

Political Corruption as Accountability Deficit: A Theory-Probing Study of Hungary

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Statement of the problem

A research part of *[The Margins of Corruption](#)* project (SNSF Advanced Grant)

➤ Claim: Normative political theory is not an abstract endeavour detached from reality. It is grounded in careful observation of moral and political life, as it is lived through practices of judging, justifying, holding actors to account, and enacting role-based obligations.

- Justification, therefore, does not emerge from pure principles alone.

It, also, arises from bringing those principles into coherence with our "considered judgements" (Rawls 1971) and "considered convictions" (Rawls 1975). These judgements are shaped within social and political experience.

Statement of the problem

- If this account is right: Scholars engaged in normative political analysis cannot stay outside the social world. They must attend to it as a domain of inquiry (Rawls 1975), and, on this basis, engage with it more directly.
- Attending these practices is analytically significant as it allows normative concepts to be interpreted, contested, and refined in context (Herzog and Zacka 2017).

Statement of the problem

- Normative political theory and political science are often treated as distinct branches of scholarly inquiry, each proceeding according to different methodological commitments and epistemic agendas.
 - ✓ This sharp separation has been increasingly questioned (see Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006; Floyd 2017; Herzog and Zacka 2017; Baderin 2023; Taylor 2024; Pölzler 2025).
 - ✓ They serve to code the same social world from different analytical perspectives (Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006, 108).
 - ❖ They are not substitutive or competing enterprises, but complementary and mutually reinforcing endeavours (Bauböck 2008, 55).
 - ✓ This understanding can facilitate cross-fertilisation between normative theorising and empirical analysis.

The Gap and Argument(s)

➤ Despite this recognition, disconnected approaches prevail in both sides. Yet a more sustained interaction is required to uphold the “cohabitation of political theory and political science” (Dryzek et al. 2006, 7), if political theory is to provide inclusive and practically relevant normative guidance to the universally pressing public concerns.

- ❑ Indeed, questions of democracy, justice, equality, migration, corruption, and accountability, among others, are not merely normatively charged but also empirically conditioned phenomena.
- Interview-based empirical research can be used as a theory-probing methodological instrument for normative political theory:
 - ❑ An empirically informed/sensitive approach to normative theorising through conceptual traveling across contexts.

Theory Probing in Normative Political Theory: A Methodological Instrument for Cohabitation with Empirical Research

- Theory-Probing: Employing empirical material to interrogate the scope conditions, background assumptions, and internal cohesion of a normative framework.
- ✓ The very idea: Bridging normative theorising and empirical research by treating them as mutually informative rather than methodologically competing disciplines.
 - Empirical findings as diagnostic resources that illuminate how normative concepts operate, erode, or transform in real-world institutional settings.
 - Does not generate new norms inactively nor evaluate their moral truth empirically.
 - Empirical insights for refining normative theory by probing its applicability, resilience, and explanatory reach across contexts.
 - Neither verifies nor falsifies normative claims.

Theory Probing in Normative Political Theory

- Theory Probing: Empirical evidence can reveal latent tension(s) within normative theories, expose implicit presuppositions about institutional functioning, and prompt conceptual refinement without collapsing normative inquiry into descriptive social science (Baubock 2008; Gerring and Yasnowitz 2006).
 - ❑ Examining how normativity operates in practice, especially under non-ideal or structurally distorted condition.
- ✓ Fieldwork allows us to observe how normativity is inhabited, interpreted, or hollowed out by institutional actors.

Theory Testing vs. Theory Probing

| Dimension | Theory testing | Theory Probing |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| Purpose | Verify or falsify theoretical claims | Interrogate assumptions and scope conditions |
| Epistemic Logic | Confirmation/Falsification | Diagnostic engagement |
| Relationship btw theory and data | Data evaluate theory | Theory illuminate theory |
| Status of empirical Data | External test | Analytical resource |
| Applicability to normative theory | Limited and controversial | Methodologically compatible |

The Ethics of Office Accountability Theory as an Analytical Lense

- The ethics of office accountability theory: Mutual duties of officeholders when they exercise public power in their institutional capacity (Ceva and Ferretti 2021a; 2021b)
 - By clarifying the feature of the interrelatedness of institutional roles which emerges with a normative order in the establishment of an institution, the theory introduces original perspectives for accountability and corruption studies.
 - Accountability as an office duty: It is internal, self-reflexive, and critical. It transcends the legal and professional necessities of the public roles, by entailing a shared internal understanding in the office.
- It reciprocally links officeholders through their normative standings, within which they give and demand accounts from one another for their institutional actions, as the interdependent members of the same institution.

➤ This ethics is essential for institutional well-functioning: Cultivates a “pro-office” mindset among officeholders that grounds institutional commitment to the *raison d’être*, institution’s foundational purpose (Ceva and Pedrini 2025).

➤ Political corruption occurs when officeholders use the power entrusted to their role for the pursuit of an agenda whose rationale may not be vindicated as coherent with the terms of their power mandate. This perspective can explain both "individual" and institutional corruption of public actions (Ceva and Ferretti 2021b, 4; Ceva and Ferretti 2018, 218).

The Ethics of Office Accountability Theory as an Analytical Lense

- **Why ethics of office accountability theory?** By its very nature, introduces not only a demanding normative order but also requires empirical analysis:
 - Normatively prescribing roles, obligations, and mutual duties of officeholders for well-functioning public institutions,
 - Concomitantly, calls for empirical observation to see what is broken without this normative framework.
- Equally important, it suggests a holistic perspective to analyse various types of institutional dysfunctions frequently observed in all political settings.
 - Here: The theory is not used as a normative benchmark imposed on reality, but as a lens to interpret actors' own normative understandings.

Why probe the theory beyond democracies/in a hybrid case:

- The question (*The Margins of Corruption*): Can conceptual and normative frameworks, developed for understanding political corruption in democratic settings, also be used to understand political corruption in a hybrid case?
- The conceptual and normative accounts of corruption of institutional actions have largely been developed with reference to democratic public institutions:
 - a pathology of public institutions in democracies (Ceva and Ferretti 2021b; Lessig 2011; Philp 2001; Weinstock 2018); the erosion of institutional integrity (Sandel 2012; Sparling 2019), the manifestation of partiality (Rothstein and Varraich 2017); political exclusion (Warren 2004; 2006).

Hybrid Regimes, Hungary, and Erosion of Normative Order

- As one moves beyond the democratic settings, where accountability mechanisms are historically and structurally disregarded and informal relations often dominate, corruption tends to persist as a more complex, deeper, and pervasive phenomenon (Kendall-Taylor, Lindstaedt, and Frantz 2019, 89-92; 124-32, Schedler 2006).
- ✓ Hungary, a post-communist state, constitutes a specific class of hybrid regimes as part of the EU, a union of democratic states (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018). It constitutes a distinct case in which the normative order anchored in the Union's liberal founding values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights including minorities, has been progressively eroded.

- ❑ Therefore, Hungary can serve as a stress laboratory to probe the robustness and travel capacity of normative theories that are originally developed for democracies.
- The research does not claim to be representative for all cases within hybrid regimes nor apply the ethics of office accountability in a hybrid context. It probes the conceptual robustness of the theory beyond democratic settings in understanding a universally pressing cross-regime phenomenon like corruption.

Semi-structured interview with 28 officeholders:

- Invited: 210 public officials (female 78; male 132) working in Budapest.
Consented: 28 (female 7; male 21)
- 2 April and 22 April 2024 in Budapest
- A Hungarian native interpreter, a doctoral student in political science, was employed for interviews in Hungarian.
- Interview average, approximately, 63 minutes (ranging roughly between 40 and 80 minutes).

Interview Profile Table

| Code | Position | Institution Type | Professional Seniority | Years in Office* | Gender** |
|-------|--------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|------------------|----------|
| INT01 | Scholar | Academia | Senior | 20-25 | F |
| INT02 | MP | Legislative | Junior | 1-5 | M |
| INT03 | Expert | Regulatory | Junior | 1-5 | M |
| INT04 | Party Leader | Political | Senior | 15-20 | F |
| INT05 | Political Adviser | Local Government | Junior | 1-5 | F |
| INT06 | City Councillor | Local Government | Mid-level | 5-10 | M |
| INT07 | MP | Legislative | Experienced | 15-20 | M |
| INT08 | Civil Registrar | Local Government | Senior | 15-20 | F |
| INT09 | City Councillor | Local Government | Junior | 1-5 | M |
| INT10 | Policy Officer | Local Government | Junior | 1-5 | F |
| INT11 | Scholar | Academia | Senior | 20-25 | M |
| INT12 | Deputy Mayor | Local Government | Junior | 1-5 | M |
| INT13 | Regional Development Officer | Local Government | Mid-level | 5-10 | M |
| INT14 | Scholar | Academia | Experienced | 15-20 | M |
| INT15 | MP | Legislative | Senior | 20-25 | M |
| INT16 | Science and Innovation Officer | Central Government | Experienced | 15-20 | M |
| INT17 | Scholar | Academia | Experienced | 15-20 | M |
| INT18 | Research Centre Director | Academia | Senior | 20-25 | M |
| INT19 | Chief Physician | Public Hospital | Mid-level | 5-10 | M |
| INT20 | Trade Union President | Trade Union | Experienced | 15-20 | M |
| INT21 | Deputy Mayor | Local Government | Mid-level | 5-10 | F |
| INT22 | Party Vice President | Political Party | Mid-level | 5-10 | M |
| INT23 | Judge | Judiciary | Senior | 20-25 | M |
| INT24 | MP | Legislative | Junior | 1-5 | M |
| INT25 | Deputy Mayor | Local Government | Junior | 1-5 | M |
| INT26 | Head of Department | Local Government | Junior | 1-5 | M |
| INT27 | Chief Administrative Officer | Local Government | Experienced | 10-15 | F |
| INT28 | Judge | Judiciary | Senior | 20-25 | M |

*Years in office are reported as ranges to preserve anonymity and in line with the interview protocol.

**Gender is reported as F/M as self-identified by participants.

Questions: A theory-inform design

➤ 10 main questions and 14 follow-up questions the relationship between accountability practices and institutional dysfunctions. Some of them:

- (1) What do the words ‘accountability’ and ‘institutional dysfunction’ mean to you?
- (2) How do you describe the term ‘accountability in the public sector’?
- (3) If there is a deficit of office accountability in the public sector, is it a long-lasting and established quality of the public sector or a temporary and periodic problem? Is it a legacy of the past?
- (4) What kinds of societal reactions, if any, have you observed in case deficits of office accountability occurred in the public sector?
- (5) Could you explain what institutional dysfunctions in the public sector are? Could you give examples?
- (6) What kinds of societal reactions, if any, have you observed in case institutional dysfunctions occurred in the public sector?

1- Hollowing out of accountability:

- One recurring pattern across interviews is that accountability persists at a formal level but weakens in practice.
 - As one interviewee put it:
 - “Legal regulations and procedures are there, but they do not constrain behaviour anymore.”
- ✓ What we observe here is not the absence of accountability, but its being hollowed out and transformed into a selective implication.
- ✓ Normative expectations remain visible, yet they lose their capacity to structure action.

What normative theory gains?

2- A second pattern concerns the **normalisation of institutional dysfunctions**.

➤ Several interviewees described corruption and rule-bending practices as part of the everyday functioning of institutions:

“You don’t question it. This is how things work.”

“ Why corruption is bad? Because I am not part of it. ”

- ✓ This suggests that institutional dysfunction is no longer perceived as deviation, but as **the new normal**.
- ✓ Here, institutional ethos itself is reshaped. Rather than upholding the *raison d’être* of public office, it reproduces practices that sustain dysfunction.

3- Adaptive compliance and survival:

- A third pattern relates to how officeholders respond to this environment: Instead of resisting dysfunctions, many adopt strategies of **adaptation and survival**.

“If you want to stay, you adjust.”

- ✓ This indicates that accountability deficits are not only structural, but also **internalised through practice**.
- ✓ Officeholders navigate between formal duties and informal expectations, often prioritising survival over normative commitment.

Theoretical payoffs

These findings allow us to draw several theoretical implications.

- First, they suggest: **the ethics of office accountability does travel beyond democratic settings.** However, it travels **under strain.**
- Second, institutional normativity appears significantly more fragile, which reproduced by historical legacy and political culture, when it is not supported by democratic conditions. Norms do not disappear, but they become **detached from practice.**
- Third, **theory probing** proves useful as a methodological approach: It allows us to observe not only whether a theory applies, but **how it transforms under non-ideal conditions.**

Closing remarks...

- Call for a sustained, theory-driven research agenda that fosters cross-fertilisation between normative theorising and empirical analysis across regime types.
- More reflection on interview-based theory-probing as a methodological approach in empirically sensitive normative theory.

Many thanks for listening me...

