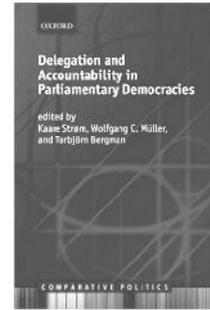


Kaare Strøm, Wolfgang C. Müller, and Torbjörn Bergman, 2006, *Delegation and Accountability in Parliamentary Democracies*, Oxford: ECPR Oxford University Press, 784 pages.



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*Delegation and Accountability in Parliamentary Democracies* focuses on processes of contemporary Western European parliamentary democracies. The fundamental argument is as follows. Parliamentary democracy is the most common way of organizing democratic systems in Europe. The advantage of parliamentarism that it is a relatively simple model, and relies on lessons gradually acquired in the past. Compared to presidentialism, parliamentarism also has certain advantages, such as decisional efficiency and the inducements it creates toward effort. On the other hand, parliamentarism also implies disadvantages such as ineffective accountability and a lack of transparency, which may cause information deficiencies.

This volume documents the two main features of this type of democracy, delegation and accountability; it also offers new conceptual framework for better understanding contemporary democracies. The book argues that representative democracies can be defined as chains of delegation and accountability between citizens and politicians. Under parliamentary democracy, the chain of delegation is simple but also long and indirect. Principal-agent theory helps us to understand the perils of democratic delegation, which include the problems of adverse selection and moral hazard. Citizens in democratic states therefore need institutional mechanisms by which they can control their representatives. The most important such control mechanisms on one hand include political parties and on the other external constraints such as courts, central banks, referendums, and supranational institutions such as those of the European Union.

Taking principal-agent theory as its framework, the empirical work illustrates how a variety of apparently unrelated representation issues can now be understood. The empirical database includes the entire political chain in seventeen West European parliamentary democracies (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg,

The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and The United Kingdom) from the post-World War II era. Of course, electoral and governmental institutions in Western democracies display great variations, with consequences for democratic delegation and accountability. However, such a comprehensive survey is a significant contribution to the study of contemporary parliamentary regimes in the ways in which governmental systems serve to express and constrain the voice of the citizens.

The above-mentioned countries are compared in a series of cross-national tables and figures, and seventeen country chapters provide a wealth of information on four distinct stages in the delegation process: delegation from voters to parliamentary representatives, delegation from parliament to the prime minister and cabinet, delegation within the cabinet, and delegation from cabinet ministers to civil servants. Each chapter illustrates how political parties serve as bonding instruments, which align incentives and permit citizen control of the policy process. This is complemented by a consideration of external constraints, such as courts, central banks, corporatism, and the main external actor: the European Union, which can impinge on national-level democratic delegation.

The authors succeed in their goal and give us a comprehensive, broad review about the state of delegation and accountability in the Western European countries. This is mainly in the concluding chapters, which deal with challenges to parliamentary democracy in general and go on to consider how well the problems of delegation and accountability are solved in the analyzed countries. The authors show that political systems with cohesive and competitive parties and strong mechanisms of external constraint solve their democratic agency problems better than countries with weaker control mechanisms.

However, in many countries political parties are now weakening, and parliamentary systems face new democratic challenges- so their argument needs reviewing, even in the case of Western European countries. In my opinion, in order to understand our region, this argument needs to be justified. Even formal structures of democratic institutions, which were reproduced to the Western European standard, the informal processes are totally different due to the heritage of the post-communist past and the current political culture. These differences are able to influence (sometimes even distort) the outcome, namely in the area of accountability. However, I do not want to be unfair with the authors: the Central European region was out of the scope of their research.

Notwithstanding the strong empirical background and the author's efforts to give an explanation for understanding the relationship between delegation and accountability, the reader has a feeling that this book is just the beginning of their work. This is primarily due to the fact that there are many newly-opened reasons minding the gap between citizens and their representatives. Contemporary democracies are faced with a tension that critically impinges on democratic agency relations. This phenomenon leads to the well-known situation in which citizens increasingly demand government accountability, while at the same time many political institutions are becoming more complex. As for the decaying of the traditional information sources, it causes the exacerbation of the problem of adverse selection, and social disintegration as well. At the same time, the citizens are becoming more critical of political institutions. In contemporary advanced societies, parliamentarism is facing the challenges of decaying screening devices and diverted accountabilities.

Besides some of the above-mentioned criticisms, this volume is innovative, because in spite of huge amount of literature on the field, our knowledge about the mechanisms of parliamentary systems still has been incomplete.

Observations in the book about the problems of political delegation are unquestionably important for the scholars and policy-makers as well. Despite that, the solutions are not obvious- even for the scholars; the governments have to find their responses for these serious challenges to preserve the health of democracy.