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Ethical Leadership and Public Sector Integrity:Governance Frameworks for Combating Corruption and Rebuilding Institutional Trust

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Abstract

Corruption and failures of institutional integrity remain among the most persistent challenges in public administration worldwide. Beyond economic losses, these failures erode public trust, distort resource allocation, and disproportionately harm vulnerable populations. Although structural causes of corruption are well studied, the role of ethical leadership in fostering organizational integrity—and the governance frameworks needed to sustain it—remains insufficiently developed. This article addresses that gap through a systematic review of 109 peer-reviewed studies (2000–2025) and a comparative analysis of integrity governance frameworks across eighteen countries at varying income levels. Drawing on social learning theory, principal-agent theory, and virtue ethics, it proposes the Public Sector Integrity Leadership Framework (PS-ILF). This model identifies three interconnected pillars: ethical leadership behaviors, organizational integrity systems, and institutional accountability structures. Findings show that ethical leadership most effectively promotes integrity by shaping organizational culture rather than relying solely on compliance mechanisms. Whistleblower protection emerges as the most influential institutional factor supporting integrity. The study also finds that transparency alone does not ensure accountability; meaningful outcomes depend on strong investigative and enforcement capacity. Furthermore, anti-corruption strategies focused primarily on punitive measures tend to be less effective over time than those emphasizing values-based culture building. The article concludes by outlining a reform agenda aimed at strengthening ethical leadership, enhancing institutional safeguards, and aligning transparency with accountability. Together, these measures offer a more sustainable approach to promoting integrity across diverse public sector contexts.

Keywords: - Ethical Leadership, Public Sector Integrity, Anti-Corruption Governance, Institutional Trust, Social Learning Theory, Whistleblower Protection, Transparency, Accountability, Organizational Culture, Principal-Agent Theory

I. INTRODUCTION

Corruption in public administration represents a fundamental betrayal of the social contract between governments and citizens. When public officials abuse entrusted power for private gain, the consequences extend far beyond the individual transaction: public resources are diverted from their intended beneficiaries, market competition is distorted by rent-seeking, public service quality is degraded for citizens who cannot afford to pay informal charges, and perhaps most corrosively citizen trust in the legitimacy and competence of public institutions is progressively eroded (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Transparency International, 2023). The World Bank (2022) estimates that corruption costs the global economy approximately five percent of gross domestic product annually, with disproportionate impacts on developing and fragile states where institutional safeguards are weakest and vulnerable populations least protected.

Scholarly and policy responses to public sector corruption have evolved through several generations. First-generation approaches, dominant through the 1990s, emphasized structural reform through deregulation, privatization, and market liberalization on the premise that reducing state discretion reduces corruption opportunity (Klitgaard, 1988). Second-generation approaches, emerging from the late 1990s, focused on institutional architecture: independent anti-corruption commissions, strengthened audit institutions, freedom of information legislation, and financial disclosure requirements (Stapenhurst & Kpundeh, 1999; Kaufmann et al., 2010). Third-generation approaches, gaining scholarly traction in the 2010s, recognize that structural and institutional reforms are necessary but insufficient without attention to the organizational cultures,

leadership behaviors, and professional values that shape everyday administrative conduct (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Kaptein, 2011).

It is this third-generation insight that sustainable public sector integrity requires proactive cultivation of ethical organizational cultures and ethical leadership, not merely reactive anti-corruption enforcement that motivates this article. Despite growing scholarly recognition of ethical leadership's importance for organizational integrity, the literature remains fragmented across disciplinary silos (organizational behavior, public administration, criminology, political science), theoretically heterogeneous in its treatment of the mechanisms linking leadership to integrity outcomes, and limited in its capacity to speak to the diverse institutional contexts in which public sector integrity challenges arise. The Public Sector Integrity Leadership Framework (PS-ILF) developed in this article addresses these limitations.

The article makes four contributions. First, it develops the PS-ILF as a theoretically integrated, multilevel framework that specifies the individual, organizational, and institutional dimensions of public sector integrity and their interactions. Second, it synthesizes evidence from 109 peer-reviewed studies on ethical leadership and public sector integrity across diverse national contexts. Third, it derives empirically grounded propositions about the conditions under which different integrity governance instruments ethical leadership development, organizational culture building, transparency mechanisms, whistleblower protection, and enforcement institutions are most effective. Fourth, it proposes a structured, context-sensitive reform agenda for practitioners and policymakers seeking to build sustainable public sector integrity. The article is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature; Section 3 develops the theoretical framework; Section 4 presents the methodology; Section 5 presents findings and discussion; Section 6 addresses practice and policy implications; Section 7 concludes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Ethical Leadership: Conceptualization and Empirical Evidence

Ethical leadership, defined by Brown et al. (2005) as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making," has attracted substantial empirical attention since the development of the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) by Brown et al. (2005). Meta-analytic evidence by Ng and Feldman (2015) synthesized 101 independent samples and found that ethical leadership was negatively associated with counterproductive work behaviors (rho = -.32), unethical decision-making (rho = -.28), and positively associated with organizational citizenship behavior (rho = .33), employee voice (rho = .38), and organizational commitment (rho = .41). These findings establish ethical leadership as a practically significant organizational variable with robust associations across a broad range of organizational outcomes.

In public sector contexts specifically, Hassan et al. (2014) found that ethical leadership by supervisors was positively associated with public employees' engagement in ethical behavior and negatively associated with misconduct, mediated by perceived ethical climate. Trevino et al. (2003) conducted influential qualitative research establishing the dual construct of ethical leadership the moral person dimension (personal ethical characteristics) and the moral manager dimension (proactive modeling and reinforcement of ethical conduct) - and demonstrated that both dimensions are necessary for leadership to produce organizational integrity culture effects. Public sector research has further established that perceived supervisor ethical leadership is a stronger predictor of subordinate ethical conduct than formal ethics codes or compliance training, pointing toward the central role of leader behavior modeling in organizational integrity formation (Kaptein, 2011; Brown & Mitchell, 2010).

2.2. Principal-Agent Theory and the Structural Analysis of Corruption

Principal-agent theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Klitgaard, 1988) provides the dominant structural framework for analyzing public sector corruption, conceptualizing corruption as an agency problem in which agents (public officials) exploit information asymmetries and discretionary authority to pursue private interests at the expense of their principals (citizens, political authorities, organizational superiors). Klitgaard's (1988) influential formula - Corruption = Monopoly + Discretion - Accountability - identifies three structural levers for corruption control: reducing public officials' monopoly over valuable services, constraining their discretion, and strengthening accountability mechanisms. This structural logic underpinned much of the second generation anti-corruption reform wave and remains highly influential in policy discourse.

However, principal-agent theory's treatment of public officials as essentially self-interested agents whose behavior is governed primarily by incentive structures and monitoring intensity has been extensively critiqued as empirically inadequate and normatively misleading (Perry & Wise, 1990; Vandenabeele, 2007). The theory underestimates the role of professional values, organizational culture, and ethical leadership in shaping public official conduct; systematically underestimates the costs of pervasive monitoring in generating distrust and crowding out intrinsic motivation; and provides insufficient analytical purchase on the collective action dynamics through which corruption becomes institutionalized as a governance equilibrium (Rothstein, 2011). The PS-ILF incorporates principal-agent insights regarding structural accountability mechanisms while embedding them within a broader analytical framework that gives proper weight to values, culture, and leadership.

2.3. Social Learning Theory and Organizational Integrity Culture

Bandura's (1977, 1986) social learning theory provides the motivational micro-foundation for understanding how ethical leadership influences organizational integrity culture. The theory holds that individuals learn behavioral norms including ethical norms - primarily through observation and imitation of role models, with model credibility, visibility, and the consequences experienced by models all influencing the strength of learning effects. In organizational contexts, senior leaders function as salient, high-visibility role models whose ethical conduct or its absence sends powerful signals about the behavioral norms that are genuinely rewarded and punished within the organization (Trevino et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2005).

Social learning theory generates specific predictions for public sector integrity management that distinguish it from purely structural approaches. Where structural approaches predict that integrity outcomes are determined by incentive and

monitoring architecture, social learning theory predicts that ethical leadership modeling, communicated through observable leader behavior and the consistency between espoused values and enacted decisions, is a more powerful and durable shaper of organizational integrity norms particularly in organizational environments where formal monitoring is incomplete and individual ethical discretion is high, as is characteristically the case in complex public service delivery environments (Kaptein, 2011; Vandenabeele, 2007).

2.4. Transparency, Accountability, and Institutional Integrity Architecture

The governance literature has extensively examined the institutional architecture of public sector integrity, with transparency and accountability mechanisms receiving particular attention as the structural pillars of integrity governance (Heald, 2006; Mulgan, 2014). Freedom of information legislation, financial disclosure requirements, open government data initiatives, and participatory audit mechanisms have all been advocated as instruments for reducing corruption opportunity and detecting integrity violations when they occur. Empirical evidence on the effectiveness of transparency instruments is, however, considerably more nuanced than policy advocacy suggests.

Meijer (2009) demonstrated that transparency instruments produce accountability outcomes only when complemented by capable institutional actors investigative journalists, civil society organizations, legislative oversight committees, judicial systems with the capacity to process disclosed information and convert it into accountability consequences. In the absence of such complementary institutions, transparency obligations can produce a "transparency paradox" (Heald, 2006): formal information disclosure without substantive accountability. This decoupling of transparency and accountability is particularly prevalent in lower-income country contexts where institutional complementarity is weakest, and represents a critical design failure in many internationally promoted anti-corruption transparency programs (Kaufmann et al., 2010; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016).

2.5. Whistleblower Protection as Integrity Infrastructure

Whistleblower protection legal and organizational frameworks enabling public employees to report integrity violations without suffering retaliation has been increasingly recognized as a critical integrity governance instrument. Near and Miceli (1985) defined whistleblowing as the disclosure by organization members of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action. Whistleblower disclosures represent a critical information asymmetry correction mechanism in the principal-agent framework enabling principals to detect agent misconduct that would otherwise remain hidden and a powerful signal of organizational ethical climate for potential violators assessing the detection risk of corrupt conduct (Vandekerckhove, 2006).

Systematically, the scholarly evidence establishes that whistleblower protection adequacy is positively associated with integrity violation reporting rates (Miceli et al., 2008), negatively associated with corruption perception indices (Government Accountability Project, 2023), and a significant predictor of organizational ethical climate quality (Kaptein, 2011). Cross-national comparative evidence has documented substantial variation in the legal robustness and organizational effectiveness of whistleblower protection frameworks, with Scandinavian and Australasian systems generally rated most protective and many developing country systems providing inadequate de facto protection despite formal legal provisions (Transparency International, 2023).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Virtue Ethics and the Moral Character Foundation

The PS-ILF is grounded in part in the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition (MacIntyre, 1981; Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 1999), which locates the foundation of ethical organizational conduct not in rule compliance or incentive calculation but in the developed moral character of organizational members particularly leaders. Virtue ethics holds that ethical conduct flows reliably from cultivated virtues practical wisdom, justice, courage, integrity, and temperance that are developed through habituation, moral reasoning, and exemplary role models. This tradition directly supports social learning theory's prediction that ethical leader modeling is a primary mechanism of organizational integrity culture formation, and provides normative grounding for the PS-ILF's emphasis on character-based leadership development alongside structural accountability mechanisms.

The virtue ethics tradition further contributes the concept of "institutional goods" (MacIntyre, 1981) the genuine purposes and values that define the point of a practice or institution - as a foundation for public sector integrity. Public administration institutions have internal goods: equitable service to all citizens, impartial application of law, stewardship of collective resources, and protection of the public interest. Corruption is, from this perspective, not merely a legal violation or an efficiency cost but a fundamental betrayal of the institution's internal goods a framing that grounds integrity governance in positive professional purpose rather than merely in prohibition.

3.2. The Principal-Agent-Values Triangle

The PS-ILF advances a synthesis of principal-agent theory and values-based integrity approaches through what the authors term the principal-agent-values (PAV) triangle. The PAV triangle holds that public sector integrity is determined by the interaction of three forces: structural accountability mechanisms (the principal-agent dimension), organizational values and culture (the social learning and virtue ethics dimension), and individual ethical character (the virtue ethics dimension). Each dimension is necessary but insufficient for sustainable integrity: structural mechanisms without values produce gaming and evasion; values without structural accountability produce good intentions without reliable deterrence; and individual ethical character without organizational support and institutional accountability produces ethical isolation rather than organizational integrity.

The PAV triangle generates a specific and practically important prediction: integrity governance reforms that address only one dimension as many anti-corruption programs do, focusing exclusively on legal and structural instruments will produce systematically lower long-run effectiveness than reforms that address all three dimensions in an integrated and internally consistent manner. This prediction is evaluated against the cross-national comparative evidence in Section 5.

3.3. The Public Sector Integrity Leadership Framework

The PS-ILF synthesizes the theoretical foundations into a three-pillar, multilevel framework. Pillar 1, Ethical Leadership Behaviors, encompasses three dimensions operationalized at the individual leader level: role modeling integrity (visibly embodying the values and conduct standards expected of all organizational members), values-based decision-making (demonstrating that ethical considerations are integrated into resource allocation, personnel, and policy decisions), and ethical voice activation (proactively creating conditions in which subordinates feel psychologically safe to raise integrity concerns and moral questions). Pillar 2, Organizational Integrity Systems, encompasses formal organizational mechanisms - codes of conduct, ethics training, integrity risk assessment, conflict of interest management, internal reporting channels, and integrity climate monitoring that institutionalize and sustain ethical leadership effects beyond individual leader tenure. Pillar 3, Institutional Accountability Architecture, encompasses the external institutional frameworks - legislative oversight, supreme audit institutions, anti-corruption agencies, judicial enforcement, civil society, and free media that provide structural deterrence and detection capabilities beyond the organizational perimeter.

The three pillars interact dynamically within the PS-ILF. Ethical leadership behaviors shape organizational integrity systems by modeling the behavioral standards that formal systems codify and the values that training programs seek to develop. Organizational integrity systems sustain ethical leadership effects by institutionalizing norms and expectations that persist through leadership succession. Institutional accountability architecture provides the structural deterrence foundation on which values-based approaches build, and signals to organizational members and leaders alike that integrity violations have consequences. The PS-ILF further specifies that Pillar 1 (ethical leadership) has its strongest integrity effect through Pillar 2 (organizational culture), not directly on individual ethical conduct a theoretical prediction that distinguishes the PS-ILF from simpler leader-behavior models and carries significant implications for how integrity interventions should be sequenced and designed.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study employs a sequential mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) comprising a systematic literature review (Phase 1) and a comparative institutional analysis of integrity governance frameworks (Phase 2). The epistemological framework is pragmatist (Dewey, 1929), treating theoretical frameworks as tools for solving practical problems rather than representations of ultimate reality, and consequently privileging theories and evidence that illuminate actionable reform pathways alongside their explanatory value for understanding integrity governance dynamics.

4.2. Phase 1: Systematic Literature Review

Searches were conducted across Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, EBSCO Business Source Complete, and Google Scholar using the primary search string: ("ethical leadership" OR "integrity management" OR "anti-corruption" OR "public sector ethics" OR "administrative corruption") AND ("public administration" OR "public sector" OR "government" OR "civil service") AND ("organizational culture" OR "governance" OR "institutional trust" OR "accountability" OR "transparency"). Searches were restricted to English-language peer-reviewed journal articles and books published between January 2000 and March 2025. The initial retrieval yielded 2,614 records, reduced to 109 included studies following duplicate removal, sequential screening, and full-text eligibility assessment. Inter-rater reliability for full-text screening reached Cohen's kappa of .85, indicating strong agreement (McHugh, 2012). Data extraction captured theoretical orientation, country and institutional context, integrity constructs and measures, key findings, and implications for governance practice.

4.3. Phase 2: Comparative Institutional Analysis

Eighteen countries were selected for comparative institutional analysis of integrity governance frameworks using a most-similar/most-different design (Lijphart, 1975) to enable both controlled comparison and broad generalization. Countries were selected to represent variation across: income level (high, middle, low); governance tradition (Westminster, Napoleonic, Nordic, East Asian developmental state, post-colonial); corruption perception level (high-integrity, moderate, low-integrity per Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index); and integrity reform trajectory (improving, stable, deteriorating over 2010-2023). The eighteen countries included Denmark, Finland, Singapore, New Zealand, Canada, South Korea, Estonia, Botswana, Georgia, Rwanda, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Kenya, Pakistan, Venezuela, and the Philippines.

Data sources included: Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2010-2023); World Bank Governance Indicators (Control of Corruption, Rule of Law, Government Effectiveness); OECD Government at a Glance integrity indicators; national anti-corruption legal and institutional frameworks obtained from official government and legislative sources; academic country case studies; and independent institutional assessment reports from the Open Government Partnership, Global Integrity, and regional development bank governance assessments. Data were analyzed through systematic cross-national qualitative comparison using Charles Ragin's (2008) qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) logic, identifying the configurations of integrity governance conditions associated with high versus low corruption reduction outcomes.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Finding 1: Ethical Leadership Operates Primarily Through Organizational Culture, Not Direct Behavioral Compliance

The systematic literature synthesis strongly supported the PS-ILF's theoretical prediction that ethical leadership exerts its primary integrity effects through organizational culture formation rather than through direct behavioral compliance. Across 67 studies that examined the mechanisms linking ethical leadership to integrity outcomes, organizational ethical climate and integrity culture were the most consistently identified mediators, with effect sizes substantially larger than those attributable to direct supervision, compliance monitoring, or formal ethics training in isolation (Trevino et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2005; Kaptein, 2011).

This pattern carries a profound implication for how integrity governance programs should be designed. The dominant operational model in many government integrity programs focused on ethics codes, compliance training, and behavioral monitoring addresses the compliance dimension of integrity but misses the more powerful culture-formation pathway through which ethical leadership sustains organizational integrity across varied situational contexts. Leaders who model ethical decision-making visibly and consistently, who speak openly about the values underpinning their decisions, and who demonstrate personal ethical vulnerability by acknowledging ethical dilemmas rather than projecting moral certainty, generate organizational integrity cultures that operate across the range of situations that no compliance rulebook can anticipate (Hassan et al., 2014; Brown & Mitchell, 2010).

5.2. Finding 2: Whistleblower Protection is the Single Most Powerful Institutional Integrity Variable

Across the systematic literature synthesis and the comparative institutional analysis, whistleblower protection adequacy emerged as the single most powerful institutional-level variable associated with integrity governance effectiveness - more consistently and more strongly associated with corruption reduction outcomes than transparency mechanisms, audit institution capacity, or anti-corruption agency powers when assessed independently. The QCA analysis identified robust whistleblower protection as a necessary (though not sufficient) condition in the configurations associated with sustained corruption reduction across the eighteen-country comparative sample, appearing in every high-performing configuration irrespective of income level, governance tradition, or regional context.

The mechanism is theoretically coherent within the PS-ILF: effective whistleblower protection activates a critical information flow from within public organizations where integrity violations actually occur to investigative and accountability institutions that are otherwise dependent on externally generated information (Miceli et al., 2008; Near & Miceli, 1985). Denmark, Finland, Singapore, and New Zealand the four consistently highest-ranked countries on the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index over the 2010-2023 period each demonstrated strong, organizationally embedded, and legally robust whistleblower protection systems with active enforcement track records. By contrast, countries showing the most pronounced integrity deterioration over the same period most notably Venezuela and to a lesser extent Brazil and the Philippines demonstrated either formal whistleblower protections without de facto implementation or active retaliatory environments that functioned to suppress internal reporting.

5.3. Finding 3: Transparency Without Institutional Complementarity Produces Accountability Deficits

The comparative institutional analysis provided robust empirical support for Meijer's (2009) theoretical prediction that transparency instruments produce accountability outcomes only when complemented by capable institutional actors able to process disclosed information into accountability consequences. Across the eighteen-country sample, countries with strong transparency legislation but weak investigative journalism, underdeveloped civil society organizations, or captured judicial systems including several studied African and South Asian cases demonstrated a systematic transparency-accountability decoupling: formal information disclosure without substantive accountability consequences for identified integrity violations.

This finding has significant implications for the internationally promoted transparency reform agenda. Freedom of information legislation, open government data portals, and asset declaration requirements have been broadly adopted as integrity reform instruments across diverse national contexts, frequently with international financial institution encouragement. The comparative evidence suggests that this adoption without complementary institutional development represents a governance design failure - producing the costs of transparency compliance without the accountability benefits. The PS-ILF positions institutional complementarity the co-development of transparency mechanisms with capable investigative, oversight, and enforcement institutions as a design imperative for effective integrity governance architecture (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Mulgan, 2014).

5.4. Finding 4: Values-Based Integrity Programs Outperform Punitive Compliance Approaches in the Long Run

The systematic literature synthesis generated consistent evidence that integrity governance programs emphasizing punitive enforcement over values-based organizational culture development demonstrate systematically lower long-run effectiveness - defined as sustained reduction in actual corrupt conduct rather than short-term compliance signaling. Programs dominated by detection and punishment logics produce, over time, sophisticated evasion strategies rather than genuine behavioral change, crowd out the intrinsic public service motivation that is the most powerful driver of ethical conduct in government employees, and generate cultures of fear that suppress the honest communication necessary for organizational learning and adaptive integrity management (Kaptein, 2011; Vandenabeele, 2007; Perry & Wise, 1990).

The longitudinal comparative evidence from Singapore's integrity governance trajectory is instructive. Singapore's internationally recognized integrity performance consistently among the five least corrupt countries globally on major indices - was built not primarily on the punitive enforcement capacity of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (though this is significant) but on a comprehensive, multi-decade investment in public service values, merit-based civil service systems, competitive compensation that reduces corruption temptation, and organizational cultures in which integrity is a genuinely

internalized professional norm rather than merely an externally monitored compliance requirement (Quah, 2017). This configuration combining strong enforcement institutions with robust values and culture investment represents the PS-ILF's ideal type of integrated integrity governance, distinguishable from enforcement-only or values only approaches by its multilevel coherence.

5.5. Finding 5: National Cultural Context Moderates but Does Not Determine Integrity Outcomes

A persistent argument in both scholarly and popular discourse holds that corruption is culturally determined that high-corruption societies are characterized by cultural values including collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, or power distance that make corruption endemic and integrity reforms futile (Hofstede, 1980). The comparative evidence examined in this study provides no support for this cultural determinism. Rwanda and Botswana both sub-Saharan African countries sharing broad cultural features with far more corrupt regional neighbors have achieved sustained and substantial integrity improvements through deliberate institutional investment. Georgia dramatically improved from among the most corrupt post-Soviet states to a moderate performer within a decade through focused institutional reform. Estonia built a consistently high-integrity governance system from a post-Soviet institutional inheritance that predicted the opposite.

These reform trajectories demonstrate that integrity governance outcomes are principally determined by institutional design choices, leadership commitment, and reform strategy rather than by national cultural inheritance. Cultural context moderates the specific design features and implementation approaches that are most effective for example, community embedded integrity mechanisms may be more effective in high-collectivism contexts while formal procedural justice mechanisms may carry greater weight in individualistic contexts but it does not determine whether integrity improvement is achievable (Rothstein, 2011; Kaufmann et al., 2010). This finding is practically consequential: it establishes the fundamental treatability of corruption as a governance challenge and the accountability of governments for integrity outcomes.

Table 1. PS-ILF Three Pillars: Components, Mechanisms, and Evidence Strength

PS-ILF Pillar	Core Components	Primary Mechanism	Evidence Strength
Ethical Leadership Behaviors	Role modeling; Values-based decisions; Ethical voice activation	Organizational culture formation (social learning)	Strong (82 of 109 studies)
Organizational Integrity Systems	Codes of conduct; Ethics training; Integrity climate monitoring; Internal reporting	Norm institutionalization; Compliance signaling; Risk identification	Strong (71 of 109 studies)
Institutional Accountability Architecture	Legislative oversight; Audit institutions; Anti-corruption agencies; Judicial enforcement; Free media	Structural deterrence; Detection; Enforcement; Systemic norm signaling	Strong (88 of 109 studies)

Note. PS-ILF = Public Sector Integrity Leadership Framework. Evidence strength reflects frequency of documentation in the systematic literature synthesis.

Table 2. Comparative Integrity Governance Profiles Across Selected Countries (2010-2023)

Country	CPI Trajectory	Ethical Leadership	Whistleblower Protection	Transparency Accountability Linkage	Overall Integrity Profile
Denmark	Stable - High (88/100)	Strong	Strong	Strong	Integrated - Best Practice
Singapore	Stable - High (85/100)	Strong	Strong	Strong	Integrated - Best Practice
New Zealand	Stable - High (87/100)	Strong	Strong	Strong	Integrated - Best Practice
Estonia	Improving (75/100)	Moderate-Strong	Moderate	Strong	Advancing Framework
Botswana	Stable - Moderate (60/100)	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Developing Framework
Rwanda	Improving (56/100)	Strong (top-down)	Moderate	Moderate	Developmental Trajectory
Georgia	Improving (53/100)	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Reform in Progress
Brazil	Declining (36/100)	Weak	Weak	Decoupled	Integrity Erosion
Nigeria	Stagnant (25/100)	Weak	Weak	Decoupled	Chronic Deficit
Venezuela	Sharp Decline (13/100)	Absent	Absent	Absent	Governance Collapse

Note. CPI = Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2023). Score out of 100 where 100 = highly clean. Trajectory assessed over 2010-2023 period. Ratings are qualitative assessments derived from systematic multi-source data analysis.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

6.1. Developing Ethical Leadership as a Core Public Service Competency

Governments seeking to strengthen public sector integrity must invest in ethical leadership development as a core, sustained component of civil service professional development rather than as an episodic compliance exercise. Leadership development programs should build moral awareness (the capacity to recognize ethical dimensions in administrative decisions), moral courage (the willingness to act on ethical judgments despite personal or organizational cost), and ethical communication competence (the ability to articulate values and ethical reasoning in ways that shape organizational culture). Assessment and selection processes for senior civil service positions should incorporate ethical leadership competency criteria alongside technical and managerial capabilities, and performance management systems should evaluate ethical leadership behaviors as a primary accountability dimension (Trevino et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2005).

6.2. Building Organizational Integrity Systems that Go Beyond Compliance

The evidence for organizational culture as the primary mechanism of ethical leadership's integrity effects argues for a fundamental reorientation of organizational integrity programs from compliance documentation to culture development. Practical elements of a culture-oriented organizational integrity system include: integrity climate surveys that regularly measure the ethical quality of organizational culture and identify emerging vulnerabilities; structured ethics dialogue forums that create space for public employees to discuss ethical dilemmas and professional values without compliance pressure; mentoring programs pairing junior officials with ethical leadership exemplars; recognition systems that explicitly celebrate integrity exemplars and public service excellence; and integrity case study programs drawing on anonymized real organizational situations to develop practical ethical reasoning capability (Kaptein, 2011; Brown & Mitchell, 2010).

6.3. Prioritizing Whistleblower Protection as Foundational Integrity Infrastructure

Given the evidence establishing whistleblower protection adequacy as the single most powerful institutional integrity variable, governments should treat whistleblower protection reform as a foundational priority rather than a peripheral integrity instrument. Effective whistleblower protection frameworks require: legal coverage extending to all public sector employment relationships including contractors and consultants; multiple disclosure channel options (internal, external regulatory, and public interest disclosure pathways) with legal protection extending to all channels; strong anti-retaliation provisions with reversible burden of proof; independent oversight bodies with investigative authority and remedial powers; organizational cultures and operational protocols that actively signal the safety of internal integrity reporting; and regular effectiveness monitoring using disclosure rate and retaliation incidence data (Miceli et al., 2008; Vandekerckhove, 2006).

6.4. Designing Transparency Mechanisms with Institutional Complementarity

Transparency reform programs should be designed from the outset with institutional complementarity as a first-order design requirement, not an afterthought. This means: co-investing in investigative journalism capacity and media freedom protection alongside freedom of information legislation; building civil society organizational capacity to conduct social audit, budget monitoring, and public expenditure tracking alongside open government data initiatives; strengthening legislative oversight committee analytical capacity to process financial disclosure information alongside asset declaration requirements; and developing judicial capacity and independence to prosecute identified violations alongside anti-corruption legislation. International development partners promoting transparency governance reforms should condition support on complementary institutional investment rather than funding transparency mechanisms in isolation from their enforcement context (Mulgan, 2014; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016).

6.5. Investing in Integrated Rather than Segmented Integrity Governance

The PS-ILF's three-pillar architecture implies that the most effective integrity governance investments are those that develop all three pillars in an integrated and mutually reinforcing configuration rather than investing heavily in any single pillar while neglecting the others. Governments and international integrity reform programs should adopt integrity governance diagnostic tools that assess the coherence and complementarity of the full three-pillar integrity system identifying not just whether individual instruments exist but whether they are internally consistent and mutually reinforcing. The OECD Recommendation of the Council on Public Integrity (OECD, 2017) provides a policy-level framework for integrated integrity governance that can inform national diagnostic and reform planning processes, supplemented by the PS-ILF's more granular specification of leadership, culture, and institutional architecture interactions.

VII. CONCLUSION

This article has developed and evidenced the Public Sector Integrity Leadership Framework (PS-ILF), a multilevel, theoretically integrated model of public sector integrity that positions ethical leadership behaviors, organizational integrity systems, and institutional accountability architecture as three interlocking pillars of sustainable integrity governance. The PS-ILF advances the integrity governance literature by synthesizing principal-agent theory, social learning theory, and virtue ethics within a unified analytical framework; by theorizing the organizational culture formation pathway as the primary mechanism of ethical leadership's integrity effects; by establishing whistleblower protection as the single most powerful institutional integrity variable through comparative cross-national analysis; and by generating empirically grounded propositions about the conditions under which different integrity instruments are most effective.

The comparative evidence strongly supports the PAV triangle's prediction that integrated, three-pillar integrity governance produces systematically superior long-run outcomes compared to approaches addressing any single pillar in isolation. The best-performing integrity governance systems exemplified by Denmark, Singapore, New Zealand, and Estonia within the comparative sample combine robust ethical leadership culture embedded throughout the civil service hierarchy, organizational integrity systems that institutionalize values beyond individual leader tenure, and institutional accountability architecture that provides structural deterrence and detection capability. The comparative evidence further establishes that cultural determinism is empirically unsupported: sustained integrity improvement is achievable across diverse cultural contexts through deliberate institutional design.

Several limitations of this study require acknowledgment. The systematic review is restricted to English-language publications, and the comparative sample of eighteen countries, while diverse, cannot represent the full range of governance contexts globally. The qualitative nature of the QCA comparative analysis, while appropriate for identifying configurational conditions, does not permit precise effect size estimation. Future research should develop and validate quantitative instruments for measuring the PS-ILF's three pillar dimensions and test the framework's propositions through large-scale multi-country survey research with nationally representative civil service samples. Experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations of

specific integrity interventions ethics leadership development programs, whistleblower protection reforms, integrity climate survey programs would substantially advance the evidence base for practice-relevant integrity governance design.

Ultimately, the challenge of building and sustaining public sector integrity is inseparable from the challenge of democratic governance itself. Public institutions that operate with integrity are not merely more efficient or less costly they are more legitimate, more trusted, and more capable of fulfilling the fundamental public purpose of serving all citizens equitably and effectively. The PS-ILF offers a theoretically grounded, empirically validated framework for the sustained, integrated institutional investment that this democrati imperative demands.

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