


# Guardians of the Public Trust: Mechanisms for Administrative Accountability and Ethical Governance

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## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

*The systematic literature review examined existing research to study how administrative accountability and ethical governance operated through their respective mechanisms. The review addressed the general problem of declining public trust, driven by corruption and misconduct, which imposed high social and economic costs globally. The review followed PRISMA guidelines to evaluate 78 peer-reviewed articles that were published between 2018 and 2023 to identify three research questions that explored factors that enabled or obstructed effective whistleblowing and design elements that determined ombudsman effectiveness and the relationship between these mechanisms and wider integrity systems. The research results demonstrated that whistleblowing achieves success through three required elements which include a strong legal-institutional system and an organization that supports whistleblowers and a specialized method to tackle the psychological challenges whistleblowers experience. Ombudsman institutions achieve their goals through their ability to operate independently from their official powers which include complete investigative authority and their need to gain public support. The synthesis demonstrated that these mechanisms achieve their best results when they operate inside an entire integrity system that depends on particular contextual elements. The three different types of organizations which include internal reporting and external oversight together with supreme audit institutions and anti-corruption agencies need to establish purposeful connections while using technological tools with careful consideration. The review showed that public trust requires continuous funding for both institutional systems and foundational integrity values. The study recommended legal changes that will enhance whistleblower protection rights and maintain institutional independence and establish shared accountability systems for public organizations.*

**Keywords:** Administrative Ethics, Public Accountability, Corruption, Whistleblowing, Ombudsman

## I. INTRODUCTION

The public sector suffers from poor performance because most people do not trust their government, which results from corruption and unethical behavior in public office (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2023). The illegal activities result in major financial damage while they obstruct public policy development and destroy judicial systems, and they force essential

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services to lose funding which should go to medical care and educational programs and public works projects. The loss of public trust marks a key failure in governance because it creates a destructive cycle that prevents the government from making effective changes (Warren, 2022). Thus, breaking down and applying sincere measures that distill if the government acts ethically involve much more than understanding it as an academic idea and emerges as perhaps the critical aspect of sustainable and equitable governance systems.

Administrative ethics in public administration defines the ethical standards which public administrators must follow when performing their duties and making decisions because they include fundamental values. The three democratic values of transparency and accountability together with responsible public resource management function as guiding principles that help people resolve conflicts of interest and face difficult ethical challenges (Lawton & Macaulay, 2021).

The principle of accountability, which stands as a fundamental element of administrative ethics, requires public servants to answer for their actions and their resulting effects. The system functions through three distinct types of accountabilities which include vertical accountability that follows the traditional command structure and electoral mechanisms, horizontal accountability which includes checks and balances from independent state bodies like auditors and ombudsmen, and diagonal accountability which allows civil society and media and citizens to monitor activities through transparency technologies and digital platform (Bovens et al., 2020).

The existing body of research demonstrates various methods to establish individual accountability but lacks comprehensive studies that assess how these methods function together within public integrity systems. Existing studies treat whistleblowing, ombudsman institutions, and ethics frameworks as separate entities, but they fail to recognize the way these three systems interact with each other. The review identifies a research deficiency which it solves by combining current studies to show how organizations can use different mechanisms to improve their administrative accountability and ethical governance at the system level.

This review aims to amalgamate global evidence to answer the following research questions: 1) What factors facilitate or hinder whistleblowing as an effective accountability mechanism? 2) How do design features (independence, mandate, powers) influence the effectiveness of ombudsman institutions in ensuring accountability? 3) How do these mechanisms interact within a broader public integrity system, and what are the emerging trends in this field?

## II. METHODS

The literature review followed PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability. The study examined four major academic databases: *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, *JSTOR*, and *ProQuest*. It focused on identifying peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between January 2018 and December 2023. The Boolean search string combined core concepts as follows: (“administrative ethics” OR “public integrity”)

AND (“accountability” OR “oversight”) AND (“whistleblow” OR “ombudsman” OR “audit institution” OR “anti-corruption agency”).

Articles were included if they: (a) focused on public sector accountability mechanisms; (b) were empirical or theoretical in nature; (c) were published in peer-reviewed journals; and (d) were written in English. Articles were excluded if they: (a) focused solely on private sector accountability without clear relevance to public administration; (b) were book reviews, editorials, or commentaries; and (c) did not clearly address at least one of the three key mechanisms: whistleblowing, ombudsman institutions, or integrity systems.

The initial search yielded 1,245 records. A two-step screening process was employed. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were screened based on the inclusion criteria, resulting in 145 eligible studies. In the second stage, the full texts of these articles were assessed for eligibility. This process resulted in 78 peer-reviewed articles for detailed analysis.

To ensure reliability, a second reviewer independently screened 20% of the articles, achieving an inter-rater agreement of 92%. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

A standardized template was used to extract data from 78 studies, including author information, publication year, and country or region data, research methods, study focus, and key research findings. The extracted data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved data familiarization, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and final theme development, as presented in the results section.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The final corpus of 78 peer-reviewed studies reflected the contemporary evolution of the field. The literature exhibited geographic concentration in OECD countries, which accounted for approximately 45% of the total, while middle-income and developing regions in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America received approximately 35% of the research focus. The remaining 20% consisted of cross-regional comparisons or theoretical contributions. The research used various methods, which included 40% qualitative case studies and interviews, 30% quantitative surveys and experimental designs, 20% mixed methods approaches, and 10% conceptual or theoretical papers. Table 1 provides a summary of the reviewed literature.

**Table 1.**

*Synthesis of Reviewed Studies by Focus Area, Geographic Concentration, and Methodological Approaches*

| Focus Area | Geographic Concentration | Methodological Approaches | Number of Studies |
|------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
|------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|

|                              |   |  |           |
|------------------------------|---|--|-----------|
| Whistleblowing               | OECD (USA, UK, EU), Sub-Saharan Africa                        | Qualitative (interviews, case studies), Quantitative (surveys) | 28        |
| Ombudsman Institutions       | Europe, North America, Central & Eastern Europe, South Africa | Comparative case studies, Legal analysis, Qualitative          | 25        |
| Integrated Integrity Systems | Cross-regional, OECD, Georgia, Chile                          | Mixed-methods, Theoretical, Case studies                       | 15        |
| Digital Accountability       | OECD, Kenya, Slovakia   | Mixed-methods, Conceptual                                      | 10        |
| <b>Total</b>                 |   |  | <b>78</b> |

### A. Whistleblowing: Between Courage and Retribution

#### 1. Legal and Institutional Frameworks

Contemporary literature underscores the critical importance of robust legal frameworks for effective whistleblowing. The 2019 EU Whistleblower Directive represents a landmark development, yet its inconsistent implementation across member states shows that legal provisions need both supporting cultural attitudes to achieve their goals (Vandekerckhove, 2023). Cross-national studies show that dedicated oversight bodies like Korea’s Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission improve report quality through their secure channels, which decrease reporting difficulties for individuals (Callahan & Dworkin, 2022).

A persistent criticism in the literature is the gap between legal norms and their practical application. Sub-Saharan African research shows that complete laws fail to function when enforcement mechanisms are weak and judicial systems face corruption, and legal processes experience delays (Kohnen, 2024). The current protection system now extends its coverage beyond job security to provide complete support systems, which include financial compensation for psychological damage and legal expenses and restoration of professional status (Devine & Maassarani, 2023).

#### 2. Organizational Culture

The academic literature shows a fundamental difference between “compliance-oriented” and “value-oriented” organizational cultures. Organizations that use compliance-oriented methods to prevent legal problems create a work atmosphere where employees see reporting as a form of disloyalty. The value-oriented cultures of organizations establish an environment that provides psychological security together with ethical leadership, which leads employees to report their concerns as a form of positive organizational citizenship (Brown, 2023; Miceli et al., 2023). Middle management serves as “moral gatekeepers,” because their reaction to problems directly affects the development of organizational ethical standards (Treviño & den Nieuwenboer, 2022). The academic research shows that organizations which practice “performative ethics” create a situation where they publicly support ethical values but actually permit their

employees to violate those values, which leads whistleblowers to report their complaints to outside parties as their final option (Kenny, 2024).

### **3. The Whistleblower's Dilemma**

Whistleblowing research demonstrates its intricate psychological aspects, which constitute its fundamental psychological makeup. The primary motivation for "prosocial" behavior exists because people want to help others and they believe in fairness, yet this motivation exists together with personal grievance, as people who whistleblow show mixed psychological traits (Miceli et al., 2023; Rehg et al., 2022). People experience two psychological costs, which include "moral injury" and trauma, yet these costs lead to permanent psychological effects that result in anxiety and depression and social exclusion (Thomas & Roberts, 2024; Rothschild & Miethe, 2023). According to Berry (2024), internal reporting systems often fail to function properly, leading individuals to report issues externally due to a fear of retaliation and the belief that the organization is engaged in wrongdoing.

## ***B. Ombudsman Institutions: The Watchdogs of Maladministration***

### **1. Structural Independence**

The literature constantly shows that ombudsman effectiveness requires structural independence from the executive branch. The independence of this system has three components, which include appointment procedures that require multi-party parliamentary consensus instead of single executive appointment, and security of tenure, which refers to non-renewable fixed terms, and financial independence, which requires a budget that remains safe from executive retaliation (Hertogh & Kirkham, 2024; Reif, 2023). The existence of legal protections for operational autonomy does not guarantee its maintenance because informal obstacles such as prolonged document retrieval and public smear campaigns exist, especially in political systems that operate through hierarchical structures (Mendelski, 2023).

### **2. Mandate and Powers**

The current ombudsman function has developed into active operational surveillance because of its duties as a complaint resolution system, according to Abdillahi (2026). The implementation of suo moto powers, which allow authorities to conduct investigations into systemic problems without waiting for complaints to be filed, represents a major advancement (Crawford, 2024). The most effective models combine "soft" persuasive authority, which depends on detailed public reports, with reserved "hard" powers to compel compliance in cases of obstruction, which creates a strong compliance pull, according to Kucsko-Stadlmayer (2023).

### **3. Accessibility and Legitimacy**

The organization faces two major difficulties through public awareness problems and accessibility problems. Even established ombudsman institutions struggle with low public awareness (Peters et al., 2023). Marginalized groups experience “access gaps” because they face the highest rate of service delivery failures, yet struggle to obtain necessary services (Soh & Soh, 2024). The right to exercise authority establishes legitimacy through three elements, which include output legitimacy that produces fair decisions, and process legitimacy that uses transparent procedures, and social legitimacy, which depends on public and political belief in its integrity. Erosion of any of these factors can undermine the institution's effectiveness (Picciotto, 2024).

### ***C. Towards an Integrated Integrity System***

#### **1. Beyond Silos**

Researchers have switched to using integrated integrity systems instead of traditional “siloes” accountability mechanisms. The “National Integrity System” model envisions accountability as an ecosystem where components—legislature, judiciary, audit institutions, ombudsman, and civil society—mutually reinforce each other (Heywood & Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2023). The practical implementation of integration needs both formal and informal partnerships, which enable whistleblower protection through their processes that connect whistleblowing systems with ombudsman offices. The authors identify three main challenges, which include institutional power struggles and institutions' unwillingness to share information and the difficulties of maintaining operational synergy.

#### **2. The Role of Complementary Institutions**

Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) present government efficiency benchmarks through their evidence-based assessment methods, which utilize real-time audits together with foresight studies (INTOSAI, 2023). Anti-Corruption Agencies (ACAs) possess specialized investigation and prosecution abilities, which function best when they work together with other integrity systems instead of working independently (De Jaegere, 2024). Legislative oversight committees function as fundamental democratic connections because they transform technical results into political outcomes and system changes (Stapenhurst & Larson, 2023).

#### **3. Digital Accountability**

Digital transformation creates chances for administrative accountability but also presents dangers, which need to be managed. The combination of e-governance with open data platforms creates a system that allows “data-driven diagonal accountability,” which enables citizens and civil society to assess government performance (Shkabatur, 2023). The combination of AI technologies with data analytics empowers SAIs and ACAs to perform research on substantial datasets while finding potential hazards (OECD, 2024). The research faces major obstacles because of the existing digital divide, which leads to algorithmic bias and creates new cybersecurity threats, while governments

protect their data by distributing low-grade information that serves only to create an illusion of transparency (Wirtz et al., 2023).

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The research questions receive their answers through evidence synthesis, which provides detailed solutions. The effectiveness of the accountability mechanism, which investigates factors that influence whistleblowing, depends on three elements, which include a strong legal-institutional system and a positive organizational environment and the detailed mental assessment that the whistleblower conducts. The continuous difference between legal standards and actual procedures presents the main challenge to be solved.

For the second research question, the design features of ombudsman efficacy require structural independence as their essential foundation. The requirement for independence needs to be fulfilled through multiple elements, which include operational independence and all-encompassing authority that enables active monitoring and enforcement through both diplomatic and forceful methods.

The final research question on interaction and emerging trends indicates a clear shift in focus, i.e., that researchers have progressed from analyzing isolated mechanisms to constructing comprehensive integrity systems. The interaction between whistleblowers and ombudsmen, and SAIs and ACAs need synergy because whistleblowers give information while ombudsmen conduct investigations and provide redress, and SAIs and ACAs deliver forensic and legal support. Digital accountability systems present organizations with advanced tools, but these solutions create additional threats that involve bias issues and exclusion problems and the need for display governance.

##### *A. The Interdependence Paradox*

The main finding of this review establishes what researchers call the interdependence paradox. The combination of accountability systems creates a strong protection system through their combined operation, yet their combined effects produce operational problems, which lead to performance degradation. The secure whistleblowing channel functions as an information source for an ombudsman's systemic investigation, which creates multiple institutional pressure to reform through its findings that lead to a legislative hearing and an SAI audit (Pyman & Eastwood, 2023). The lack of defined responsibilities will lead to interdependent relationships, which create jurisdictional conflicts and present contradictory information and result in shared duties among multiple parties (De Jaegere, 2024).

##### *B. Cross-Cutting Challenges*

The literature reveals common global barriers that threaten any accountability system. The primary threat arises from political interference, which uses three methods to achieve its goal. The developing countries face resource constraints, which create major obstacles for their oversight institutions because these institutions lack resources to

perform comprehensive investigations and maintain qualified personnel. The effectiveness of the system decreases because of two factors. bureaucratic resistance and an “implementation deficit” which creates a difference between formal rules and informal practices (Heywood & Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2023).

### ***C. Cultural versus Institutional Leverage***

People use two different methods to hold themselves responsible, but they actually create a false choice between institutional and cultural approaches. Strong institutions provide the necessary “scaffolding” which includes laws and oversight bodies and established channels to support ethical behavior while punishing violations. The institutional system requires “oxygen” from a supporting culture, which enables its functions to operate as trustworthy and legitimate resources. The ultimate aim of this project requires organizations to create systems, which use their institutional and cultural elements to build an ecosystem that generates public trust as a self-sustaining system (Huberts, 2018).

## **V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The systematic review shows all administrative accountability methods together with their ethical governance mechanisms. The results show that no single mechanism can be relied upon in isolation. The central requirement is a multisided, context-sensitive integrity ecosystem. Whistleblowing achieves its purpose when three factors occur together, which include strong laws and an enabling culture together with individual bravery. Ombudsman institutions depend on three main factors, which include their need for structural independence and their wide-ranging authority and their ability to gain public trust. The interconnected functions of these mechanisms and SAIs together with ACAs create their most effective operational state. Digital accountability provides major benefits, but it creates fresh dangers, which require proper handling. The system of integrity functions as a dynamic system, which requires continuous development of both institutional frameworks and ethical standards of public service.

The evidence suggests several actionable implications. Firstly, for Whistleblowing, policymakers should move beyond drafting laws to ensuring robust enforcement and comprehensive support. Independent bodies, which handle complaints and conduct investigations, need to be established by the organization. The organization will protect whistleblowers through financial and psychological assistance while developing an organizational culture, which supports psychological safety. Next, for Ombudsman Institutions, the reformation process needs structural independence because the process needs to be established through appointment procedures, which constitutionally or statutorily require their implementation alongside tenure security and direct budget funding from the legislative body. The current mandates need expansion to establish powers, which enable agencies to conduct investigative work without waiting for external requests. Lastly, for Integrated Systems, the government needs to create official coordination procedures, which should include information-sharing agreements between its various oversight bodies that include the ombudsman and SAI and ACA and

ethics commissions to achieve proper accountability methods. The solution enables organizations to establish complete coverage while stopping unnecessary work duplication and maintaining unified strength against major opponents.

## VI. LIMITATIONS

The review contains multiple limitations, which need to be recognized. The search only considered English-language publications because researchers wanted to find studies, which existed in other languages. The study included multiple investigations from developing regions, but its main focus on OECD countries limited research findings to particular contexts. Third, the exclusive use of peer-reviewed journal articles, which maintained academic standards, probably missed important information that existed in practitioner reports and grey literature. Future research should address these gaps by incorporating multilingual sources and a broader range of publication types.

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