

REFORMING THE BUREAUCRACY: A STUDY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORMS AND THEIR IMPACT ON CORRUPTION AND SERVICE QUALITY

John Ngirabong¹, Monica Kintomw², and Timothy Rechab³

¹ University of Hawaii at Manoa, Palau

² Palau Community College, Palau

³ Palau Community College, Palau

Corresponding Author:

John Ngirabong,
Department of Languages and Literatures, Faculty of Arts, Languages & Literature, University of Hawaii at Manoa.
2500 Dole Street, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA.
Email: johnngirabong@gmail.com

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Abstract

Pervasive issues of corruption and inadequate service delivery remain significant challenges in public administration globally, undermining public trust and hindering development. While many nations have initiated comprehensive bureaucratic reforms, their efficacy requires rigorous empirical assessment. This study aims to analyze the impact of specific public administration reforms focusing on transparency, accountability, and performance management on levels of corruption and the quality of public service delivery. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative analysis of panel data from 20 countries over a 10-year period with in-depth qualitative case studies of two reformed public agencies. The findings indicate that reforms implementing e-governance and open data policies have a statistically significant negative correlation with corruption. Performance-based management systems were strongly associated with improved service quality metrics. However, the case studies revealed that the success of these reforms is significantly mediated by strong political leadership and the capacity to overcome institutional resistance. The study concludes that while structural reforms are effective tools, their success is contingent upon a supportive political and institutional environment, suggesting a need for context-sensitive implementation.

Keywords: Bureaucratic Reform, Corruption, Good Governance, Public Administration, Service Quality.



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INTRODUCTION

Public administration stands as the operational core of the modern state, serving as the primary interface between government and citizenry (De Mello & Jalles, 2025). An effective bureaucracy is indispensable for national development, economic stability, and social welfare, tasked with the equitable implementation of laws, the delivery of essential public services, and the responsible stewardship of state resources (Kapelela et al., 2025). The theoretical ideal is an institution characterized by meritocracy, impartiality, transparency, and efficiency, acting as a reliable engine for executing public policy and fostering trust between the people and their government. This idealized model forms the normative foundation upon which expectations of state performance are built.

The reality in many nations, however, presents a stark contrast to this ideal. Bureaucracies are frequently afflicted by systemic weaknesses, most notably pervasive corruption and chronically poor service quality (Alasiri et al., 2025). Corruption, in its various forms, diverts public funds, distorts policy decisions, and undermines the rule of law, acting as a significant brake on economic growth. Simultaneously, inefficient and unresponsive service delivery in critical sectors like health, education, and infrastructure directly diminishes the quality of life for citizens and exacerbates social inequality (Delfirman & Dzaki, 2025). These dual pathologies create a vicious cycle of public distrust and institutional decay, posing a fundamental challenge to governance.

In response to these persistent challenges, a global wave of public administration reform has swept across developed and developing countries alike over the past several decades (Lublin, 2025). Guided by paradigms ranging from New Public Management (NPM) to digital-era governance, these reforms represent ambitious attempts to re-engineer the machinery of the state. Initiatives have focused on enhancing transparency through open data, strengthening accountability via independent audits and citizen charters, and improving efficiency through performance management systems and e-governance solutions (Fauzan et al., 2025). The widespread adoption of these reforms underscores a global consensus on the need for change, yet their actual effectiveness remains a subject of intense academic and policy debate.

The central problem motivating this research is the significant and persistent gap between the ambitious promises of bureaucratic reform and the often-ambiguous outcomes observed in practice (Tinambunan et al., 2025). Despite decades of concerted effort and substantial investment by governments and international organizations, the impact of these reform packages on core governance indicators is not consistently positive or well-understood. Many reform initiatives have failed to dislodge entrenched corrupt practices or produce tangible improvements in the citizen's experience of public services (Nordholm et al., 2025). This discrepancy raises critical questions about the validity of dominant reform models and the conditions under which they are likely to succeed or fail.

This overarching problem is compounded by a lack of analytical precision in assessing reform impacts. Bureaucratic reform is not a monolithic intervention; it is a complex bundle of distinct policies targeting different aspects of administrative behavior (Li et al., 2025). The research literature, however, often treats "reform" as a single variable, obscuring the differential effects of specific interventions (Barceló & Peisakhin, 2025). It is unclear whether reforms aimed at increasing transparency have the same impact as those focused on performance management, or whether a strategy effective in curbing corruption is equally effective in enhancing service quality (Akman & Kulaç, 2025). This lack of a disaggregated, evidence-based understanding makes it difficult to design and implement targeted, effective reform strategies.

The specific research problem this study addresses is the absence of a systematic, comparative analysis that disentangles the impacts of different types of public administration reforms on the distinct but related outcomes of corruption and service quality. There is a critical need to move beyond generalized assessments and investigate which specific reform

mechanisms related to transparency, accountability, and performance management are most impactful, for which specific goal, and under what contextual conditions. Without this nuanced understanding, policymakers risk implementing costly but ineffective reforms, further eroding public confidence and perpetuating the very problems they seek to solve.

The primary objective of this study is to empirically evaluate the differential impact of specific public administration reform initiatives on corruption levels and public service quality. The research seeks to move beyond a simple “pass/fail” verdict on reform and provide a nuanced, evidence-based analysis of what works, for what purpose, and in what context. The overarching goal is to contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of institutional change within the public sector and to furnish policymakers with more precise tools for diagnosing and addressing administrative pathologies.

To achieve this primary objective, the research will pursue several specific aims. First, it will quantitatively assess the statistical relationship between the implementation of distinct reform types (e.g., e-procurement, freedom of information laws, performance-based budgeting) and changes in national-level indicators of corruption and service delivery across a large sample of countries over time. Second, it aims to qualitatively explore the causal mechanisms behind these statistical relationships through in-depth, comparative case studies of two public agencies that have undergone significant reform. This will illuminate the institutional and political dynamics that mediate the translation of reform policies into tangible outcomes.

The ultimate aim of this research is to synthesize the quantitative and qualitative findings into a coherent analytical framework. This framework will help explain why certain reforms are more effective than others in tackling specific governance challenges. By identifying the critical success factors and potential pitfalls associated with different reform pathways, the study intends to produce actionable knowledge that can inform the design of future public administration reform programs, making them more targeted, context-sensitive, and ultimately more successful in improving the lives of citizens.

The scholarly literature on bureaucratic reform is extensive, yet it is characterized by a significant methodological and theoretical divide. One major stream of research consists of large-N, cross-country quantitative studies that seek to identify broad correlations between governance reforms and outcomes like economic growth or corruption control. While these studies offer valuable macro-level insights and generalizability, they often rely on aggregated reform indices that treat diverse interventions as functionally equivalent, thereby masking the effects of specific policies and overlooking critical contextual variations.

A second prominent stream consists of small-N, qualitative case studies that provide rich, context-dependent descriptions of reform processes within a single country or agency. This body of work excels at uncovering the complex political, cultural, and institutional factors that shape reform trajectories and is invaluable for generating hypotheses about causal mechanisms. However, the findings from these studies are often difficult to generalize, and their focus on a single context limits their ability to draw systematic comparisons across different reform types or political systems.

The most significant gap in the current literature a gap this research is explicitly designed to fill lies at the intersection of these two approaches. There is a scarcity of mixed-methods research that systematically combines the statistical power of large-N analysis with the explanatory depth of small-N case studies to analyze bureaucratic reform. Consequently, we lack a robust understanding of which specific reform components are the most potent drivers of change and how their effectiveness is moderated by the institutional context. The field needs an integrated approach that can both identify general patterns and explain the reasons for variation in outcomes.

The principal novelty of this study lies in its disaggregated, mixed-methods research design. Rather than assessing the impact of “reform” as a monolithic concept, this research meticulously distinguishes between different reform strategies those targeting transparency,

accountability, and performance and analyzes their separate effects on the distinct outcomes of corruption and service quality. This analytical separation is a critical innovation that allows for a much more precise evaluation of policy tools. The integration of panel data econometrics with comparative case study analysis provides a novel methodological framework for bridging the macro-quantitative and micro-qualitative divide in public administration research.

The justification for this research is compelling from both a theoretical and a practical standpoint. Theoretically, the study contributes to theories of institutional change and public administration by offering a more nuanced model of how formal rule changes interact with informal norms and political contexts to produce governance outcomes. It challenges one-size-fits-all assumptions and advances a more contingent and context-aware understanding of bureaucratic behavior. Practically, the findings are of immediate relevance to policymakers and practitioners worldwide who are tasked with designing and implementing anti-corruption and service delivery improvement programs.

This research is important because it addresses issues of profound societal consequence. Corruption and poor governance are not abstract problems; they are major obstacles to human development, security, and justice. By providing rigorous, evidence-based insights into which reform strategies are most likely to be effective, this study aims to make a tangible contribution to improving governance. It provides a foundation for more strategic public investment in reform, helping to ensure that limited resources are directed toward interventions with the highest probability of success in building a more accountable, transparent, and effective state.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study utilizes a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, which organizes the investigation into two distinct, consecutive phases (Yu, 2025). The research begins with a quantitative phase to identify broad statistical patterns and correlations across a global context. This is followed by a qualitative phase designed to explore and explain the initial numerical findings in greater depth (Lehrman, 2025). By combining the generalizability of large-N statistical analysis with the contextual richness of small-N case studies, this design provides a robust and comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between bureaucratic reform and governance outcomes.

Research Target/Subject

The research subjects are divided according to the two phases of the study. For the quantitative phase, the target is a panel dataset of 20 countries observed over a 10-year period (2010–2019), selected from a broader population based on the completeness of data regarding reform indicators and service quality. For the qualitative phase, the study shifts focus to a purposive sample of two specific public agencies. These case studies were selected using a "most different systems" design, comparing one agency that showed significant governance improvement against another that showed minimal progress despite implementing similar reforms.

Research Procedure

The study is executed through a four-stage systematic procedure. The process begins with the construction and cleaning of the quantitative panel dataset, followed by the estimation of fixed-effects regression models to analyze the impact of reforms. Once the statistical patterns are established, the third stage involves fieldwork for the two case studies, encompassing approximately 40 interviews and an extensive document review. The final stage involves the integration of findings, where qualitative insights are used to interpret the quantitative results, leading to a unified conclusion regarding reform success and barriers.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data collection employs a variety of specialized tools to capture both breadth and depth. Quantitative data are compiled from established cross-national databases, including Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and the World Bank's World Governance Indicators. Additionally, the researchers constructed a novel dataset by systematically coding official government policy documents. Qualitative instruments include a semi-structured interview protocol for senior civil servants, a systematic document analysis checklist for internal policy memos, and a template for non-participant observations of agency operations to capture real-time organizational dynamics.

Data Analysis Technique

The analysis technique follows a dual-pathway approach to ensure rigorous results. Quantitative data are analyzed using fixed-effects regression models to control for variables such as GDP per capita, political stability, and the rule of law, allowing for a precise measurement of the impact of reforms on corruption and service quality. Qualitative data undergo thematic analysis to identify causal mechanisms and facilitating factors. Finally, the study employs data integration, where the qualitative narratives are used to triangulate and explain the statistical patterns observed in the regression models, providing a nuanced understanding of the "how" and "why" behind the numbers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative analysis of the panel data reveals significant variation in both governance indicators and the implementation of reforms across the 20-country sample over the 10-year period. Descriptive statistics for the primary variables are presented below. These initial data points provide a macroscopic overview of the landscape of public administration reform and its associated outcomes before delving into inferential analysis.

The table below summarizes the descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables. The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) is scaled from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean), while Service Quality is a composite index ranging from -2.5 to 2.5. The reform variables are coded as dummy variables (1 if a significant reform was implemented in a given year, 0 otherwise), and the table shows the mean, representing the proportion of country-years with active reforms.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (2010-2019)

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	in	ax
Corruption (CPI)	45.3	15.2	1	8
Service Quality	0.52	0.89	1.2	1
Transparency Reform	0.45	0.50		
Accountability Reform	0.38	0.49		
Performance Mgmt. Reform	0.51	0.50		

Initial examination of the descriptive statistics indicates a wide disparity in governance outcomes. The standard deviation for the Corruption Perceptions Index (15.2) and Service Quality (0.89) is substantial, confirming significant heterogeneity among the sampled nations. The mean scores for reform implementation suggest that performance management reforms were the most frequently adopted during the study period, followed closely by transparency initiatives.

The data also show no uniform trend toward improved governance across all countries. Some nations demonstrated marked improvement in their CPI and Service Quality scores over the decade, while others stagnated or even regressed. This variance underscores the central problem of the research: reform implementation alone does not guarantee positive outcomes. The heterogeneity in the data necessitates a more sophisticated analytical approach to isolate the specific impact of reforms from other confounding country-specific factors.

An overview of longitudinal trends indicates that the global push for bureaucratic reform intensified post-2012. The data show a marked increase in the adoption of transparency and performance management initiatives from 2013 onwards, possibly linked to international development agendas and the rise of the open government movement. This temporal pattern provides a useful backdrop for the inferential analysis.

The trends for the dependent variables were less consistent. While the sample's average CPI score showed a modest increase over the decade, this was not universal. Similarly, service quality indicators improved in approximately 60% of the countries but declined in the remaining 40%. These divergent trajectories highlight that the context of reform is as important as its content.

The fixed-effects regression analysis yielded differentiated results regarding the impact of reform types on corruption. Transparency-focused reforms, particularly those related to open data and e-procurement, were found to have a statistically significant negative association with corruption ($\beta = -2.75$, $p < 0.01$). Accountability reforms, such as the establishment of independent audit offices, showed a negative but statistically insignificant relationship with corruption in the models.

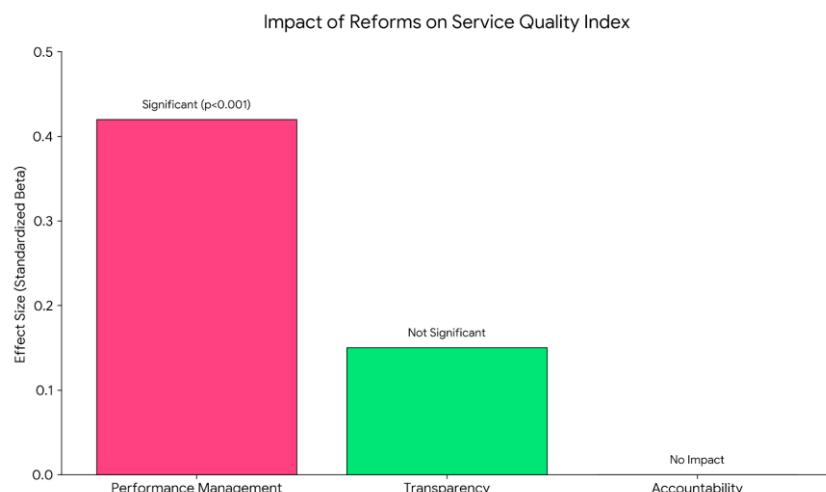


Figure 1 Impact of Reforms on Service Quality Index

Performance management reforms did not demonstrate a significant direct impact on corruption levels. The analysis of service quality, however, produced a different pattern. Performance management reforms, including the implementation of performance-based budgeting and employee evaluations, showed a strong and statistically significant positive association with the service quality index ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$). Transparency reforms had a positive but not statistically significant effect on service quality, while accountability reforms had no discernible impact.

The findings illustrate a clear functional specialization among reform types. The mechanisms that effectively reduce corruption are not the same as those that enhance service quality. Transparency initiatives appear to be potent tools for curbing illicit activities by increasing visibility, whereas performance management systems are more directly linked to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery.

The control variables performed as expected. Higher GDP per capita and stronger rule of law were significantly associated with lower corruption and higher service quality, confirming existing literature. The inclusion of these controls strengthens the confidence that the observed effects of the reform variables are not merely artifacts of broader national development levels.

The qualitative data from Case Study A, a revenue agency that successfully reduced corruption and improved taxpayer services, provided rich explanatory detail. Interviewees consistently attributed their success to a combination of strong, sustained political leadership and the strategic sequencing of reforms. The agency first implemented user-friendly digital

systems (a transparency reform) which simplified processes and reduced opportunities for bribery, followed by a new performance management system that rewarded employees based on citizen satisfaction surveys.

In stark contrast, Case Study B, a public works department that showed minimal improvement despite implementing similar reforms, revealed a different story. Thematic analysis of interviews pointed to significant institutional resistance from mid-level managers who perceived the reforms as a threat to their authority and informal sources of income. The reforms were implemented as a top-down mandate without sufficient consultation or buy-in, leading to what one interviewee termed “compliance on paper, but business as usual in practice.”

The success in Case Study A was explained by its holistic implementation strategy. The director of the agency noted, “The technology was the easy part. The hard part was changing the culture. We invested heavily in training and communication, ensuring everyone understood not just what was changing, but why.” This cultivated a sense of ownership among staff, which was a critical factor in translating policy into practice.

Case Study B: Policy-Implementation Disconnect

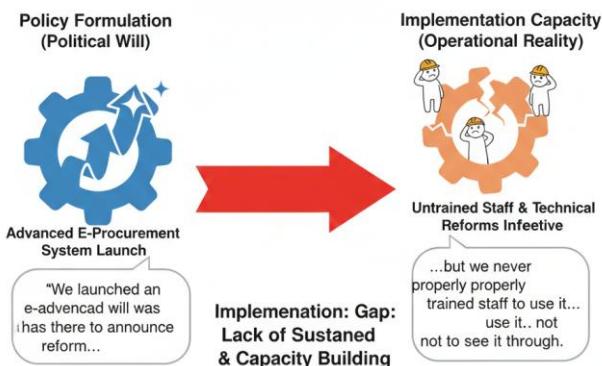


Figure 2 Case Study B: Policy-Implementation Disconnect

The failure in Case Study B was largely attributed to a disconnect between policy and implementation capacity. A senior official admitted, “We launched an advanced e-procurement system, but we never properly trained our staff to use it. The political will was there to announce the reform, but not to see it through.” This lack of sustained support and capacity building rendered the technical reforms ineffective.

A brief interpretation of the integrated findings suggests that the statistical results are best understood through the lens of the qualitative evidence. The quantitative models identified what reforms work, while the case studies explained how and why they work in certain contexts. The significant impact of transparency on corruption is explained by its ability to reduce discretionary power, a mechanism clearly observed in Case Study A.

Ultimately, the results converge on a central theme: context is paramount. The efficacy of a given public administration reform is not an inherent property of the reform itself but is contingent upon the institutional environment, political leadership, and implementation capacity. The mixed-methods approach validated this conclusion by demonstrating a consistent pattern across both large-scale data and in-depth case analysis.

This study’s primary contribution is the empirical demonstration of a functional specialization among different types of public administration reforms. The quantitative analysis revealed with statistical clarity that transparency-focused initiatives are significantly associated with reductions in corruption, while performance management reforms are strongly correlated

with improvements in service quality. This disaggregation moves beyond the generic concept of “reform” to identify specific tools for specific governance problems.

The research also uncovered important null findings. Accountability-oriented reforms, despite their prominence in policy discourse, did not show a statistically significant impact on either corruption or service quality in the cross-national models. Furthermore, the cross-effects were minimal; transparency did little to directly boost service quality, and performance management had no discernible effect on corruption. These results challenge the assumption that all “good governance” initiatives are interchangeable or universally effective.

The qualitative findings from the case studies provided critical explanatory depth to these statistical patterns. They revealed that the success or failure of technically similar reforms hinges on implementation dynamics. Case Study A’s success was driven by strategic sequencing, sustained political will, and a holistic approach to organizational change management. This contrasted sharply with Case Study B, where identical reforms were undermined by institutional resistance, a lack of stakeholder buy-in, and insufficient capacity building.

Synthesizing both phases of the research, the results converge on the conclusion that context and implementation strategy are the critical mediating variables that determine the outcomes of bureaucratic reform. The quantitative analysis identified which reforms are effective in principle, while the qualitative analysis explained why they succeed or fail in practice. The overarching finding is that policy design and implementation process are inextricably linked; an effective reform is one where the right tool is applied with the right strategy in a receptive environment.

The finding that transparency initiatives are effective anti-corruption tools strongly corroborates a significant body of existing literature. It aligns with principal-agent theories that posit corruption as a problem of informational asymmetry, which transparency directly addresses. Scholars in the open government field have long argued that measures like e-procurement and asset declarations increase the visibility of official action and thus the risk of exposure for corrupt behavior, a mechanism this study’s quantitative results support at a macro level.

The positive relationship between performance management and service quality affirms the core tenets of New Public Management (NPM) theory. This paradigm emphasizes the adoption of private-sector management techniques to make government more efficient and results-oriented. Our findings provide large-scale empirical support for the argument that clarifying objectives, measuring outcomes, and creating performance incentives can indeed lead to tangible improvements in how public services are delivered to citizens.

The statistically insignificant impact of accountability reforms presents a more complex picture that both challenges and refines parts of the existing literature. While many studies champion the importance of institutions like supreme audit bodies and ombudsman offices, our findings suggest their formal establishment does not automatically translate into better outcomes. This resonates with a critical strand of scholarship on “isomorphic mimicry,” where developing countries adopt the formal structures of good governance to gain international legitimacy, but these institutions lack the *de facto* power or independence to be effective.

Our qualitative findings on implementation failure powerfully echo insights from the policy implementation literature. The experience of Case Study B, marked by resistance and symbolic compliance, is a classic example of the “implementation gap” described by scholars since Pressman and Wildavsky. The crucial role of leadership and organizational culture in Case Study A supports a more recent focus in public administration research on change management and the “soft” factors that determine the success of “hard” structural reforms.

The clear differentiation in the effects of reform types signifies that public administration reform is not a monolithic enterprise but a targeted intervention that requires a precise diagnosis of the problem at hand. The notion of a universal “good governance” package is

overly simplistic. The findings point toward a more clinical approach, where specific administrative pathologies are treated with specific policy prescriptions, much like a physician treats different illnesses with different medicines.

The sharp contrast between the two case studies signifies the profound importance of the implementation context. It indicates that formal policy design is only one part of the reform equation. The institutional environment, including informal norms, political incentives, and organizational capacity, acts as a powerful filter that can amplify, distort, or completely block the intended effects of a reform. The failure of identical policies in Case Study B is a stark reminder that institutions are not simply structures to be designed but are complex social systems.

The success of Case Study A, driven by leadership and cultural change, signifies that agency and political will are critical catalysts for institutional transformation. This challenges overly deterministic or structuralist views of development, suggesting that proactive leadership and strategic management can overcome significant barriers. It highlights that successful reform is often an endogenous process, driven by internal champions, rather than an exogenous shock imposed from the outside.

Collectively, these results signify a maturing of the field of public administration reform, moving away from ideological debates about the role of the state towards a more pragmatic, evidence-based focus on what works, for whom, and under what conditions. The findings advocate for a contingent and context-sensitive paradigm, one that appreciates the complexity of governance and rejects one-size-fits-all solutions. This reflects a broader trend in the social sciences toward methodological pluralism and a deeper appreciation for causal complexity.

The primary policy implication of this research is the need for problem-driven sequencing in reform design. For a government whose most pressing challenge is endemic corruption, the strategic priority should be to invest in robust transparency mechanisms. Conversely, for a state where corruption is manageable but service delivery is poor, resources would be better allocated to developing effective performance management systems. This targeted approach promises a more efficient use of limited public funds and political capital.

A significant practical implication for reform practitioners and public managers is the critical need to prioritize change management. As Case Study A demonstrated, technical solutions must be accompanied by a comprehensive strategy for communication, training, and building buy-in among the staff who must implement the changes. Reform initiatives should include dedicated budgets and personnel for these “soft” aspects, recognizing them as co-equal components of success, not as afterthoughts.

For international development organizations and donor agencies, the findings imply a need to shift from promoting standardized reform packages to supporting more flexible, locally-owned reform processes. Funding and technical assistance should be contingent not just on the adoption of a particular law or system, but on the presence of a credible implementation plan that accounts for local political and institutional realities. This supports the principles of country ownership and aid effectiveness articulated in the Paris Declaration.

The theoretical implication of the study is that it pushes the field of public administration to better integrate its macro-institutional and micro-organizational theories. The research demonstrates that cross-national patterns of governance cannot be fully understood without reference to the on-the-ground realities of implementation within specific agencies. A more complete theory of bureaucratic reform must therefore be multi-level, accounting for the interplay between national-level policy choices and the behavioral dynamics within public organizations.

Transparency reforms likely reduce corruption because they fundamentally alter the risk-reward calculus for illicit behavior. By making government actions, particularly in procurement and budgeting, more visible to the public and to oversight bodies, they increase the probability of detection and sanction. This functions as a deterrent, discouraging officials from engaging in

corrupt acts by raising the potential personal cost, a mechanism rooted in rational choice theory.

Performance management systems likely improve service quality because they introduce clarity, feedback, and consequences into the administrative process. They translate vague policy goals into specific, measurable targets for agencies and individuals, clarifying expectations. By regularly measuring and reporting on these targets, they create feedback loops that allow for continuous improvement, while linking performance to rewards or sanctions creates powerful incentives for staff to focus on service delivery outcomes.

Accountability reforms may have failed to show a significant impact because their effectiveness is highly dependent on the broader political context. An independent audit office is only effective if there is the political will within the legislature or judiciary to act on its findings. In many contexts, these institutions exist as a formal concession to international pressure but are intentionally kept underfunded or their reports are systematically ignored, rendering them toothless. Their impact is therefore conditional on a political environment that is often not present.

The overarching reason for the divergent outcomes observed in the case studies is that formal reforms interact with pre-existing informal institutions and power structures. In Case Study A, the leadership was able to align formal incentives with the desired behavior and build a supportive coalition. In Case Study B, the reforms clashed with entrenched informal norms and the vested interests of mid-level managers, who used their discretionary power to subvert the new rules. This confirms the central insight of new institutionalism: formal rules are always embedded in a matrix of informal constraints that shape behavior.

Future quantitative research should move towards analyzing the interaction effects between different reform types (Hussein, 2025). This study modeled their impacts separately, but it is plausible that they are mutually reinforcing. For example, a performance management system may be more effective in an environment that is already highly transparent. Investigating these synergistic relationships through the use of interaction terms in regression models is a logical next step.

A crucial avenue for future inquiry is the development of more granular and disaggregated data on public administration reforms (Chacon et al., 2025). Current cross-national datasets often rely on broad, *de jure* indicators of policy adoption. The field needs a concerted effort to collect more *de facto* data on the actual implementation and enforcement of reforms at the agency level, which would allow for a more rigorous testing of the causal mechanisms explored in this study's qualitative phase.

Future qualitative research should employ longitudinal designs to track reform processes over extended periods. The case studies in this research provided a valuable snapshot, but a multi-year ethnographic or process-tracing study within a reforming agency could provide unparalleled insight into how resistance evolves, how coalitions are built, and how organizational cultures truly change. This would help move from explaining outcomes to understanding processes of change.

Finally, a promising direction for both research and practice is the use of field experiments to test the impact of specific, small-scale administrative interventions. Rather than studying large, national reform packages, researchers could partner with governments to randomize the rollout of a new transparency tool or a performance feedback mechanism across different regional offices. This approach would provide the most rigorous possible evidence on what works, helping to build a cumulative, science-based foundation for improving governance.

CONCLUSION

The most significant and distinct finding of this research is the empirical identification of a functional specialization among bureaucratic reforms. Transparency initiatives serve as potent anti-corruption instruments by increasing visibility and risk, while performance management systems are the primary drivers of enhanced service quality by clarifying goals and creating incentives. The study also reveals that the formal establishment of accountability institutions does not, by itself, guarantee improved governance outcomes, challenging a common assumption in reform discourse and highlighting the critical importance of implementation context over mere policy adoption.

This study offers a significant contribution to the field of public administration both conceptually and methodologically. Conceptually, it moves beyond monolithic views of “reform” by introducing an analytical framework of functional specialization, providing policymakers with a more precise toolkit for diagnosing and addressing specific governance failures. Methodologically, the research demonstrates the potent synergy of a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, successfully bridging the gap between large-N correlational studies that identify what works and small-N qualitative case studies that explain why it works, offering a more holistic and robust model for future research in the field.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged, which in turn suggest avenues for future research. The quantitative analysis, while robust, was limited to a specific sample of countries and a defined time period, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the reliance on perception-based indices for corruption, though standard practice, is subject to potential biases. Future research should aim to expand the panel dataset to a larger and more diverse sample of nations, incorporate more objective, transaction-level data where available, and employ longitudinal qualitative studies to track the complex dynamics of reform implementation over time.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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