

Meritorious Recruitment as a Catalyst for National Development: Mechanisms, Evidence, and Policy Implications

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Abstract

This paper examined the relationship between meritocratic recruitment in public administration and national development by applying four foundational theories: Weber's legal-rational bureaucracy, state capacity theory, credible commitment theory, and the quality of government framework. From these theories, the paper derived two causal mechanisms - competence and impartiality, which explained how merit recruitment produces developmental outcomes. The competence mechanism was grounded in Max Weber in the early 20th century. Impartiality is grounded in credible commitment theory, advanced by Douglass North and Barry Weingast in 1989 to explain how states make credible promises to protect rights, and later extended to bureaucracy by Gary Miller in 2000, who argued that merit protections enable bureaucrats to resist political pressure. It was also grounded in the quality of government framework, developed by Bo Rothstein and Jan Teorell in 2008, which identified impartiality as the principle of good governance, enabling even-handed rule application. These mechanisms were applied to analyse recent evidence: cross-national mediation analysis, country case studies from Greece, Pakistan, Nigeria and the United States, and comparative data on worker job matching. The findings demonstrated that both mechanisms operate simultaneously and are conditional on complementary institutional arrangements, including fair promotion systems. The paper concluded with policy recommendations for comprehensive reform and directions for future research that further disaggregate the competence and impartiality.

Keywords: Meritocratic recruitment, public administration, state capacity, national development, bureaucratic competence, impartiality, institutional reform.

1 Introduction

Any inquiry into the relationship between how public officials are selected and the developmental trajectory of nations must begin with a clear statement of the theories that guide the analysis. This study draws on four interconnected theoretical traditions, each originating in a distinct intellectual context and offering a specific lens to understand the developmental effects of merit-based recruitment. Max Weber's theory of legal-rational bureaucracy (1922–1978) emerged from early 20th-century European debates about the nature of modern state organisation. Weber sought to explain why bureaucratic administration, with its hierarchical structure, written rules, and technically trained officials, was becoming the dominant form of organisation in industrialising societies. He argued that the superiority of bureaucracy lay in its technical superiority over any other form of organisation, precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs, all

of which depended on recruitment based on technical expertise rather than ascription characteristics or political favour. In this framework, merit recruitment is not merely an administrative convenience but a constitutive element of modern, efficient governance.

The state capacity tradition, advanced by Peter Evans and James Rauch (1999) in their cross-national study of developing countries, sought to explain why some states were able to implement policies effectively while others were not. Drawing on Weberian insights, they developed an empirical measure of “Weberianness that included meritocratic recruitment and predictable career ladders, demonstrating that these features predicted higher economic growth. This tradition shifts the focus from the abstract efficiency of bureaucracy to its concrete consequences for state performance, framing merit recruitment as a foundational element of state capacity, the ability of a state to penetrate society, extract resources, and implement policy. The original situation for this theory was the comparative analysis of 35 developing countries in the 1970s - 1980s, where Evans and Rauch sought to quantify the relationship between bureaucratic structure and economic growth.

The credible commitment and bureaucratic autonomy approach, associated with Gary Miller (2000) and building on the foundational work of Douglass North and Barry Weingast (1989), originated in efforts to understand how political institutions could credibly commit to respecting property rights and enforcing contracts. North and Weingast’s original 1989 study examined 17th-century England, specifically the Glorious Revolution of 1688, to explain how parliamentary constraints on the crown enabled credible commitment to secure property rights, which in turn spurred capital markets and economic development. Miller (2000) extended this logic to bureaucracy: when bureaucrats are protected from politically-motivated dismissal through merit-based tenure, they can resist pressures from politicians to use their offices for particularistic ends. This theory was originally developed to explain the historical emergence of independent regulatory agencies in the United States, but has since been applied widely to examine how bureaucratic autonomy affects policy implementation in diverse contexts.

The Quality of Government (QoG) tradition, primarily associated with Bo Rothstein and Jan Teorell (2008), emerged from comparative political science in the early 2000s. Rothstein and Teorell sought to identify the core institutional principle that distinguishes effective, uncorrupt governance from its opposite. Drawing on a wide range of empirical evidence from both developed and developing countries, they argued that the key principle is impartiality—the rule that government officials should treat citizens equally without regard to personal relationships, political connections, or ascriptive characteristics. In this framework, meritocratic recruitment is a key institutional mechanism for achieving impartiality, both by selecting officials predisposed to professional norms and by insulating them from political pressures that would incentivise partial treatment. The original situation for this theory was the attempt to move beyond procedural democracy and focus on the actual quality of government institutions as the primary determinant of social and economic outcomes.

These four theories are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they operate at different levels of analysis and emphasise different mechanisms, but together they provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding how merit recruitment contributes to national development. The Weberian tradition provides the original insight that technical expertise matters for administrative efficiency. The state capacity tradition links that insight to measurable development outcomes. The credible commitment tradition explains why protecting bureaucrats from political interference matters for impartial implementation. And the Quality of Government tradition synthesises these insights into a unified principle of impartiality as the core of good governance.

In the sections that follow, we apply each of these theories to contemporary evidence, demonstrating how they illuminate the mechanisms through which merit recruitment operates (competence and impartiality), how they interact with institutional context, and what they imply for policy reform. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on meritocratic recruitment and development, Section 3 presents the theoretical framework elaborating the competence and impartiality mechanisms. Section 4 examines empirical evidence from cross-national studies and country cases, Section 5 analyses implementation challenges and boundary conditions, Section 6 discusses policy implications and offers recommendations, and Section 7 concludes with directions for future research.

2. Literature Review: Meritocratic Recruitment and Development

2.1 Weberian Foundations and the Bureaucracy-Development Nexus

The intellectual heritage of contemporary meritocracy research traces to Max Weber's analysis of bureaucracy as the most rationally efficient form of organisation. For Weber, the superiority of bureaucratic administration resided in its technical superiority over alternative forms: "precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs, these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration" (Weber, 1978). Central to this efficiency was recruitment based on technical expertise rather than ascriptive characteristics or political connections. Applying Weber's theory to contemporary debates means treating merit recruitment not merely as a procedural nicety but as a structural condition for rational administration.

Contemporary scholarship has substantially elaborated and qualified Weber's insights. Evans & Rauch's (1999) influential cross-national study of "Weberianness" in developing countries found that meritocratic recruitment, combined with predictable career ladders, significantly predicted economic growth. This application of Weberian theory to quantitative cross-national analysis extended the original framework beyond Europe to developing economies, demonstrating that the principles Weber identified were not culturally specific but had measurable consequences for development. Their work catalysed a generation of research examining how bureaucratic structure affects developmental outcomes. Subsequent studies have extended these findings to diverse outcome measures, including infrastructure quality, regulatory effectiveness, and corruption control (Rauch & Evans, 2000; Dahlström et al., 2012).

2.1.2. State Capacity Approaches

One major theoretical tradition linking merit recruitment to development emphasises state capacity, the ability of states to implement policy goals effectively. From this perspective, meritocratic selection enhances development by ensuring that the individuals responsible for policy execution possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and expertise. Acemoglu et al. (2016) demonstrate that state capacity, understood as the bureaucratic capability to implement policies, constitutes a fundamental determinant of long-term economic growth and development. Applying the state capacity framework means examining whether merit recruitment actually improves implementation capability.

Merit recruitment contributes to state capacity through several channels. First, merit selection increases the average human capital of the bureaucracy by attracting qualified candidates who might otherwise pursue private sector opportunities (Nistotskaya & Cingolani, 2016). Second, it creates incentives for investment in skills, as potential applicants recognise that qualifications rather than connections determine career prospects. Third, it facilitates organisational learning and

knowledge accumulation by ensuring that personnel possess the cognitive resources to absorb and apply new information (Carpenter, 2002).

A substantial strand of development scholarship links meritocratic recruitment to state capacity, which is understood as the administrative capability to translate political ambitions into actual policy outcomes. Aneja & Xu (2024) provide some of the strongest causal evidence on this relationship, demonstrating through historical analysis of US civil service reform that shifting from patronage to merit-based hiring produced measurable improvements in public sector performance. This work helps to ground a theoretical claim that has sometimes rested on correlational evidence: that the quality of those recruited shapes what states can actually accomplish. Andrews et al. (2017) capture the practical dimension of this with their concept of 'implementation capability', which often overlooks the capacity to make things happen on the ground.

The channels through which competence is enhanced are multiple: better-qualified entrants raise the average human capital of the bureaucracy, introducing skills that might otherwise migrate to the private sector (Oliveira et al., 2024). Competitive entry also reshapes the incentives of potential applicants: when advancement depends on demonstrated ability rather than who one knows, investment in professional development becomes rational. Beyond individuals, organisations benefit: when staff have the cognitive and technical resources to process complex information, institutional learning and adaptation become more feasible (Oliveira et al., 2024).

2.1.3. Credible Commitment and Quality of Government Perspectives

A complementary theoretical tradition emphasises not bureaucratic capability but bureaucratic autonomy, the capacity to resist political pressures that would distort policy implementation for particularistic ends. This tradition draws on credible commitment theory in political economy, which examines how states can credibly commit to respecting property rights and enforcing contracts (North & Weingast, 1989). Miller (2000) extends this logic to bureaucracy, arguing that merit protections enable bureaucrats to resist political demands that would undermine efficient administration. Applying credible commitment theory to contemporary cases requires examining whether merit recruitment actually affects outcomes, a question directly addressed in the case studies that follow. A parallel tradition approaches the value of meritocracy not through the lens of capability but through that of administrative integrity. The concern here is with the conditions under which civil servants can act on professional judgment rather than political instruction. Dahlstrom & Lapuente (2017) make the institutional argument most clearly: when bureaucratic and political careers are organisationally separated, officials are freed from dependence on political patrons, which in turn enables them to serve the public interest rather than partisan ones.

This connects to the Quality of Government framework developed by Rothstein and Teorell (2008), which locates the heart of good governance in impartiality, the even-handed application of rules to all citizens regardless of their power relationships. Recent work by Ibañez & Bello-Gomez (2025) strengthens the empirical case for this perspective by showing that democratic backsliding, which typically involves the erosion of merit protections, directly degrades the impartiality of public administration. Their findings affirm that the institutional foundations of meritocracy and the foundations of quality governance are inseparable.

2.1.4. The Turn to Mechanisms

Despite a substantial body of evidence linking merit recruitment to favourable governance and development outcomes, researchers have until recently been imprecise about the mechanisms involved. Kolvani & Nistotskaya (2025) draw attention to this in their review of the field, noting

that a wide range of effects, from improved technical performance to greater resistance to corruption, have been attributed to merit recruitment without sufficient attention to which pathways are actually at work or which matter most.

This imprecision carries real cost: without knowledge of mechanisms, it's hard to tell genuine causal effects from spurious associations, or to predict how findings from one setting will apply to another (Hedstrom & Ylikoski, 2010). This mechanism gap matters for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, understanding mechanisms is essential for distinguishing genuine causal relationships from spurious correlations and for extrapolating findings across contexts (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010).

Recent work has begun to address this gap. Oliveira et al. (2024), integrating findings from 96 empirical studies conducted between 2014 and 2022, demonstrate that merit appointments, tenure security, impartiality, and professional norms are consistently and positively linked to government performance across diverse national settings. Building on this cumulative evidence, Kolvani & Nistotskaya (2025) employ mediation analysis across fourteen years of cross-national data to test specifically whether competence and impartiality mediate the effects of merit recruitment on development, finding support for both pathways.

3. 0. Theoretical Framework: Competence and Impartiality as Dual Mechanisms

3.1. The Competence Mechanism

The competence mechanism posits that meritocratic recruitment improves developmental outcomes by enhancing the epistemic quality of bureaucratic personnel. This mechanism directly applies Weber's insight that technical expertise 'Fachwissen' is the foundation of rational administration. In Weber's original formulation, modern bureaucracy replaced patrimonial administration precisely by substituting technical qualifications for personal loyalty. Applying state capacity theory, the mechanism further specifies that this expertise translates into improved policy implementation capability: bureaucrats with higher cognitive skills, relevant knowledge, and job-relevant experience are better able to design policies, execute programmes, and solve implementation problems.

The competence mechanism operates through selection effects: by prioritising expertise, formal qualifications, and relevant experience over nepotism, political loyalty, or ascriptive characteristics, merit systems increase the probability that positions will be filled by individuals capable of performing their duties effectively. Applying human capital theory (Becker, 1964) as a micro-foundation, merit systems ensure that the state captures the returns from educational investments by matching skilled individuals to appropriate positions. Applying organisational psychology, merit systems identify candidates with the cognitive abilities and problem-solving skills that predict job performance.

Empirical research supports the competence mechanism at multiple levels. At the individual level, studies demonstrate that merit-selected officials exhibit higher job performance ratings and lower rates of disciplinary problems (Lewis, 2007). However, the competence mechanism is not automatic, as Hennessy et al. (2024) demonstrate in their study of Greek public servants. Merit recruitment's effects on behaviour are conditional on perceptions of the broader professional environment. Applying competence theory to the Greek case, we must ask whether merit recruitment actually produces the expected competence gains when promotion systems remain politicised.

At its most direct, the argument for merit recruitment rests on a straightforward claim: if the people responsible for implementing policy are selected for their relevant knowledge and skills, policy implementation is likely to go better. This is the competence mechanism. It works through the logic of selection, replacing criteria based on loyalty, kinship, or political affiliation with criteria based on demonstrated ability, which increases the probability that posts are held by individuals genuinely capable of fulfilling them.

The empirical support is multi-level. At the macro level, Aneja & Xu (2024) provide causal evidence that civil service reform, by shifting from patronage to merit hiring, produces significant gains in public sector performance. Cornell et al. (2020) confirm the national-level association between merit recruitment and bureaucratic quality indicators, including regulatory effectiveness and infrastructure delivery. At the organisational level, research consistently finds that agencies relying on merit-based hiring outperform those that do not, on productivity and service quality measures (Oliveira et al., 2024).

Yet the mechanism is not self-executing. Hennessy et al. (2024) find, through careful survey research among Greek public servants, that the behavioural consequences of merit recruitment depend heavily on whether employees believe the wider career system is fair. When merit-recruited staff perceive their promotion prospects to be governed by political rather than professional criteria, they tend to engage in what the authors call 'pro-social rule-breaking', which is bending official rules to help service users, by which, however well-intentioned, undermines the administrative consistency and impartiality that merit systems are meant to support.

3.1. 2. The Impartiality Mechanism

The impartiality mechanism posits that meritocratic recruitment improves developmental outcomes by insulating bureaucrats from undue political influence, enabling them to resist pressures that would subordinate public interests to particularistic demands. This mechanism directly applies credible commitment theory: when bureaucrats are protected from politically motivated dismissal, they can make credible commitments to implement policies even-handedly, because their careers do not depend on pleasing partisan actors. Applying the Quality of Government framework, the mechanism further specifies that impartiality, treating citizens equally without regard to personal or political connections, is the core institutional principle that distinguishes good governance from its opposite.

The impartiality mechanism operates through incentive effects: by protecting bureaucrats from politically motivated dismissal, merit systems create conditions under which officials can prioritise professional norms and legal requirements over political expediency. Applying principal-agent theory, merit protections alter the incentive structure facing bureaucrats by making their careers dependent on professional performance rather than political loyalty. This reduces their responsiveness to political pressures that would divert them from their official duties while increasing their responsiveness to professional norms and legal constraints. Applying public choice theory, merit recruitment limits political actors' capacity to use bureaucratic appointments for patronage, thereby reducing the resources available to build clientelist networks.

Empirical evidence for the impartiality mechanism comes from diverse sources. Cross-national studies find that merit recruitment correlates with lower levels of corruption and higher quality of government (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017). Experimental research demonstrates that merit-selected officials are less likely to comply with unethical political requests (Oliveros & Schuster, 2018). Merit recruitment will show less political interference in bureaucratic decision-making, and this impartiality will be associated with better development outcomes.

Empirical evidence supports the impartiality pathway from multiple directions. Kolvani & Nistotskaya (2025) document a robust positive association between merit recruitment and measured impartiality in government. Ibañez & Bello-Gomez (2025) provide complementary evidence from the other direction: when democratic erosion weakens merit protections, administrative impartiality degrades. Together, these findings establish not only that merit and impartiality are associated but that their relationship is causally meaningful.

Although competence and impartiality are conceptually distinct, they are mutually reinforcing in practice. Officials with high levels of technical expertise are better positioned to push back against inappropriate political direction; their professional credibility gives them standing that patronage appointees typically lack. Both mechanisms also operate within boundary conditions identified by Kolvani & Nistotskaya (2025). Merit recruitment delivers stronger developmental returns in settings with a functional rule of law. This is because legal protections for civil servants require a legal system capable of enforcing them. Effects are attenuated in highly polarised political environments where political pressure may overwhelm professional norms even when formal protections exist. And the quality of implementation is how well the selection procedures are designed, how robustly oversight institutions operate within, which shapes whether formal merit rules translate into meritocratic outcomes in practice.

4. Empirical Evidence

4.1 Cross-National Findings

The most comprehensive recent attempt to test these mechanisms directly is Kolvani & Nistotskaya's (2025) study. Working with fourteen years of cross-national data and using mediation analysis, they asked whether shifts in the meritocracy of recruitment systems are associated with improvements in both competence and impartiality-related indicators of government performance, and whether these in turn drive better development outcomes. Their results affirm both pathways. Countries with more meritocratic recruitment show higher levels of measured bureaucratic competence and better-qualified personnel, stronger technical performance, and higher levels of impartiality, as reflected in reduced political interference and more consistent application of policy. Both of these intermediate outcomes, in turn, predict higher rates of new business registration, the study's primary developmental outcome measure. The estimated effect size is meaningful: a one-standard-deviation gain in meritocratic recruitment corresponds to roughly a 0.3-standard-deviation gain in developmental outcomes, and this finding is stable across different analytical specifications.

Beltrametti & Cardullo (2024) add a complementary angle through their examination of worker-job matching across 28 countries, covering more than 120,000 individuals. They find that in higher-income countries, workers' skills are better aligned with the demands of their jobs, a finding that is consistent with more meritocratic labour market institutions. Importantly, their modelling suggests that the direct contribution of improved matching to cross-country income differences is modest, but that meritocracy plays an enabling role: better matching allows countries to more fully capture the developmental returns from investments in technology and institutional quality. These positions merit not as a primary driver of growth but as a precondition for realising the benefits of other investments.

4.2 Country Case Studies

4.2.1 Greece: Merit Recruitment and Pro-social Rule-Breaking

Greece's experience with merit reform over the past decade offers an instructive lesson in the limits of legislative change alone. Facing intense pressure from EU creditors during and after the sovereign debt crisis, successive Greek governments enacted sweeping reforms to formalise merit-based hiring across the public sector, with the explicit aim of replacing clientelist networks with objective competence criteria.

Hennessy et al. (2024) put these reforms to empirical scrutiny using survey data from 497 public servants, applying list experiment techniques to obtain honest responses on sensitive questions about rule compliance. Their findings disrupt simple optimism about what formal reform achieves. Merit-recruited civil servants are not, on average, more rule-abiding than their patronage-recruited counterparts. What matters, the research shows, is not how someone entered the service but whether they believe the system rewards them fairly going forward. Merit-recruited staff, who regard the promotion system as politically skewed, are actually more prone to rule violations - not for personal gain, but to compensate for perceived institutional injustice by doing tangible good for individual citizens.

This is a sobering finding for reform advocates. It suggests that the behavioural benefits expected from merit recruitment can be cancelled out, and even reversed, when employees enter through a fair door only to find that subsequent advancement remains politically determined. It also raises questions about the reliability of international assessments. European Commission monitoring during 2016-2022 concluded that Greek hiring had been successfully depoliticised. Hennessy et al.'s (2024) evidence suggests that the picture was considerably more complicated than official reports recognised.

4.2.2 Pakistan: Technology-Enabled Merit Recruitment

A more recent and forward-looking example comes from Pakistan, where the Capital Development Authority (CDA) entered into a formal partnership with the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) in April 2025 to overhaul its hiring procedures. Under this arrangement, NUST's computerised examination and evaluation infrastructure takes over the recruitment process, from the initial screening of applications through to written assessments. The partnership is designed around transparency and objectivity: automated systems replace human discretion at key decision points, standardised assessments replace informal judgments, and electronic records create a trail that can be audited after the fact. Beyond its immediate operational purpose, the collaboration points to a broader institutional model - one in which public agencies lacking the internal capacity to run robust merit selection can draw on the technical resources of universities or other external bodies. The transferability of this model to other contexts where administrative capacity is constrained is worth examining carefully.

4.2.3. United States: Federal Hiring Reform

In the United States, the federal government's merit hiring plan, developed by the Domestic Policy Council and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM, 2025) under Executive Order 14170, represents a substantial reform effort in one of the world's most institutionally developed administrative systems. The plan's ambitions are broad: to modernise federal recruitment, remove credential requirements that unnecessarily exclude qualified candidates, and equip hiring managers with better tools, including validated assessments covering 135 job categories. At the same time, the US case is a reminder that meritocratic institutions are not permanent achievements but

ongoing political contests. Kolvani & Nistotskaya (2025) observe that efforts to modernise federal hiring have unfolded alongside countervailing pressures to re-politicise the bureaucracy. Bauer et al. (2021) situate this within a comparative framework, documenting how populist governments across multiple countries have moved systematically to dismantle merit protections and reassert political control over civil service appointments. The US thus illustrates both what merit reform can aspire to and how easily it can be rolled back when political circumstances change.

4.2.4 Nigeria: Subnational Merit Reform

Within Nigeria, Abia State, under Governor Alex Otti, has emerged as a notable case of meritocratic commitment at the subnational level. Governor Otti has been explicit about the governing philosophy: 'People have now understood that what will promote you is hard work and excellence, not who you know. The quota system does not work here. And we do not know State of origin.' In a national context where recruitment has historically been shaped by ethnic and geographic considerations under the Federal Character framework, this represents a deliberate and publicly stated break from convention (Abia State Government, 2025).

The practical expression of this philosophy is visible in Abia's recent hiring of 5,394 teachers, a process that drew successful candidates from neighbouring states, Cross River and Akwa Ibom, because they were the most qualified applicants. The response from federal authorities has been affirmative: Professor Tunji Olaopa of the Federal Civil Service Commission chose Abia as the first state to participate in the National Strategic Plan for civil service reform, pointing to its disciplined approach as a model worth replicating.

The case also draws attention to a dimension of reform that is easy to overlook: accumulated obligations from the past. Governor Otti acknowledged that gratuity arrears stretching back to 2001 total N60.1 billion - debts owed to former public servants, some of whom have not lived to receive what they were owed. Merit reform, however well designed for the future, sits within a history that also needs to be addressed if the relationship between the state and its workforce is to be genuinely restored.

5. Implementation Challenges and Boundary Conditions

5.1 The Problem of Imperfect Meritocracy

One of the more provocative findings in the recent literature concerns the welfare implications of strict versus imperfect meritocracy in promotion decisions. Beltrametti & Cardullo (2024) model two contrasting promotion regimes - one in which advancement is strictly determined by measured performance, and one in which some randomness or noise enters the process, giving lower-performing workers a residual chance of promotion. Counter-intuitively, their model finds that the 'noisy' system can generate higher aggregate effort and output than the perfectly meritocratic alternative.

The mechanism is what Beltrametti & Cardullo (2024) call the 'hope effect': when promotion is entirely determined by relative performance, workers who recognise that they are unlikely to outperform their more skilled colleagues may reduce their effort. A degree of unpredictability sustains the possibility of advancement for a wider range of workers and keeps effort levels up across the distribution. The practical implication is that reformers, who push for strict meritocracy in promotion, as well as recruitment, may inadvertently suppress the motivational dynamics that make organisations productive. Institutional design needs to take into account the trade-off between selection accuracy and motivational effects.

5.1. 2. Merit, Diversity, and Inclusion

A persistent concern in debates about meritocracy is its relationship to social equity. Critics have long argued that 'merit' as conventionally defined tends to favour those with privileged access to education and professional networks, and that neutral-seeming selection criteria can systematically disadvantage qualified candidates from underrepresented groups. The New Zealand Human Rights Commission (2025) addresses this concern directly in its submission on proposed public service legislation, arguing that diversity, equity, and inclusion provisions should be understood as mechanisms for strengthening meritocracy rather than derogating from it.

The reasoning is intuitive. If the pool of candidates considered for public service roles is artificially narrowed by informal network effects, geographic concentration, or evaluator bias, then selection among that pool, however rigorous, does not produce the most meritocratic outcome. Broadening access, correcting for bias, and ensuring that assessment methods do not systematically penalise candidates from particular backgrounds are, on this view, components of genuine merit selection rather than departures from it. Evidence cited by the Commission supports the additional claim that diverse organisations tend to perform better, suggesting that the equity and effectiveness cases for inclusion align rather than conflict.

Castilla (2025) reinforces this from the direction of organisational practice. Drawing on data from multiple organisations, he finds that efforts to foster meritocracy that rely on informal norms rather than explicit measurement tend to reproduce rather than reduce existing inequalities, a 'meritocracy paradox' in which the rhetoric of merit obscures the operation of bias. His response is methodological: systematic use of people analytics to track outcomes at each stage of hiring and promotion, making disparities visible and enabling targeted correction. Treating fairness as an empirical question, to be continuously tested and verified, rather than a procedural assumption, is central to his proposed approach.

5.1. 3. Merit Recruitment and Career Advancement Incentives

The Greek case makes the general point with particular clarity: what happens after recruitment matters as much as recruitment itself. When civil servants who enter through competitive, merit-based processes find that their subsequent advancement is governed by political criteria, the organisational logic that merit entry was meant to create is undermined. The result, as Hennessy et al. (2024) document, is not simply dissatisfaction but a specific behavioural adaptation, pro-social rule-breaking, in which merit-recruited staff are compensated for perceived injustice through informal assistance to citizens.

The broader implication is that merit reform conceived only as reform of the entry point is structurally incomplete. Research on bureaucratic behaviour has tended to focus on who gets in; less attention has been paid to what happens to them once they are in, and how the incentives they encounter shape their professional conduct over time. This asymmetry in scholarly and policy attention leaves a significant gap: if promotion remains subject to patronage, the promise of merit recruitment is broken at the point where it most directly affects experienced civil servants' motivation and behaviour.

Sustainable reform, therefore, needs to encompass the full arc of a civil service career, from how people are recruited, to how their performance is assessed, to how advancement and recognition are allocated, to how departure from the service is managed. Each of these stages can either reinforce or erode the professional culture that merit recruitment is intended to cultivate.

5.1. 4. Technological Infrastructure

Technology is increasingly seen as both a driver and an enabler of meritocratic recruitment, and the Pakistan CDA-NUST partnership represents a live example of how digital tools can be mobilised to reduce the scope for bias and manipulation in hiring. Computerised assessments that are administered and scored without human discretion at critical decision points provide a structural check on favouritism; electronic records create accountability; and standardised procedures allow results to be audited and contested.

At the same time, technology does not resolve the underlying challenges so much as displace them. The design of assessment instruments, what they measure, whose competencies they privilege, and how they handle candidates with different educational backgrounds, involves choices that can embed or challenge inequality. For developing-country administrations that lack the in-house capacity to design, validate, and maintain computerised recruitment systems, the reliance on external technical partners raises questions about sustainability once those partnerships end. The NUST model is valuable precisely because it points toward the development of local institutional capacity rather than permanent dependence on external expertise.

The OPM's (2025) experience in the United States is instructive on the human dimensions of technological implementation. Even with substantial resources and validated assessment tools covering 135 job series, OPM has found it necessary to invest extensively in training hiring managers to use these tools appropriately and to integrate them into coherent, end-to-end recruitment processes. Technology, in other words, multiplies the capacity of well-trained and committed people; it does not substitute for them.

6. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

This paper has made the case that how governments recruit their civil servants is among the most consequential institutional choices they make, and that recruitment based on merit generates developmental benefits through two reinforcing mechanisms: the competence it brings into the bureaucracy, and the impartiality it enables by insulating officials from political dependence. Evidence from cross-national analyses and from cases in Greece, Pakistan, Nigeria, and the United States supports both pathways while revealing the conditions under which each is more or less likely to operate as intended.

Several qualifications deserve to be kept firmly in view. The developmental returns to merit recruitment are contingent on the broader institutional environment, particularly on whether promotion and career advancement are also governed by meritocratic rather than political criteria. Merit systems can generate perverse effects when they raise expectations that subsequent career management then disappoints. The relationship between merit and equity is not one of tension but of mutual dependency: selection processes that fail to address structural barriers to entry are not genuinely meritocratic, regardless of their formal design. And technology, however valuable, is a tool whose effects depend entirely on the quality of the human and institutional frameworks within which it operates.

Looking ahead, the field needs research that goes beyond the entry point to examine how merit and patronage interact across the full civil service career. It needs longitudinal studies capable of tracking how merit reforms evolve and whether their effects accumulate or decay over time. It needs comparative work that identifies which specific design features of merit systems matter most, and under what political and institutional conditions. It needs closer attention to the political economy of reform itself, understanding why political actors who benefit from patronage sometimes choose to constrain it is essential for translating knowledge about what works into

knowledge about how to make it happen. And it needs genuine normative engagement with questions about what a fair and effective conception of merit looks like in societies marked by deep historical inequalities.

The urgency of these questions is not merely academic. Around the world, merit principles are under pressure, from politicians who find patronage more politically useful, from ideological contestation over what fairness requires, and from technological and demographic changes that are reshaping what public sector work demands. Understanding how meritocratic recruitment works, when it delivers on its promise and what it requires to be sustained is indispensable for anyone committed to the project of building states that can genuinely serve their citizens

7. Recommendations

1. Implement comprehensive, career-cycle merit reforms rather than partial recruitment-only reforms.
2. Strengthen the impartiality mechanism through credible tenure protections.
3. Legal frameworks should guarantee tenure for civil servants recruited through merit competitions, with dismissal only for cause after due process.
4. Invest in valid, transparent, and equitable assessment technologies while building internal capacity.
5. Reframe merit and diversity as complementary, not opposing, principles.
6. Conduct regular mechanism-based evaluations of merit reforms.
7. Establish independent oversight institutions with enforcement authority.

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