussain and Basri (2024) who find that legislative oversight mechanisms such as PACs can convert citizen pressure into institutional responses. Their analyses of PAC reports document a high response rate to raised issues, illustrating this horizontal channel.

These perspectives lead to different accountability logics. Principal-agent models highlight *vertical accountability* through elections and audits, and assume an information unevenness that voters must manage. Participatory models highlight *horizontal or social accountability* through public consultations and citizen monitoring, and aim to equalize power by involving citizens directly. The three perspectives are complementary. Principal-agent theory identifies the problem of delegation and monitoring; participatory governance identifies the citizen channel through which evaluative information is produced; and social accountability research explains when voice can lead to response and sanction. In this framework, principal-agent logic justifies the need for accountability, participatory governance specifies how citizens participate, and performance management logic determines what is measured. The resulting model is therefore an integrated accountability framework rather than a simple participation checklist.

Accordingly, the framework links citizen feedback with formal oversight. Citizens receive and assess performance information, then use surveys, forums, or digital platforms to generate evaluative input. That input is aggregated and interpreted as a constituent signal, while legislative committees, ethics bodies, or other oversight institutions examine the results and require explanations where performance is weak. This design retains the value of elections, but extends accountability into the inter-election period.

In summary, the theoretical framework connects delegation, participation, and answerability. It uses principal-agent theory to explain the accountability deficit, participatory governance to explain the participation mechanism, and accountability theory to explain the institutional response. Table 2 outlines the relationship among these traditions and the proposed model.

Table 2: Conceptual Comparison of Principal–Agent and Participatory Governance Approaches (Adapted from Bovens, 2007; Arnstein, 1969)

Feature	Principal–Agent Theory	Participatory Governance
Citizen Role	Principal delegating authority to agent; passive between elections	Active co-decision-makers (deliberators, petitioners)
Accountability Route	Vertical (through elections, audits, hierarchical oversight)	Horizontal/social (through deliberation, collective monitoring)
Information Flow	Controlled by agent; asymmetry (citizens rely on representatives)	Transparent and multi-directional (citizens access data, share feedback)
Power Distribution	Concentrated with elected officials; citizens exercise power only periodically	Distributed: citizens hold continual influence commensurate with ladder rung

Proposed Framework

Our citizen-centric evaluation framework synthesizes these insights into a conceptual model with four performance dimensions: constituent service effectiveness, legislative responsiveness, transparency, and accountability. The dimensions are not treated as random indicators. They are selected because they capture, respectively, the representative's service role, policy responsiveness, information disclosure, and answerability. These dimensions reflect both normative expectations of democratic representation and the analytical concerns identified in the accountability literature (Bovens, 2007; Neshkova & Guo, 2012; Papp, 2023). These indicators are assigned weights reflecting their perceived importance. These weights can be informed by a combination of normative judgment and empirical input. Significantly, the framework combines objective metrics (e.g. number of bills sponsored, budget allocation effectiveness) with citizen perceptions (survey ratings of trust, responsiveness). For instance, a representative might score well on outputs but poorly on perceived integrity. The framework can then prescribe how to integrate these into a composite score.

The framework operates in four linked stages. First, representatives' activities and institutional records are made visible through standardized disclosure. Second, citizens provide feedback through representative surveys, public forums, or digital platforms. Third, the responses are aggregated using clear rules, with weighting and validation procedures designed to reduce bias and enhance representativeness. Fourth, the results are transmitted to formal oversight bodies and to the representatives themselves, creating a documented follow-up loop. In this sense, citizen input is not the endpoint of the process; it is the evidence base for institutional review.

Methodology

To operationalize this framework, we propose a mixed-methods conceptual design rather than an empirical test of a finished instrument. The framework was developed through a structured synthesis of literature on social accountability, participatory governance, legislative accountability, digital participation, and performance management. We then mapped the

recurring concepts into the four performance dimensions and the four-stage accountability cycle. If the framework is later implemented, objective data could include legislative records, committee attendance, constituency-service logs, and transparency indicators, while qualitative data could come from citizen surveys, interviews, and public forums.

This approach is consistent with the broader empirical literature. Hout et al. (2022) show that combining citizen perceptions with administrative indicators can illuminate accountability effects, while Abdul Manaf et al. (2023) demonstrate that perceived accountability is closely tied to service responsiveness. In the legislative setting, the same logic suggests that a credible framework should combine recorded performance with systematic constituent feedback rather than relying on a single source of evidence.

Novel Contributions and Framework Illustration

The framework's novelty lies in the integration of measurement and participation. Unlike a narrow scorecard, it combines downward accountability through citizen evaluation with horizontal accountability through committee review and institutional oversight. Unlike a purely consultative model, it also specifies how feedback is validated, aggregated, and returned to representatives. This addresses a recurring gap in the literature: many citizen-engagement tools collect input but do not close the accountability loop (Fox, 2015; Shin et al., 2024).

Table 3 summarizes how the proposed framework combines accountability and participation. It shows that the model does not replace existing institutions, but links citizen input, formal oversight, and performance measurement into one cycle.

Table 3: Conceptual Comparison of Bovens's Typology, Arnstein's Model, And Our Own Framework.

Aspect	Bovens (2007)	Arnstein (1969)	This Framework
Citizen Role	Actor/forum relation and answerability	From informing to citizen control	Structured citizen feedback plus institutional review
Accountability Type	Hierarchical, horizontal, and social accountability channels	Participation levels	Social accountability linked to oversight bodies
Mechanisms	Enforceability through forums and consequences	Consultation, partnership, delegated power	Survey data, forums, and digital submissions with follow-up
Power Distribution	Delegation and multiple accountability forums	Shift from tokenism to citizen power	Citizens help set indicators and interpret results
Output Focus	Defines accountability relations	Emphasizes participation levels	Combines participation, performance metrics, and response

Aspect	Bovens (2007)	Arnstein (1969)	This Framework
Novelty (Comparison)	A general accountability relation, not designed specifically for legislators or performance measurement	A general participation ladder that does not specify how citizen input becomes a measurable indicator	Our model combines these in which citizens are not just passive ladder climbers, but principals shaping accountability routes, with specified weights for outcomes vs. perceptions.

Conclusion

This paper presents a conceptual framework for citizen-centric legislative accountability that clarifies the purpose, context, method, and structure of the proposed model. It integrates principal-agent theory, participatory governance, social accountability, and performance management into a single framework for state legislative representatives in Malaysia. In doing so, it specifies how citizen scorecards and digital participation can complement formal legislative oversight rather than stand apart from it.

For policymakers, the framework offers a basis for designing evaluation systems that combine objective performance indicators with citizen feedback. For scholars, it generates testable propositions about when citizen participation improves responsiveness, transparency, and trust. Future research can operationalize the dimensions, pilot the participation mechanism, and compare results across constituencies or states to assess reliability and practical impact.

By defining what the framework is, why it is needed, how it is constructed, and how it would function, the paper offers a more precise foundation for future empirical work on citizen-led performance evaluation. More evidence will be needed to refine the indicators and weights, but the present model provides a structured starting point for that process.

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