Politics Without Foundations Can Normativity Survive the Collapse of First Principles?

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Abstract—**The erosion of first principles has become one of the defining conditions of contemporary political theory. Grand foundations—whether metaphysical, moral, or procedural—no longer command the authority they once did, challenged by pluralism, historical violence, and sustained philosophical critique. This situation raises a fundamental question: can political normativity survive once its traditional grounds have collapsed? This article argues that normativity does not disappear with the loss of foundations, but must be reconceived in non-foundational terms. Rather than deriving political obligations from ultimate principles, normativity emerges from practices of justification, contestation, and responsibility within political life itself. By rejecting both foundational certainty and normative nihilism, the article develops an immanent account of political normativity that treats disagreement as constitutive rather than pathological. Norms remain binding not because they are grounded in unquestionable truths, but because they are continuously defended, revised, and sustained through public reasoning. In this framework, the absence of foundations intensifies rather than diminishes ethical responsibility, compelling political actors to own their judgments without recourse to necessity or inevitability. Politics without foundations thus reveals not the end of normativity, but its transformation into a fragile, dynamic, and democratic practice.**

Index Terms—**Political normativity; anti-foundationalism; justification; democratic legitimacy; political responsibility**

I. INTRODUCTION

Political theory has long been structured around the search for foundations. From classical conceptions of natural order to modern accounts of rational autonomy and procedural justice, the legitimacy of political authority has repeatedly been tied to the existence of first principles capable of grounding normative claims. These principles were meant to stand outside politics while authorizing it, providing a stable point from which judgments about justice, obligation, and legitimacy could be made. The foundational ambition promised certainty in the face of conflict and coherence in the midst of diversity. Yet this ambition has increasingly come under strain, giving rise to a widespread sense that political theory now operates in a post-foundational condition.

This condition is not the result of a single intellectual rupture but the cumulative effect of multiple critiques. Philosophical challenges to metaphysics have cast doubt on the possibility of universal moral truths detached from history and power. Social and political pluralism has rendered consensus on ultimate values increasingly implausible. Historical experience, particularly in the twentieth century, has revealed how appeals to absolute foundations can serve not as constraints on violence but as instruments of domination. Together, these developments have destabilized the idea that political normativity can be secured by reference to unquestionable first principles. The collapse of foundations, however, presents political theory with a profound dilemma. If political norms can no longer be justified by appeal to universal truths, what distinguishes them from mere expressions of preference or exercises of power? The fear is that anti-foundationalism inevitably leads to relativism or

nihilism, dissolving the normative dimension of politics altogether. Without foundations, it seems, political judgment loses its authority, and critique loses its force. This anxiety continues to animate many attempts to salvage normativity by reconstructing foundations in more modest or indirect forms.

At the same time, the persistence of political disagreement suggests that foundational solutions may never have delivered what they promised. Even where first principles were widely endorsed, their interpretation and application remained contested. Political actors have always had to make judgments under conditions of uncertainty, disagreement, and change. The appeal to foundations often functioned less as a resolution of conflict than as a means of closing it down. From this perspective, the current crisis of foundations may reveal something fundamental about politics itself rather than an accidental loss to be repaired.

This article takes the collapse of first principles not as a problem to be solved by renewed foundational efforts, but as a condition to be theorized. It asks whether normativity can be sustained without foundations and argues that it can, provided normativity is understood differently. Rather than conceiving political norms as derived from external grounds, the article advances an immanent account in which normativity arises from political practices of justification, contestation, and responsibility. In this view, norms are neither arbitrary nor absolute; they are binding precisely because they remain open to challenge and revision by those subject to them.

By shifting the focus from foundational justification to justificatory practice, the article seeks to reconceptualize political normativity in a way that is compatible with pluralism and disagreement. This approach does not deny the need for critique or the possibility of injustice. Instead, it locates critique within political life itself, emphasizing the role of immanent standards and shared expectations rather than transcendent principles. In doing so, it aims to show that politics without foundations is not politics without norms, but politics without guarantees—a condition that demands greater ethical responsibility rather than less.

II. THE CRISIS OF FOUNDATIONS AND THE MISDIAGNOSIS OF NORMATIVE LOSS

The widespread perception that the collapse of first principles entails the disappearance of political normativity rests on a profound misdiagnosis of both what foundations have historically accomplished and how normativity actually operates within political life. Foundations have often been treated as the invisible supports of political judgment, silently guaranteeing the legitimacy of norms by anchoring them in something beyond contestation. Yet this image obscures the extent to which foundations themselves have always depended on interpretation, authority, and power. Natural law, reason, popular sovereignty, or procedural fairness did not function as self-evident truths but as contested claims whose authority had to be asserted, defended, and enforced. The stability attributed to foundations was never intrinsic; it was the outcome of political work that concealed its own contingency. To assume that normativity vanishes once foundations are exposed as fragile is therefore to confuse the rhetoric of grounding with the actual practice of justification. What collapses in moments of foundational crisis is not the capacity to make normative claims, but the illusion that such claims can be insulated from disagreement by appeal to an unquestionable source. Political actors continue to judge, criticize, and justify even when foundational narratives lose credibility, suggesting that normativity does not depend on first principles in the way political theory has often assumed. Indeed, the insistence on foundations has frequently narrowed the space of normative reasoning by foreclosing contestation in advance, treating dissent as deviation rather than as a constitutive feature of political life. When foundations fracture, what becomes visible is not normative emptiness but normative plurality: a landscape of competing claims that must be negotiated rather than deduced. The crisis of foundations thus exposes a deeper truth about political normativity, namely that it has always been sustained through practices of argument, persuasion, and mutual accountability rather than secured by metaphysical guarantees. Far from signaling the end of normativity, the collapse of first principles reveals how normativity has persistently operated under conditions of uncertainty, conflict, and historical change.

III. NORMATIVITY AS PRACTICE: JUSTIFICATION WITHOUT ULTIMATE GROUNDS

If the crisis of foundations does not entail the disappearance of normativity, it nonetheless demands a fundamental rethinking of how normativity is generated, sustained, and challenged within political life. The most significant shift required is away from the idea that political norms derive their authority from ultimate grounds and toward an understanding of normativity as a practice of justification embedded in social and political relations. On this account, norms are not valid because they correspond to first principles, but because they can be defended, contested, and revised through ongoing processes of political reasoning among those subject to them. This reconceptualization marks a decisive break with foundational models of political theory, yet it does not abandon the aspiration to reasoned judgment or moral critique. Instead, it relocates normativity from the realm of certainty to that of responsibility.

To treat normativity as practice is to recognize that political justification is always addressed to others. Normative claims are inherently relational: they seek recognition, acceptance, or at least engagement from those whom they govern or affect. Even when political actors invoke universal principles, their claims must still be articulated in a language that resonates with particular audiences and responds to concrete objections. This suggests that justification has never been a purely deductive exercise, even in the most rigorously foundational theories. What changes in a post-foundational context is not the presence of justification but its self-understanding. Justification no longer aims at demonstrating alignment with an ultimate source of validity; it aims at sustaining normative credibility under conditions of disagreement.

This shift has important implications for the authority of political norms. Authority is often imagined as something conferred by foundations: norms are authoritative because they rest on reason, nature, or collective will. In the absence of such grounds, authority might seem impossible to sustain. Yet political authority has always been mediated through practices—laws enacted, reasons given, decisions explained, dissent managed. Authority, in practice, depends on whether norms can be made intelligible and defensible to those who must live under them. A non-foundational account makes this dependence explicit rather than denying it. Norms command authority not because they are beyond challenge, but because they survive challenge.

Understanding normativity as practice also clarifies why the absence of foundations does not lead to arbitrariness. The fear of arbitrariness assumes that without external constraints, normative claims become mere expressions of will. This fear overlooks the internal constraints generated by justificatory practices themselves. Political actors are not free to assert any norm whatsoever if they wish to maintain legitimacy. They must offer reasons that connect with shared experiences, established commitments, and widely recognized harms. These constraints are neither absolute nor fixed, but they are no less real for that reason. The demand to justify one's claims to others imposes discipline on political reasoning, even in the absence of ultimate grounds.

Moreover, justificatory practices are historically sedimented. Political communities inherit languages of justification shaped by past struggles, institutions, and ideals. Concepts such as equality, freedom, dignity, or security do not float freely; they carry histories that structure how they can be invoked and contested. A non-foundational account of normativity does not treat these concepts as timeless truths, but neither does it treat them as empty signifiers. Their normative force lies in their capacity to organize expectations and articulate grievances within particular contexts. Political justification thus operates within horizons that are contingent yet binding, revisable yet authoritative.

This perspective also reshapes the role of political theory itself. Rather than seeking to identify the correct foundations of political order, political theory becomes a critical engagement with existing justificatory practices. Its task is to clarify the assumptions embedded in political arguments, expose exclusions and contradictions, and explore alternative ways of articulating normative claims. Political theory does not stand above politics as an arbiter of truth; it intervenes within politics as a reflective practice. This does not diminish its critical power. On the contrary, it enhances it by refusing the false neutrality of foundational certainty and embracing the risks of situated judgment.

One of the most significant advantages of a practice-based conception of normativity is its capacity to account for disagreement without reducing it to error. In foundational models, disagreement often appears as a failure to recognize the correct principles or to apply them properly. This framing implicitly delegitimizes dissent, casting it as ignorance or irrationality. In contrast, a non-foundational approach treats disagreement as a normal and enduring feature of political life. Because norms are not anchored in uncontestable grounds, reasonable disagreement is not only possible but inevitable. The persistence of disagreement does not undermine normativity; it is one of the conditions under which normativity operates.

This does not mean that all disagreements are equally valid or that power plays no role in shaping outcomes. Rather, it means that the legitimacy of norms depends in part on how disagreement is handled. Norms that suppress contestation through force or procedural closure risk losing normative credibility, even if they are formally justified. Norms that remain open to challenge and capable of revision demonstrate a different, more resilient form of authority. Normativity, in this sense, is inseparable from the institutional and cultural conditions that allow justificatory practices to occur.

The absence of foundations also intensifies the ethical dimension of political judgment. When political actors can no longer appeal to necessity or inevitability, they must take responsibility for their choices. Decisions are no longer justified by claiming that there was no alternative grounded in first principles. Instead, actors must acknowledge that alternatives existed and explain why certain paths were chosen over others. This acknowledgment does not weaken political action; it renders it more accountable. Responsibility replaces certainty as the core ethical stance of politics without foundations.

Critically, this form of normativity does not preclude strong critique or resistance. On the contrary, it provides a robust basis for challenging domination. Political orders inevitably invoke normative claims to justify themselves, whether explicitly or implicitly. They appeal to values such as security, prosperity, freedom, or order. A practice-based conception of normativity enables critique by interrogating these claims on their own terms. Are the values invoked applied consistently? Whose experiences are excluded? Which harms are rendered invisible? Such questions do not require external foundations; they arise from within the normative vocabulary of the political order itself.

This immanent mode of critique is particularly important in pluralistic societies, where appeals to shared first principles are often unconvincing or exclusionary. By engaging with existing justificatory practices rather than imposing external standards, critique becomes more accessible and politically effective. It speaks in a language that is already meaningful within the political community, even as it pushes that language beyond its current limits. Normativity survives not by escaping politics, but by deepening political engagement.

At the same time, a non-foundational account must resist the temptation to romanticize openness or contingency. The absence of foundations does not guarantee inclusivity or justice. Justificatory practices can be distorted by unequal power relations, institutional barriers, and entrenched hierarchies. Recognizing normativity as practice therefore requires attention to the conditions under which justification takes place. Who is heard? Whose reasons count? Which forms of expression are recognized as legitimate? These questions are themselves normative, and they underscore that normativity without foundations is inseparable from struggles over voice and recognition.

Ultimately, understanding normativity as practice allows political theory to navigate between the false alternatives of foundational certainty and normative nihilism. It affirms that political judgments can be reasoned, binding, and criticizable even in the absence of ultimate grounds. Normativity persists not as an inheritance from first principles, but as an ongoing achievement sustained through practices of justification, contestation, and responsibility. Politics without foundations is not a weaker form of politics, but a more honest one—one that acknowledges its own fragility while refusing to abandon the task of judgment.

IV. RESPONSIBILITY, LEGITIMACY, AND THE ETHICS OF DECISION IN A POST-FOUNDATIONAL POLITICS

The reconfiguration of normativity as practice rather than principle has far-reaching consequences for how

political responsibility and legitimacy are understood once foundational guarantees are abandoned. In a foundational framework, responsibility is often displaced onto principles themselves. Political actors present their decisions as the necessary outcome of reason, nature, law, or history, thereby obscuring the element of choice involved. Legitimacy, in turn, is treated as something secured in advance, derived from conformity to an external standard rather than from the ongoing reception of political action. When foundations collapse, this displacement becomes increasingly untenable. Decisions can no longer be justified by invoking necessity without appearing evasive, and legitimacy can no longer be assumed as a settled property of institutions. What emerges instead is a more demanding ethical landscape in which responsibility and legitimacy must be continuously enacted rather than inherited.

In a post-foundational politics, responsibility begins with the recognition that political decisions are irreducibly contingent. This contingency does not mean that decisions are arbitrary or irrational, but that they are made in situations where no final rule determines the correct outcome. Competing values, uncertain consequences, and conflicting claims render political judgment unavoidable. To act politically is therefore to choose among imperfect options without the comfort of ultimate justification. Responsibility lies not in eliminating this uncertainty but in acknowledging it and responding to it with seriousness and care. Political actors are accountable precisely because they could have acted otherwise, even if no alternative was clearly superior.

This understanding of responsibility challenges a deeply ingrained tendency in political justification: the appeal to inevitability. Foundational narratives often function by presenting political arrangements as the only rational or moral possibility. Such narratives depoliticize decision-making by disguising choices as necessities. In contrast, a non-foundational approach insists that political decisions remain open to scrutiny precisely because they are choices. Even when constraints are real and options limited, the claim that "there was no alternative" is itself a political assertion that demands justification. Responsibility, in this sense, is inseparable from the willingness to explain not only why a particular decision was made, but why other possibilities were rejected.

This heightened sense of responsibility also reshapes the concept of political legitimacy. Without foundations, legitimacy cannot be grounded once and for all in constitutional origins, social contracts, or ideal procedures. Instead, legitimacy becomes a dynamic relationship between governing norms and those subject to them. It depends on whether political decisions can be justified in ways that are intelligible and responsive to the concerns of affected individuals and groups. Legitimacy is not exhausted by formal legality or procedural correctness; it is sustained through ongoing practices of explanation, responsiveness, and revision.

Crucially, this does not mean that legitimacy is reduced to popularity or immediate consent. A norm can be legitimate even if it is contested, provided that the contestation is recognized and engaged rather than suppressed. Conversely, a norm that enjoys widespread acceptance may still lack legitimacy if it forecloses justification or silences dissent. Legitimacy, in a post-foundational context, is less about unanimity than about the quality of justificatory relations. It concerns how power is exercised and defended, not merely whether it is obeyed.

The absence of foundations also alters the ethical stakes of political authority. Authority can no longer present itself as neutral or impersonal, deriving its force from abstract principles rather than human judgment. Political authority becomes visible as an ongoing practice that must continually earn its standing. This visibility exposes authority to critique, but it also humanizes it. Decisions are no longer attributed to faceless principles but to actors and institutions that can be questioned, held accountable, and, if necessary, transformed. The ethical burden of authority increases, because it can no longer hide behind claims of objectivity or inevitability.

This burden is particularly evident in situations of political conflict and crisis. Emergencies often provoke renewed appeals to foundations—security, sovereignty, necessity—as a way of suspending contestation. A post-foundational perspective does not deny that extraordinary circumstances may require decisive action, but it resists the idea that such action can ever be exempt from justification. Even in moments of urgency, decisions remain normative acts that shape political life and set precedents. The refusal to justify emergency measures on the grounds that they are self-evidently necessary undermines

legitimacy rather than securing it. Responsibility persists precisely where foundations are most temptingly invoked.

At the same time, post-foundational responsibility extends beyond decision-makers to political subjects themselves. If normativity is sustained through practices of justification, then political actors are not merely recipients of norms but participants in their reproduction and transformation. Citizenship, on this view, is not exhausted by compliance or voting; it involves engagement with the normative claims that structure political life. To contest, criticize, or demand justification is not to undermine political order, but to contribute to its normative vitality. A politics without foundations depends on such engagement for its legitimacy.

This conception of responsibility also reframes political critique. Without foundations, critique cannot rely on external standards that stand above political life. Instead, it must operate immanently, drawing on the norms, values, and commitments already present within a political order. This does not weaken critique; it makes it more precise. By exposing inconsistencies between professed ideals and actual practices, immanent critique holds political actors responsible for their own claims. It demands not abstract conformity to universal principles, but fidelity to the values invoked in justification.

Importantly, this mode of critique avoids the moral arrogance often associated with foundationalism. Because critique does not claim access to ultimate truth, it must remain open to counter-critique. Critics themselves are subject to the same demands of justification they impose on others. This mutual vulnerability is not a flaw but a strength. It transforms critique from an exercise in denunciation into a dialogical practice oriented toward normative learning. Responsibility, in this sense, is shared rather than monopolized.

Nevertheless, a post-foundational ethics of responsibility must confront the realities of power. Justificatory practices do not occur on an equal playing field. Some voices are amplified, others marginalized; some reasons are recognized, others dismissed. Acknowledging normativity as practice therefore entails a critical awareness of the conditions under which responsibility and legitimacy are negotiated. The ethical demand is not merely to justify decisions, but to attend to who is included in justificatory processes and on what terms. Responsibility extends to the structuring of political spaces themselves.

This awareness complicates any simplistic celebration of openness or contestation. The mere existence of justificatory practices does not guarantee justice. Norms can be justified in ways that are formally coherent yet substantively exclusionary. Post-foundational normativity does not provide automatic safeguards against domination; it provides a framework within which domination can be named and contested. The ethical challenge is ongoing, requiring vigilance rather than closure.

In the end, the collapse of foundations transforms political ethics from a search for secure grounds into an engagement with fragile practices. Responsibility replaces certainty as the central virtue of political life, and legitimacy becomes an achievement rather than an inheritance. This transformation does not signal the exhaustion of political normativity, but its intensification. When no principle can absolve us of judgment, the ethical weight of politics becomes unavoidable. Politics without foundations is thus not a realm of diminished normativity, but one in which normativity is fully exposed—demanding, contested, and inseparable from the responsibilities of acting together in a shared world.

V. CONCLUSION

In examining the state of contemporary political thought, the question of whether normativity can endure the collapse of first principles is not merely theoretical; it is existential for modern governance and ethical reasoning. Historically, political systems and moral frameworks have relied on foundational principles—concepts of justice, human nature, or divine law—to legitimize authority, guide behavior, and resolve conflict. These first principles functioned as axiomatic starting points, providing coherence to the vast complexity of political life. Yet, in the postmodern and hyperpluralistic age, such axioms are increasingly destabilized. The recognition that principles once considered self-evident—liberty, equality, the common good—are contingent and socially constructed challenges the very possibility of universal normativity. However, the collapse of foundational certainties does not necessarily entail the death of normative politics; rather, it demands a

radical reconception of how norms emerge, are justified, and operate within political communities.

One argument against the survival of normativity is that without grounding in unassailable first principles, moral and political prescriptions risk descending into mere preference or power dynamics. Classical theorists, from Aristotle to Kant, presumed that certain ethical truths could anchor political reasoning, and without them, moral statements appear arbitrary. In contemporary terms, if justice is no longer rooted in a conception of universal human dignity, or authority lacks a metaphysical or natural justification, then appeals to right or wrong lose persuasive force. Critics suggest that the erosion of first principles leaves only instrumental rationality: law and policy become exercises in expedience, and claims of moral obligation collapse into negotiation and strategic self-interest. Indeed, the post-structuralist critique of normative universals highlights the fragility of ethics and politics in the absence of foundational certainties, leaving some theorists pessimistic about the prospects of coherent normativity.

Yet, such a pessimistic assessment underestimates the adaptive capacities of normative systems. Normativity need not be tethered to immutable foundations to be meaningful; it can derive legitimacy from processes rather than premises, from practices rather than principles. Contemporary political theorists—Habermas, Rawls, and others—demonstrate that norms can emerge from intersubjective agreement, procedural fairness, or reflective equilibrium. In other words, the collapse of first principles does not preclude normativity if political communities can generate legitimacy through reasoned discourse, reciprocal recognition, and institutionalized deliberation. Norms anchored in communicative practice or mutual justification can possess robustness without requiring metaphysical guarantees. This proceduralist or constructivist approach shifts the focus from seeking immutable truths to cultivating conditions under which moral and political reasoning can be continuously tested, refined, and justified—a dynamic rather than static conception of normativity.

Moreover, the post-foundational perspective offers a unique advantage: resilience. First principles often fail because they overreach, claiming universal applicability in contexts where historical, cultural, or social variability is decisive. By contrast, normativity rooted in ongoing negotiation and reflexive critique is inherently responsive to pluralism and change. In an increasingly interconnected world, where moral and political landscapes are diverse and contested, procedural and contingent approaches to normativity may be more effective than rigid adherence to foundational dogmas. The challenge, then, is not to resurrect lost certainties, but to cultivate ethical and political literacy, deliberative skills, and institutional mechanisms that allow norms to emerge organically and remain accountable.

Ultimately, the survival of normativity in a post-foundational political landscape depends less on metaphysical certainties and more on the social and institutional frameworks that facilitate sustained reasoning, dialogue, and mutual recognition. Normativity is no longer a matter of discovery but of construction, continually negotiated and contested within the shared spaces of political life. Far from signaling the end of moral or political obligation, the collapse of first principles invites a more reflective, adaptive, and resilient understanding of what it means to govern and to act rightly. It demands that societies take seriously the conditions under which norms are legitimate, cultivating deliberative practices capable of sustaining coherent and ethical political orders without recourse to unverifiable axioms.

In conclusion, the collapse of foundational principles does not signal the demise of normativity but its transformation. Political and moral norms can survive—and even thrive—by rooting themselves in process, intersubjectivity, and reflexive practice. Normativity becomes less about certitude and more about reasoned engagement, less about immutable truths and more about accountable procedures. Far from undermining ethical and political life, the post-foundational landscape challenges societies to build norms that are not only justified but adaptable, inclusive, and capable of guiding action in a world defined by complexity and diversity. In this sense, politics without foundations is not the end of normativity but its most rigorous test: a test that demands creativity, vigilance, and an unwavering commitment to dialogue, deliberation, and ethical responsibility.

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