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What does the evidence tell us about merit principles and government performance?

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Abstract

In October 2020, President Donald Trump sought to convert many US federal civil servants to at-will employees by executive order. Trump's initiative, referred to as Schedule F, has stimulated a partisan debate about dismantling the merit system in the US federal government. A substantial international body of evidence has developed during the last three decades about the effects of administrative practices associated with meritocracy and the likely consequences of changes to civil service systems, such as those embedded in Schedule F. This article employs guidelines established under the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) to conduct a systematic review of the evidence to address the question: What does the evidence tell us about merit principles and government performance? This systematic review summarizes what empirical research tells us about effects of civil service practices, such as meritocratic appointments, meritocratic advancement, and tenure protection, for government performance and the quality of government. The findings indicate that factors such as meritocratic appointments/recruitment, tenure protection, impartiality,

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and professionalism are strongly associated with higher government performance and lower corruption. We conclude by discussing implications of our findings for public policy and management and for future research.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Although civil service systems globally are often objects of criticism because of their adherence to rigid bureaucratic rules, they are simultaneously institutions that embody merit as a value (Ingraham, 2006), which is prized by public actors and citizens alike. In the United States, an unanticipated civil service reform controversy materialized when President Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13957 in October 2020 (Executive Order No. 13957, 2020). The Executive Order created a Schedule F in the excepted service for career employees in confidential, policy-making, policy-determining, or policy-advocating positions (Sherk, 2021). The Executive Order empowered agencies to remove policy-influencing employees for poor performance or intransigence; employees fired could not appeal their dismissal. The issuance of the Executive Order and its withdrawal 2 days after President Biden was inaugurated subsequently triggered intense partisan legislative activity intended both to outlaw and legitimate Schedule F.

Notably, the initiative to deconstruct the US administrative state (Lewis, 2019) and federal civil service is not an isolated incident, but one of many interventions globally to politicize public services, especially in countries that are experiencing increasing political influence on bureaucracy and rising populism (Halligan, 2021; Muno & Briceño, 2023; Peci, 2021; Peters, 2023). These initiatives come despite evidence from social science research about the effects of meritocracy on government performance. Between 2014 and 2022, for instance, *Public Administration* alone has published eight articles about meritocracy and government performance (see Appendix S1: Cooper, 2018; Ebinger, Veit & Fromm, 2019; Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen & Schuster, 2021; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, K. S., 2016; Nieto-Morales & Ríos, 2022; Persson, Parker & Widmalm, 2017; Schuster, 2017; Sundell, 2014).

This article seeks to fill an evidence void with a systematic review of empirical research about meritocracy and government performance. We proceed in four stages. We begin by reviewing theory about meritocracy and government performance. The theory review provides a foundation for a systematic search of relevant research, applying guidelines established under the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). Using a review of theories and the PRISMA guidelines, we identified 96 empirical articles related to meritocracy and government performance broadly defined. We coded the 96 empirical articles to extract a breadth of information about date of publication and geographic location of the research, research methodologies, and results based upon the empirical research. The data derived from coding the research included in the systematic review is synthesized and summarized in the third stage of our presentation. We conclude by discussing the implications of the systematic review for public policy and public management, specifically civil service design, and, in particular, Schedule F.

1.1 | Theory about how meritocracy affects government performance

Theories for thinking about meritocracy and government performance have been expanded and enriched in the last three decades. Public administration theory once revolved around concepts of spoils, politicization, and neutral competence to explain advantages of meritocracy for government performance (Kaufman, 1969; van Riper, 1958). These concepts and understandings of meritocracy and performance have been augmented in recent decades by principal-agent theory and quality of government theory (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

1.2 | Traditional theories of meritocracy in government institutions

Bureaucratic organization as both a rational instrument and value-infused institution originated in the scholarship of Max Weber in the late nineteenth century (Olsen, 2006). At the heart of Weber's conception of bureaucracy was its technical superiority and procedural rationality. More than a century after Weber introduced the concept of bureaucracy, Ingraham (2006) described merit in similar terms: "Merit's core features are qualifications, competence, and the absence of political favoritism." (p. 487).

Ingraham's characterization of merit captures Herbert Kaufman's description of neutral competence, which shared much in common with Weber's conception of bureaucracy. Kaufman helped popularize the neutral competence concept in public administration research with articles that appeared in 1956 and 1969. In the first article (Kaufman, 1956), Kaufman repeatedly referred to the concept as *neutral competence*. In the subsequent article (Kaufman, 1969), Kaufman called the concept of *politically neutral competence*, conveying in greater detail the meaning of the concept but not altering the ideas associated with the concept across the two articles.

Kaufman's thesis was simple. The design of US administrative institutions rests on three values, that is, representativeness, neutral competence, and executive leadership. Kaufman argued that each of the values had been dominant at different times in United States history, rotating temporally from representativeness to neutral competence, to executive leadership. Kaufman argued that attention to neutral competence, as an alternative design value, ascended in the late 19th and early 20th century during early development of public administration doctrine. His mid-century article on emerging conflicts in public administration advanced the premise that the values of neutral competence and executive leadership were simultaneously prominent after World War I when they "pointed in the same direction for governmental improvement" (p. 1057). Beginning with the New Deal, however, "...the second and third values have been not only different but contradictory....(p. 1057).

At the center of Kaufman's (1956) reasoning about divergence between the governmental design direction associated with neutral competence and executive leadership was his inference that the dominance of representativeness and neutral competence during the 19th and early 20th centuries significantly decentralized and dispersed government policy-making:

The centrifugal drives of the representativeness and neutral competence institutions thus found no important counter-force in the legislatures or in the courts. So the efforts to maximize these values brought with them the dispersion of governmental policy-making processes (p. 1063).

Although neutral competence and executive leadership advocates worked in concert during much of the first half of the 20th century, neutral competence increasingly impeded executive leadership because of its explicit grant of competence-based autonomy to bureaucrats that constrained executive discretion. The constraints that neutral competence imposed on executive leadership led Kaufman to conclude the two values had become contradictory.

The attention Kaufman brought to conflicts between neutral competence and executive leadership helped lead to development of another concept, responsive competence, that articulates a normative alternative to neutral competence and a potential focus for reconciling conflicts between the two forms of competence. A foundational premise associated with responsive competence is that "neutral competence" is not neutral because the line between politics and administration, a distinction popularized by Wilson (1887) early in the pursuit of neutral competence in public administration, cannot be drawn objectively (Aberbach & Rockman, 1994). Thus, administrative leaders need to have opportunities for shaping policy toward their ends. Terry Moe, one of the first to use the term "responsive competence," argues, for example, that United States presidents build up White House power and appoint officials based on loyalty or programmatic support (Moe, 1985). Moe's perspective reflects an administrative strategy for imposing executive leadership articulated by Nathan (1983) based on his study of Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.

1.3 | Principal-agent theory

Like traditional theories of meritocracy and government performance, principal-agent theory has a long pedigree, also originating with sociologist Max Weber's foundational theory of bureaucracy. Principal-agent theory's subsequent development is associated with economists Schelling (1960) and North (1979), and political scientists Weingast (1984) and Moe (1985), indicating that the theory bridges disciplines. Early in its evolution, principal-agent theory was used to support "responsive competence" (Moe, 1985) to emphasize the political principal's control of bureaucratic agents, usually by instruments such as contracts. More recently, however, principal-agent theory has emphasized how public bureaucracy constrains principals. The syntheses of principal-agent theory used here draw upon recent formulations of the theory by Miller (2000, 2005), Gailmard and Patty (2013) and Miller and Whitford (2016).

Principal-agent theory, which Miller and Whitford (2016) characterize as "the family of theories that have been used to study hierarchical control" (p. 20), argues that political principals confront two fundamental problems. The first is "shaping incentives to induce constituency-serving behavior by potentially reluctant or recalcitrant bureaucrats" (p. 20). The principal's second "problem is constraining his or her behavior" (p. 20), which Miller and Whitford (2016) note represents a paradox involving time-inconsistent goals. In the long run, politicians (i.e., principals) may seek electoral advantage (e.g., by creating conditions that produce price stability), but in the short run, they are inclined to behave in ways that are inefficient (e.g., by pursuing earmarks that benefit their constituents), especially if others are seeking the same benefits. Miller and Whitford (2016) build a case that time inconsistency problems are inevitable. The inevitability of time inconsistency problems leads Miller and Whitford to infer that a fundamental role for public bureaucracies is to constrain principals. They write: "This leads us to conclude that the more fundamental role for bureaucracy is not to be tamed by politicians, but to constrain them. Bureaucracies can play their most important role as part of a system of checks and balances" (p. 21).

Nistotskaya and Cingolani (2016) demonstrate the power of principal-agent theory to explain the effects of meritocracy on government performance in the context of regulatory quality and entrepreneurship. They focus on two theoretical rationales underlying credible commitment, that is, ways to credibly buffer trustees, like public bureaucracies, from morally hazardous behavior of politicians. The first rationale is to diffuse power among actors to check one another from acting cohesively to use the state for their self-interests. The second rationale involves delegating "relevant powers to an actor, who is insulated from political instability and the time-inconsistent preferences of politicians" (p. 521). Their analysis validates credible commitment and epistemic effects for two common meritocratic practices, meritocratic recruitment, and tenure protection. In addition, they find that credible commitment and epistemic effects operate independently.

1.4 | Quality of government

The "neo-institutional revolution" in the 1990s led to increased interest in characteristics of "good institutions" among scholars and practitioners and development of a large empirical literature linking these institutions and broader socially important outcomes such as economic development (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2022; Fukuyama, 2013; Holmberg et al., 2009; Nistotskaya, 2020). When discussing what constitutes good institutions, however, much attention has been paid to the role of the so-called "input" side of the political system (i.e., electoral and representative democracy such as equal voting rights, free and fair elections, and freedom of expression). For decades, representative democracy was a center of normative definition of what constitutes good government among political scientists (Bågenholm et al., 2021). The "output" side, the institutions regulating the exercise of power, that is, public bureaucracies, has been relatively neglected (Nistotskaya, 2020; Rothstein, 2009).

Recent decades, however, have seen a "rediscovery" of public bureaucracies (Olsen, 2006) and expansion of the scope of study to the quality of public administration and bureaucracy to understand government performance.

Scholars have given increased attention to theory and empirical research to analyze common causes of socioeconomic outcomes and performance of bureaucracies. In particular, since the pioneering work by Evans and Rauch (1999), characteristics of Weberian bureaucracy—that is, meritocracy, tenure protection, and impartiality—have been found to be associated empirically with favorable macro-level outcomes, including socio-economic development, corruption prevention, regulatory quality and entrepreneurship, scientific productivity, and innovation, environmental outcomes and government effectiveness.

Among perspectives linking public bureaucracies and broader outcomes, two approaches stand out: Impartiality in the exercise of public power and meritocracy in personnel systems. Rothstein and Teorell (2008) contend that good governance can be explained by the impartiality of institutions that exercise government authority. Impartiality is defined as “When implementing laws and policies, government officials shall not take into consideration anything about the citizen/case that is not beforehand stipulated in the policy or the law” (p.170). The argument does not directly invoke the concepts of neutral competence or meritocracy, but civil service is an institution that directly factors into impartiality as a consequence of merit.

A distinct approach to quality of government is reflected in research by Dahlström and Lapuente (2017). They identify a key mechanism that explains processes that promote impartiality. They argue that politicians and civil servants have different career incentives and accountability mechanisms. Separation of career incentives is conducive to good governance because such separation enhances mutual checks and balances between the two groups. They argue that separation of political and bureaucratic careers puts the two groups into positions to respond to different accountability systems that are characterized by different incentives. The distinct incentive systems make politicians accountable to electors and bureaucrats accountable to professional peers. Equally important is that the distinct incentives stimulate mutual monitoring between the groups and give bureaucrats capabilities to speak truth to power.

1.5 | Summary

The research streams summarized above—neutral competence, principal-agent theory, and quality of government—provide strong theoretical foundations for thinking about meritocracy and government performance. It is important to acknowledge that throughout history government leaders in the United States and around the world have restricted access to government employment based on race, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other forms of identity (see Portillo et al., 2022). Thus, meritocracy in government employment as an ideal may never have existed. When we use the term meritocracy we are referring to policies concerning recruitment, selection, hiring, promotion, and evaluation that are based on job-related factors that aim to be fair and equitable. We turn next to explaining the methodology we used to identify empirical research that sheds light on the validity of the theories summarized above.

2 | METHODOLOGY

Our goal is to identify evidence from social science research about the effects of meritocracy, broadly defined, on government performance. The systematic review summarizes what high-quality empirical research tells us about effects of civil service practices, such as meritocratic appointments, meritocratic advancement, and tenure protection, for government performance and the quality of government.

We conduct a systematic review using the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA statement consists of a 27-item checklist and a four-phase flow diagram designed to deliver a replicable and transparent analysis and reporting of a systematic review. PRISMA focuses on author transparency and complete reporting of systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Liberati et al., 2009). In addition, systematic reviews require authors to prespecify the selection and quality criteria for inclusion of studies as a way to minimize bias (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009).

2.1 | Eligibility criteria

We included articles from three electronic databases, Web of Science, ProQuest, and EBSCO, if they satisfied several pre-specified criteria. Among the criteria was that we included only English-language articles published in peer-reviewed journals from January 1990 to October 2022. We sought to include articles that studied some facet of “meritocracy” as an independent variable and its relationship to various individual, organizational, and country-level outcomes. Systematic review articles, editorials, books, and book chapters were excluded. Our initial plan was to focus on articles published after the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (CSRA) passed, but doing so increased prospective articles to review by 25%. We, therefore, opted to reduce the time period covered by the systematic review. The total population of articles was large, but we judged it to be manageable.

One of our primary challenges was the diversity of disciplines and journals in which research appeared, which was manifest in different terminology used for relevant research. This meant we needed to use many different search terms to identify relevant research. A total of 14 different search terms were used for each electronic database. The terms were:

1. “merit system” AND “government” OR “public.”
2. “merit system” AND “civil service.”
3. “patronage” AND “merit” AND “government” OR “public.”
4. “professional bureaucracy.”
5. “neutral competence.”
6. “politicization” AND “public administration” OR “public officials.”
7. “meritocracy” AND “government.”
8. “meritocratic recruitment.”
9. “merit recruitment.”
10. “impartial public administration.”
11. “job security” AND “tenure” AND “public.”
12. “quality of government” AND “impartiality.”
13. “merit principles” AND “government.”
14. “impartial” AND “bureaucracies.”

2.2 | Study selection

Our initial search for relevant literature, using the criteria specified above, returned 1090 sources that were further refined in the following steps. First, we screened articles based on publication information and titles. We removed duplicates, books, book chapters, and working papers. At the end of this initial screening, 404 articles remained in the sample.

In the second step, we screened the 404 articles based on three criteria: (1) Was the article written in English?; (2) Was the article published in a journal indexed by SSCI or SCOPUS?; and (3) Was “meritocracy,” “meritocratic recruitment,” “meritocratic advancement,” “tenure protection” or similar variable used as an independent variable to assess the impact of meritocracy on individual, organizational, and/or country-level outcomes. The goal of this screening was to narrow the population of articles to those that superficially represented content relevant to our systematic review objectives. After this step, 126 articles remained in our sample for deeper review.

Although the search process identified many relevant sources for the systematic review, we acknowledge that the search process may have missed some articles. For example, articles were not included if they related to “merit system” but did not include the words “government” or “public” anywhere in the title or abstract. To assure the systematic review included a comprehensive population of articles, we asked three scholars familiar with research in the field to review our list of articles to assess whether any articles were not included in our list. This process led to the inclusion of another 44 articles, resulting in a total of 170 articles on the final list we read, reviewed, and coded in depth. Figure 1 describes the process.

During coding, we looked more deeply into the role of meritocracy variables in the articles identified using keyword searches of article titles and abstracts. Each reviewer answered the questions presented in Appendix S1. As part of this in-depth review of 170 articles, each reviewer had to decide if the paper should be retained or removed from the list according to the criteria established for inclusion. Ninety-six articles were retained after the final review.

The coding process occurred in two stages. In the first stage, the articles were split between the co-authors and coding was done individually. In the second stage, co-authors would take a second look at papers that were flagged as more challenging by another co-author. In the event of discrepancies, the six researchers conferred using Zoom or phone calls to arrive at agreement on coding. In the final stage, 74 articles were dropped from inclusion in the systematic review database because they were theoretical only, that is, nonempirical, or contained no clear relationships between independent and dependent variables. Ninety-six articles were included for the review. The full population of articles included in the systematic review is provided in Appendix S1.

3 | RESULTS

The results of the systematic review are presented in two steps below. We begin with a description of attributes of the population of 96 articles, including the years and journals in which the research appears, units of analysis studied, and common research methods. The second step is to summarize research results across the 96 studies. We discuss which variables were studied and how different meritocracy and other variables related to government performance.

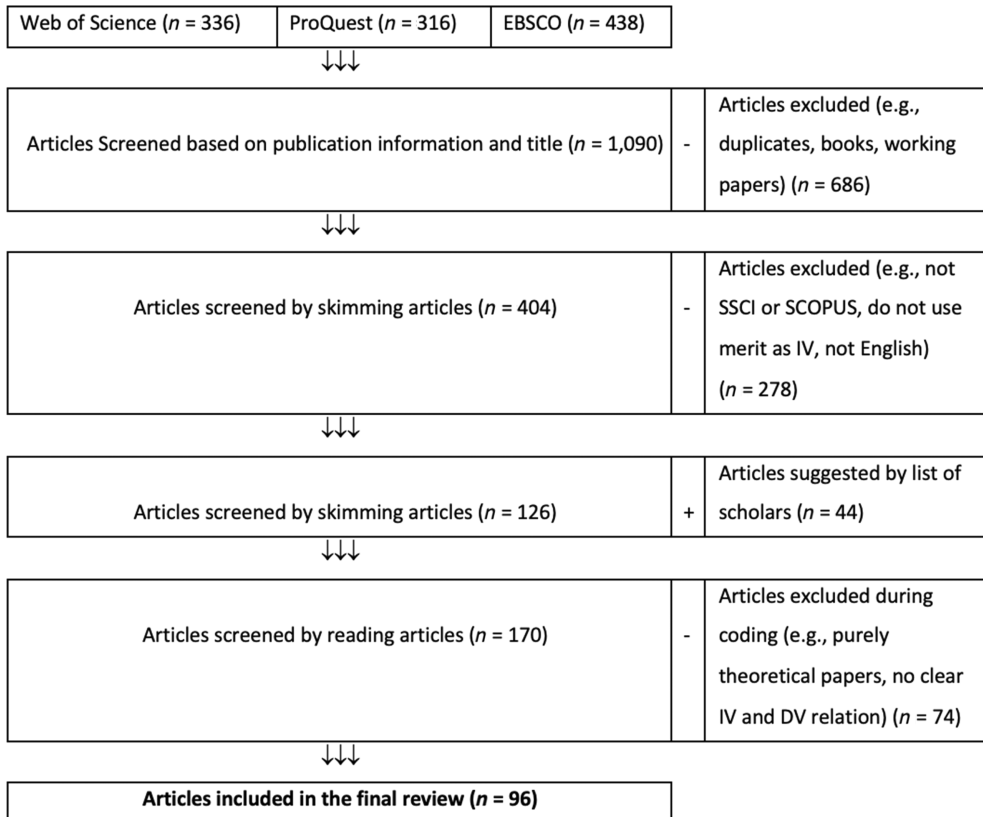


FIGURE 1 PRISMA flow diagram.

3.1 | Attributes of research in the systematic review

We begin our analysis of the 96 articles by presenting descriptive information about them. Figure 2 presents the annual frequency of articles from 1991 to 2022. The period from 1991 to 2011 can be characterized as low-frequency years, including many years in which no articles appeared and 11 other years in which only 1 or 2 articles were published. During the final 11 years of the period, research was published at much higher frequencies, ranging from 3 to 12 articles per year.

3.1.1 | Journal diversity

Research about meritocracy and government performance has been published in an extraordinarily diverse range of journals. The 96 articles published from 1991 to 2022 appeared in 56 different journals.¹ The 56 journals run the gamut of humanities and social and behavioral science disciplines, including anthropology, economics, history, political science, sociology, and applied fields, including criminal justice, public administration and policy, and public management. The 20 journals that published at least two articles during the period are presented in Figure 3. *Public Administration* published the most articles during the period, 8, followed by *Public Administration Review*, 6, and *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 5.

3.1.2 | Countries studied

The countries that were incorporated into the research that appeared in the 96 articles are also highly diverse. Forty-eight countries were explicitly identified as sites for research in studies conducted in the context of a single country. Many of the articles included data from multiple countries from specified geographic regions or included in

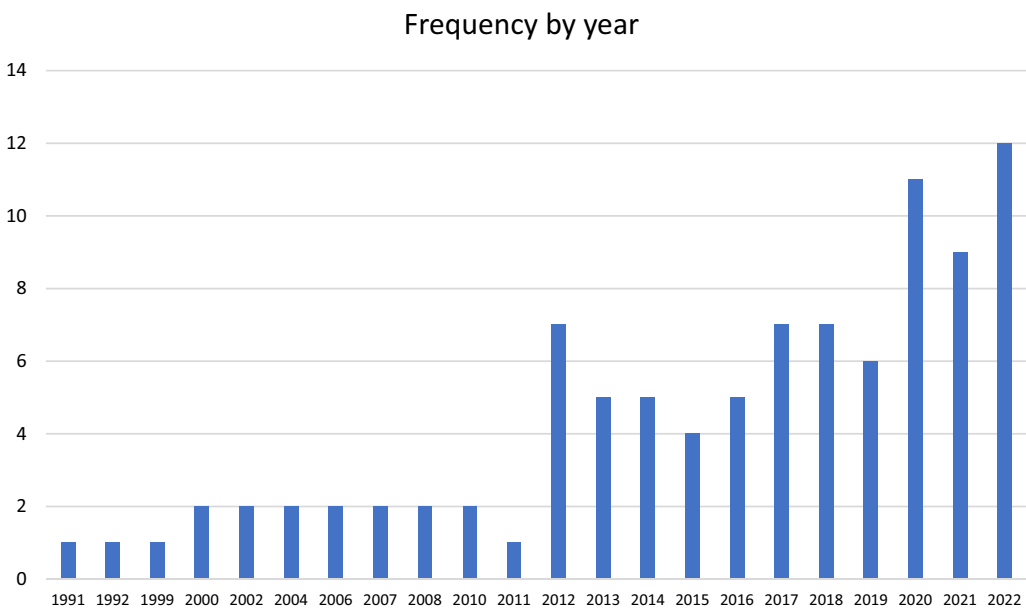


FIGURE 2 Frequency of articles published from 1991 to 2022. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

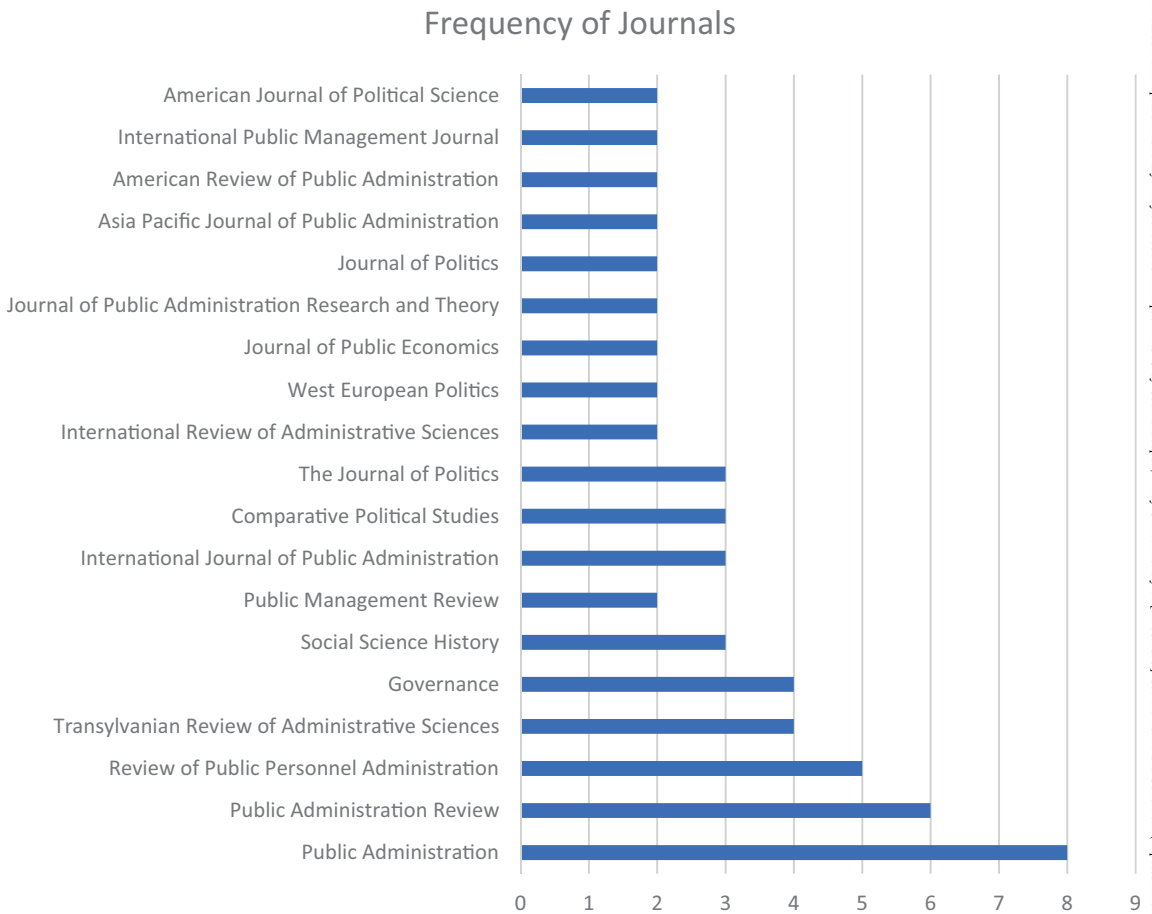


FIGURE 3 Journals publishing a minimum of two articles about meritocracy and performance since 1991. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

specific databases (e.g., Quality of Government Institute Expert Survey). Thus, the articles collectively studied more than 150 countries, covering most of the world's governments.

3.1.3 | Units of analysis and research methods

The units of analysis and research methods are also varied, but not as varied as the journals. As Figure 4 illustrates, a large portion of the research used individuals as units of analysis, followed by countries, organizations, and civil service systems. Thus, the least frequently studied unit of analysis was the civil service as an institution, which was the focus of fewer than 10 articles. The most common analytic method (see Figure 5) was cross-sectional analysis. Panel or longitudinal methods, on their face more rigorous than cross-sectional methods, were second most common; experimental methods were least common. Case studies were used in 15 of the articles and other methods were used in 10. The most common reason articles were coded as “other” was when they used two analytic methods, which usually involved a time series of cross-sectional observations. Regardless of quality differences among research methods (e.g., experimental methods are presumed superior to non-experimental methods), we treated the evidence from all methods as equal.

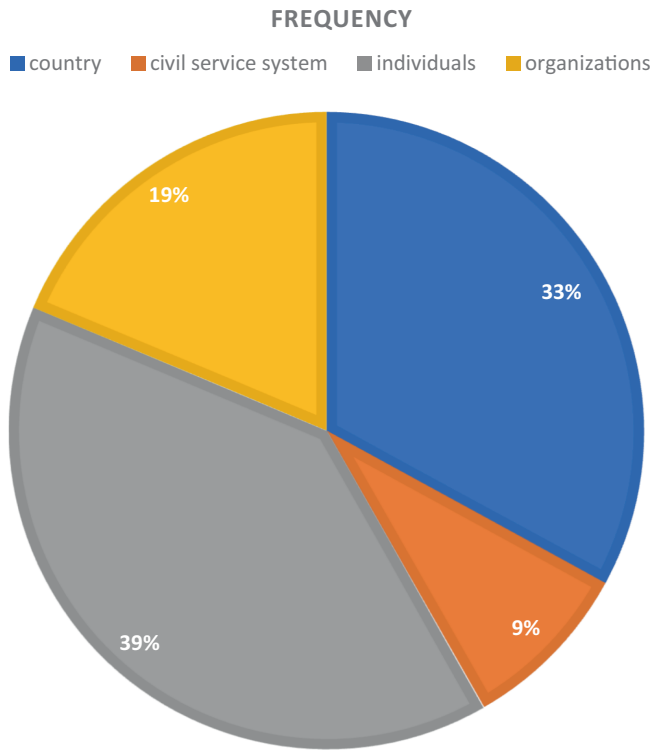


FIGURE 4 Units of analysis studied in the articles. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/padm.12945)]

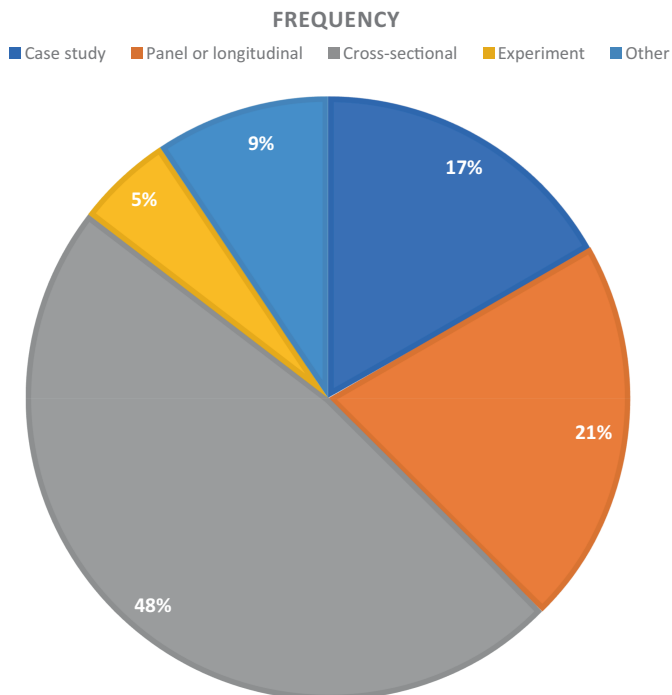


FIGURE 5 Primary analytic methods used in articles. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/padm.12945)]

3.2 | Independent variables studied and relationships with government performance

The findings from the 96 studies in this systematic review are summarized in Tables 1–3. The information in the tables is organized around three sets of independent variables associated with government performance, meritocratic practices (Table 1), quality of government (Table 2), and neutral and responsive competence (Table 3).

3.2.1 | Meritocratic practices

As shown in Table 1, the meritocratic practice most frequently investigated in the research is meritocratic appointment/recruitment, which appeared as an independent variable in 22 articles. If civil service appointments using competitive examinations are aggregated with the meritocratic appointment/recruitment variable, then the total is 24. This variable is positively related to a variety of desired outcomes, among them government performance, whistleblowing, economic growth, quality of service delivery, regulatory quality, work motivation, and public service motivation. These practices are also consistently negatively related to corruption.

The second most frequently studied meritocratic practice is job security/tenure protection, which appeared in 11 of the articles. Like meritocratic appointment/recruitment, job security is positively related to several outcomes, including government performance, whistleblowing, quality of service delivery, work motivation, workplace satisfaction, and work unit performance. Job security is also negatively related to employee turnover intention and engagement in political services. One relationship, a negative association between job security and public service motivation, stands out as contrary to expectations. In addition, only one article found an expected negative relationship between job security and corruption. Three of the four articles that investigated the job security–corruption were nonsignificant.

Two closely related meritocratic practices, meritocratic promotion, and merit-based rewards, have been studied far less frequently than the two practices above. The relationships identified in the five articles that studied the two related practices, however, found positive relationships between them and government performance indicators. Meritocratic promotion was positively associated with indicators of government performance, quality of service delivery, and the efficiency and effectiveness of government accounting. Merit-based rewards were positively related to whistleblowing, program and agency performance, individual competence, and public confidence.

Three articles investigated the merit system as a whole rather than isolating individual practices. Those articles resulted in findings consistent with results in studies focused on individual practices. Articles that studied the overall merit-based system found positive relationships with government performance and democratic stability. A third study found that merit-based systems depressed state highway spending, a favorable fiscal outcome.

To summarize, most studies that have investigated the effects of meritocratic practices found that core meritocratic practices—recruitment, appointment, advancement, rewards, and tenure protection—are associated positively with government performance and negatively to corruption. These results are strongly supportive of both traditional meritocratic theories of government institutions and principal-agent theory. One anomalous set of results stands out, which is the nonsignificant relationship between job security and corruption. We return to this issue later in our discussion of the findings and future research.

3.2.2 | Quality of government

The relationships in the systematic review that reflect most directly on quality of government are those that investigate empirically outcomes associated with impartiality. Table 2 presents results between impartiality and a variety of outcomes. Fifteen articles investigated impartiality, the second largest to address a specific independent variable

TABLE 1 Relationships between meritocratic practices and government performance in the 96 articles reviewed.

Independent variables	Categories of outcome variables	Outcome variables	Positive effect	Negative effect	No effect	
Meritocratic appointment/recruitment	Government performance	Corruption		5		
		Government performance	3			
		Quality of service delivery	1			
		Regulatory quality	1			
	Employee capacity/work attitudes/motivation	Government responsiveness	Government responsiveness	1	1	
			Whistleblowing	2		
			Upskill of current workforce	1		
			Capacity of public employees	1		
		Other	Employee voice	1		
			Work motivation	1		
			Engagement in political services		1	
			Public service motivation	1		
	Economy/finance	Economic growth	Economic growth	1		1
			Foreign direct investment	1		
			Inter-governmental expenditure	1		
Politicization	Patronage in public sector hiring	Patronage in public sector hiring	1	1		
		Democratic stabilization		1		
		Presidential appointments of ministers from civil service	1			
Other	Minority representation	Minority representation	1			
		Competitive examination	Government performance	Efficiency of government accounting	1	
				Effectiveness of government accounting	1	
				Corruption		
Employee capacity/work attitudes/motivation	Organizational commitment	Organizational commitment	1			
		Politicization	Patronage in public sector hiring		1	
Meritocratic promotion	Government performance	Government performance	1			
		Quality of service delivery	1			
		Efficiency of government accounting	1			
		Effectiveness of government accounting	1			
	Employee capacity/work attitudes/motivation	Organizational commitment	1			
Merit-based rewards	Government performance	Program performance	1			
		Agency performance	1			

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Independent variables	Categories of outcome variables	Outcome variables	Positive effect	Negative effect	No effect
	Employee capacity/	Whistleblowing	1		
	Work attitudes/ motivation	Employee competence	1		
	Public trust/confidence	Public confidence	1		
Job security/tenure protection	Government performance	Corruption		1	3
		Government performance	1		
		Quality of service delivery	1		
		Work unit performance	1		
	Employee capacity/work attitudes/motivation	Whistleblowing	1		1
		Work attitudes			1
		Work motivation	1		
		Workplace satisfaction (agency, leadership, and recognition)	1		
		Turnover intention		1	
		Engagement in political services		1	
		Public service motivation		1	
		Organizational commitment	1		
		Employee morale/loyalty	1		
Overall merit-based system	Government performance	Government performance	1		
	Economy/finance	US state highway spending		1	
	Politicization	Democratic stability	1		
Merit-system/civil service reforms	Reform outcomes	Meritocratic recruitment	2		
		Workforce competence	1		
		Professionalism	1		
		Neutral competence	1		

among the 96 articles we reviewed. In all the articles, impartiality was related as expected based on theory to a range of outcomes. Impartiality was positively related to, among a range of diverse outcomes, quality of service delivery, economic growth, government performance, political and government trust, citizens' perceived fairness, social trust, unbiased policy knowledge, and citizens' satisfaction with democracy. As expected based on theory, impartiality was negatively related to corruption.

Another independent variable studied in 11 of the articles is professionalism. Professionalism is a concept relevant to both quality of government (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017) and principal-agent theory (Miller & Whitford, 2016, pp. 144–152). The results reported in the eight articles are consistent with expectations grounded in theory. Professionalism is significantly and negatively related to corruption (two articles) and political solutions (one article) in three articles in which it was studied. It is significantly and positively associated with a variety of other outcomes, among them government performance, technical performance, ethical behavior, neutral competence, political responsiveness, and citizens' satisfaction with democracy.

TABLE 2 Relationships between quality of government variables and government performance in 96 articles reviewed.

Independent variables	Categories of outcome variables	Outcome variables	Positive effect	Negative effect	No effect		
Impartiality	Government performance	Corruption		1			
		Government performance	1				
		Quality of service delivery	2				
	Economy/finance	Economic growth	2				
		Intrapreneurship	1				
		Small and medium size enterprises	1				
		Politicization	Democratic stabilization	1			
	Public trust/confidence	Political trust	Government trust	1			
			Citizens' perceived fairness	1			
		Social trust	Citizens' confidence in crisis management	1			
			Citizens' satisfaction with democracy	1			
			Trust in civil service	1			
		Other	Unbiased policy knowledge	1			
			Attitudes to taxes and social spending*	1			
	Professionalism	Government performance	Corruption*		2		
Government performance			1				
Technical performance			1				
Employee capacity/work attitudes/motivation		Ethical behavior	1				
		Neutral competence	1				
		Political responsiveness	1				
Economy/finance		Intrapreneurship			1		
Politicization		Political solutions		1			
		Political participation*	1				
Public trust/confidence		Citizens' satisfaction with democracy	1				
Other	COVID infection/death rates		1				

Note: Studies with * (Cornell & Grimes, 2015; Larsson & Grimes, 2022; Svallfors, 2013) treat meritocracy variables as moderating variables.

To summarize, the relationships in the systematic review articles are strongly supportive of quality of government and principal-agent theory. Impartiality and professionalism are consistently related to positive performance outcomes, higher public trust and confidence, and lower levels of corruption.

Table 3 presents results from the systematic review relevant to theories of neutral and responsive competence. Neutral competence was significantly related to outcomes in two of three studies involving dependent variables of

TABLE 3 Relationships between neutral and responsive competence variables and government performance in 96 articles reviewed.

Independent variables	Categories of outcome variables	Outcome variables	Positive effect	Negative effect	No effect	
Neutral competence	Government performance	Government performance			1	
	Employee capacity/work attitudes/motivation	Political responsiveness	1			
	Economy/Finance	Fiscal performance	1			
	Politicization	Political solutions		1		
Politicization	Government performance	Corruption	1			
		Government performance		2		
	Employee capacity/work attitudes/motivation	Job satisfaction	1	1		
		Organizational commitment	1	1		
		Engagement	1	1		
		Public service motivation	1			
		Political accountability	1			
		Pro-innovation attitudes	1			
		Responsiveness to the minister				
	Responsibility toward the public interest					1
	Bureaucrats' rule enforcing behaviors	1				
	Politicization	Impartial administration			1	
	Public trust/confidence	Trust in civil service				1
Other	Complexity of governance structure	1				
	Effectiveness of HRM practices			1		
Performance	Government performance	Corruption		1		
Pay	Employee capacity/work attitudes/motivation	Employee job satisfaction		1		
		Employee turnover intention	1			
		Employee performance			1	

fiscal performance, political responsiveness, and political solutions. Its association with government performance, however, was non-significant in a third study.

Politicization, which may be an imprecise proxy for responsive competence as conceived by Moe (1985), was studied in 11 articles. Its association with outcomes is varied. Politicization was negatively related to government performance, employee work attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction, organizational commitment), and impartial administration, and

positively related to corruption. Politicization was nonsignificant in relationships with responsiveness to the minister, responsibility toward the public interest, and trust in civil service. It was positively and significantly related to pro-innovation attitudes. If politicization in the articles reported in Table 3 is a reflection of responsive competence, then many of the relationships with government performance do not represent desirable outcomes.

To summarize the results in Table 3, they are generally supportive of claims in the literature about neutral competence. The results generally are not consistent, however, with claims about responsive competence.

3.2.3 | Summary

The results in Tables 1–3 strongly support the theories reviewed in this article. The relationships reported in the articles reviewed consistently support predictions from meritocratic, principal-agent, and quality of government research.

4 | DISCUSSION

We organize the discussion of the results of the systematic review around four questions: What conclusions should be drawn about meritocracy and government performance?; what are the implications of the findings for Schedule F as a public policy?; what alternatives are available to policymakers seeking to alter institutional designs?; and what issues deserve priority for future research?

4.1 | What conclusions should be drawn about meritocracy and government performance?

The 96 articles in the systematic review provide consistent support for claims about meritocracy and government performance. Predictions based on traditional theories of meritocracy and government performance, as well as predictions grounded in principal-agent and quality of government theory, are affirmed by most results reported across a large number of studies. Although the research was diverse with respect to variables such as political context, administrative law, and organizational operations, the findings are similar regardless of context, suggesting the relationships between merit principles and government performance are robust.

4.2 | What are the implications of the findings for schedule F as a public policy?

The implications of the findings for Schedule F are unequivocal—converting career employees to Schedule F and removing their civil service protections is likely to degrade government performance. The outcome variables across the 96 articles are diverse, but outcomes likely to be affected range from unit performance, to citizen confidence, to corruption. What we cannot assess a priori is how widely Schedule F could be applied over time, but the likelihood of degradation to government performance is high given results from empirical research conducted between 1990 and 2022.

The findings of our systematic review raise questions about some premises associated with Schedule F, which were articulated by the executive order's principal author (Sherk, 2021). We touch upon two of these premises briefly here. The first premise is: “Making it difficult to remove poor performers affects agency performance” (Sherk, 2021, p. 3). A variety of questions can be raised about this premise. One question is, To what extent does difficulty in removing a poor performer translate to agency performance? Although Sherk cites five studies about

constraints on removing employees (Ichino & Riphahn, 2005; Martins, 2009; Riphahn, 2004; Scoppa, 2010; Scoppa & Vuri, 2014), they largely focus on absenteeism levels (as a proxy for worker shirking), for the most part among employees in small private firms, in only three European countries (Germany, Italy, and Portugal). Does the body of evidence Sherk identifies apply to public institutional contexts for the types of policy and regulatory work performed by government employees? His premise should not be dismissed easily, but the evidence for the premise is neither robust nor broadly representative.

The second premise is the following: At-will “reforms have been generally successful” (p. 12). Sherk cites six studies (Cogburn, 2006; Condrey & Battaglio, 2007; Cournoyer, 2012; French & Goodman, 2011; Gossett, 2003; Kim & Kellough, 2014), which he asserts “show mixed-to-positive effects” (p. 12). Questions arise about whether the reforms have been “generally successful,” showing “mixed-to-positive effects” after reviewing the studies he cites. All but one of the six studies (Cournoyer, 2012) rely exclusively on a small sample, cross-sectional survey data, surveys typically of human resource directors in state agencies. Cournoyer (2012), a journalist, relied on two interviews, one pro, and one con, in her story for *Governing* magazine. The studies generally agree that at-will employment increases responsiveness to political leadership, but are reluctant to make other claims about these state-level reforms. Cogburn's (2006) conclusions about Texas are representative:

On items related to the concept of at-will employment, respondents expressed strong agreement that it increases personnel responsiveness to agency administrators, but levels of agreement about the doctrine's ability to produce greater HR efficiency, essential management flexibility, and needed motivation were much more tepid. This suggests that many of the espoused benefits of at-will employment are not borne out in practice (p. 173).

Although the Center for American Freedom (CAF) policy paper was published in 2021, it cites none of the 96 articles in this systematic review, and 69 of the 96 articles reviewed were published before the end of 2020. Among these 69 articles, the CAF paper fails to cite state-level articles (Battaglio, 2010; Bowman & West, 2006; Nigro & Kellough, 2000) critical of at-will systems identified in our keyword search.

4.3 | What alternatives are available to policymakers seeking to alter institutional designs?

As we note above, the results of this systematic review are strongly supportive of theories discussed at the beginning of this article. Despite this global inference about the research, it is useful to revisit Ingraham's (2006) observation about values and practices to frame a discussion of civil service reform. Ingraham distinguished between merit as a “value” and the efficacy of specific civil service reform. Thus, our conclusion regarding reform is that we can affirm merit or meritocracy, but can simultaneously press forward with improvements to civil service practices.

This contrasts with the frame for civil service reform associated with advocates for Schedule F, who argue for converting to an at-will system. As principal-agent theorists have argued, an at-will employment system would give political principals significant leverage over agents to pursue morally-hazardous ends. Thus, the Schedule F solution is the equivalent of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater.”

What alternatives are available to policymakers seeking to alter institutional designs? One option would be to institute reforms to better manage tradeoffs between neutral competence, the central premise of traditional meritocracy, and responsive competence, which prioritizes responsiveness to political preferences. The classic example of institutional designs intended to buffer administrative actors from incentives of political principles is the independence granted to central banks in many countries. The autonomy given to central banks is intended to reduce short-term political pressures that could undermine pursuit of long-term monetary goals.

Arel-Bundock et al. (2015) illustrate how independence—dependence varies across a portfolio of international aid agencies to affect results. They studied 15 aid-giving agencies in the US government during the 1999–2010 period. They found that in agencies where the executive could influence bureaucrats' budgets or career paths that foreign aid conformed to the diplomatic objectives of the president. In agencies where bureaucrats had more autonomy, foreign aid was more responsive to needs in recipient countries. This case of multiple aid agencies illustrates that institutional designs are one avenue for managing tradeoffs between neutral competence and responsive competence.

CAF's central criticism of the US federal civil service is that it is difficult to fire poor performers, drawing on findings from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). Recent surveys, however, also reveal positive assessments of federal performance management. In 2019, for instance, 71% of FEVS respondents agreed with the following statement: "In my most recent performance appraisal, I understood what I had to do to be rated at different performance levels (for example, fully successful, outstanding)." In 2022, 82% of FEVS respondents agreed with this statement: "Employees in my work unit produce high-quality work." The evidence as a whole is mixed, leaving questions about whether radical reforms to alter tenure protection may exceed adjustments necessary to achieve civil servant accountability and whether lesser measures might be appropriate. Given the experience in countries and US states that have embraced radical reforms that have failed to achieve their intended effects (Battaglio, 2010; Bowman & West, 2006; Brewer & Kellough, 2016; Nigro & Kellough, 2000), we believe it is appropriate to raise questions about the efficacy of radical reforms.

CSRA instituted reforms to reduce incidence of poor performance and to make it easier to discipline poor performers (Perry, 2008). Among the reforms was creation of government-wide performance appraisal programs and simplification of appeal procedures for personnel actions. Although Sherk writes, "Federal job protections are not necessary to run a professional, apolitical civil service," he does not discuss revisiting performance appraisal and performance-based discipline, which are core practices in the private sector and will continue to be keys to performance management in the public sector as emphasized in a National Research Council report commissioned by OPM (Milkovich & Wigdor, 1991).

4.3.1 | Probationary periods

Are other tools available to effect performance management that reduce challenges created by poor performers? Two additional areas offer avenues for research and experimentation. The first is probationary periods, an area of practice that Sherk invokes but does not pursue. He writes: "Consequently, federal employees are rarely fired *once they complete their probationary period*" (p. 2, emphasis added). Sherk observes in a related footnote: "In most agencies, the probationary period is one year, but it is two years at the Department of Defense (which accounts for over one-third of the Federal, non-postal workforce)" (p. 2). These observations raise a number of questions: How effective are probationary periods? Why the 1-year disparity between DoD and civilian agencies? What criteria should guide the length of probationary periods? To what extent are decisions to retain employees intentional and owned by their supervisors?

Probation is a period during which most civil servants are at-will employees. We have almost no systematic evidence about the effectiveness of probationary periods in the private or public sectors. We also know relatively little about how agencies manage an employee's conversion to career status. A 2015 Government Accountability Office report (US Government Accountability Office, 2015) that investigated federal performance management concluded that better use of probationary periods was one of three avenues to address poor performance.² Probationary periods are therefore an arena ripe for research and experimentation. The questions posed above represent a starting point for research and experimentation. Systematic evidence about the effectiveness of probationary periods would provide critical information for better performance management.

4.3.2 | Length of tenure protection periods

A second area that may address CAF's concerns about poor performers that deserve future research and experimentation is the term for tenure protection. Although Sherk cites none of the articles identified in our systematic review, an appropriate conclusion from the present study and other research about public job security (Hur, 2022; Hur & Perry, 2016, 2020) is that tenure protection has a positive influence on government performance. This conclusion therefore directly contradicts CAF's advocacy for at-will status for civil servants. Are there alternatives to mitigate concerns about poor performers that would retain the benefits of tenure protection?

Some governments have sought to modify employment contracts governing civil service, but, like practices surrounding probationary periods, we have relatively little systematic evidence about outcomes associated with modified employment contracts.³ Perry (2021) suggests, "Modestly changing traditional property-rights rules might better assure a balance between job security and performance...." (p. 135). He proposes public employers consider medium-term employment contracts (in contrast to at-will employment and short-term, 3–5 year, renewable contracts).

4.4 | What issues deserve priority for future research?

Given the overwhelming evidence that supports traditional tenets of the merit system such as meritocratic appointments/recruitment, tenure protection, impartiality, and professionalism, a policy decision like that proposed by Sherk and embedded in Executive Order 13957 is too big to be made without rigorous research. Two issues discussed immediately above, that is, probationary periods and modifying contracts associated with tenure protection, deserve priority consideration for this future research agenda.

These issues, however, do not exhaust issues for future research arising from this systematic review. Another issue is the diversity of criteria associated with government performance across the research included in the systematic review. Indicators of performance ranged from attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction) or behaviors (e.g., innovativeness), to the effective performance of an agency's core mission, to indicators of policy achievements (e.g., economic growth, regulatory quality). Future research assessing the effects of meritocracy and government performance might be framed around standardized measures of performance. One way to standardize measures would be to frame government performance around indicators of mission accomplishment, goal achievement, and organizational effectiveness rather than employee attitudes or individual behaviors.

Another facet of performance that merits future research is performance management, in the US federal service and countries globally. Performance management has been little studied in the United States since the 1991 National Research Council's blue-ribbon panel report commissioned by the US Office of Personnel Management (Milkovich & Wigdor, 1991). Although survey evidence about difficulties in dealing with poor performers is cited in Sherk's (2021) position paper and Executive Order 13957, more favorable survey evidence about federal performance management is ignored. For instance, OPM reports that 71% of respondents to the 2019 US FEVS agreed that "my performance appraisal is a fair reflection of my performance." Survey evidence is far from sufficient, however, to provide a valid assessment of performance management in the US federal government. We have reached a juncture when another blue-ribbon panel report is appropriate.

Finally, another frontier for future research is to examine rigorously the state-level at-will systems that Sherk (2021) claims "demonstrate that a modern civil service does not need removal protections" (p. 1). The research literature provides reasons why merit may not disappear after a few states adopt at-will systems. One reason, which is well documented, is institutional isomorphism, (Lah & Perry, 2008). Another reason, which does surface in the scholarly literature about some state-level conversions to at-will systems, is that the reforms were applied only to new hires and did not undo other, powerful legal protections for civil service employees. A third reason is that the consequences of the reforms have not been studied thoroughly, and performance has fallen or is at risk of declining but the reforms have not been thoroughly evaluated.

5 | CONCLUSION

Several long-standing theoretical streams from political science, economics, sociology, and public administration point to meritocracy as a foundation for government performance. A systematic review of empirical research about meritocracy and government performance bears out predictions from the theories. Drawing upon the contents of 96 articles published from 1991 to 2022, we found strong support for several different theories that explain positive relationships between meritocratic practices and government performance.

The findings from this systematic review raise serious doubts about public policy based on Executive Order 13957, which was issued in October 2020 and rescinded in January 2021. Although the executive order applied only to the US federal civil service, the findings from the systematic review are broadly based, indicating the generalizations about meritocratic policies and practices are robust not only for the United States but countries globally, both developed and developing. The findings also raise concerns about administrative performance in countries experiencing increased political influence in public bureaucracies and deterioration of meritocratic principles.

We do not regard our findings as the final word. We identified several areas, among them probationary periods and employment contracts, that have attracted little systematic research or experimentation. Learning more about the performance-related effects of probationary periods and employment contracts could conceivably facilitate better realization of merit as a central value underlying civil service institutions in the United States and other countries. Our results are unequivocal, however, about the inadvisability of at-will status for civil servants. Converting civil servants to at-will status likely decreases government performance and increases corruption. The findings from our systematic review testify to the value of comparative studies in public administration (McDonald et al., 2022).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/padm.12945>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The 36 journals not included in Figure 3, which published just one article during the period, are: *American Sociological Review*, *International Journal of Law Crime and Justice*, *American Economic Journal-Economic Policy*, *China Journal*, *Politics & Policy (Online)*, *Public Integrity*, *Journal of Institutional Economics*, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, *Investigaciones Regionales-Journal of Regional Research*, *European Political Science Review*, *Journal of Economic Policy Reform*, *PLoS One*, *Current Anthropology*, *Asian Politics & Policy*, *Local Environment*, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *Political Science Quarterly (Academy of Political Science)*, *Journal of Accounting and Public Policy*, *Journal of Public Affairs*, *China Economic Review*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Administration & Society*, *Environment and Planning C-Government and Policy*, *Journal of Public Procurement*, *World Development*, *Regulation & Governance*, *Political Studies*, *Democratization*, *International Area Studies Review*, *American Politics Research*, *Sociology*, *American Political Science Review*, *Cliometrica*, *International Review of Public Administration*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *American Economic Review*.

- ² The other two avenues were day-to-day performance management activities and formal procedures under chapters 43 and 75 of Title 5 of the United States Code. GAO associated deficiencies in day-to-day performance management with supervisors who lacked effective skills. Thus, only one of the three sources accounting for performance management deficiencies is related to formal procedures that would be modified by converting civil servants to at-will status.
- ³ Among the studies that have addressed effects of variations in employment contracts are: Sylvia et al. (2021) (China) and Aмоса (2008) (Samoa). The research covers a limited geographic scope and institutional context.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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