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LEGITIMACY AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM

A Systematic Review of the Public Administration Literature

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Public administration reforms (PARs) are frequently justified by the expectation that they will enhance citizens' trust in government and strengthen the legitimacy of political and administrative institutions. Yet, despite decades of scholarly and policy attention, systematic, comparative, and empirical evidence on the relationship between PARs and citizens' perceptions of legitimacy remains limited. This paper presents a systematic literature review of empirical studies examining how administrative reforms influence legitimacy perceptions, following PRISMA reporting standards. The review synthesizes findings from diverse reform contexts to assess whether and under what conditions such reforms bolster political trust and perceived legitimacy. By mapping the scope, direction, and conditionality of observed effects, the study identifies key evidence gaps and conceptual ambiguities.

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Legitimacy and Administrative Reform: A Systematic Review of the Public Administration Literature

renewing administration through democratic anchorage reforms

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public administration reforms (PARs) profoundly influence the lives of citizens and the way they relate to bureaucrats, elected officials and public-facing institutions of the state in general. What effects do PARs have on citizens' perceptions about the political system in general? Do they shape process and output legitimacy? This is a question that has been asked by many in the past, but scholars of public administration and political science have not yet provided answers rooted in systematic, comparative and empirical evidence.

More than five decades ago, Groves (1974, 332) wrote about the "question of the ultimate value of administrative reform in strengthening such factors as political stability and political legitimacy", asking "whether administrative reform has had the sort of broad beneficial impact on national life". Recent scholarly work suggests we are yet to receive a comprehensive answer about the direction, intensity, conditional nature – or even the mere existence – of this relationship. For instance, Goldfinch et al. (2023, 843) ask: "In the context of public administration reform models or 'paradigms': Is trust related to the way local government performs its functions? Is it about what is achieved either through results, outcomes, or outputs ...perhaps measured by citizen satisfaction (performance)?"

This systematic review undertakes to collect, analyze, and present empirical evidence about the effects of public administration reforms on citizens' process and output legitimacy perceptions. The purpose of this review is twofold: to inform decision-makers and stakeholders about the consequences of newly proposed, introduced and implemented public administration reforms for the politico-administrative system; and to establish whether there is enough empirical, data-driven evidence to back up the expectations characterizing the scholarly literature.

In earlier work we find propositions about innovations in (digital) communication mechanisms between citizens and public administration being able to strengthen government legitimacy (Pestoff, 2006) and regarding spillovers of satisfaction with successful PARs to trust in the political system. As Holzer et al. (2009, 408) put it, first "a public organization finds ways to ameliorate the quality of service ...If the improvement is important to citizens, they will notice and as a result will be more satisfied with the service ... Increases in citizen satisfaction might even go so far as to bolster citizens' trust in government as a whole."

In a similar fashion, policy documents, white papers and preambles of legislation often justify the introduction of various PARs with the stated goal of increasing legitimacy and restoring trust in the political system. For instance, the 2020 Public Service Act in New Zealand mentioned "maintaining trust in the public service" as one of the declared aims of post-NPM reforms (Scott et al., 2023). One-stop service shops (OSSs) are often justified not only on managerial grounds, but their introduction often comes with the expectation that the "legitimacy of governments and political parties responsible for OSS innovation will be strengthened" (Turner, 2012, 201). New Public Governance (NPG) explicitly lists "mak[ing] government[s] more effective and legitimate" among its core claims (Bel and Casula, 2024, 2564). Super-department reforms (SDRs) in China have long been perceived as the silver bullet to improve trust in government (Ma, 2016).

However, to our knowledge there is scant systematic evidence regarding how public administration reform and legitimacy are related. The aim of this paper is to systematically review this literature, following reporting standards as recommended by the PRISMA statement (Page et al., 2021), in order to summarize what has been learned, and to identify fruitful avenues for future research.[1]

This systematic literature review is delivered as part of the Horizon Europe project *Renewing Administration through Democratic Anchorage Reforms* (RADAR). Within RADAR's empirical and

[1] The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) statement prescribes guidelines to ensure transparency and methodological rigor for syntheses of the state of knowledge in a field (Page et al., 2021), and is widely used in political and social sciences (e.g. Devine, 2024; Lubej et al., 2025).

conceptual work package on legitimacy and reform (WP1), this review serves to synthesize existing research on the effects of public administration reforms (PARs) on citizens' perceptions of legitimacy. It thereby provides an essential foundation for assessing when, how, and under what conditions administrative change contributes to democratic anchorage, which we understand as a "quality and a process through which PARs are normatively and institutionally tied to liberal democratic ideals such as participation, accountability, inclusiveness, and representation" (Bauer et al., 2025a, 11).

2. METHODS

1.1. Study identification and selection

The systematic review includes peer-reviewed articles from 30 scholarly journals, selected based on publicly available rankings (Impact Factor and h4-index) of OOIR. Most of these journals are from the field of public administration (*Public Administration Review*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Public Management Review*, *Public Administration*, *Regulation & Governance*, *Administration & Society*, *Governance*, *Policy & Society*, *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, *Journal of European Social Policy*, *Public Performance & Management Review*, *Science and Public Policy*, *Review of Policy Research*, *Journal of Public Policy*). We furthermore included political science journals, expecting that they might serve as natural venues for publishing empirical findings on legitimacy, using the same ranking-based selection criteria. These journals included the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, *Political Geography*, the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Comparative Political Studies* and *West European Politics*. Lastly, working under the assumption that some forms of PARs might be especially relevant at the municipal, local or regional level (cf. Andrews and Van de Walle, 2013), we extended our search to the highest ranked urban studies journals (*Local Government Studies*, *Urban Studies*, *Cities*, *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, *Regional & Federal Studies*, *European Urban and Regional Studies*, and *Regional Science and Urban Economics*).

To identify studies in these journals we did not apply any specific filters in terms of geographic focus area. No time period was imposed on this search either.[2] All articles were included as long as the keywords returned a hit including them. In the next step, during screening, we further scrutinized whether they reported original research (i.e. they were not book reviews, biographies or notes on contributors). All reports sought for retrieval were accessible for us, either relying on major university networks or other public repositories (e.g. JSTOR). All studies meeting the aforementioned eligibility criteria were thoroughly reviewed, regardless of the countries they covered, whether they included empirical research, or whether they focused on national, transnational, or sub-national PARs. The vast majority of hits came from public administration journals; only a small fraction of articles covered here were originally published in disciplinary venues of the other two categories. To conduct the search, the journals' own search engines were used.

As the purpose of this systematic literature review was to understand how public administration reform and legitimacy are related and how particular types of administrative reforms impact citizens' perceptions of the political system, the strings used as keywords also reflect this (*"public administration reform" AND "legitimacy" AND "estimate" OR "public administration reform" AND "legitimacy" AND "data from" OR "public administration reform" AND "legitimacy" AND "survey" OR "public administration reform" AND "legitimacy" AND "qualitative"*). Doing so yielded, in total, N = 300 hits; after removing the duplicates (i.e.

[2] This means that, theoretically, the earliest articles on the relationship between PARs and legitimacy could be studies written in the 1910s (*American Political Science Review*), 1920s (*Public Administration*) and 1930s (*The Journal of Politics*). Nevertheless, as Table 1 suggests, the earliest record included in this systematic review was published in the 1950s.

peer-reviewed articles that were listed among the search results of multiple different keywords), we are left with a sample of N = 124 individual peer-reviewed articles in the journals mentioned above. See Figure 1 for the exact steps taken to identify and filter studies, and Table A1 in the Appendix for the number of identified records by subfield and journal. Subsequently, all articles were thoroughly consulted, with the aim to establish whether they indeed discuss and present empirical evidence about the effects of public administration reforms on citizens' process and output legitimacy perceptions of public administration. Throughout this systematic review, we remain methodologically pluralist: the Results section below includes studies using qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods, without privileging one type of evidence over another.

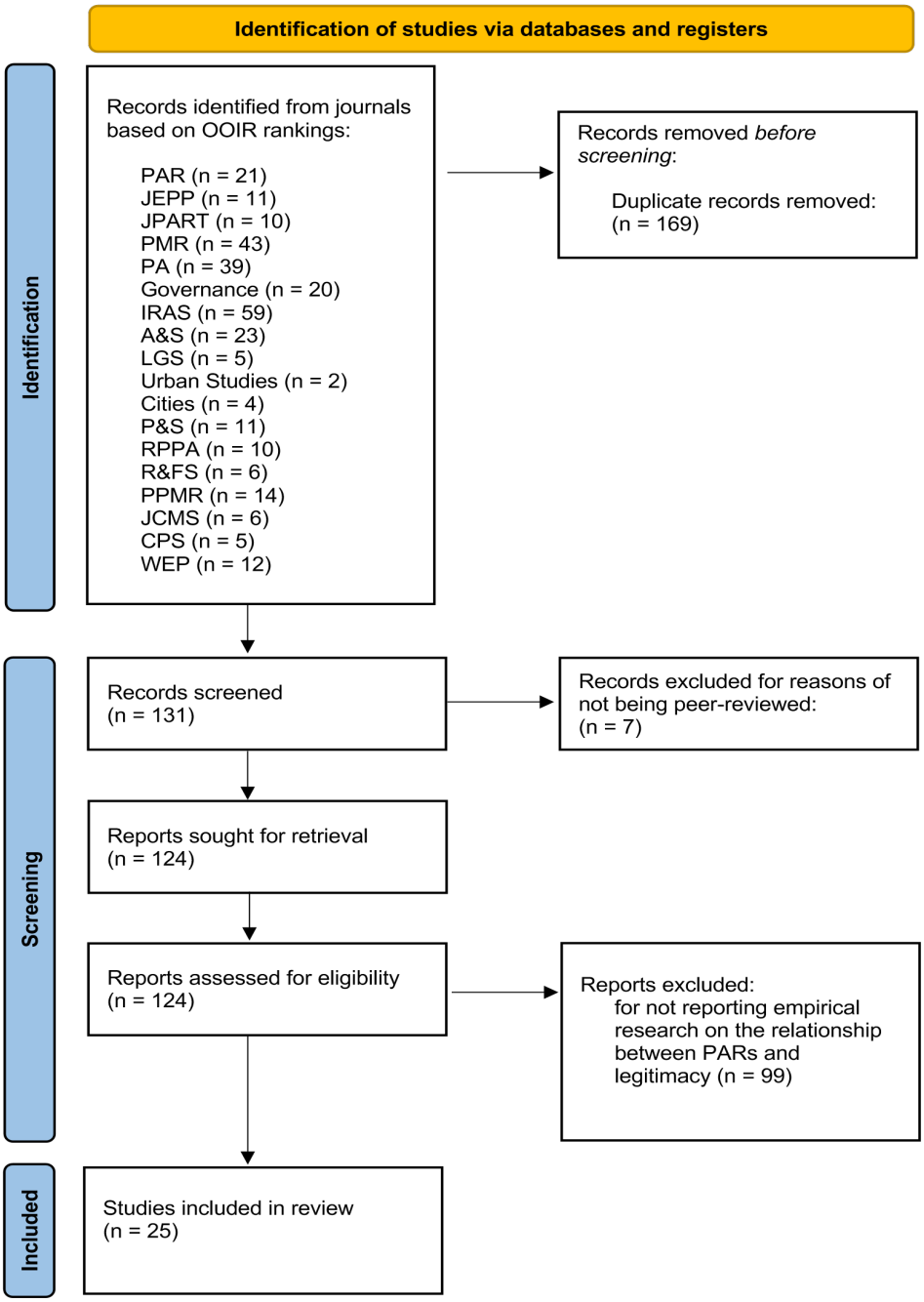

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Chart of Article Selection. Journals where search terms yielded zero hits (R&G, JESP, SPP, RPR, JPP, APSR, AJPS, JOP, PG, CJRES, EURS, RSUE) are dropped from the top-left pane for the sake of legibility. Table A2 in the Appendix lists all studies included in this review.

3. RESULTS

We first observe that empirical studies on the relationship between legitimacy and public administration reforms are scarce. Even fewer studies examine this potential causal link from the perspective of citizens, and with a focus on relationships where legitimacy perceptions are dependent variables, on which the introduction, implementation or reversal of PARs have an effect. Table 1 summarizes these studies, revealing a clear gap in the literature.

Study	Time Period	Reform	Geographic Scope	Results
Nõmm and Randma-Liiv (2012)	2001–2005	performance audits	Estonia	negative
Rouban (2007)	2002–2003	NPM	10 EU MS	positive
Turner (2012)	2007–2010	one-stop service shops	Mongolia	positive
Groves (1974)	1958	organizational reform	Colombia	null
Swianiewicz (2006)	1990–2000	decentralization	Poland & Ukraine	positive
Siltala (2013)	1991–2011	NPM	Finland	negative
Toonen (1993)	1990–1993	public sector reform	V4 countries	negative
Goldfinch et al. (2023)	2020	NPM	Japan	positive
Birner and Wittmer (2006)	1996	delegation to agency	Guatemala	negative
Featherstone (2015)	2007–2013	central state administration reform	Greece	negative
Spanou (1996)	1981–1994	civil service reforms	Greece	negative

Table 1: Effects of Public Administration Reforms on Legitimacy.

This body of literature is characterized by methodological pluralism, with scholars of public administration employing both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Some use public opinion data to gauge citizens' perceptions (Swianiewicz, 2006; Goldfinch et al., 2023; Rouban, 2007) or customer satisfaction surveys aimed at clients with first-hand experience of administrative reforms (Turner, 2012), others analyze secondary data, drawing on occasional papers, reports, governmental documents, performance audits, newspaper articles, and letters from street-level bureaucrats (Featherstone, 2015; Toonen, 1993; Nõmm and Randma-Liiv, 2012; Siltala, 2013).

We find great geographic coverage for countries of Central Eastern Europe – both as candidate countries and, more recently, as EU member states –, Southern Europe – with Greek, Italian and Spanish PARs introduced in the wake of the Great Recession drawing considerable scholarly attention –, and the Nordic countries (Finland, Estonia, Norway). Despite the well-known hurdles for authors from countries of the Global South and non-Western institutions to place their research in highly ranked English language journals (Connell, 2020), it was, to our surprise, studies from Western European and Anglo-Saxon countries that were largely absent from our sample of peer-reviewed articles (Tables 1–3). This might have to do with the generally higher levels of baseline legitimacy and trust in political institutions prevailing in those countries. In other words, had scholars of public administration attempted to identify the effects of reforms in this set of countries, it is likely that their efforts would have been obscured by ceiling effects. That is, at least, before the Great Recession, during which many EU member states witnessed a significant drop in institutional trust due to economical hardship and political turmoil (Muro and Vidal, 2017; Tormos, 2019).[3]

[3] It is no coincidence that several of the articles included in the present systematic review on Southern Europe study explicitly this time period (Lampropoulou and Oikonomou, 2020; Badell et al., 2019; Featherstone, 2015).

With respect to assigning categories for the type of PARs, we followed an inductive approach. The third columns of Tables 1 and 2 display the same terminology used by the authors when referring to the administrative reforms under study. The synthesis of these articles reveals civil service reforms, territorial decentralization, agencification and various elements of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm being the most common variants of PARs that have been linked to changes in legitimacy – either as drivers of change in perceptions, or as being triggered/inhibited by differing levels of baseline legitimacy.

In addition to geographic scope and methodological breadth of the articles included in this systematic review, we shall now turn our attention to their temporal characteristics: the time period covered by these administrative reforms. Dates in Tables 1 and 2 indicate the time period when the respective PARs were implemented, even if qualitative fieldwork and data collection occurred at a later point in time (cf. Birner and Wittmer, 2006).

As the tabular summary of peer-reviewed articles suggests, many of the reforms covered in these studies extend over multiple years or entire decades; a span of 20 years is not uncommon, especially when it comes to comparative, longitudinal analyses of territorial decentralization and civil service reforms (Swianiewicz, 2006; Turner, 2006; Spanou, 1996). Contrarily, delegation of authority to independent agencies or the introduction of performance audit measures seem to be more time-bound and episodic in nature (Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2022; Nõmm and Randma-Liiv, 2012). We also note that the vast majority of studies listed in Table 1 (and all studies included in Tables 2–3) were published in the 2000s or after.

The last column of Table 1, capturing the direction of the effect (if any), proved to be the most challenging for us. While we did assign binary labels to each study included in Table 1, we contend this categorization has only limited use in grasping the essence of these articles. Whether administrative reforms were successful in increasing legitimacy ("positive") or actively contributed to eroding them ("negative") tend to be highly context dependent in our diverse set of country cases. For instance, Siltala (2013) characterizes NPM reforms in Finland as innovations "fundamental[ly] depriv[ing] the legitimacy of public employees", channeling the "social envy of citizens" against them, and allowing incumbent politicians to "blame" civil servants for legitimacy problems. Compare this with the negative relationship demonstrated by Nõmm and Randma-Liiv (2012, 868): their Estonian case study demonstrates how trust in government officials and institutions dropped due to "large-scale failures of performance management initiatives", as many in the public likened performance targets to "Soviet-style planned economy".

Relatedly, based on the sampled articles, we document the relevance of *speed* and *frequency* of PARs, as factors moderating reforms' effects on legitimacy perceptions. A comparative study of decentralization (territorial reforms) in Poland and Ukraine is a good example for this. Swianiewicz (2006, 612–613) argues that "more radical decentralization pays off", finding "indirect proof of public dissatisfaction with the slow pace of decentralization", which he links to lower levels of trust. Analyzing civil service reforms in Greece, Spanou (1996) documents how the bipolar competition of the country's two major parties – PASOK and New Democracy – contributed to government turnovers becoming increasingly consequential for the survival (or reversal) of PARs. As she puts it, the "inflation" of "ultra-frequent, successive" reforms were linked to "disastrous results" in terms of legitimacy in the 1980s–90s. To better understand these contingent relationships and the causal link between PARs and legitimacy outcomes, the next section discusses how these administrative reforms relate to input, throughput, and output legitimacy.

3.1 Dimensions of Legitimacy

When it comes to positive or adverse effects of PARs on legitimacy, we can group the identified articles on the basis of how they relate to the tripartite model of legitimacy. In other words, whether the mechanisms uncovered and discussed by these authors focus on the relationship between input, throughput, or output legitimacy and various reform trajectories (Scharpf, 1999; Schmidt, 2013).

It is worth mentioning that the discussion below builds on peer-reviewed articles that understand legitimacy and trust in relation to the government, political parties and other institutions, or the political

system as a whole. Consequently, articles that discuss effects of PARs on legitimacy, but in a *very narrow sense* – legitimacy of performance measures, legislative legitimacy of various state sector acts or trust in e-governance portals (Angiola and Bianchi, 2015; de Mattos Donadelli and Scott, 2025; Barbosa et al., 2013) – are omitted from Table 1 and not discussed in the corresponding paragraphs either. As this systematic review is primarily interested in how PARs might increase (or decrease) legitimacy and restore (or undermine) trust in the political system, such purely reflexive legitimacy of reforms, related to the very instruments and policies introduced by decisionmakers, is beyond the scope of the present review.

Studies scrutinizing how loss of legitimacy occurred due to a "sense of the reforms being imposed" by various EU/IO actors, perceived as "foreigners' blackmail" (Featherstone, 2015, 309) certainly suggest an important role of societal expectations regarding procedural integrity and transparency in how PARs shape perceptions about the political system as a whole. In a similar fashion, Negretto (2004, 559) demonstrates how reforms concerning the public sector and other policy domains (taxation, economics, agriculture) in Brazil and Argentina "undermine[d] the trust of citizens" not because of their content *per se*, but rather due to them being introduced via constitutional decree authority, "weaken[ing] mechanisms of horizontal and vertical accountability" and "affect[ing] the legitimacy of lawmaking in a democratic regime. Negretto (2004, 559) also explicitly reflects on the efficiency vs. accountability tradeoff when concluding that "this loss in legitimacy is not necessarily compensated by a more effective system of lawmaking".

The comparative study by Julnes and Mixcóatl (2006, 410) finds that input legitimacy packs little explanatory power in the context of performance measurement initiatives in the United States and Mexico, as citizens had an important role only "during the initial steps of the effort", after which "they became generally absent" and their input was "no longer necessary". Instead, the authors emphasize the role of strong, reform-minded governors.

Lastly, the systematic review also identified a handful of scholarly works demonstrating mechanisms that pinpoint the relevance of output legitimacy. A study on PARs in the Visegrád 4 countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) reports how the trust of citizens was undermined by "the fact that the reforms have not resulted in an immediate increase in welfare, but rather the contrary" (Toonen, 1993, 164). Likewise, a scholarly analysis of the introduction of one-stop shops in Mongolia suggests little responsiveness to citizen concerns and hardly any inclusion of diverse voices in reform process: according to Turner (2012, 211), the general public was not involved in the design or implementation of the aforementioned reform, and "their voice was heard only in so far as the general satisfaction with the OSSs contributed to government's legitimacy through the perception that government was interested in improving citizens' welfare".

3.2 Legitimacy enabling or inhibiting administrative reforms

Study	Time Period	Reform	Geographic Scope	Relationship
Lampropoulou and Oikonomou (2020)	2010–2018	agencification	Greece	low trust in political system → PAR
Badell et al. (2019)	2008–2016	public sector reforms	Italy & Spain	EU leaders legitimize actors to pass PARs
Nieto Morales et al. (2015)	2003	civil service reform	Mexico	trust as important asset for PAR
Chen et al. (2022)	1949–2019	agency termination	China	bureaucratic legitimacy & reputation → survival
Börzel and van Hüllen (2014)	2000–2010	anti-corruption reforms	Southern Caucasus	legitimacy = necessary condition for effective reforms
Turner (2006)	1990s	territorial decentralization	Southeast Asia	lack of legitimacy → unsuccessful PARs
Meyer-Sahling (2004)	1990–2001	civil service reform	Hungary	lost legitimacy by outgoing regime → more radical PARs

Table 2: Studies on Public Administration Reform Introduction or Implementation Requiring Legitimacy.

The articles listed in Table 2 serve as the foundation for the following discussion, which examines arguments positing that (*status quo*) legitimacy determines the extent to which administrative reforms

are introduced or implemented successfully.[4] These studies vary considerably in terms of research design, data sources, and analytical techniques. Among others, we find empirical strategies using text-as-data methods (Chen et al., 2022); analyzing protest event databases (Börzel and van Hüllen, 2014), secondary data sources consisting of NGO reports and legislation (Turner, 2012), or macro-level indicators (Börzel and van Hüllen, 2014).

Interview data with public managers from Ukraine suggest that the "lack of trust among differing groups in society" is one of main obstacles of improving public management (Condrey et al., 2001, 275). A close look at anti-corruption reforms in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia demonstrates that their effectiveness and success is dependent on the legitimacy of the EU, which in turn largely explains the European polity's differential impact in the Southern Caucasus (Börzel and van Hüllen, 2014). A comparative study of territorial decentralization in Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines reveals how the Indonesian government's lack of legitimacy among the Melanesian inhabitants of Papua greatly contributed to the failure of autonomy reforms (Turner, 2012). In the context of Southern Europe, technocrats in Italy and Spain needed external legitimization to be able to pass PARs and to achieve fiscal consolidation (Badell et al., 2019).

In the context of the political transitions in Central Eastern Europe Meyer-Sahling (2004, 80) notes that PARs were more profound and large-scale because "existing policies had ...lost ...their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens", suggesting that the lack of legitimacy might not only hinder the ability of incumbents to pass reforms, but also serve as a potential resource for their newly elected successors when introducing and implementing reforms. Indeed, Meyer-Sahling (2004, 91) emphasizes how Hungary's last governing cabinet before the end of Communism, the Németh government "lacked the legitimacy ...to initiate far-reaching reform of public administration". A very similar argument is made by Dimitrova (2002, 180), whose work suggests that pre-regime change elites "hav[ing] been thoroughly discredited in the past" essentially served as a precondition for successful PARs in EU candidate countries in the same region.

Chen et al. (2022) focus on agencies in China and finds that the legitimacy of such organizations – understood as their popular reputation, proxied via news coverage in People's Daily – largely influences whether they subsequently become subjects of PARs, initiated by the central government. Administrative agencies with a worse reputation are unlikely to survive, as they more often become targets of reforms whose "ultimate focus" is agency termination (cf. Adam and Bauer, 2018).

Lastly, we need to mention the work of Mussari and Cepiku (2007, 369): despite not directly engaging with the relationship between trust/legitimacy and PARs, the authors put forward an interesting proposition regarding how the level of development a country enjoys might moderate the relationship between public opinion and introduction of PARs. Building on the empirical case of administrative reforms on sustainable development in Albania, they suggest that in developed countries, "citizens' expectations ...have been a fundamental driver for PA reforms", whereas in developing countries international pressure plays a bigger role. While this might be particularly true for countries in transition such as Albania, and other candidate countries of the European Union, we note that several of the aforementioned studies demonstrating the independent (unconditional) effect of domestic legitimacy on PAR success and introduction in fact were reported in the context of the Global South.

[4] According to the article by Rouban (2007, 488), which is already included in Table 1, *PAR → legitimacy* and *legitimacy → PAR* are both plausible relationships. As he puts it: "one may contend that reforms precede trust, but ...data confirm that ...NPM reforms are not only the outcome of the government willingness but require specific social and political cultures".

3.3 Elite and expert perceptions

Study	Time Period	Relationship[a]	Geographic Scope	Respondents/Interviewees
Miao et al. (2014)	2011	servant-minded PA employees → legitimacy	China	civil servants (MPA graduates)
Klun and Slabe-Erker (2009)	2007	quality of regulation → legitimacy	Slovenia	323 businesses (selected randomly)
Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen (2022)	2001	ethics code in writing → higher legitimacy	Poland	455 ministerial civil servants
Painter (2006)	2001–2003	pay reform in public sector → legitimacy	Vietnam	state employees (data on wages)
Mohr et al. (2021)	2012–2014	NPM → increased Western legitimacy for CEE	19 EU MS	5,462 top public sector executives
Torres (2005)	2002–2003	service charters → higher trust in government	Spain	public-sector managers (44 gov't units)
Christensen et al. (2019)	2016	coordination capacity = remedy for lack of legitimacy	Norway	4,253 civil servants (ministries + agencies)

[a] Some of these articles only conjecture, others also empirically demonstrate these relationships.

Table 3: Studies with Data Collection among Political Elites and Bureaucrats.

Lastly, Table 3 summarize studies that look into the relationship between PARs and legitimacy (or at least conjecture such a link), but do so using original data collected from experts, bureaucrats, politicians or other elites. Even though the focus of this systematic review is to understand the effects of PARs on legitimacy *as perceived by citizens*, the literature search returned several empirical works where this question was studied on an elite or expert sample. These articles aim to capture (changing) perceptions of incumbent politicians, senior civil servants or street-level bureaucrats following the introduction and implementation of various PARs; or their perceptions and expectations about specific PARs' ability to increase legitimacy and trust of the political system. While all studies share the common trait of relying on data derived from elites and bureaucratic actors, they exhibit considerable methodological diversity. For instance, Torres (2005) interviewed public-sector managers using the Delphi method; Mohr et al. (2021) and Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen (2022) rely on regression analysis of survey data collected in the framework of the COCOPS Executive Survey on Public Sector Reform in Europe (Hammerschmid et al., 2019) and the SIGMA project, respectively; Nieto Morales et al. (2015) conduct a fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis; while Miao et al. (2014) run a confirmatory factor analysis and SEM models on responses of graduates of a Chinese MPA program.

Their substantive focus is similar to that of the aforementioned studies in Tables 1–2, as most of them are concerned with how to improve legitimacy (or even circumvent problems stemming from an outright lack of legitimacy). Nevertheless, as their empirical strategy often focuses on observing changes directly among bureaucrats, the PARs under scrutiny in these studies are less concerned with empowering citizens or making government more accessible and transparent to them. Instead, interventions directly targeting civil servants – for instance, pay reforms and codes of ethics – take center stage in this strand of scholarly works (Painter, 2006; Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2022).

4. DISCUSSION

There is a general expectation both in the scholarly literature and in policy documents that public administrative reforms, if effective, are positively related to citizens trust and legitimacy (e.g. Scott et al., 2023; Bel and Casula, 2024; Holzer et al., 2009). Nevertheless, when it comes to empirically capturing and identifying this hypothesized relationship, our PRISMA-based systematic review suggest there are only a handful of studies available that investigate this legitimacy–reform nexus, let alone provide reliable systemic evidence about the relationship. This justifies the choice of analytical focus of the RADAR project because it reveals the lack of systematic empirical evidence on how specific types of administrative reforms impact citizens' legitimacy perceptions, especially in relation to input and throughput dimensions. It demonstrates that legitimacy cannot be treated as an automatic outcome of reform

performance, but must instead be investigated as a contingent and mediated relationship – shaped by design, implementation context, and political framing.

We contend that the relationship between PARs and legitimacy is important both for normative and empirical reasons. The RADAR project uses the analytical lens of democratic anchorage to understand how administrative reforms shape perceptions of legitimacy and expect that certain features of their design and implementation make them normatively more aligned with widely shared democratic values. Nevertheless, a number of studies indicate how administrative reforms might increase the trust of citizens in the political system in closed autocracies.

For instance, Painter (2006) documents how the creation of a decentralized, nonuniform pay and rewards system increased the legitimacy of the Vietnamese state among civil servants. Interviewing public sector employees, Miao et al. (2014, 739) underscores the role of organizational commitment and servant leadership in "prevent[ing] social unrest and creat[ing] the legitimacy that is crucial for the Communist Party to retain its absolute power". Similarly, super-department reform packages in China "have been advocated as key to ...retaining government trust" (Ma, 2016, 385).

These findings are, at least partly, due to our search strategy, as we enforced no geographic constraints in our literature search and consulted several empirical works on the Global South. By contrast, RADAR focuses on EU member states and candidate countries — a group within which even the most problematic cases are classified, at worst, as electoral autocracies (Kovarek and Littvay, 2022; Bieber, 2020). Nevertheless, findings of this systematic review should invite further investigation about empirical cases where increased regime legitimacy due to successful PARs remains normatively concerning.

Furthermore, when public administration reforms concerned the relationship of the central state and sub-national entities (local governments, municipalities, or regions), existing studies on legitimacy largely focused on decentralization (Swianiewicz, 2006; Turner, 2006; Brusis, 2002). In spite of the lack of any temporal restrictions applied in our search and our focus on peer-reviewed articles which should be a format well-suited to communicate findings on recent and contemporary developments, this systematic review did not identify any studies looking into how re-centralization in illiberal regimes shapes public opinion and the legitimacy of the political system. Incumbents in countries that recently underwent severe democratic erosion, such as Brazil, Hungary, or Poland, have implemented PARs targeting the autonomy and independent capacity of bureaucrats at the local and regional level (Bauer et al., 2025b; Bauer, 2024; Aksztejn et al., 2024; Kovarek and Dobos, 2023). As RADAR aims to understand how public sector reforms might be strategically employed to reduce the democratic quality of governance, we hope to see more scholars leverage original data to better elucidate the empirical relationship between administrative reforms and legitimacy in the context of illiberal transformations.

The analytical framework of the RADAR project follows the standard tripartite model of legitimacy developed in democratic theory (Scharpf, 1999; Schmidt, 2013; Bauer et al., 2025a) and considers the relationship between political trust and legitimacy as mutually reinforcing but contextually contingent. Nevertheless, some of the articles discussed in the systematic review above (e.g. Goldfinch et al., 2023) have raised the question of the relationship between satisfaction and legitimacy. Turner (2012)'s Mongolian case study would suggest satisfaction follows PARs but precedes legitimacy, as opposed to being an interchangeable term denoting the same latent phenomenon. In a similar fashion, while quantitative measures of institutional and political trust tend to be fairly standardized and straightforward, mostly relying on survey instruments and self-reported attitudes (Swianiewicz, 2006), approaches to capture legitimacy vary to a greater extent: Groves (1974) even suggests to use incumbents' electoral results to proxy changes in legitimacy, occurring due to PARs implemented by the government.

The unique role of the European Union, Eurozone leaders and heads of states of (other) EU member states was frequently mentioned in studies, both when it comes to EU member states in crisis and case studies using data from the EU's Eastern neighborhood and other candidate countries (Lampropoulou and Oikonomou, 2020; Badell et al., 2019; Börzel and van Hüllen, 2014). Existing – albeit very scarce – evidence suggests endorsements for PARs by aforementioned actors to be double-edged swords, as they can both undermine and strengthen the legitimacy of reforms, depending on the existing (i.e. baseline)

legitimacy possessed by the domestic government. Featherstone (2015, 309) notes how "Greek governments suffered their own loss of legitimacy, as they appeared weak in the face of the foreigners' «blackmail»" when reforming of the central state administration in the wake of the Great Recession. Contrarily, Kettunen and Kungla (2005) mention how, in the context of Estonia and Finland, European policies and ideas might serve as a valuable resource to legitimize domestic PARs.

Lastly, we take note of the predominance of empirical studies conducting fieldwork among street-level bureaucrats, ministerial civil servants, or department heads of directorate-generals, even if the vast majority of these articles does not address the research question of our systematic review directly (Miao et al., 2014; Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2022; Nieto Morales et al., 2015; O'Connor and Shahwan, 2024). This is despite bureaucrats, politicians, and other elite groups are often harder-to-reach than ordinary citizens, making survey work targeting them significantly more time-consuming and resource-intensive than standard citizen surveys (López, 2023; Rodríguez-Teruel and Daloz, 2018). Future research would be better served by the use of surveys directly tapping into the attitudes and perceptions of citizens, who remain not only the primary target and ultimate beneficiaries of innovations and structural reforms in the public sector, but also the eventual arbiters of the fate of elected office-holders responsible for introducing such reforms.

5. CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RADAR PROJECT

This systematic review yields three key insights that directly inform the RADAR project's analytical framework and empirical agenda. First, the available literature offers only fragmented, methodologically heterogeneous and generally scarce reliable evidence on the link between public administration reform (PAR) and legitimacy. This underscores the need for RADAR's systematic and multi-dimensional approach to legitimacy, distinguishing clearly between input, throughput, and output effects of reform initiatives (Caby and Frehen, 2021; Bauer et al., 2025a).

Second, existing studies reveal that legitimacy effects are not intrinsic to reform content, but highly context-dependent and mediated by citizens' perceptions of procedural fairness, political ownership, and the inclusiveness of reform processes. These findings strengthen RADAR's emphasis on *democratic anchorage* as a testable, process-oriented concept for assessing reform legitimacy beyond technocratic output indicators (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005, 2018).

Third, the discrete timing of public administration reforms enables more precise empirical identification of the effects of their introduction. Consequently, they provide a particularly useful context for studies utilizing quasi-experimental designs, such as UESD, MUESD, RDiT, event study analysis, or Differences-in-Differences approaches. These would be able to isolate the true effect of PARs on legitimacy or trust in institutions and elected politicians. An advantage of such research projects would be their cost-effective nature: similarly to how the European Social Survey (ESS) provides a companion dataset on events that took place during their fieldwork and data collection,[5] existing surveys that include questions on trust and legitimacy could be easily merged with information on PARs being introduced, implemented, or debated in the domestic political arena. The CLIO Library, which in the framework of the RADAR project generates an open-access database of public administration reform documents, could serve as an ideal starting point for this.

Fourth, the literature confirms that reforms can erode rather than enhance legitimacy when they are perceived as externally imposed, opaque, or excessively frequent. This calls for a normative and empirical reorientation of administrative reform debates: away from performance-centered models and towards

[5] https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/ess-methodology/ monitoring-national-contexts

approaches that prioritize democratic quality, societal engagement, and institutional trust (Rosanvallon, 2024). RADAR's framework is uniquely positioned to deliver such a reorientation.

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8. APPENDIX

Journal Name	Subfield	Number of Records
Public Administration Review	Public Administration	21
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory	Public Administration	10
Journal of European Public Policy	Public Administration	11
Public Management Review	Public Administration	43
Public Administration	Public Administration	39
Regulation & Governance	Public Administration	0
Administration & Society	Public Administration	23
Governance	Public Administration	20
Policy & Society	Public Administration	11
International Review of Administrative Sciences	Public Administration	59
Review of Public Personnel Administration	Public Administration	10
Journal of European Social Policy	Public Administration	0
Public Performance & Management Review	Public Administration	14
Science and Public Policy	Public Administration	0
Review of Policy Research	Public Administration	0
Journal of Public Policy	Public Administration	0
American Political Science Review	Political Science	0
American Journal of Political Science	Political Science	0
Journal of Politics	Political Science	0
Political Geography	Political Science	0
Journal of Common Market Studies	Political Science	6
Comparative Political Studies	Political Science	5
West European Politics	Political Science	12
Local Government Studies	Urban Studies	5
Urban Studies	Urban Studies	2
Cities	Urban Studies	4
Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society	Urban Studies	0
Regional & Federal Studies	Urban Studies	6
European Urban and Regional Studies	Urban Studies	0
Regional Science and Urban Economics	Urban Studies	0

Table A1: Journal coverage by subfield and the number of identified studies

Author	Year	Journal
Badell et al.	2019	*Public Management Review*
Birner and Wittmer	2006	*International Review of Administrative Sciences*
Börzel and van Hüllen	2014	*Governance*
Chen et al.	2022	*Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*
Christensen et al.	2019	*Policy and Society*
Featherstone	2015	*Journal of European Public Policy*
Goldfinch et al.	2023	*International Review of Administrative Sciences*
Groves	1974	*Administration & Society*
Klun and Slabe-Erker	2009	*International Review of Administrative Sciences*
Lampropoulou and Oikonomou	2020	*Administration & Society*
Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen	2022	*Review of Public Personnel Administration*
Meyer-Sahling	2004	*West European Politics*
Miao et al.	2014	*Public Administration*
Mohr et al.	2021	*Public Administration Review*
Nieto Morales et al.	2015	*Public Administration*
Nõmm and Randma-Liiv	2012	*Public Management Review*
Painter	2006	*Governance*
Rouban	2007	*Public Administration*
Siltala	2013	*Administration & Society*
Spanou	1996	*West European Politics*
Swianiewicz	2006	*Local Government Studies*
Toonen	1993	*Public Administration*
Torres	2005	*Public Administration Review*
Turner	2012	*Public Management Review*
Turner	2006	*Public Management Review*

Table A2: List of all articles included in the systematic review (Tables 1–3).

RADAR

renewing administration through
democratic anchorage reforms