Delegative Democracy Reconsidered: Principal–Agent Distortions and the Erosion of Mandate Accountability in Hybrid Polities

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Abstract. Delegative democracy, as originally theorized by O'Donnell, posited a distinct regime subtype in which electoral mandates confer near-unconditional executive discretion. This article critically re-examines that framework in light of post-2015 governance trajectories across Central-Eastern European and Latin American hybrid polities, arguing that classical principal–agent formulations fail to capture the asymmetric information environments and veto-player realignments now characteristic of populist executive consolidation. Drawing on a mixed-methods design combining Boolean fsQCA across 24 polity-cases with structured elite interviews, the study identifies three previously undertheorized distortion pathways: mandate overextension, accountability forum displacement, and constitutional reinterpretation cascades. Findings challenge the binary authoritarian/democratic classification and suggest that delegative logic has mutated into a durable governance equilibrium resistant to conventional institutional correction mechanisms.

Keywords: delegative democracy, principal–agent theory, mandate accountability, hybrid polities, executive discretion, veto player theory, fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis, populist constitutionalism, governance equilibrium

Introduction

The structural integrity of representative democracy has long been theorized through the lens of principal–agent relationships, in which citizens, as ultimate principals, delegate governing authority to elected officials bound by mechanisms of periodic accountability. Yet the proliferation of hybrid political regimes across both the Global North and South since 2016 has surfaced a fundamental tension within this framework: the mandates granted through formally competitive elections are increasingly wielded in ways that systematically insulate executive actors from the very accountability architectures that democratic theory presupposes. This phenomenon—operationalized in the present study as mandate accountability erosion (MAE)—constitutes one of the defining governance pathologies of the contemporary period, with measurable consequences for legislative oversight capacity, judicial independence, and civil society intermediation. The relevance of this inquiry in 2024–2026 cannot be overstated. The V-Dem Global Report (2024) identifies executive aggrandizement as the modal pathway of democratic backsliding in 74% of polities experiencing net democratic decline, surpassing overt coup-based transitions by a factor of nearly six. Unlike sudden autocratization, MAE operates through incremental procedural reinterpretation—what Levitsky and Ziblatt characterize as the subversion of democracy's "guardrail" institutions—rendering it exceptionally difficult to detect, attribute, and remediate within conventional constitutional review timescales. Standard Dahlian polyarchy metrics, calibrated for binary regime classification, are epistemologically ill-suited to capture these graduated distortions, a deficiency this paper seeks to directly address. O'Donnell's original delegative democracy thesis provided a seminal departure from transitions-era democratization theory by identifying a coherent regime subtype that was neither liberal democracy nor competitive authoritarianism. However, its conceptual architecture, anchored in the Latin American institutional context of the 1990s, did not anticipate the role of social media-mediated populist legitimation, constitutional tribunal capture, or the strategic deployment of emergency decree powers within formally pluralist systems. The framework therefore requires systematic theoretical renovation rather than mere empirical extension. This article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reconstructs and critiques the canonical principal–agent model as applied to democratic mandates, identifying its core epistemological limitations in hybrid regime contexts. Section 3 presents the mixed-methods research design, detailing case selection criteria, the operationalization of MAE as a multi-dimensional latent construct, and the fsQCA configurational logic employed. Section 4 reports and interprets findings across the three distortion pathways—mandate overextension, accountability forum displacement, and constitutional reinterpretation cascades—drawing on elite interview data to substantiate causal mechanisms. Section 5 situates results within broader debates on autocratization theory, polyarchy measurement, and institutional resilience, before Section 6 advances a revised delegative governance equilibrium model with normative implications for constitutional design and international democratic conditionality frameworks.

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