

Responsible AI and Algorithmic Accountability in Public Administration: Governance Instruments, Oversight, and Democratic Legitimacy

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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines how artificial intelligence and automated decision making are governed in public administration, with particular attention to the accountability instruments used to supervise these systems and their implications for democratic legitimacy. Using a structured qualitative review design, the study synthesises 15 peer reviewed journal articles selected for their relevance to public sector AI, automated administrative decision making, algorithmic accountability, and democratic governance. The analysis proceeds in three stages: identifying recurring governance instruments, mapping them across the lifecycle of public sector AI, and assessing their institutional and democratic implications. The review finds that the literature clusters accountability instruments into normative, procedural, technical, and institutional forms, with the most frequently discussed mechanisms being transparency, explainability, audit, impact assessment, human oversight, and reviewability. However, the evidence also shows that the field remains unevenly developed, with stronger attention to ex ante safeguards and operational oversight than to complaint handling, appeals, and administrative correction. Substantively, the reviewed studies indicate that these instruments do not automatically enhance fairness, due process, administrative justice, or public trust. Their democratic value is conditional on legal design, organisational capacity, and meaningful review mechanisms. The study concludes that algorithmic accountability in public administration should be understood as an integrated institutional architecture rather than a checklist of abstract principles.



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INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of government has become a central driver of artificial intelligence and automated decision making adoption in public administration. As citizens and businesses increasingly expect public services to be as fast, responsive, and data driven as those offered in the private sector, governments have expanded investments in digital infrastructure, administrative automation, and predictive analytics (Latupeirissa et al., 2024; Mergel et al., 2019). In this context, AI is not introduced merely as a technological innovation, but as part of

a broader reform agenda aimed at modernising the state, improving administrative efficiency, reducing procedural burdens, and enabling more anticipatory forms of governance (Matias-Pereira, 2025; Noordt & Misuraca, 2022; Pecile et al., 2024). The shift toward data intensive public administration has therefore created favourable conditions for AI deployment across service delivery, internal management, and policy implementation.

Recent evidence suggests that the quantitative growth of AI in the public sector has been substantial, although uneven across countries, sectors, and levels of government. A global mapping of 262 AI implementations across 170 local governments documented a consistent upward trend over the past decade, with applications spanning 28 service areas and especially concentrated in information management, transport, citizen services, and process automation (Yigitcanlar et al., 2024). In Germany, an AI adoption index applied to 347 local governments revealed strong territorial disparities, with significantly higher adoption in urban and western regions than in rural and eastern areas (Clim et al., 2025). Additional sectoral studies also indicate measurable administrative effects, including improved service quality and performance in public hospitals in Nairobi, statistically significant gains in service frequency and public satisfaction in local governments in Indonesia, and growing use of generative AI in administrative tasks within the Philippine public sector (Bien et al., 2025; Nurfitarini et al., 2025; Tira & Kihara, 2025).

However, the spread of AI in government has also intensified long standing concerns about fairness, due process, administrative justice, equality, and public trust. Public sector algorithms are often deployed in high stakes domains such as welfare distribution, labour market services, taxation, and administrative enforcement, where biased training data, opaque models, and limited review mechanisms can directly affect citizens' rights and life chances (Berman et al., 2024; Henman, 2020; Kuziemski & Misuraca, 2020). The literature increasingly warns that black box systems may weaken the right to know the reasons for decisions, constrain meaningful appeals, and widen the gap between traditional administrative law safeguards and algorithmic governance practices (Alshehri, 2025; Liu & Gu, 2025; Marifov, 2025). In this sense, the core issue is no longer whether AI can enhance efficiency, but whether its use can remain compatible with democratic standards of justification, reviewability, and equal treatment.

These concerns have stimulated growing attention to governance and accountability instruments such as transparency requirements, explainable AI, algorithmic audits, impact assessments, human oversight, appeals mechanisms, and specialised institutional oversight bodies (Adepoju & Chinonyerem, 2025; Grigalashvili, 2025; Pavlidis, 2024; Sharma, 2025). Yet the literature remains fragmented across ethics, law, public policy, and public administration. Existing reviews note that scholarship is still dominated by conceptual and normative discussions, while comparative evidence on how specific accountability instruments shape democratic legitimacy under different institutional conditions remains limited (Zuiderwijk et al., 2021; Djeflal et al., 2022; Walter, 2024). This study addresses that gap by synthesising how governance instruments are discussed across the lifecycle of public sector AI

and by clarifying their implications for fairness, due process, reviewability, and public trust in democratic administration.

Against the backdrop of expanding artificial intelligence adoption within public administration, the primary intellectual challenge transcends the mere presence of digital innovation; rather, the imperative is establishing democratically legitimate governance frameworks. Although scholarship concerning public sector AI has proliferated rapidly, it remains profoundly fragmented across disparate intellectual traditions. Specifically, ethical discourses prioritize abstract normative principles, legal scholarship emphasizes procedural safeguards, and public administration research focuses predominantly on managerial efficiency and service delivery. Consequently, the field lacks a systematically integrated account detailing how automated decision-making operates in practice, which concrete accountability instruments effectively supervise these systems, and how such mechanisms influence core democratic values, including due process, systemic fairness, and public trust. To address these structural limitations, this article systematically reviews the intersection of algorithmic deployment, accountability design, and democratic legitimacy. Moving beyond purely technical or descriptive evaluations, this study examines the specific institutional mechanisms required to formally oversee, contest, and correct public sector AI. Ultimately, this review provides a cohesive analytical foundation for evaluating automated systems not merely through the lens of operational innovation, but in direct relation to fairness, legality, and fundamental democratic justification.

To systematically guide this inquiry, the review is structured around two interrelated research questions:

1. How does the extant literature articulate and classify the governance and accountability instruments deployed to supervise artificial intelligence and automated decision-making within public administration across successive stages of the system lifecycle?
2. How does current scholarship evaluate the institutional and democratic implications of these instruments concerning due process, systemic fairness, reviewability, administrative justice, and public trust in public sector decision-making?

The principal novelty of this study resides in its endeavor to generate a comparative and analytically structured synthesis of AI accountability within public administration. It achieves this by explicitly disaggregating three dimensions that are frequently conflated within existing scholarship, namely normative claims regarding responsible AI, the institutional and procedural designs of governance, and the empirical evidence detailing democratic and administrative consequences. Rather than merely cataloging abstract principles or enumerating disparate governance tools, this review systematically maps accountability instruments across the entire lifecycle of public sector AI. This comprehensive mapping spans from initial procurement and system design through to active deployment, decision review, complaint adjudication, and ultimate administrative correction. Furthermore, the research accentuates the specific institutional conditions that either fortify, attenuate, or complicate the practical efficacy of these instruments. By advancing this approach, the article contributes a robust,

multi-level framework for conceptualizing the intrinsic nexus between algorithmic accountability and democratic legitimacy in public administration. This contribution is particularly salient for contexts characterized by unevenly developed state capacity, fragile legal protections, and nascent oversight institutions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a structured qualitative literature review to examine how scholarship on artificial intelligence and automated decision-making in public administration conceptualises accountability, oversight, and democratic legitimacy. The methodological design is aligned with the article's two research questions, namely the classification of governance and accountability instruments across the lifecycle of public sector AI, and the assessment of their implications for due process, fairness, reviewability, administrative justice, and public trust. Rather than measuring effect sizes or pursuing statistical aggregation, the review is interpretive and comparative in orientation, because the field remains fragmented across public administration, law, ethics, and governance studies. This approach is appropriate for the present article because the manuscript seeks to synthesise dispersed conceptual, legal, and empirical insights into a coherent analytical framework for understanding how public sector AI is supervised and how such supervision affects democratic standards of administration.

The evidentiary base of the review consists of peer-reviewed journal articles selected for their direct relevance to public sector AI, automated administrative decision-making, algorithmic accountability, and democratic governance in administrative settings. Article selection was guided by substantive fit with the scope of the study rather than by broad keyword accumulation alone. To be included, studies had to address at least one of two analytical concerns: first, the governance and accountability instruments used to supervise AI or automated decision systems in public administration; and second, the institutional or democratic implications of those instruments for legality, transparency, contestability, fairness, equality, or trust. Priority was given to studies situated in public administration, administrative law, digital governance, or closely related governance contexts, including welfare administration, taxation, policing, social services, and other high-stakes public decision domains. For each included article, the review extracted core information on study context, article type or method, administrative domain, governance instruments, and major implications, which were then organised into a study-characteristics matrix to ensure consistency and comparability across the corpus.

The analysis proceeded through qualitative thematic synthesis and cross-study comparison. In the first stage, the included studies were read comparatively to identify recurring governance instruments, such as transparency requirements, explainability, audit, impact assessment, human oversight, appeals, reviewability, documentation, and institutional oversight. In the second stage, these instruments were interpreted across the lifecycle of public sector AI, spanning system design, procurement, deployment, decision-making, monitoring,

complaint handling, and administrative correction. In the third stage, the review synthesised the democratic and institutional consequences associated with these instruments, with particular attention to due process, fairness, reviewability, administrative justice, legitimacy, and public trust. This three-step analytical strategy allowed the article not only to map what forms of oversight are discussed in the literature, but also to clarify which institutional conditions strengthen or weaken their practical effectiveness in democratic public administration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Characteristics of the Reviewed Studies

Before turning to the thematic synthesis, it is necessary to map the general profile of the evidence base reviewed in this article. This subsection provides an overview of the selected studies in terms of their contexts, methodological approaches, administrative domains of AI use, governance and accountability instruments, and their main relevance to the review questions.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Reviewed Studies

No	Study	Context / Method	AI Domain	Governance & Accountability Instruments
1	Murko et al. (2024)	Slovenia; mixed methods & welfare case study	Welfare administration; social rights ADM	Regulation, human oversight, transparency, audits, ombuds oversight
2	Sharma (2025)	India; qualitative review & stakeholder survey	Welfare, biometrics, policing, grievance systems	Transparency, ethics-by-design, disclosure, audits, capacity building
3	Gursoy & Kakadiaris (2022)	Cross-sector conceptual framework	High-stakes ADS/public decision support	System cards, explainability, fairness, privacy, monitoring, remedies
4	Raji et al. (2022)	U.S.-centered policy analysis	High-risk AI in public domains	Third-party audits, impact assessment, auditor independence, oversight boards
5	Cobbe et al. (2021)	English administrative law framework	Welfare, housing, immigration, employment ADM	Reviewability, logging, documentation, audits, disclosure
6	Roehl & Hansen (2024)	Cross-national critical review	Automated administrative decisions	Reason-giving, complaint mechanisms, logging, human discretion, privacy safeguards

7	Loi & Spielkamp (2021)	Analysis of 16 public-sector AI guidelines	Public administration AI	Responsibility, transparency, testing, risk assessment, auditing, contestation
8	Suksi (2021)	Finland/Nordic-EU legal analysis	Taxation & social-benefit ADM	Right to be heard, appeals, judicial review, liability rules
9	Malawani (2025)	Narrative review	Service delivery, fraud detection, chatbots	Ethical guidelines, transparency, privacy, accountability, capacity building
10	Hillo et al. (2025)	Finland; experimental survey	Child protection ADM	Source-code disclosure, human-in-the-loop, procedural safeguards
11	Grigalashvili (2025)	Comparative public administration review	Welfare & predictive policing	Explainability, ethical impact assessment, bias audits, participation
12	Plantinga (2024)	African multi-country review	Welfare, health, digital government	Responsible AI, data protection, procurement guidance, legal safeguards
13	Pagliari et al. (2025)	Cross-national systematic review	Public-service allocation & eligibility	Due process, appeals, participatory assessment, standards, audits
14	Busuioc (2020)	Comparative governance analysis	Policing, healthcare, immigration, welfare AI	Explainability, audit trails, certification, testing, redress
15	Busuioc et al. (2023)	EU legal-governance analysis	High-risk AI in welfare & law enforcement	Disclosure, technical documentation, logging, monitoring, oversight

As shown in Table 1, the reviewed studies reflect a diverse but clearly convergent body of scholarship on AI and automated decision-making in public administration. The evidence spans multiple geographical settings, including Europe, Asia, Africa, and cross-national comparative contexts, and combines conceptual, legal, policy-analytical, experimental, review-based, and mixed-methods approaches. Across these studies, AI is most frequently discussed in high-stakes administrative domains such as welfare, taxation, immigration, policing, child protection, and other rights-related public services. The table also shows that the literature consistently highlights a core cluster of governance and accountability instruments, particularly transparency, explainability, audit, human oversight, documentation, reviewability, appeals, and broader legal or institutional safeguards. At the same time, the studies differ in analytical emphasis. Some are more directly oriented toward classifying governance instruments across the lifecycle of public sector AI, while others focus more strongly on democratic implications such as fairness, due process, administrative justice, legitimacy, and public trust. Taken

together, Table 1 demonstrates that the evidence base is not methodologically uniform, yet it is sufficiently coherent to support a structured synthesis of both accountability design and its institutional consequences.

B. Governance and Accountability Instruments Across the Public Sector AI Lifecycle

The reviewed literature suggests that governance and accountability instruments for public sector AI can be organised into four broad categories: normative instruments, procedural instruments, technical instruments, and institutional instruments. Normative instruments include principles such as fairness, transparency, accountability, and due process; procedural instruments include impact assessments, documentation, complaint procedures, and appeals; technical instruments include logging, traceability, interpretable models, and audit mechanisms; and institutional instruments include courts, ombuds institutions, external auditors, and supervisory authorities (Loi & Spielkamp, 2021; Busuioc, 2020; Gursoy & Kakadiaris, 2022; Busuioc et al., 2023). This classification is analytically useful because the literature does not develop all instruments evenly. Most studies are stronger in articulating what responsible AI should achieve than in specifying how accountability should be secured in routine administrative practice (Suksi, 2021; Røhl et al., 2024; Paglieri et al., 2025). Across the 15 studies, transparency, audit, and human oversight emerge as the most frequently discussed instruments, while appeals, complaint handling, and administrative correction remain less fully elaborated. The field therefore contains a recognisable governance toolkit, but not a single, internally consistent model of accountability across the lifecycle of public sector AI.

At the procurement and design stage, the literature places strong emphasis on ex ante safeguards. Ethics-by-design, participatory design, procurement scrutiny, risk assessment, model and data documentation, and algorithmic impact assessment are repeatedly presented as mechanisms for anticipating bias, assigning responsibility, and aligning technical systems with administrative and legal norms (Sharma, 2025; Cobbe et al., 2021; Grigalashvili, 2025; Plantinga, 2024). Several studies also show that procurement is not merely a contractual step, but a governance site in which later possibilities for oversight and review are shaped, especially when public agencies depend on proprietary private vendors whose secrecy may obstruct transparency and contestability (Cobbe et al., 2021; Busuioc et al., 2023). Once systems move into deployment and operational use, the dominant instruments shift toward transparency, explainability, audit, monitoring, and human oversight (Murko et al., 2024; Busuioc, 2020; Hillo et al., 2025). Transparency is discussed in multiple forms, including disclosure that AI is being used, access to technical information, publication of registries, and reason-giving to affected persons, while explainability is treated more specifically as the capacity to make decisions and system behaviour intelligible in context (Loi & Spielkamp, 2021; Hillo et al., 2025; Busuioc et al., 2023). Audit is similarly central but conceptually uneven, ranging from internal review to more formalised third-party oversight involving accreditation, standards, and privileged access to system information (Gursoy & Kakadiaris, 2022; Raji et al., 2022). Human oversight functions as a cross-cutting safeguard across these stages, yet the literature often

invokes it in broad terms without specifying what meaningful human intervention requires in high-volume administrative settings (Busuioc, 2020; Røhl et al., 2024; Grigalashvili, 2025).

The literature becomes more precise when discussing decision review, but less developed when addressing complaint handling, appeals, and correction. Studies centred on reviewability show that accountability in public sector AI depends not only on transparency in the abstract, but on the practical ability to reconstruct and scrutinise how a decision was made through documentation, logs, procurement records, model information, and clearly assigned responsibility (Cobbe et al., 2021; Suksi, 2021). In this sense, reviewability operates as a composite condition that links technical traceability to administrative legality and due process. Legal analyses further stress that automated decision-making requires statutory basis, identifiable responsible officials, reasoned decisions, and standards of review compatible with administrative justice, especially in high-impact areas such as taxation and social benefits (Suksi, 2021). Yet when the literature moves to complaint handling, appeals, and administrative correction, the discussion becomes less systematic. Contestability, redress, and complaint mechanisms are acknowledged as important, but they are more often treated as normative expectations than as fully specified institutional arrangements (Loi & Spielkamp, 2021; Paglieri et al., 2025; Busuioc, 2020). Where this stage is addressed more directly, the focus falls on appeals, judicial review, ombuds institutions, and complaint procedures as safeguards against an opaque rule of algorithm (Murko et al., 2024; Suksi, 2021). Overall, the literature supports a lifecycle-based typology in which normative instruments define public values, procedural instruments structure administrative processes, technical instruments enable traceability, and institutional instruments allocate oversight authority. However, it remains inconsistent in linking these instruments systematically to each stage of system use, with strongest coverage at the design and deployment stages and weaker treatment of post-decision correction and remedy.

C. Democratic and Institutional Implications of Algorithmic Accountability in Public Administration

The reviewed literature broadly agrees that algorithmic accountability instruments matter for democratic governance in public administration, but it does not treat their effects as automatically positive or institutionally self-executing. Rather, the dominant view is that instruments such as transparency, explainability, audit, human oversight, appeals, and institutional supervision are best understood as enabling conditions whose democratic value depends on how they are designed, embedded, and enforced. Across the literature, the core democratic concerns are due process, fairness, equality, reviewability, administrative justice, and public trust, especially in high-stakes domains such as welfare, taxation, child protection, immigration, and other rights-affecting administrative decisions (Murko et al., 2024; Suksi, 2021; Hillo et al., 2025). Several studies suggest that accountability instruments can strengthen legitimacy by making decisions more visible, traceable, and contestable, yet they also warn that such instruments may function only symbolically when they are weakly specified or

disconnected from actual review and correction mechanisms (Loi & Spielkamp, 2021; Busuioc, 2020; Røhl et al., 2024). In this sense, the literature rejects a linear assumption that more governance instruments necessarily produce more democratic legitimacy.

This conditionality is especially clear in the treatment of transparency, explainability, and human oversight. Transparency is frequently presented as essential for public accountability, but the literature distinguishes between mere disclosure and meaningful public understanding. Technical disclosure, registries, or documentation may increase visibility without necessarily making administrative decisions intelligible to affected individuals or review bodies, particularly when proprietary secrecy, system complexity, or poor communication restrict practical comprehension (Busuioc et al., 2023; Busuioc, 2020). Experimental evidence suggests that transparency can improve legitimacy perceptions among both citizens and public administrators, especially when paired with visible human involvement, but this effect is contingent rather than automatic (Hillo et al., 2025). Explainability is assessed similarly. Several studies argue that explanation is normatively valuable only when it supports justification, reason-giving, and the capacity to understand why a decision was made, rather than simply exposing technical features of a model (Cobbe et al., 2021; Suksi, 2021). Human oversight is also widely endorsed, yet the literature repeatedly warns that nominal human presence does not guarantee genuine reviewability. Oversight can become ritualistic when officials lack discretion, expertise, or institutional authority to question algorithmic outputs, thereby weakening rather than strengthening administrative accountability (Busuioc, 2020; Grigalashvili, 2025; Røhl et al., 2024).

The same pattern extends to audit, appeals, and institutional oversight. Audit is often presented as a major accountability instrument, but its democratic value depends on access, independence, professional standards, and the ability to translate findings into administrative correction (Gursoy & Kakadiaris, 2022; Raji et al., 2022). Where institutional capacity is weak, audits risk becoming procedural formalities rather than effective safeguards. Likewise, appeals, ombuds review, and complaint mechanisms are treated as essential for administrative justice, but the literature shows that these downstream mechanisms remain less developed than ex ante design safeguards or operational monitoring (Paglieri et al., 2025; Murko et al., 2024; Plantinga, 2024). A consistent tension across the studies is therefore that accountability instruments may promise fairness, trust, and legitimacy, while in practice delivering only partial protection when legal safeguards are weak, organisational capacity is uneven, or review mechanisms are underdeveloped (Sharma, 2025; Malawani, 2025). Overall, the literature assesses the relationship between accountability instruments and democratic legitimacy as conditional rather than automatic: these instruments can strengthen due process, fairness, and trust, but only when they are supported by robust institutional design, effective administrative review, and meaningful opportunities for correction.

D. Comparative Lessons, Policy Priorities, and Research Directions for Algorithmic Accountability in Public Administration

Across the 15 reviewed studies, a clear comparative pattern emerges: the literature has moved beyond celebrating public sector AI as a tool of efficiency, yet it has not fully converged on a mature model of algorithmic accountability in administration. The strongest cross-study consensus is that responsible AI in government cannot rest on abstract principles alone. Transparency, explainability, audit, human oversight, and redress matter only when they are embedded in legal authority, administrative routines, and institutions capable of using them meaningfully (Busuioc, 2020; Busuioc et al., 2023; Cobbe et al., 2021; Suksi, 2021). The reviewed literature also shows that legitimacy problems are rarely caused by a single weak instrument. Rather, democratic deficits tend to arise when multiple conditions coincide, especially opaque system design, vendor secrecy, weak review capacity, formal but shallow human oversight, and underdeveloped complaint or correction mechanisms (Murko et al., 2024; Raji et al., 2022; Plantinga, 2024). In comparative terms, the field is strongest on ex ante governance, such as risk assessment, documentation, and design-stage safeguards, but weaker on downstream accountability, particularly appeals, remedies, and administrative correction. This imbalance suggests that many public sector AI frameworks are still better at anticipating risk than at repairing harm once consequential decisions have been made.

The main policy direction implied by this synthesis is therefore institutionalisation rather than further proliferation of general principles. Public bodies need integrated accountability architectures that connect procurement rules, documentation duties, interpretability requirements, independent or external oversight, human override authority, and accessible redress procedures across the full system lifecycle (Sharma, 2025; Paglieri et al., 2025). This also requires stronger state capacity: trained officials, public-interest procurement standards, and reduced dependency on proprietary infrastructures that constrain scrutiny and public values (Paglieri et al., 2025; Plantinga, 2024). The research agenda is equally clear. Future scholarship should move beyond generic references to “AI” by specifying technology type, task, deployment context, human-in-the-loop design, and appeal pathways; it should also expand longitudinal, practitioner-engaged, and comparative research on how accountability instruments actually function in different administrative settings, including capacity-constrained contexts and Global South cases (Paglieri et al., 2025; Sharma, 2025). Taken together, the literature indicates that the next stage of research should focus less on whether accountability matters, and more on which institutional combinations make it durable, reviewable, and democratically credible in practice.

CONCLUSION

This review shows that the literature on responsible AI in public administration has moved beyond a narrow concern with efficiency and innovation toward a more substantial focus on accountability, legality, and democratic legitimacy. Across the reviewed studies, governance

instruments can be grouped into normative, procedural, technical, and institutional categories, but the literature does not yet offer a fully consistent model linking these instruments to each stage of the public sector AI lifecycle. Transparency, audit, and human oversight are the most visible and frequently discussed mechanisms, while appeals, complaint handling, and administrative correction remain comparatively underdeveloped. The review also demonstrates that the relationship between accountability instruments and democratic values is conditional rather than linear. These instruments can support due process, fairness, reviewability, administrative justice, and trust, but only when they are embedded in robust legal authority, meaningful institutional oversight, and workable correction mechanisms.

The main implication of this study is that responsible AI in government cannot be secured through abstract principles alone. Public institutions require integrated accountability architectures that connect procurement rules, documentation duties, interpretability requirements, external or independent oversight, human review authority, and accessible redress procedures across the full lifecycle of algorithmic systems. At the same time, the review identifies a clear agenda for future scholarship: more comparative and empirically grounded research is needed on how accountability instruments function in practice across administrative sectors, levels of state capacity, and institutional contexts beyond highly resourced settings. Advancing this agenda will be essential for building a more credible and operational understanding of how algorithmic governance can remain democratically legitimate in contemporary public administration.

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