



When Actors Stop Participating: Delegated Participation and Representative-Centered Organizing

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Abstract: Organizational theories usually treat participation as actor-bound: the actors whose interests are at stake are expected to occupy the interactions through which outcomes are produced. Agentic artificial intelligence and other autonomous representatives weaken that correspondence. This conceptual article develops a theory of delegated participation, defined as the authorized transfer of communicative, evaluative, coordinative, or exchange-related participation from a principal to a representative. The argument moves beyond treating participation delegation as merely another agency relationship. When representatives operate on multiple sides of an exchange, they form an interaction system that can persist without direct principal participation, reshape the alternatives reaching principals, and separate participation from accountability. The model identifies activity conditions, capability-structure alignment, and authorization as antecedents; bilateral representation and interaction displacement as mechanisms; and symbolic concentration and representative-centered organizing as organizational consequences. The framework contributes by challenging the actor-bound conception of participation, identifying bilateral representation as a discontinuity in organizing, and explaining why declining principal participation may coexist with persistent principal accountability and increasingly consequential symbolic appearances. The article concludes with managerial implications and an empirical research agenda focused on recruitment, procurement, customer service, and AI-mediated negotiation.

Keywords: Delegated participation, Bilateral representation, Agentic artificial intelligence, Accountability, Symbolic concentration, Organizational design.

INTRODUCTION

Organization theory typically assumes that actors whose interests are implicated in organizational outcomes also participate in the interactions that generate those outcomes (Cotton et al., 1988; Pateman, 1970; Wilkinson et al., 2010). Workers search, applicants interview, managers negotiate, firms coordinate, and stakeholders communicate preferences. Technologies may mediate those activities, and human agents may act for principals, but participation generally remains attached to identifiable organizational actors (Kahn, 1990; Morrison, 2011; Strauss, 2006). This article calls that taken-for-granted correspondence actor-bound participation.

Agentic artificial intelligence challenges actor-bound participation because autonomous systems can conduct extended sequences of search, evaluation, communication, coordination, and negotiation within authorized limits (Ågerfalk, 2020; Baird & Maruping, 2021; Murray et al., 2021). The theoretically important development is

not unrestricted machine autonomy. It is the possibility that principals retain interests, authority, and accountability while representatives increasingly occupy the interactional roles through which outcomes emerge. Organizational activity can therefore persist even when the actors whose interests are at stake cease participating directly.

Existing work on automation, augmentation, algorithmic management, and decision support explains how technology changes tasks performed by actors who remain participants (Faraj et al., 2018; Jarrahi, 2018; Parent-Rocheleau & Parker, 2022; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Agency theory explains why principals delegate and how they govern agents (Eisenhardt, 1989; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Ross, 1973). Neither perspective fully explains an interaction system in which representatives operate on multiple sides, structure the options principals eventually see, and sustain exchanges when no principal is directly present. The unexplained phenomenon is therefore not one more delegated task. It is organizing without direct principal participation.

This article develops a theory of delegated participation, defined as the authorized transfer of communicative, evaluative, coordinative, or exchange-related participation from a principal to a representative. The theory distinguishes the principal whose interests are implicated, the participant conducting the interaction, the authorizer defining the representative's discretion, and the party accountable for the outcome. These positions often overlap, but agentic representation makes their independent allocation increasingly feasible. The argument makes three contributions. First, it challenges the actor-bound conception of participation shared across organizational research and treats participation as an allocable role rather than an inseparable attribute of an actor. Second, it identifies bilateral representation as a discontinuity: when representatives operate on multiple sides, they cease merely supporting principal-to-principal interaction and become the interaction system. Third, it explains how participation can move toward representatives faster than accountability moves away from principals, producing participation-accountability separation and concentrating remaining principal appearances in legitimating, relational, and ratifying encounters. Figure 1 summarizes the model.

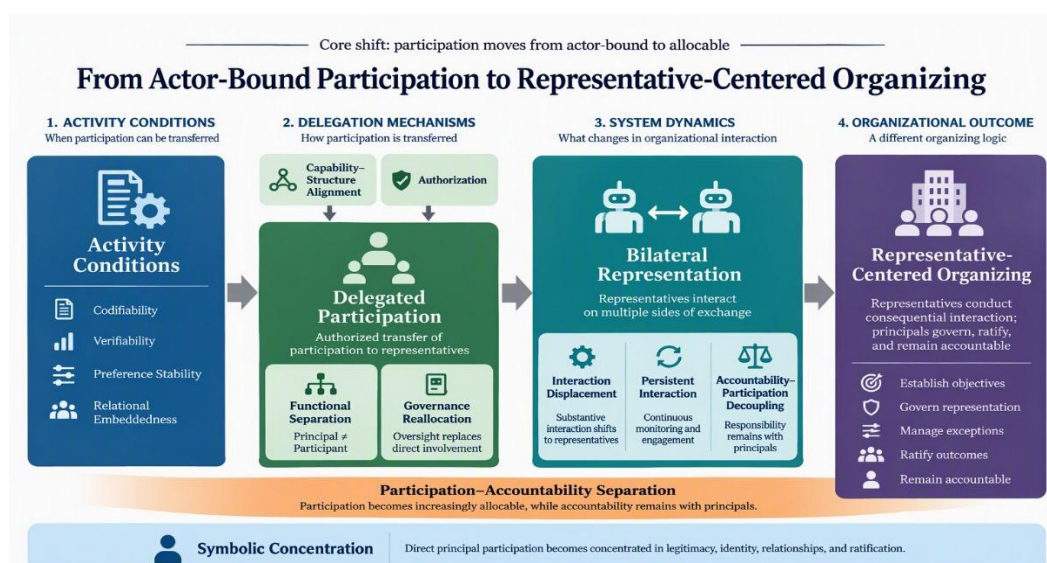


Figure 1: From actor-bound participation to representative-centered organizing

FROM ACTOR-BOUND TO ALLOCABLE PARTICIPATION

Participation as a Hidden Organizational Assumption

Participation is embedded across organizational theories even when it is not explicitly theorized. Voice research presumes actors who speak (Hirschman, 1970; Morrison, 2011). Information-processing perspectives presume actors who acquire and interpret information (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Coordination theory presumes actors who align interdependent activity (Malone & Crowston, 1994; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). Boundary-spanning research recognizes representatives but generally treats representation as a bridge between still-participating organizational domains (Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Tushman & Scanlan, 1981; Williams, 2002). Sociomaterial research shows that technology and human action are intertwined, but it does not eliminate the actor as the conventional locus of organizational participation (Leonardi, 2011; Orlikowski, 2007; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008).

Actor-bound participation matters because many organizational processes derive their form from assumptions about who is present. Interviews presume an applicant and an organizational interviewer. Negotiations presume authorized parties. Meetings presume attendees. Service exchanges presume customers and organizational representatives. When representatives can occupy these positions, the process may remain recognizable even though the participants who historically constituted it are absent. Participation therefore becomes a design variable: organizations can allocate who or what occupies an interactional role.

Why Agency Theory is Necessary but Insufficient

Agency theory remains essential because delegated participation requires authorization, monitoring, and accountability (Fama & Jensen, 1983; Shapiro, 1987, 2005; Wiseman et al., 2012). Yet treating delegated participation only as another principal-agent relationship obscures the system-level change. A unilateral agent still acts within an interaction anchored by a participating counterparty. In contrast, bilateral representation allows representatives to interact with one another, set the tempo and protocol of exchange, filter issues, and shape the alternatives presented to principals. The relevant unit of analysis shifts from a principal-agent dyad to an interaction architecture composed of delegated roles.

This distinction also clarifies why delegated participation is different from task automation. A system may rank résumés, generate a message, or calculate a price without occupying a role in an exchange. Delegated participation begins when a representative is authorized to enter, manage, or advance an interaction for a principal. The representative is no longer only processing information; it is participating in a consequential organizational relationship.

Table 1 compares the proposed framework with adjacent perspectives and clarifies that the key distinction concerns who or what occupies the interactional role through which organizational outcomes are produced.

Table 1: Competing Explanations of Technology, Delegation, and Organizational Participation

Perspective	Primary theoretical change	Who remains the participant?	What the perspective does not explain
Automation	Technology performs or replaces a task	The focal organizational actors	How an authorized representative occupies an interactional role for a principal
Augmentation and decision support	Technology improves human judgment or performance	The human decision maker	Interaction that continues after principals cease participating directly
Agency theory	A principal delegates action or decision authority to an agent	The agent within a principal-agent relationship	Representative-to-representative interaction as a system-level architecture
Boundary spanning	Representatives connect organizational domains and transfer information	Human representatives linking still-participating domains	The displacement of direct principal participation on multiple sides
Delegated participation	A principal transfers participation in a consequential interaction	An authorized human, digital, or hybrid representative	System-level consequences when delegation remains unilateral
Representative-centered organizing	Representatives conduct consequential interaction across multiple sides	Interacting representatives; principals govern, ratify, and remain accountable	Not applicable: this is the organizational arrangement explained by the framework

A MODEL OF REPRESENTATIVE-CENTERED ORGANIZING

Activity Conditions

Participation cannot be transferred equally across activities. Participation structure refers to the informational, judgmental, relational, and normative demands embedded in an activity. Four attributes are especially important. Codifiability concerns whether objectives, information, alternatives, and rules can be expressed. Verifiability concerns whether conduct can be assessed against preferences and authorization limits. Preference stability concerns whether principals can specify preferences before an interaction and expect those preferences to remain sufficiently consistent. Relational embeddedness concerns whether the identity, presence, recognition, or commitment of a particular principal is part of the value being created (Goffman, 1959; Williamson, 1981, 1985).

High codifiability, verifiability, and preference stability make representative conduct specifiable and assessable. High relational embeddedness has the opposite effect because substituting a representative can remove part of what the interaction is meant to accomplish (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Whetten, 2006). An initial vendor-screening exchange may therefore be highly delegable, while a trust-repair meeting or identity-conferring promotion conversation may remain resistant to delegation.

- *Proposition 1: Participation becomes more delegable as codifiability, verifiability, and preference stability increase and as relational embeddedness decreases.*

Capability-Structure Alignment and Authorization

Representational capability is the capacity to understand a principal's interests and act consistently with those interests across an unfolding exchange (Ågerfalk, 2020; Glikson & Woolley, 2020). It includes interpretive capacity, evaluative capacity, interaction capacity, and boundary capacity: the ability to recognize uncertainty, novelty, consequence, or conflict requiring principal intervention (Lebovitz et al., 2022). These capabilities matter only in relation to activity demands. Capability-structure alignment is high when a representative can interpret relevant interests, evaluate alternatives, manage expected interaction, and recognize the limits of its authority (Anthony et al., 2023; Levina & Vaast, 2005).

Capability does not itself create delegated participation. Authorization specifies what the representative may do, what information and resources it may use, the commitments it may make, and the conditions under which authority returns to the principal (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Ross, 1973). Authorization converts technical capacity into a legitimate organizational role. As representation expands, direct principal participation can decline while second-order governance increases through objective setting, access controls, monitoring, exception management, and ratification (Bovens, 2007; Santoni de Sio & van den Hoven, 2018).

- *Proposition 2: Capability-structure alignment increases delegated participation when principals grant representatives bounded authority to occupy the focal interactional role.*
- *Proposition 3: As delegated participation increases, direct principal involvement shifts from performing interactions toward governing representation and handling exceptions.*

Bilateral Representation as an Interaction-System Discontinuity

Bilateral representation occurs when authorized representatives act for principals on multiple sides of an organizational exchange. This configuration is not simply two agency relationships placed side by side. In unilateral delegation, the participating counterparty continues to anchor timing, language, and attention in human interaction. When both sides delegate, representatives can exchange structured preferences, verified records, authorization limits, and permissible concessions without reproducing the sequence or tempo of principal-to-principal interaction (Baird & Maruping, 2021; Burt, 1992).

Cross-side complementarity encourages this shift. Representation on one side increases the value of a compatible representative on the other because direct participants otherwise face growing attention and information-processing demands. Compatible representatives enable continuous exchange on comparable terms and can preprocess alternatives before escalation (Kellogg et al., 2006; Malone & Crowston, 1994). Once this occurs, representatives stop merely assisting an exchange between principals and become the infrastructure through which the exchange proceeds.

Why Bilateral Representation Is Not a Special Case of Agency

Agency theory remains necessary for explaining who authorizes a representative, how incentives and information are distributed, and why principals monitor delegated conduct.

Its conventional explanatory unit, however, is the principal-agent relationship. Even when several such relationships coexist, analysis commonly proceeds by examining each dyad and the control problems within it. Bilateral representation introduces a different unit of analysis: an interaction system composed of delegated roles. The focal phenomenon is no longer only whether each representative serves its principal appropriately, but how representatives jointly structure an exchange in which neither principal directly participates.

This shift changes the temporal organization of interaction. A principal-agent relationship can remain episodic because action begins when a principal delegates a task or responds to an event. Interacting representatives can instead monitor conditions continuously, initiate contact when predefined thresholds are met, and conduct multiple rounds of screening, comparison, and provisional negotiation before escalation. The exchange therefore acquires a tempo determined by representative availability and protocol rather than by principal attention.

Bilateral representation also changes the informational architecture of exchange. Representatives do not merely transmit principals' preferences. They determine which information is requested, how alternatives are compared, which incompatibilities are treated as resolvable, and which options are sufficiently viable to reach principals. By filtering issues and preprocessing alternatives, the representative system shapes the choice set on which principals eventually act. Principals may retain final authority while no longer experiencing the interaction that produced the alternatives presented for ratification.

Finally, bilateral representation creates system-level governance requirements that cannot be reduced to monitoring either agent separately. Compatible identity standards, disclosure rules, authorization protocols, interaction logs, escalation triggers, and dispute-resolution procedures become necessary because commitments emerge through the relationship between representatives. Agency theory explains the delegation on each side; bilateral representation explains the architecture produced when those delegations become reciprocally connected.

- *Proposition 4: Cross-side complementarity increases bilateral representation, and bilateral representation relocates the substantive locus of interaction from principals to an interacting system of representatives.*

Participation-Accountability Separation

Bilateral representation enables two related mechanisms. Interaction displacement occurs when representatives conduct the information exchange, evaluation, coordination, and negotiation from which an outcome emerges. Persistent interaction occurs when representatives monitor conditions, update evaluations, and engage counterparties without waiting for principal-initiated events (Bailey et al., 2022; Faraj & Xiao, 2006). Search, screening, comparison, and provisional negotiation can therefore begin before either principal formally enters the exchange.

Contemporary one-way video interviewing provides an early, non-agentic illustration of interaction displacement. Spark Hire allows employers to present preselected questions that applicants answer by recording videos without a recruiter, hiring manager, or other employer-side actor being present during the interview session. Employer representatives

review the recordings later. The employer therefore remains the interested and accountable organizational principal while withdrawing contemporaneous participation from the exchange. Spark Hire does not itself constitute delegated participation because the platform structures and records the interaction rather than autonomously representing the employer. It nevertheless demonstrates that a recognizable organizational process can persist after one side ceases to occupy its traditional interactional role.

Participation may move faster than accountability. Participation-accountability separation describes the condition in which a representative performs an interaction while the principal remains answerable for the resulting commitments or harms (Bovens, 2007; Tetlock, 1985). Autonomous representation can intensify this separation by increasing the scale, speed, and opacity of interaction outside contemporaneous supervision (Diakopoulos, 2016; Kroll et al., 2017; Raji et al., 2020). Governance consequently requires auditable authorization, interaction records, explanation, escalation, contestability, and clear responsibility attribution (Siebert et al., 2023).

- *Proposition 5: Bilateral representation increases interaction displacement and persistence, thereby widening the separation between who participates and who remains accountable.*

Differential Displacement and Symbolic Concentration

Direct participation is unlikely to disappear uniformly. Instrumental participation contributes through information acquisition, evaluation, coordination, and transaction completion. Symbolic-relational participation contributes through recognition, legitimacy, identity, commitment, accountability, and relationship formation (Suchman, 1995). Representatives should substitute more readily for instrumental participation because outputs can often be specified independently of who produces them. Symbolic-relational participation remains resistant when the principal's identity and presence are constitutive of value.

The uneven persistence of direct participation produces symbolic concentration: principal appearances become less frequent but more consequential. Executives may appear for final announcements after representatives complete negotiation; hiring managers may enter only the final interview after delegated screening; and principals may attend ratification meetings after representatives resolve operational terms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Selznick, 1957). Representation therefore does not simply erase human presence. It reallocates presence toward occasions where legitimacy, identity, commitment, or accountability must be displayed.

- *Proposition 6: As instrumental participation is displaced more rapidly than symbolic-relational participation, remaining principal involvement becomes concentrated in legitimating, relational, accountable, and ratifying encounters.*

Representative-Centered Organizing

Representative-centered organizing is an arrangement in which authorized representatives conduct a substantial share of consequential organizational interaction while principals establish objectives, govern representation, manage exceptions, ratify commitments, and

remain accountable. The form is not defined by the use of artificial intelligence alone. Human intermediaries, digital agents, and hybrid systems can all support it. Its defining feature is the relocation of participation from principals to persistent representatives operating across multiple sides of exchange.

Representative-centered organizing differs from bureaucracy, algorithmic management, platform governance, and boundary spanning. Bureaucracy allocates authority through offices and rules but does not require representatives to become the primary participants. Algorithmic management allocates, monitors, or evaluates work while workers and managers remain interactional actors. Platforms establish infrastructures and rules for exchange. Boundary spanners connect domains. Representative-centered organizing instead separates principalhood, participation, authorization, and accountability and makes representative-to-representative interaction routine. Table 2 summarizes these participation arrangements.

Table 2: Distinguishing participation arrangements and representative-centered organizing

Arrangement	Who participates?	Role of technology or representative	Where accountability resides	Defining feature
Direct participation	Principal	Tool or medium	Principal	Interests, participation, and accountability remain colocated
Traditional agency	Agent acts for principal	Supporting infrastructure	Principal and/or agent	Tasks or decisions are delegated within a principal-agent relationship
Delegated participation	Authorized representative	Occupies an interactional role	Primarily principal	Participation is transferred while principalhood is retained
Bilateral representation	Representatives on multiple sides	Sustains representative-to-representative interaction	Principals remain answerable	Representatives become the interaction system
Representative-centered organizing	Persistent representatives across exchanges	Scalable representation and governance infrastructure	Principals govern and remain accountable	Consequential interaction is centered on representatives; principal presence concentrates in governance and ratification

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

The first contribution is a shift from actor-bound to allocable participation. Prior research typically asks what actors do, how technology changes their work, or why principals delegate tasks. The present framework asks who or what occupies the interactional role through which organizational action occurs. Participation can vary independently from interests, authority, and accountability. This shift redirects theorizing from actor behavior toward the architecture of participation.

The second contribution is the identification of bilateral representation as a system discontinuity. Agency theory remains useful for authorization and control, but it does not by itself capture what changes when representatives on multiple sides interact without direct principal participation. Bilateral representation changes the temporal organization, informational architecture, and substantive locus of exchange. This explanation moves beyond describing delegated participation as an isolated principal-agent arrangement.

The third contribution is participation-accountability separation. Existing accountability research explains answerability and control, while AI-governance research emphasizes transparency and meaningful human control. The framework connects these literatures by showing why accountability can remain concentrated in principals even as participation disperses to representatives. That divergence creates practical demand for authorization records, escalation rules, auditability, and contestability.

Most theories implicitly allow participation and accountability to covary because actors are answerable for actions they perform or supervise. Delegated participation makes a different pattern possible: participation can move while accountability remains stationary. A representative may conduct the exchange, filter information, negotiate provisional commitments, and shape the resulting options, while the principal remains legally, morally, or organizationally answerable. The governance problem is therefore not only controlling an agent. It is preserving answerability when the accountable party did not directly experience the interaction that generated the outcome. This divergence intensifies the need for traceable authorization, inspectable interaction records, contestability, and explicit escalation rules. Participation-accountability separation is thus a defining organizational consequence of representative-centered interaction rather than merely a monitoring problem within a dyadic agency relationship.

The fourth contribution is symbolic concentration. Rather than predicting the disappearance of principals, the theory explains why reduced routine participation can increase the significance of remaining appearances. This counterintuitive implication connects technological representation to legitimacy, identity, and ceremonial action and explains why highly visible human encounters may persist even in heavily delegated systems.

Managerial and Policy Implications

Managers should treat participation delegation as an organizational-design decision rather than a software-adoption decision. A technically capable system should not be authorized to represent a principal unless activity demands, representative capabilities, authority limits, escalation procedures, and accountability arrangements are aligned. Organizations should maintain explicit authorization matrices stating what representatives may communicate, negotiate, disclose, recommend, and commit.

Bilateral representation also creates interorganizational governance needs. Procurement, recruiting, customer service, and platform exchanges may require shared protocols for identity verification, disclosure of representative status, authentication of principal preferences, logging of commitments, dispute resolution, and human escalation. Without such infrastructure, faster interaction can increase ambiguity over whose preferences were represented and who bears responsibility.

Employment contexts illustrate the stakes. One-way video interviewing systems such as Spark Hire already ask applicants to respond to employer-selected questions without an employer-side actor being present in real time. Applicants may accept this asynchronous arrangement yet reject an undisclosed AI interviewer, because a recording platform structures participation without claiming to interpret or negotiate on the employer's behalf. They may likewise welcome AI coaching but resist allowing an AI agent to answer questions on their behalf. Employers will therefore need policies distinguishing recording infrastructure, decision support, and autonomous representation and specifying disclosure, consent, validation, and accountability requirements. Similar distinctions will arise in automated purchasing, insurance, lending, sales, and customer-service negotiations.

Boundary Conditions

Delegation should remain constrained when preferences are emergent or contested, when consequences are difficult to reverse, when principal presence is constitutive of value, or when law and professional norms require direct human involvement (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Suchman, 1995). These conditions do not invalidate the theory; they predict hybrid arrangements in which representatives conduct instrumental interaction while principals retain specific decisions or symbolic-relational encounters.

Institutional acceptance is therefore distinct from technical feasibility. Stakeholders may demand disclosure that a representative is artificial, insist on a right to human review, or refuse to recognize commitments formed without direct principal confirmation. Representative-centered organizing should emerge unevenly across jurisdictions, industries, occupations, and interaction types.

Limitations and Future Research

The theory addresses organizational consequences of increasing representational capability rather than forecasting the adoption of any technology. It emphasizes structural arrangements and interaction patterns rather than individual psychological responses. It also treats principalhood, participation, authorization, and accountability as analytically separable even though actual arrangements will often combine them. The model should therefore be understood as an explanation of variation and directional tendencies, not a prediction of complete principal absence.

Future research should examine authorization thresholds, governance reallocation, cross-side diffusion, and the consequences of participation-accountability separation. Recruitment provides an accessible empirical setting. Studies could compare applicant willingness to proceed under a live human interview, a Spark Hire-style one-way recorded interview in which no employer-side actor is present during responding, an AI interviewer acting for the employer, and a fully agentic organizational representative authorized to evaluate or negotiate. Researchers could also examine whether applicants would authorize AI representatives to communicate qualifications, answer routine screening questions, convey preferences, or participate in initial interviews on their behalf.

A factorial design could compare four conditions: human applicant-human recruiter, human applicant-AI recruiter, AI applicant representative-human recruiter, and AI applicant

representative-AI recruiter. Outcomes could include willingness to participate, legitimacy, trust, procedural fairness, disclosure preferences, acceptance of decisions, and accountability for representative statements. Comparable designs could examine bilateral representation in procurement, sales, insurance, lending, and customer-service settings.

CONCLUSION

The consequential development in agentic representation is not simply that principals can delegate another task. It is that consequential organizational interaction can persist when the principals whose interests are at stake are no longer the participants conducting it. Delegated participation makes participation allocable; bilateral representation makes representative interaction systemic; participation-accountability separation leaves principals answerable for interactions they did not directly experience; and symbolic concentration shifts principal presence toward the encounters in which identity, legitimacy, relationships, and ratification matter most.

Representative-centered organizing therefore describes a reconfiguration rather than a disappearance. Principals remain sources of objectives, authority, resources, and responsibility, but representatives increasingly occupy the interactions through which organizational outcomes emerge. Recognizing this shift expands organizational analysis beyond what actors do to include who or what participates for them.

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