

Dismantling the Weberian Orthodoxy: Bureaucratic Discretion, Street-Level Legitimacy, and the Post-NPM Governance Deficit in Fragmented Administrative States

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Abstract. Contemporary public administration scholarship has long privileged Weberian hierarchical rationality as the normative benchmark for organizational accountability. This article critically interrogates that assumption by synthesizing multilevel governance theory, discretionary judgment frameworks, and post-New Public Management (post-NPM) institutional analysis across four OECD member states. Drawing on comparative case study methodology and structured elite interviews with 112 senior civil servants conducted between 2022 and 2024, the study identifies a systemic "legitimacy displacement" phenomenon whereby formal rule adherence erodes substantive democratic responsiveness at street-level bureaucratic interfaces. Findings demonstrate that fragmented administrative architectures systematically amplify principal-agent misalignment while constraining adaptive policy implementation. The article proposes a Discretionary Legitimacy Equilibrium (DLE) model as an alternative analytical scaffold for recalibrating accountability norms in post-hierarchical governance regimes. Policy implications for institutional redesign are discussed.

Keywords: bureaucratic discretion, post-NPM governance, street-level bureaucracy, Weberian rationality, legitimacy deficit, principal-agent misalignment, multilevel governance, administrative fragmentation, institutional accountability

Introduction

The architecture of modern public administration has been historically anchored in Weberian principles of hierarchical authority, procedural formalization, and depersonalized rule application. Since Weber's foundational articulation of rational-legal legitimacy in the early twentieth century, these precepts have served as the dominant normative template for evaluating bureaucratic performance and democratic accountability across liberal administrative states. Yet, as governance arrangements grow increasingly polycentric, digitally mediated, and horizontally networked, the explanatory and prescriptive adequacy of this orthodoxy has come under sustained empirical challenge. The period between 2020 and 2025 witnessed an accelerated unraveling of classical administrative assumptions, driven by compounding crises—pandemic-era service delivery failures, fiscal austerity-induced workforce fragmentation, and the asymmetric diffusion of algorithmic decision-support tools into front-line public service environments. These pressures have not merely strained existing institutional architectures; they have exposed the structural incapacity of hierarchical accountability models to accommodate the operational realities facing contemporary street-level bureaucrats.

The concept of street-level bureaucracy, originally theorized by Lipsky (1980), posits that public servants who interact directly with citizens—social workers, licensing officers, benefits administrators—exercise substantial *de facto* discretion that shapes policy outcomes in ways unaccounted for by formal statutory mandates. Subsequent scholarship has progressively documented how this discretion is simultaneously indispensable for adaptive governance and structurally undertheorized within dominant principal-agent frameworks that privilege vertical control and compliance verification. The New Public Management (NPM) reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, premised on performance metrics and managerial autonomy, paradoxically intensified this tension: while nominally decentralizing operational authority, they introduced accountability regimes that further compressed legitimate discretionary space at the implementation interface. The post-NPM turn toward collaborative governance, whole-of-government frameworks, and networked public value creation has yet to produce a coherent analytical model capable of reconciling hierarchical legitimacy imperatives with the pluralistic, negotiated character of contemporary service delivery.

This article addresses that theoretical lacuna directly. It argues that the persistent application of Weberian-NPM hybrid accountability norms to fragmented, multi-actor administrative environments generates a recurring and measurable legitimacy displacement: a structural condition in which procedural compliance is optimized at the organizational apex while democratic responsiveness degrades at the citizen interface. To operationalize this argument, the study develops the Discretionary Legitimacy Equilibrium (DLE) model—a mid-range theoretical instrument designed to map the conditional thresholds under which discretionary behavior by front-line administrators either reinforces or undermines aggregate institutional legitimacy.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical lineage of bureaucratic discretion and legitimacy within

public administration scholarship, locating the present contribution within ongoing post-NPM debates. Section 3 details the comparative case study methodology and elite interview protocol applied across four OECD jurisdictions. Section 4 presents the empirical findings, with particular attention to the structural antecedents and behavioral manifestations of legitimacy displacement. Section 5 introduces and elaborates the DLE model, specifying its conceptual boundaries and predictive scope. Section 6 discusses policy implications for institutional redesign and administrative reform, and Section 7 concludes with reflections on future research directions.

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