

The Performance-Based Social Contract: Reconfiguring Political Legitimacy in Contemporary Governance

العقد الاجتماعي الأدائي: إعادة تشكيل الشرعية السياسية في أنماط الحكم المعاصرة

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Abstract:

This article examines the transformation of political legitimacy in contemporary governance through the emergence of what is conceptualized as a “performance-based social contract.” While classical theories of legitimacy emphasized representation and participation, recent decades have witnessed a growing reliance on measurable outputs, administrative efficiency, and policy effectiveness as primary sources of legitimacy. Drawing on contemporary debates on input/output legitimacy developed by Fritz Scharpf and subsequent refinements by Vivien Schmidt, the study argues that performance is no longer merely a complementary source of legitimacy but a structuring principle redefining state–society relations. Through a conceptual and analytical approach supported by contemporary empirical illustrations, the article introduces the notion of the performance-based social contract as a distinct mode of political ordering. It concludes that this transformation reshapes citizenship, reconfigures accountability, and conditions political stability on continuous policy success.

Key words: Political legitimacy – Social contract – Governance – Performance – State capacity

Introduction:

Across diverse regime types, contemporary political authority is increasingly evaluated through its capacity to deliver measurable socio-economic outcomes, manage crises effectively, and ensure administrative reliability.¹ Declining trust in representative institutions has coincided with rising societal expectations regarding policy effectiveness and governance performance. This shift signals more than an administrative adjustment; it reflects a broader transformation in the normative foundations upon which political legitimacy is constructed.

Classical democratic theory located legitimacy primarily in participation, representation, and procedural fairness.² Authority was justified through mechanisms of inclusion and institutionalized consent. However, contemporary governance environments—marked by economic volatility, complex regulatory systems, and intensified public performance scrutiny—have progressively elevated outcome delivery as a central criterion of political validation. The distinction between participatory authorization and outcome-based validation provided an important analytical lens for understanding this evolution.³

Yet existing legitimacy theory exhibits a significant conceptual limitation. While acknowledging the increasing relevance of policy effectiveness, much of the literature continues to treat performance as one legitimacy source among others. What remains insufficiently theorized is whether the sustained centrality of measurable outcomes alters the structural logic of the social contract itself. In other words, scholarship has largely analyzed performance within legitimacy theory, but has not fully examined how performance may reorganize legitimacy theory.

This article addresses that gap. It argues that contemporary governance is witnessing the consolidation of a performance-based social contract in which legitimacy becomes structurally conditional upon sustained output delivery. Performance no longer functions merely as a

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complementary justification of authority; it operates as a structuring principle that redefines reciprocal expectations between citizens and the state.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is therefore:

Does the growing centrality of performance indicate a transformation in the nature of the social contract rather than a simple recalibration within existing legitimacy models?

Methodologically, the article adopts a conceptual-analytical approach grounded in contemporary governance scholarship and recent empirical debates on state capacity and political stability. By introducing the concept of the performance-based social contract as a distinct analytical category, the study contributes to legitimacy theory in two ways: first, by identifying the structural implications of performance dominance; and second, by clarifying the normative tensions that emerge when authority becomes performance-conditional.

Understanding this transformation is essential for interpreting contemporary patterns of political stability, democratic tension, and regime durability in an era increasingly defined by performance evaluation.

1 – Recalibrating the Normative Foundations of Authority

The foundations of political authority have never been static. Across historical epochs, the legitimacy of rule has been grounded in shifting normative frameworks that define why power is justified, how it is recognized, and under what conditions it is sustained. While classical models emphasized consent, representation, and institutionalized participation, contemporary governance dynamics suggest that the normative architecture of authority is undergoing recalibration.

This recalibration does not necessarily imply the abandonment of democratic procedures or constitutional principles. Rather, it reflects a reordering of evaluative priorities. Authority is increasingly judged not only by its procedural origin but by its capacity to produce tangible outcomes, manage complexity, and secure stability within highly interconnected socio-economic environments. The criteria of legitimacy are thus becoming progressively functionalized.

Such a transformation requires analytical attention at the structural level. When performance metrics, administrative efficiency, and policy effectiveness become central to political validation, the normative grammar through which citizens interpret authority is subtly altered. Recognition shifts from institutional authorship to outcome verification. Political obligation becomes intertwined with expectations of delivery.

This evolution invites a reconsideration of how authority is normatively constituted. If legitimacy is increasingly anchored in measurable effectiveness, then the evaluative standards of governance may no longer be primarily deliberative or participatory, but operational and performance-oriented. The recalibration of normative foundations therefore signals not merely a change in administrative technique, but a deeper transformation in the conceptual relationship between state and society.

Understanding this shift is essential for interpreting contemporary political stability, democratic tension, and regime resilience. The question is no longer solely how authority is authorized, but how it is continuously validated.

1.1 Functional Validation and the Marginalization of Procedural Centrality

Modern democratic legitimacy historically rested upon the presumption that political authority derives its validity from participatory inclusion and institutionalized representation. Procedural fairness and electoral accountability constituted the principal channels through which citizens recognized and authorized power.⁴

In recent decades, however, the evaluative axis of legitimacy has gradually shifted. Authority is increasingly assessed according to its capacity to manage crises, deliver economic stability, coordinate complex policy environments, and ensure administrative reliability.⁵ The justificatory

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language of politics increasingly references performance benchmarks, efficiency indicators, and governance rankings as evidence of competence.⁶

The differentiation between participatory authorization and outcome-based validation illuminated this transition.⁷ Yet what appears at first as a mere rebalancing between two legitimacy dimensions may in fact represent a more profound displacement: procedural inclusion no longer operates as the uncontested core of legitimacy, but as one variable within a broader performance-centered evaluative regime.

Technocratic decision-making structures, independent regulatory bodies, and performance auditing systems illustrate how expertise and measurable output increasingly serve as sources of authority recognition.⁸ In this configuration, legitimacy is not abolished from democratic procedures; rather, it is recalibrated through a hierarchy in which functional success acquires primacy.

1.2 The Conceptual Blind Spot in Contemporary Legitimacy Theory

While contemporary scholarship acknowledges the growing prominence of performance-based justification, it often remains analytically cautious in attributing structural consequences to this shift. Performance is frequently treated as complementary to participatory mechanisms rather than transformative of them.⁹

Attempts to refine legitimacy theory by incorporating procedural quality into governance processes expanded analytical nuance but left unresolved the broader structural implications of sustained performance dominance.¹⁰

Recent research on governance capacity and regime durability suggests that measurable socio-economic delivery may sustain political stability even where participatory inclusion remains limited.¹¹ These findings challenge the assumption that procedural centrality constitutes the indispensable foundation of durable legitimacy.

The theoretical gap emerges precisely at this juncture: legitimacy theory has not sufficiently conceptualized how continuous reliance on measurable outcomes may gradually reconstitute the normative expectations linking citizens and authority. If legitimacy becomes systematically contingent upon performance, the underlying social contract may be undergoing transformation rather than mere adaptation.

2 – The Performance-Based Social Contract as a Structuring Principle

If political legitimacy is increasingly evaluated through measurable outcomes, then the relationship between authority and society cannot remain conceptually unchanged. What appears initially as a shift in governance priorities may in fact represent a deeper reorganization of the underlying logic that structures political order. When performance becomes central to political validation, it begins to operate not merely as a criterion of assessment but as a structuring principle that shapes expectations, obligations, and institutional hierarchies.

A structuring principle does more than justify authority; it organizes the normative and functional architecture within which authority is exercised and recognized. In this sense, the performance-based orientation of contemporary governance redefines the reciprocal terms linking rulers and ruled. Authority is increasingly expected to demonstrate competence, responsiveness, and efficiency as preconditions of continued recognition. Citizens, in turn, evaluate political power through the lens of delivery, stability, and tangible outcomes.

This transformation signals a subtle but consequential displacement in the logic of political obligation. The traditional emphasis on collective authorship, representation, and procedural inclusion does not disappear, but it is progressively subordinated to evaluative standards grounded in effectiveness. Political order becomes anchored in sustained performance rather than in episodic authorization alone.

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Conceptualizing the performance-based social contract as a structuring principle allows us to move beyond descriptive accounts of administrative reform or technocratic governance. It invites an examination of how performance reshapes the normative foundations of legitimacy, recalibrates accountability mechanisms, and reorganizes state–society relations at a systemic level.

The analytical task, therefore, is not simply to observe that governments seek to perform well, but to understand how performance itself becomes constitutive of political order. When legitimacy is continuously measured against outcomes, the social contract ceases to be defined primarily by consent and becomes increasingly defined by conditional effectiveness.

2.1 Conceptual Architecture of the Performance-Based Social Contract

If legitimacy becomes structurally tied to demonstrable policy effectiveness, then the relationship between authority and society cannot remain conceptually intact. What emerges is not merely a governance adjustment, but a reorganization of reciprocal expectations between rulers and ruled.

The performance-based social contract may therefore be conceptualized as a mode of political ordering in which the durability of authority is primarily anchored in sustained output delivery rather than participatory authorization.¹² In this configuration, the justificatory threshold of power shifts from procedural compliance to measurable socio-economic results.

Unlike classical contractarian formulations that grounded political obligation in consent or normative agreement, contemporary performance-centered arrangements derive stability from administrative competence and crisis-management capacity.¹³ The metric of legitimacy becomes evaluative rather than deliberative.

This transformation produces a subtle but consequential displacement: citizens are repositioned less as co-authors of collective will and more as evaluators of state performance. Authority, in turn, assumes the profile of a managerial guarantor of stability and welfare optimization.

Such an arrangement does not necessarily abolish electoral institutions or constitutional frameworks. Rather, it hierarchizes them beneath an overarching performance criterion. Participation remains formally present but substantively secondary when policy effectiveness becomes the dominant legitimating currency.¹⁴

The performance-based contract thus operates as a structuring principle: it organizes political expectations, redistributes normative weight within institutions, and reframes accountability around output verification.

2.2 Structural Consequences for State–Society Relations

The consolidation of a performance-based contract generates several structural consequences that reshape contemporary political order.

First, citizenship acquires a functional orientation. Political belonging becomes increasingly mediated by service provision, welfare guarantees, and economic security.¹⁵ The relationship between citizen and state is evaluated through delivery rather than deliberation.

Second, legitimacy becomes temporally volatile. Because it is contingent upon continuous performance, crises or policy failures may trigger accelerated erosion of public confidence.¹⁶ Stability is no longer anchored in deeply internalized normative commitments but in ongoing administrative success.

Third, political discourse undergoes managerial reframing. Ideological contestation gives way to comparative performance assessment. Competing political actors differentiate themselves less through normative visions and more through efficiency claims, growth metrics, and crisis-management records.¹⁷

Empirical patterns across diverse regime types reinforce the plausibility of this structural shift. Studies on governance capacity demonstrate that sustained socio-economic delivery can generate compliance and stability even where participatory depth remains limited.¹⁸ Conversely,

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advanced democracies experiencing performance breakdowns often witness rapid trust decline despite intact procedural frameworks.¹⁹

These patterns suggest that performance has evolved from a supplementary legitimacy resource into a systemic ordering logic. When authority is continuously evaluated through measurable outputs, the social contract itself becomes performance-contingent.

The performance-based social contract therefore represents not a normative endorsement of technocracy, but an analytical category capturing a reconfiguration of legitimacy foundations in contemporary governance.

3 – Normative Risks and Democratic Tensions in Performance-Centered Legitimacy

When political legitimacy becomes increasingly anchored in measurable performance, its normative implications extend far beyond questions of administrative efficiency. Performance-centered legitimacy may enhance responsiveness and strengthen expectations of effectiveness, yet it simultaneously reshapes the ethical and democratic terrain within which authority operates. What begins as a functional recalibration may gradually introduce tensions that affect the depth, stability, and meaning of democratic governance.

Legitimacy grounded in performance is inherently conditional. It relies on sustained success, visible outcomes, and the continuous capacity of institutions to deliver under changing circumstances. While such conditionality may incentivize competence, it also embeds fragility within the political order. Authority becomes exposed to rapid erosion in moments of crisis, economic downturn, or policy failure. Unlike legitimacy anchored in entrenched norms or collective identification, performance-based validation is perpetually subject to recalculation.

Moreover, the centrality of performance may transform the nature of political contestation. When governance is primarily evaluated through efficiency metrics and delivery benchmarks, public debate risks narrowing into managerial comparison. Ideological plurality, normative disagreement, and deliberative complexity may be reframed as obstacles to optimal administration. The language of politics shifts from competing visions of collective purpose to competing claims of technical competence.

Such dynamics generate democratic tensions. The reduction of political evaluation to performance indicators may unintentionally depoliticize public life, repositioning citizens as evaluators of service provision rather than participants in collective self-rule. At the same time, uneven state capacity across contexts may produce asymmetrical legitimacy outcomes, where high-performing systems consolidate stability while lower-capacity systems face structural vulnerability.

Examining these normative risks does not imply rejecting performance as a dimension of legitimacy. Rather, it requires acknowledging that when performance becomes central, it alters the balance between effectiveness and participation, between managerial rationality and democratic deliberation. The challenge lies in understanding how performance-centered legitimacy can coexist with, rather than displace, the normative commitments that sustain democratic life.

3.1 The Fragility of Performance-Conditional Authority

If legitimacy becomes structurally dependent on measurable outcomes, its durability becomes intrinsically unstable. Unlike procedural legitimacy, which derives resilience from institutionalized norms and routinized participation, performance-based legitimacy operates under conditions of continuous evaluative exposure.²⁰

Authority grounded in output delivery is vulnerable to external shocks, economic downturns, and governance failures that may lie beyond direct state control. In such contexts, the erosion of trust can occur rapidly because the justificatory basis of rule is narrowly defined.²¹

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This dynamic introduces a paradox: the more legitimacy relies on demonstrable success, the less insulated it becomes from cyclical crises. Stability becomes conditional rather than embedded.

Moreover, the evaluative culture associated with performance metrics may intensify political short-termism. Governments incentivized to secure measurable achievements within compressed time horizons may prioritize visible outputs over structural reforms whose benefits are less immediately quantifiable.²²

Thus, while performance-centered legitimacy can generate compliance during periods of growth and stability, it simultaneously embeds a structural fragility within the political order.

3.2 The Depoliticization of Democratic Contestation

A second normative tension concerns the transformation of political discourse itself. When authority is assessed primarily through efficiency indicators and delivery benchmarks, public debate risks narrowing into managerial evaluation.²³

In such an environment, ideological disagreement and normative pluralism may be reframed as inefficiencies rather than legitimate dimensions of democratic life. Political competition shifts from contesting visions of collective purpose to comparing administrative competence.

This shift does not eliminate elections or formal representation; rather, it reorients their substance. Electoral campaigns increasingly revolve around growth rates, fiscal discipline, and crisis-management performance instead of substantive ideological alternatives.²⁴

The cumulative effect may be a subtle depoliticization of democratic space. If citizens evaluate authority primarily as consumers of public services, collective self-governance risks being reduced to performance auditing.

This does not imply that performance legitimacy is inherently anti-democratic. Rather, it suggests that its consolidation may recalibrate the normative center of democracy away from deliberation and toward technocratic validation.

3.3 Inequality, Capacity, and Asymmetrical Legitimacy

A further structural tension emerges from uneven state capacity. Performance-based contracts presuppose the ability to deliver consistent outcomes. Yet state capacities vary significantly across political systems.²⁵

In high-capacity states, performance-centered legitimacy may reinforce stability. In lower-capacity contexts, however, persistent delivery gaps may delegitimize authority even where participatory mechanisms exist.

This asymmetry generates differentiated legitimacy trajectories: systems capable of sustaining economic and administrative success accumulate performance credit, while others face cyclical legitimacy crises.²⁶

Consequently, performance-based legitimacy may inadvertently intensify global and domestic inequality in political stability. Where capacity is limited, legitimacy erosion becomes structural rather than episodic.

The performance-based social contract therefore contains within it a stratifying logic: it rewards administrative strength and penalizes structural vulnerability.

Conclusion

This article has argued that contemporary governance is witnessing more than a recalibration between participatory and outcome-based legitimacy. Rather, it is undergoing a structural reconfiguration in which performance increasingly operates as the primary organizing logic of political justification.

By conceptualizing the performance-based social contract as a distinct mode of political ordering, the study moves beyond the prevailing tendency to treat output legitimacy as one variable

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among others. Instead, it demonstrates that sustained reliance on measurable socio-economic delivery reorganizes the reciprocal expectations between citizens and authority.

In this configuration, legitimacy becomes performance-conditional. Authority is evaluated through demonstrable capacity to manage crises, stabilize economies, and deliver public goods efficiently. Citizens, in turn, assume the role of evaluative recipients whose recognition of power is contingent upon continued effectiveness.

The contribution of this article lies in identifying the structural implications of this shift. First, it reveals how performance-centered legitimacy hierarchizes democratic procedures beneath functional validation without formally abolishing them. Second, it exposes the volatility inherent in performance-dependent authority, where legitimacy can erode rapidly under conditions of failure. Third, it highlights the normative tensions introduced by managerial depoliticization and unequal state capacity.

The performance-based social contract thus emerges as an analytical category capable of explaining contemporary patterns of political stability across diverse regime types. In high-capacity systems, sustained output delivery can generate compliance even in the presence of limited participatory depth.²⁷ Conversely, performance breakdowns may trigger legitimacy crises despite intact institutional frameworks.²⁸

Importantly, this conceptualization does not normatively endorse technocratic governance. Rather, it provides a theoretical lens through which to interpret a transformation already unfolding within contemporary political systems. The emphasis shifts from asking whether performance contributes to legitimacy toward examining how performance reorganizes the foundations of authority itself.

Future research may pursue three principal directions. First, comparative empirical analysis across regime types could assess the durability of performance-based contracts under conditions of economic volatility. Second, longitudinal studies may examine whether performance-centered legitimacy gradually reshapes democratic culture and civic expectations. Third, normative political theory may further interrogate the compatibility between performance conditionality and democratic self-rule.

Understanding legitimacy in the twenty-first century requires recognizing that authority is increasingly judged not only by how it is constituted, but by what it continuously delivers. The performance-based social contract captures this transformation and offers a framework for analyzing its long-term implications for governance, democracy, and political stability.

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