

**Unpacking Delegative Democracy:
Digging into the Empirical Content of a Rich Theoretical Concept**

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Introduction

In his work on delegative democracies, Guillermo O'Donnell appealed for more “empirical research, as well as more refined analytical work” on the “new species” he depicted (O'Donnell 1994: 55). This is what I intend to do in this paper: first, I provide an empirical classification of some Latin American cases based on the different dimensions in O'Donnell's definition of delegative democracies.¹ In this descriptive section, I observe cross-case variation between delegative and representative democracies (something O'Donnell obviously recognized), but also variation inside each of the two groups. Even more importantly, there is also within-case variation over time: in some countries, there has been a continuous erosion of their representative democracies; others have been going through a gradual but steady “second transition” to a more representative democracy, while in a third group of cases there has been an oscillating trend or, “recurring delegativeness.” Second, I explore some possible causes of this variation by identifying the main conditions under which delegative democracies are more likely to occur and why delegative democracies are enduring and recurrent in some countries, while not in others.

The paper is structured as follows: In the first section, and after reviewing the research and justifying the main contribution of this work to the empirical literature on the topic, I present O'Donnell's definition of delegative democracy and the discussions over the concept. Based on the main dimensions in the definition, I classify cases and analyze the empirical data. In the second part, I review the theoretical argument on the origins of delegative

democracies and the conditions that could explain variation among them and representative democracies. I empirically assess some of these propositions relying on a quantitative analysis (descriptive statistics and linear and ordinal logistic regression analysis) and explore whether some specific structural, cultural, and politico-institutional factors in the theoretical argument may account for some of the variation across and within cases. O'Donnell contended that tools in political science cannot be an end in itself. As such, they shall be used to help developing or complementing a theory. He developed the theory; here, I use some simple tools to analyze the empirical content of his work and (hopefully) contribute to more debate on the topic.

In this study I show that under conditions of economic growth, low inflation, and large public support for democracy, Latin American countries are more likely to be representative than delegative democracies. When structural conditions deteriorate and public confidence diminishes, the probability of having a delegative democracy increases dramatically. Empirical results also demonstrate that there is a quadratic relationship between partisan polarization and volatility and the odds of a country being a delegative democracy. I review the main findings and their limitations, and highlight some questions that could be addressed in a future research agenda in the conclusion.

State of Research

O'Donnell's concept of delegative democracy generated stimulating debates, both theoretical and empirical (something the author himself demanded). In the theoretical realm, some of the discussions explored the connections between delegative democracies and the literature on transition from authoritarian rule and democratic consolidation or quality of democracy (Diamond 1997: 16; O'Donnell 1996a). Other studies delved into the similarities and differences with other concepts, such as populism,² "*decisionismo*" (Quiroga 2011), and

presidential leadership (Ollier 2011), or elaborated on the theoretical consequences of delegation on accountability and representation (Quiroga 2011; Stokes 1999). Despite the important contributions at the theoretical level, part of this literature developed weak connections and exchanges with empirical studies on the abovementioned concepts. This paper works on the links between these fields.

The empirical research agenda on delegative democracy can be divided into several areas, broadly defined out of the different features of the concept being studied. One of them concentrated on the role of presidential power and executive-legislative relations in weakly institutionalized democracies, particularly in Latin America.³ Another large body of research focused its efforts on a different attribute of delegative democracies: the weaknesses of control institutions and accountability in its horizontal and societal versions.⁴ A third group studied informal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2006; Levitsky and Murillo 2009) and a fourth, the specific characteristics of their policymaking process, especially policy switches, and their implications over broader discussions on accountability and representation (Stokes 1999).

Some empirical work has been conducted in the format of case studies, but most of these works have studied specific dimensions of the concept in a particular case,⁵ without considering all of them together or in a broad comparative way. International organizations, such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), or think tanks, such as Freedom House, Polity, or Estado de la Nación, developed comparative analysis by regularly presenting descriptive diagnoses on the functioning of democracies either globally (Freedom House, Polity) or in Latin America (UNDP 2004).⁶ These studies take different definitions of democracy (see Collier and Levitsky (1997) and Munck and Verkuilen (2002) for excellent reviews and critiques on these measures), but none of them specifically focuses on delegative democracy.⁷

These research agendas have significantly advanced our theoretical and empirical knowledge on democracy in Latin America and beyond. Despite the large and productive discussions generated, there is no systematic empirical comparative work, at least to the best of my knowledge, focused specifically on the concept of delegative democracy or large-N empirical study to account for some of the observed features across cases.

Unpacking Delegative Democracy (Its Definition and a Preliminary Classification)

In his well-known work on delegative democracies, O'Donnell introduces a conceptual framework to analyze a "new species," a new type of democracy (O'Donnell 1994: 55). Delegative democracies meet Dahl's (1971) criteria for the definition of polyarchy, yet they are neither representative nor consolidated (i.e., institutionalized) democracies because they maintain serious deficits in the mechanisms of horizontal accountability (O'Donnell et al. 2011: 10). Besides, these democracies are also characterized by informal institutional practices related to the exercise of power: "Delegative democracies rest on the premise that whoever wins election to the presidency is thereby entitled to govern as he or she sees fit, constrained only by the hard facts of existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term of office" (O'Donnell 1994: 59). As a result of these practices, delegative democracies have not yet transitioned "from a democratically elected *government* to an institutionalized, consolidated democratic *regime*" (O'Donnell 1994: 56).

O'Donnell presents a definition that is a full instance of the root definition of polyarchy, but at the same time he provides useful conceptual differentiation and fine-grained distinction by identifying the key attributes of the subtype (Collier and Levitsky 1997: 435). Based on O'Donnell's (1994: 60-62; and 2011: 21-23) characterization, I identified the main features or attributes that define the subtype delegative democracy (and use these features to classify cases across the region in the next section). These attributes are:

- The president is taken to be the embodiment of the nation, custodian, and definer of its interests;
- The policies of his government need bear no resemblance to the promises of his campaign;
- The president's political base is a political movement; the president presents herself as above both political parties and organized interests;
- Other institutions, such as courts and legislatures, are considered impediments to the exercise of power;
- The exercise of power is non-institutionalized;
- The president nominates isolated and shielded *técnicos* to office;
- Extremely weak or nonexistent horizontal accountability; and
- Swift policymaking (and a higher likelihood of gross mistakes, hazardous implementation, and the president taking responsibility for the outcome).

In contrast, the main features that characterize representative democracies are a series of constitutional restrictions and historically embedded practices to institutionalize the exercise of power, strong horizontal accountability, an institutionalized legislature, slow and incremental decision-making, a decisive coalition of broadly supported political leaders who take great care in creating and strengthening democratic political institutions, and a clear distinction between the public and private interests of office holders (O'Donnell 1994: 56, 61-64).

Based on the previous definition, I categorize countries in the region as delegative or representative democracies. I classify each country from 1980 or from its transition to democracy if that occurred later, until the last year for which we have access to data (2010). First, I follow O'Donnell's own classification in his 1994 piece: Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia,