Responsible Technocracy? Public Accountability in Regulatory Agencies as a Condition for Democratic Risk Governance

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Abstract: In contemporary governance, regulatory agencies occupy a pivotal position at the intersection of expert authority and democratic legitimacy. As societies confront escalating uncertainty—from climate disruptions and health emergencies to technological transformations—the delegation of decision-making power to specialized bodies has intensified. This shift, while often necessary for effective and timely risk management, raises fundamental questions about the democratic character of technocratic governance. The paper examines how public accountability mechanisms can serve as a corrective to the democratic deficits commonly attributed to regulatory agencies, and how they can transform technocratic expertise into a source of legitimacy rather than opacity.

Drawing on theories of accountability, epistemic governance, and risk regulation, the analysis distinguishes between formal (judicial review, parliamentary oversight, transparency obligations) and informal (stakeholder participation, public justification, expert contestation) dimensions of control. Particular attention is given to how these mechanisms operate under conditions of uncertainty, where decisions must often be made with incomplete information and contested values. The argument advanced is that responsible technocracy—defined as expert-based governance constrained and shaped by robust accountability practices—offers a framework capable of reconciling the need for specialized expertise with the normative demands of democratic governance.

Through selected case studies, the paper identifies institutional designs that enhance both the effectiveness and perceived legitimacy of agencies. It concludes that public accountability is not merely an external check on technocratic power, but an integral component of democratic risk governance: it compels agencies to articulate the reasoning behind their decisions, opens space for societal learning, and ensures that expert discretion remains aligned with public values. The concept of responsible technocracy thus emerges as a necessary response to the governance challenges of the uncertainty age.