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Ethical governance of artificial intelligence in public administration: an integrative literature review (2021–2025)

Governança ética da inteligência artificial na administração pública: uma revisão integrativa de literatura (2021–2025)

Gobernanza ética de la inteligencia artificial en la administración pública: una revisión integrativa de la literatura (2021–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Context: Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly generative AI, has emerged as a transformative force in Public Administration, promising enhanced operational efficiency while posing significant risks to administrative discretion and equity.

Objective: This study aims to examine how recent scholarly literature (2021–2025) addresses and advances approaches to the ethical governance of AI in the public sector through an integrative literature review.

Method: Following Fink's (2014) methodological protocol, 22 high-impact articles indexed in the Web of Science database were systematically reviewed and analyzed.

Results: The findings indicate a rapid expansion of scholarly interest in the topic, structured around three major thematic dimensions: (i) the tension between algorithmic efficiency and human judgment; (ii) delayed regulatory responses to the opacity of automated systems; and (iii) the central role of citizen trust as a critical indicator of success. The bibliometric analysis further reveals a multipolar geopolitics of knowledge production, with China and Brazil emerging as prominent contributors to the development of pragmatic approaches to governance and oversight.

Conclusions: This study contributes to the literature by proposing foundational guidelines for the implementation of AI in the public sector. The findings suggest that ensuring the ethical use of AI in public administration depends not only on technological solutions but also on digital literacy and the development of a hybrid governance ecosystem that integrates regulatory frameworks, technical auditing mechanisms, and mandatory human oversight (human-in-the-loop) in critical decision-making processes.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; generative AI; public administration; ethical governance; citizen trust.

RESUMO

Contextualização: A Inteligência Artificial (IA), notadamente a generativa, emerge como vetor de transformação na Administração Pública, prometendo eficiência operacional, mas impondo riscos significativos à discricionariedade e à equidade.

Objetivo: Este estudo objetiva analisar, via revisão integrativa, como a produção acadêmica recente (2021–2025) discute e propõe caminhos para a governança ética da IA no setor público.

Método: Adotando o protocolo de Fink (2014), foram analisados 22 artigos de alto impacto da base *Web of Science*.

Resultados: Os resultados revelam uma rápida expansão da literatura sobre o tema, marcada por três eixos temáticos: (i) tensão entre agilidade algorítmica e julgamento humano; (ii) reação regulatória tardia frente à opacidade dos sistemas automatizados; e (iii) centralidade da confiança cidadã como métrica de sucesso. A bibliometria destaca uma geopolítica do conhecimento multipolar, com protagonismo de China e Brasil em abordagens pragmáticas de controle.

Conclusões: O estudo contribui ao propor diretrizes estruturantes para a implementação de IA no setor público. Conclui-se que a garantia de uma IA ética na administração pública não reside apenas na tecnologia, mas no letramento digital e na construção de um ecossistema de governança híbrido, combinando regulação normativa, auditoria técnica e supervisão humana mandatária (*human-in-the-loop*) em decisões críticas.

Palavras-chave: inteligência artificial; IA generativa; administração pública; governança ética; confiança cidadã.

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RESUMEN

Contextualización: La Inteligencia Artificial (IA), en particular la IA generativa, se está consolidando como motor de transformación en la Administración Pública, prometiendo eficiencia operativa pero planteando riesgos significativos para la discrecionalidad y la equidad.

Objetivo: Este estudio busca analizar, mediante una revisión integradora, cómo la producción académica reciente (2021-2025) aborda y propone vías para la gobernanza ética de la IA en el sector público.

Método: Siguiendo el protocolo de Fink (2014), se analizaron 22 artículos de alto impacto de la base de datos Web of Science.

Resultados: Los resultados revelan una rápida expansión de la literatura sobre el tema, marcada por tres ejes temáticos: (i) la tensión entre la agilidad algorítmica y el juicio humano; (ii) la reacción regulatoria tardía ante la opacidad de los sistemas automatizados; y (iii) la centralidad de la confianza ciudadana como indicador de éxito. La bibliometría pone de relieve una geopolítica multipolar del conocimiento, con China y Brasil desempeñando un papel protagónico en los enfoques pragmáticos de control.

Conclusiones: El estudio contribuye al proponer directrices estructurales para la implementación de la IA en el sector público. Se concluye que garantizar la ética de la IA en la administración pública no solo depende de la tecnología, sino también de la alfabetización digital y la construcción de un ecosistema de gobernanza híbrido, que combine la regulación normativa, la auditoría técnica y la supervisión humana obligatoria (intervención humana) en las decisiones críticas.

Palabras clave: inteligencia artificial; IA generativa; administración pública; gobernanza ética; la confianza ciudadana.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a defining feature of technological transformation in the twenty-first century. In the public sector, both globally and increasingly in Brazil, AI has emerged as a promising tool for optimizing processes, managing large volumes of data, and enhancing the efficiency and responsiveness of public service delivery (Façanha et al., 2024; SGD & SERPRO, 2025; Teixeira, 2023).

More recently, the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Generative AI) and large language models (LLMs) has expanded the scope of governmental automation. Unlike traditional predictive models, Generative AI enables cognitive automation in complex environments by supporting document drafting, information synthesis, and citizen engagement (Brown et al., 2020; Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020). Beyond optimizing structured routines, this technology increasingly contributes to the production of analyses that were once the exclusive domain of public servants, reshaping professional practices and creating new demands for competencies related to human oversight and validation (Façanha et al., 2024; Niaradi & Nascimento, 2023; SGD & SERPRO, 2025).

However, the integration of these technologies into governmental environments raises complex ethical challenges. Concerns related to data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and bias mitigation have become central to ensuring the fair and responsible use of AI (Cruz et al., 2022; Façanha et al., 2024). Regulatory and policy frameworks have reinforced the urgency of addressing these issues. In Brazil, the Brazilian Artificial Intelligence Strategy (EBIA) established “Ethical Use” as a core thematic pillar (MCTI, 2021), aligning with the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Artificial Intelligence (OECD, 2024), which advocates a trustworthy, human-centered approach to AI that safeguards fundamental rights and democratic values.

Despite the growing normative recognition of these challenges, a significant theoretical and practical gap persists in the literature. Much of the existing research has focused either on the technical dimensions of algorithms or on the corporate regulation of AI in the private sector. However, a systematic understanding of how ethical governance is conceptualized and operationalized within the specific context of public administration remains underdeveloped, particularly in settings where administrative discretion and democratic accountability play a central role. It is therefore essential not only to identify the risks associated with AI adoption but also to examine how the academic literature has proposed concrete solutions to address these challenges.

In response to this gap, the present study seeks to examine how recent scholarly research (2021–2025) has conceptualized and advanced approaches to the ethical governance of AI in public administration through an integrative literature review, with particular emphasis on transparency, accountability, and citizen trust (Laux, Wachter & Mittelstadt, 2024; Paglieri, Costumato & Savignon, 2025). The originality and analytical contribution of this research lie in moving beyond the mere identification of algorithmic shortcomings by providing an up-to-date synthesis of the literature that integrates hybrid governance frameworks and oversight mechanisms. By mapping this emerging field of inquiry, the study offers robust insights to support public managers in reconciling technological innovation with a sustained commitment to the public interest and equity.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the role of AI in public administration first requires situating this technology within the broader context of the technical and scientific transformations that characterize contemporary society. Santos (1994) argues that the current era is marked by the emergence of a technical-scientific-informational milieu, in which technology, science, and information converge to profoundly reshape territories, economic structures, and power relations (Santos, 1994; Santos & Marques, 2002). Within this milieu, digital technologies cease to function merely as neutral instruments and instead become a fundamental infrastructure of social life, mediating interactions between the state and citizens, structuring decision-making processes, and influencing access to rights and opportunities (Santos, 1994). Artificial intelligence, in particular, constitutes an advanced expression of this milieu, insofar as it enables information to be translated into decisions in an increasingly accelerated, automated, and often opaque manner (Schiff, Schiff & Pierson, 2022).

From this perspective, the recent expansion of AI in the public sector represents more than the adoption of a new managerial tool; it entails the incorporation of an informational logic that tends to intensify technical rationality in state action. Applied to AI, this perspective enables a critical examination of the technological optimism that automatically equates automation and efficiency with improvements in collective well-being, highlighting the need to question who controls these systems, which data are mobilized, and how risks and benefits are distributed (Valle-Cruz, Garcia-Contreras & Gil-Garcia, 2024; Young et al., 2021). Furthermore, it provides a foundation for contemporary debates on digital sovereignty and data colonialism. The uncritical adoption of AI may deepen the public sector's technological dependence on major global technology corporations (Big Tech companies), effectively externalizing key components of the state's decision-making infrastructure.

Within the field of public administration, this tension is reflected in the increasing incorporation of algorithmic systems into critical decision-making processes, including auditing, benefit allocation, policing, regulatory enforcement, and the management of access to public services. Recent studies suggest that these applications can enhance the capacity to process large volumes of information, enabling decisions to be made more rapidly and consistently (Juárez Merino, 2025; Mencke, Gomes & Xavier, 2024; Valle-Cruz, Garcia-Contreras & Gil-Garcia, 2024). However, uncritical defenses of algorithmic rationalization must be balanced by critical perspectives that highlight the risks of technocracy and the dehumanization of public decision-making, echoing the argument that the very systems that promote connectivity may also reproduce and intensify forms of exclusion (Santos, 1994).

Accordingly, rather than merely reiterating the notion that AI is a “promising” technology for the modernization of the state, the theoretical framework should recognize that its incorporation into public services takes place within a historical context shaped by the intensification of the technical-scientific-informational milieu, marked by ongoing disputes over power, information, and social control. From this perspective, the central question is no longer whether AI should be used, but rather how it should be designed, governed, and regulated to ensure that it serves the public interest, respects fundamental rights, and strengthens citizen trust (Cruz et al., 2022; Façanha et al., 2024; SGD & SERPRO, 2025).

Given the recognition of this transformative role, several studies argue that the successful implementation of AI in the public sector depends on the existence of adequate safeguards (Neves & Romão, 2024; Oliveira & Dias, 2023). It is precisely at this juncture that a critical paradox emerges: the normative imperative of administrative transparency directly conflicts with the adoption of systems based on complex algorithms, whose inferential logic often operates as a “black box.” Such algorithmic opacity not only challenges the interpretability and explainability of governmental decisions but also hinders the attribution of responsibility and undermines democratic mechanisms of accountability (Niaradi & Nascimento, 2023).

Even when the potential benefits of their application are fully acknowledged, Generative AI models operate on the basis of probabilistic patterns, lacking both awareness and intentionality. As a result, they may generate inappropriate, hallucinatory, or contextually inaccurate outputs. Furthermore, these models can reproduce and amplify biases embedded in their training data, reinforcing the need for human oversight and rigorous evaluation, particularly within public institutions responsible for handling sensitive information (SGD & SERPRO, 2025; Teixeira, 2023).

There are growing indications that artificial intelligence may become widely employed in judicial and administrative decision-making processes in the near future. However, the advancement of these applications presents significant challenges for developers, including the need for robust datasets, the high costs and complexity associated with data labeling, the mitigation of algorithmic bias, and, most fundamentally, the inherent limitations of AI in addressing issues that require interpretive judgment and the balancing of human principles. Such tasks extend beyond the mere computational application of legal rules (Cruz et al., 2022).

The implementation of AI in the public sector also faces significant practical challenges, including insufficient digital infrastructure, the continuous need for public servant training, difficulties associated with system integration, and the adaptation of existing regulatory frameworks (Façanha et al., 2024; Valle-Cruz, Garcia-Contreras & Gil-Garcia, 2024).

The need to address these barriers in an integrated manner, both technical and ethical, underscores that discussions surrounding the responsible use of AI ultimately converge on the development of appropriate regulatory frameworks. The OECD Recommendation of the Council on Artificial Intelligence (OECD, 2024) recognizes the transformative potential of AI while cautioning against risks associated with inequality and broader democratic implications, emphasizing the need to adapt legal and regulatory frameworks in order to foster a stable, trustworthy, and human-centered environment.

In the Brazilian context, these regulatory principles have been translated into operational guidelines through documents such as the Guide for the Responsible Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) Tools, developed by the Digital Government Secretariat (SGD) and the Federal Data Processing Service (SERPRO) (2025). Grounded in constitutional principles and Brazil’s General Data Protection Law (LGPD), the guide establishes that the use of AI tools should be guided by transparency, auditability, and mandatory human oversight in sensitive decision-making processes. By adopting a risk-based approach, it seeks to ensure that the deployment of these technologies remains aligned with the public interest.

Together with the Brazilian Artificial Intelligence Strategy (MCTI, 2021) and recent initiatives undertaken by the National Data Protection Authority (ANPD, 2024), these frameworks provide a foundation for the development of secure and trustworthy AI solutions, reducing reliance solely on corporate self-regulation. They are also consistent with regulatory efforts advanced by the European Union (European Commission, 2021), which seek to establish clear governance guidelines to support public managers in the responsible adoption and governance of AI technologies.

International best practices further reinforce the centrality of a systemic approach to AI governance. Frameworks adopted in countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom emphasize algorithmic transparency, continuous auditing, and participatory policymaking, demonstrating that effective governance requires an organizational culture grounded in openness, accountability, and social oversight (Government of Canada, 2024; Neves & Romão, 2024; Oliveira & Dias, 2023; UK Government, 2023).

Despite these governance and oversight requirements, it is important to recognize that the adoption of AI technologies in Brazilian public administration continues to be strongly motivated by expectations of substantial structural gains. Studies have documented significant reductions in operational costs, as well as improvements in efficiency and service delivery outcomes, resulting from the implementation of AI-based solutions (Toledo & Mendonça, 2023).

The judiciary and oversight institutions, which manage vast volumes of information, have emerged as prominent actors in the movement toward automation. Alice, an AI-powered system developed by Brazil's Office of the Comptroller General (CGU) and employed by the Federal Court of Accounts (TCU), exemplifies the capacity of AI to conduct preventive analyses of large-scale public procurement processes (Toledo & Mendonça, 2023). Nevertheless, a critical assessment of such tools reveals important limitations. One key concern is the risk of automation bias, whereby public officials may uncritically endorse machine-generated recommendations. Furthermore, there is a risk that auditing activities become overly focused on the identification of readily quantifiable anomalies, thereby obscuring more complex patterns of fraud and misconduct that require the judgment, contextual understanding, and analytical discernment characteristic of human evaluators.

3 METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts an integrative literature review as its methodological approach, enabling the synthesis of both theoretical and empirical knowledge to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The choice of this methodological framework, rather than a strictly systematic or exclusively bibliometric review, is justified by its capacity to combine the descriptive quantification of the literature corpus through bibliometric analysis with an in-depth qualitative examination of the theoretical perspectives and governance practices discussed in the literature. To ensure scientific rigor, transparency, and reproducibility, the study followed the review protocol proposed by Fink (2014). This protocol is organized into a series of systematic stages, including the formulation of research questions, the selection of databases, the precise definition of search terms, the application of methodological and practical inclusion criteria, and the thematic synthesis of findings.

The selection of the database was guided by the need to access high-impact, peer-reviewed research with broad international scope. The Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection was chosen due to its extensive and well-established coverage of the fields of Public Administration, Political Science, and Management.

The search strategy was designed to capture the intersection of three conceptual dimensions underpinning the research question: (1) the technology and its developments; (2) the governmental context; and (3) the ethical lens of analysis. To operationalize the search process, the Advanced Search function was employed, combining English-language search terms through Boolean operators (OR within each conceptual dimension and AND across dimensions).

Table 1 presents the structure of the search strings and the theoretical rationale guiding the selection of terms within each conceptual dimension.

Table 1
Search strategy details

Conceptual Dimension	Search String (Descriptors in Web of Science)	Rationale for Selection
1. Technology (Object)	("Generative AI" OR "Generative Artificial Intelligence" OR "Large Language Models" OR "LLM" OR "ChatGPT" OR "Automated Content Generation" OR "Artificial Intelligence")	Although initially centered on Generative AI, this conceptual dimension was expanded to include the broader term "Artificial Intelligence." This strategic decision was intended to capture the full scope of the 2021–2025 period, enabling the analysis not only of the recent emergence of text-generating AI systems (post-2022), but also of their transition to and coexistence with predictive and symbolic AI models in public-sector contexts.
2. Sector (Context)	AND ("Public Administration" OR "Public Sector" OR "Government" OR "Public Service" OR "E-government" OR "Digital Government")	These search terms provide a precise delimitation of the application context, excluding studies focused on private-sector or industrial settings. Terms such as "e-government" and "digital government" link AI to broader state digital transformation initiatives, while "public service" highlights the direct interface between governmental institutions and citizens.
3. Ethical Lens (Theoretical Perspective)	AND ("Ethics" OR "Ethical" OR "Fairness" OR "Accountability" OR "Transparency" OR "Bias" OR "Trust" OR "Responsible AI" OR "Algorithmic Justice")	This dimension operationalizes the core concepts underpinning ethical AI governance. Terms such as "bias", "transparency", and "accountability" are essential for capturing challenges related to democratic oversight and control. The inclusion of the term "trust" directly reflects the study's overarching objective of examining the relationship between technology and citizen trust.

Source: prepared by the authors based on Fink's (2014) protocol.

The combination of these three conceptual dimensions resulted in a search strategy that prioritizes the specificity of the research problem, namely ethical governance in the public sector, while maintaining the technological breadth necessary to capture the phenomenon comprehensively.

The initial search conducted in the Web of Science database, using the combination of the three descriptor dimensions (technology, context, and theoretical lens), yielded an initial corpus of 1,101 records. Given the substantial volume of results and the potential presence of technical noise, including studies from other fields that merely referenced the search terms, the two-stage screening procedure proposed by Fink (2014) was applied: the Practical Screen and the Methodological Quality Screen.

The following database filters were applied to refine the sample through an automated screening process, as detailed in Table 2:

Table 2

Practical screen – database filters

Timeframe (2021–2025)
Restricting the search to the most recent period reduced the sample to 957 articles . This criterion was adopted to capture both the evolution of contemporary predictive AI models and the disruptive emergence of Generative AI (post-2022), thereby ensuring that the analysis reflects the most recent developments in the field.
Document Type
Only Articles and Review Articles were included, while editorials, conference abstracts, and book chapters were excluded. This filter reduced the corpus to 787 records and was applied to ensure that all selected sources had undergone peer review, thereby strengthening the reliability of the dataset.
Subject Area (Context)
The Web of Science category filter was restricted to Public Administration. This represented the most substantial reduction stage, resulting in a corpus of 100 records . The exclusion of nearly 700 records reflects the inherently interdisciplinary nature of AI research, as many studies were indexed under fields such as Computer Science, Engineering, or Business and focused on technical algorithmic development or corporate performance, rather than on issues of governance in the public sector.
Language
Restricting the corpus to English-language publications, the dominant language of international scientific production in this field, concluded the practical screening stage and resulted in 95 records eligible for full-text review.

Source: prepared by the authors.

The selection process then proceeded to the Methodological Quality Screen. The remaining 95 records underwent a manual screening process based on the review of titles and abstracts. During this qualitative stage, the objective was to assess the direct relevance of each study to the research question. A total of 73 records were excluded for meeting one or more of the following criteria: (a) AI was employed solely as a methodological tool (e.g., for statistical analysis) without being examined as an object of governance or public policy; (b) the study focused exclusively on clinical healthcare or urban engineering applications without addressing governance or management issues; or (c) the study did not provide a substantive discussion of ethics, governance, or trust.

At the conclusion of the selection process, 22 highly relevant articles were retained, constituting the final corpus of this review. This sample represents the core body of recent scholarly literature addressing the ethical and governance challenges associated with AI in the context of public administration. Figure 1 illustrates the article selection process.

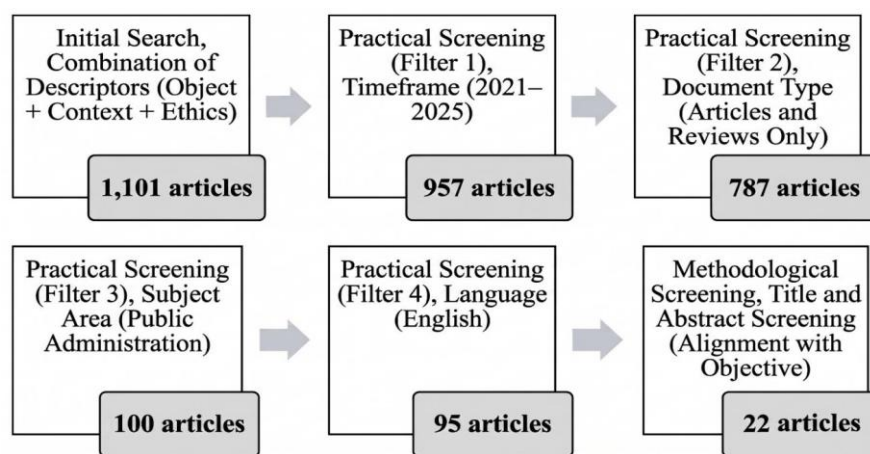


Figure 1. Number of articles by screening stage

Source: prepared by the authors.

The final corpus of 22 articles was analyzed through Thematic Analysis, which enabled the interpretation of the findings. The coding process was conducted through the development of an analytical matrix in which the metadata of each article were extracted and systematically organized in a spreadsheet, with particular attention given to abstracts and

keywords. Based on a close reading of this material, a qualitative assessment of each study's relevance was performed, followed by the grouping of the most recurrent concepts, allowing the thematic dimensions that structure the discussion of the findings to emerge inductively. To enhance the reliability of the process and reduce interpretive bias, this categorization was conducted iteratively through successive reviews of the alignment between the articles and the proposed thematic dimensions, thereby strengthening the analytical rigor and internal consistency of the synthesis.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the methodological limitations inherent in this research design. The exclusive use of the Web of Science database and the restriction to English-language publications, although justified by the objective of selecting high-impact studies that have undergone rigorous peer review, inevitably limit the scope of the literature reviewed. In an interdisciplinary and rapidly evolving field such as AI governance in the public sector, this methodological choice may have excluded relevant theoretical contributions and practical case studies published in regional databases or local languages, potentially limiting the representation of administrative realities and institutional specificities in the Global South.

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Before proceeding to the qualitative analysis of the thematic dimensions, a bibliometric characterization of the corpus is presented.

4.1 Bibliometric characterization and field development

The descriptive analysis reveals a field of research that has evolved from a niche area of inquiry into a cross-cutting strategic priority within contemporary public administration. The findings indicate a shift from largely speculative discussions about the “future of AI” toward empirical investigations of the immediate and practical challenges posed by Generative AI in government settings (Chandra & Feng, 2025).

The chronological distribution of publications (Table 3) reveals a marked increase in scientific output over the period analyzed. The period from 2021 to 2023 was marked by conceptual consolidation, with the literature focusing primarily on predictive AI and emerging discussions of trust. In contrast, publications from 2024 and 2025 reflect a substantial expansion of scholarly interest, largely driven by the widespread adoption of Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT.

Table 3

Temporal distribution of selected publications (N=22)

Year	Number (N)	% of the Database	Predominant Technological Context
2021	2	9.1%	Seminal studies on public values and administrative risks.
2022	1	4.5%	Focus on trust in automated services.
2023	3	13.6%	Initial responses to Generative AI and transparency dilemmas.
2024	4	18.2%	Consolidation of governance framework proposals.
2025*	12	54.5%	Surge in studies on regulation and bureaucratic impacts.
Total	22	100%	<i>* Includes Early Access articles with a 2025 publication date.</i>

Source: prepared by the authors based on Web of Science data.

The strong concentration of publications in 2025, which accounts for 54.5% of the sample, suggests that the literature on ethical AI governance is not merely keeping pace with technological developments. Rather, it reflects an urgent effort to establish governance frameworks before key risks become systemic. Among these risks are algorithmic opacity, understood as the difficulty of understanding and auditing the internal functioning of AI systems that operate as “black boxes” (Valle-Cruz, Garcia-Contreras & Gil-Garcia, 2024), and algorithmic bias.

The relevance of the topic is further reflected in the quality of the publication outlets in which these studies appear (Table 4). The debate is being advanced in leading journals in the field, including *Public Management Review* and *Government Information Quarterly*. This suggests that the study of Generative AI in public administration has attracted not only significant scholarly attention but also growing policy and societal interest. Furthermore, it highlights the quality of the emerging body of research analyzing the implications of AI for public governance.

Table 4

Leading scientific journals in the corpus

Journal (Source Title)	Articles (N)	Identified Editorial Focus
<i>Public Management Review</i>	3	Innovation and strategic management in the public sector.
<i>Public Administration</i>	2	Administrative theory and bureaucracy.
<i>Public Performance & Management Rev.</i>	2	Performance and accountability.
<i>Public Policy and Administration</i>	2	Policy analysis and regulation.
Others	13	Includes: Government Information Quarterly, Regulation & Governance.
Total	22	

Source: prepared by the authors.

The most significant finding of the bibliometric characterization concerns the geographical diversity of the literature (Table 5). The analysis challenges a common assumption in the early digital governance literature, which often attributed a dominant role to developed countries in shaping regulatory standards for emerging technologies (Young et al., 2021), by revealing substantial contributions from the Global South. The prominence of both China and the United States, combined with the strong presence of Latin American scholarship, points to a multipolar landscape in which diverse administrative traditions are advancing distinct responses to shared ethical challenges.

Table 5

Geographical distribution of publications by country of first author affiliation

Country of Origin	Number (N)	Percentage (%)	Representative Authors in the Sample
China	5	22.7%	Yuan, Fang, Liang, Tao, Chandra
United States	4	18.2%	Young, Robles, Schiff, Adobor
Netherlands	3	13.6%	Grimmelikhuijsen, Nieuwenhuizen, Bodo
Mexico	3	13.6%	Valle-Cruz, Juárez-Merino, Ruvalcaba-Gomez
Brazil	2	9.1%	Fajardo, Mencke
United Kingdom	1	4.5%	Laux
Others*	4	18.2%	* Includes Austria, Italy, South Africa, and Estonia
Total	22	100%	

Source: prepared by the authors.

The scholarly contributions from Brazil (9.1%) and Mexico (13.6%) suggest that Latin America has emerged as an important source of critical knowledge on oversight mechanisms and anti-corruption auditing (Juárez Merino, 2025; Mencke, Gomes & Xavier, 2024). In contrast, research from China (22.7%) places greater emphasis on administrative efficiency and public service delivery (Yuan & Chen, 2025), while studies from the United States (18.2%) focus primarily on accountability and failures in public value creation (Young et al., 2021). Studies from the Netherlands (13.6%), in turn, places particular emphasis on transparency and citizen trust (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2023).

This geographical diversity reinforces the argument that AI governance constitutes a global challenge shaped by distinct local contexts. While European scholarship tends to focus on normative and regulatory frameworks (Laux, Wachter & Mittelstadt, 2024), research from countries such as Brazil and China places greater emphasis on the practical application of AI technologies to enhance public auditing and service efficiency, respectively (Mencke, Gomes & Xavier, 2024; Yuan & Chen, 2025).

However, it is imperative to recognize that associating specific countries with particular research emphases, such as auditing in Brazil or efficiency in China, should be interpreted with methodological caution. These categorizations reflect the thematic emphases identified within the limited corpus analyzed in this review (22 articles) and should not be construed as absolute generalizations or deterministic representations of the broader administrative cultures of these nations. Rather, they should be understood as indicators of contextually emerging research agendas.

4.2 Core themes and concept co-occurrence

Beyond bibliometric quantification, this study sought to identify the conceptual foundations that structure the academic debate on AI in the public sector. The analysis of keyword frequency and co-occurrence across the 22 selected articles was conducted through manual systematization and the semantic grouping of related terms. This procedure enabled the identification of the organic mapping of the central themes that revolve around the research object.

Table 6 presents the most recurrent descriptors, grouped according to semantic affinity, thereby revealing the global research agenda surrounding the topic.

Table 6

Core themes and frequency of occurrence in the analyzed articles

Thematic Dimension	Identified Keywords	Absolute Frequency*	Interpretation of the Dimension
1. Technological Object	Artificial Intelligence, AI, Generative AI, Technology	29	Focus on technology and its technical evolution.
2. Ethical Dimension	Accountability, Transparency, Ethics, Responsibility, Trust, Bias	18	Focus on public values and democratic risks.
3. Managerial Dimension	Government, Public Sector, Management, Public Administration, Decision-Making	16	Focus on the context of application and management.
4. Critical Dilemma	Discretion, Challenges, Framework	12	Focus on bureaucratic and regulatory tensions.

* Frequency refers to the number of times these terms (or their direct synonyms) appeared as indexed keywords across the 22 articles.

Source: prepared by the authors based on Web of Science data.

The thematic dimensions indicate that the literature does not approach AI merely as a tool for enhancing efficiency (Dimension 3). More fundamentally, it frames AI as a challenge to bureaucratic authority, particularly to the discretion traditionally exercised by public servants through professional judgment (Young et al., 2021), as well as to democratic principles such as transparency and algorithmic accountability (Valle-Cruz, Garcia-Contreras & Gil-Garcia, 2024) (Dimension 2).

One of the key findings concerns the prominence of the concept of discretion, which appears in five studies (22.7% of the sample). These studies examine how AI may constrain the autonomy of public servants by shifting their role from one of independent professional judgment to the mechanical validation of algorithmic recommendations, a phenomenon described as the Discretion Paradox (Young et al., 2021).

Similarly, the concepts of accountability, transparency, and trust frequently co-occur across the studies analyzed, suggesting a strong conceptual interdependence within the literature. In this perspective, trust depends on transparency, while meaningful transparency requires effective mechanisms of accountability. This conceptual configuration has been described as the Ethical Triad (Young et al., 2021; Yuan & Chen, 2025). However, this apparent coherence warrants critical examination. In practical governmental contexts, the pursuit of complete transparency regarding the operation of algorithmic systems may conflict with institutional security requirements, the protection of sensitive data, and, paradoxically, may generate information overload that hinders rather than enhances public understanding. Consequently, governance frameworks must continuously balance democratic openness with administrative effectiveness.

Finally, the analysis identified the emergence of themes related to external oversight, including financial oversight and anti-corruption mechanisms, particularly within the Brazilian studies included in the corpus. This emphasis suggests that Brazil's contribution to the broader debate on AI governance is strongly influenced by traditions of public auditing and accountability, characterizing what may be described as a distinct Brazilian Oversight Dimension (Fajardo & Neiva, 2025).

The intersection of these thematic dimensions reinforces the structure of the study's research question by demonstrating that ethical governance constitutes the central point of articulation between technological development (Dimension 1) and administrative practice (Dimension 3) (Laux, Wachter & Mittelstadt, 2024).

4.3 Integrative synthesis: Dimensions of ethical governance in recent literature

The integrative review conducted for the 2021–2025 period indicates that the ethical governance of artificial intelligence in public administration has been examined primarily through three interrelated dimensions: the transparency and explainability of algorithmic systems, mechanisms of accountability, and the preservation of citizen trust in contexts of increasing automation of governmental decision-making (Chandra & Feng, 2025; Valle-Cruz, Garcia-Contreras & Gil-Garcia, 2024; Young et al., 2021). Within this body of literature, AI is no longer treated merely as a tool for efficiency or technological innovation. Rather, it is increasingly conceptualized as a political and organizational phenomenon capable of both strengthening public values, such as justice, equity, and responsiveness, and generating new forms of public value failure when implemented without adequate normative and institutional safeguards (Paglieri, Costumato & Savignon, 2025; Schiff, Schiff & Pierson, 2022).

The studies indicate that the consolidation of ethical AI governance requires institutional arrangements that combine regulatory frameworks, technical standards, organizational practices, and mechanisms for public participation to guide the design, implementation, and oversight of algorithmic systems in accordance with democratic principles (Laux, Wachter & Mittelstadt, 2024; Van Noordt, Medaglia & Tangi, 2025). Across different national contexts, the literature documents the emergence of diverse governance strategies and regulatory approaches, including European and African initiatives aimed at promoting the responsible use of AI in the public sector. These initiatives seek to integrate principles of transparency, risk management, impact assessment, and both internal and external oversight mechanisms (Juárez Merino, 2025; Plantinga et al., 2024). Such efforts respond directly to concerns regarding bias, algorithmic opacity, diffuse harms, and the potential for administrative evil. These concerns have been highlighted by scholars who examine the “dark side” associated with the use of AI in public administration and advocate for critical governance frameworks capable of anticipating and mitigating unintended consequences (Valle-Cruz, Garcia-Contreras & Gil-Garcia, 2024; Young et al., 2021).

With regard to citizen trust, the findings indicate that the acceptance of AI in public services depends not only on perceived gains in effectiveness but also on the perception that these systems are understandable, contestable, and aligned with clear, intelligible, and explainable public values (Robles & Mallinson, 2025; Willems et al., 2023). Experimental studies suggest that providing accessible explanations for algorithmic decisions, ensuring the possibility of human review, and clearly identifying who is accountable for errors or injustices contribute to strengthening trust and legitimacy in the use of AI within sensitive domains such as policing, benefit allocation, and administrative adjudication (Fang, Zhou & Chen, 2025; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2023; Nieuwenhuizen et al., 2025). At the same time, research on blame attribution in automated system failures indicates that responsibility remains ambiguously distributed among machines, managers, and government organizations from the perspective of citizens. This finding underscores the importance of institutional accountability arrangements capable of preventing both the excessive delegation of decision-making authority to algorithms and the diffusion of human responsibility (Liang, Li & Chen, 2025; Tao, Wan & Wen, 2025).

Finally, the articles examining concrete applications—such as the use of AI in anti-corruption auditing and public procurement in Brazil, as well as experiences involving open-data platforms and automated judicial decision-making systems in Latin American cities—demonstrate that AI can simultaneously enhance transparency, efficiency, and civic engagement while also introducing new challenges related to privacy, information asymmetries, and the risk of algorithmic bias (Adobor & Yawson, 2023; Juárez Merino, 2025; Mencke, Gomes & Xavier, 2024). These studies suggest that ethical AI governance cannot be reduced to the adoption of abstract principles alone. Rather, it depends on the capacity to continuously adapt regulatory frameworks, management practices, and social oversight mechanisms in response to the observed effects of these technologies on different social groups, with particular attention to equity and the protection of vulnerable populations (Paglieri, Costumato & Savignon, 2025; Plantinga et al., 2024).

Among the mechanisms most frequently discussed in the literature are mandatory human oversight (human-in-the-loop) in critical decision-making processes (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2023), regulatory sandboxes for the controlled testing of algorithmic systems (Laux, Wachter & Mittelstadt, 2024), and AI ethics committees within public organizations (Bullock, 2019). Together, these instruments illustrate the multidimensional governance approach advocated in the literature.

To systematize the governance proposals identified in the literature, Table 7 categorizes the mechanisms discussed across the studies into four dimensions: technical, regulatory, organizational, and social. This classification highlights the multiplicity of institutional arrangements required for the effective governance of AI within the public sector.

Table 7

Governance proposals identified in the literature

Governance Dimension	Proposed Mechanism	Reference Articles
Technical (Design)	- Human-in-the-loop (mandatory human oversight) - Dataset auditing (bias mitigation) - Explainable AI (XAI)	Zhang et al. (2025); Taeihagh (2023); Grimmelikhuijsen (2023)
Regulatory (Rules)	- Regulatory sandboxes (controlled testing environments) - AI Impact Assessment protocols - Risk-based legislation (e.g., EU AI Act)	Laux et al. (2024); Mokhtarian (2024); Weerts (2025)
Organizational (Management)	- Ethical training for public servants - AI Ethics Committees - Redefinition of bureaucratic discretion	Bullock et al. (2024); Young et al. (2021); Vogl et al. (2024)
Social (Oversight)	- Citizen participation in service design - Algorithm transparency portals - Decision appeal mechanisms	Ahn; Chen (2024); Valle-Cruz et al. (2024); Juárez-Merino (2025)

Source: prepared by the authors based on Web of Science data.

Studies produced in Brazil and other Latin American countries suggest that the ethical governance of AI in public administration assumes distinctive characteristics in contexts marked by social inequalities, institutional constraints, and intense political contestation. Research examining concrete cases in Latin American cities and within the Brazilian federal government indicates that AI tools can strengthen transparency, efficiency, and anti-corruption efforts while simultaneously introducing new risks related to digital exclusion, algorithmic bias, opacity, and the concentration of informational power. These findings underscore the importance of governance and regulatory frameworks that are responsive to regional particularities and contextual realities (Juárez Merino, 2025; Mencke, Gomes & Xavier, 2024; Ruvalcaba-Gomez, 2025; Valle-Cruz, Garcia-Contreras & Gil-Garcia, 2024).

As illustrated in Table 8, the Latin American literature broadens the debate beyond predominantly Eurocentric and North American perspectives by emphasizing the importance of combining technological innovation with institutional strengthening, citizen participation, and the proactive protection of rights in contexts characterized by heightened democratic vulnerabilities.

Table 8

Studies on AI in public administration in Brazil and Latin America

Article	Country / Context	Type of Study	Main Focus	Contribution to Ethical AI Governance
Juárez-Merino (2025)	Mexico, Chile, Argentina (Mexico City, Santiago, and Buenos Aires)	Comparative case studies	The use of AI in open data, justice, public security, and urban mobility	Explores how AI applications can enhance transparency, efficiency, and civic engagement while also creating challenges related to privacy, bias, and digital exclusion, highlighting the need for inclusive regulatory frameworks aligned with citizenship rights.

Mencke; Gomes; Xavier (2024)	Brazil (Federal Government – ALICE tool)	Quantitative case study	AI-assisted anti-corruption auditing in public procurement	Demonstrates that AI systems can influence decision-making processes in public procurement, reducing risk aversion and potentially enhancing transparency and accountability, while also raising important questions regarding institutional oversight and ethical implications.
Valle-Cruz; Garcia-Contreras; Gil-Garcia (2024)	Mexico (broader Latin American perspective)	Literature review + conceptual framework	The “dark side” of AI in public administration	Proposes an analytical framework for examining the adverse implications of AI in public administration, emphasizing political, institutional, legal, and technological dimensions, with particular relevance for Latin American contexts characterized by power asymmetries and institutional constraints.
Ruvalcaba-Gomez (2025)	Mexico (public managers)	Quantitative study (EFA)	Systemic and axiological AI capacities in the public sector	Classifies AI capabilities into technical and value-based dimensions, demonstrating that public managers perceive ethics, decision-making, and creativity as central factors, thereby contributing to the identification of institutional competencies required for responsible AI governance in the region.

Source: prepared by the authors based on Web of Science data.

The consolidated geographical analysis presented in the table above points to a multipolar landscape in the scientific literature on ethical AI governance, characterized by the coexistence of distinct yet complementary approaches, including pragmatic efficiency (China), critical oversight (Latin America), institutional accountability (the United States), and normative transparency (Europe). This heterogeneity underscores the need for adaptive governance models capable of integrating international experiences with national specificities, particularly in contexts such as Brazil, where challenges related to administrative capacity and social oversight remain especially relevant (Mencke, Gomes & Xavier, 2024).

The analytical synthesis of these dimensions reveals that the ethical governance of AI extends far beyond the implementation of compliance frameworks. Rather, it constitutes a broader structural debate concerning the reconfiguration of decision-making authority within the state. Drawing on Santos's (1994) theoretical perspective regarding the intensification of the technical-scientific-informational milieu, the findings of this review suggest that the opacity of automated systems reshapes informational asymmetries between public institutions and society. Within this context, citizen trust cannot be understood merely as a byproduct of technical transparency or as the outcome of passive normative consensus. Instead, it emerges as an inherently political and cultural construct whose development is conditioned by the democratic legitimacy of institutions.

Accordingly, the main theoretical tension identified in this study lies in the latent conflict between algorithmic rationality, driven by efficiency and procedural speed, and the preservation of bureaucratic discretion necessary for human judgment and democratic oversight. Ethical governance therefore requires recognizing that the role of AI in the public sector is not simply to accelerate decision-making processes at any cost, but to ensure that technological mediation does not undermine the democratic foundations and principles of equity that underpin public service.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that AI, particularly in its generative forms, offers significant opportunities to enhance administrative efficiency and address longstanding limitations in state capacity. However, the literature consistently warns that efficiency pursued without adequate human oversight, contextual sensitivity, and considerations of justice may erode bureaucratic discretion, reinforce structural inequalities, and generate public value failures. Ethical governance therefore emerges not as a supplementary consideration but as a functional necessity. Without explainable transparency and clear accountability mechanisms, the adoption of AI is unlikely to generate public value and may instead foster societal resistance or distrust.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the ethical governance of AI should not be understood merely as a regulatory or technical issue, but as a broader institutional and political challenge concerning the democratic legitimacy of state automation. Within this context, fundamental concepts such as bureaucratic discretion, algorithmic accountability, and citizen trust are continuously negotiated and contested.

The review indicates that the current state of the art in global AI governance is evolving toward hybrid models in which normative regulation, expressed through laws, national strategies, and governance frameworks, is complemented by technical safeguards such as bias audits, algorithmic impact assessments, and risk-based classification systems, as well as by the preservation of human-in-the-loop oversight in critical decision-making processes. The findings also highlight the growing relevance of scholarly contributions from the Global South. Studies from Brazil and other Latin American countries examining the use of AI in auditing, anti-corruption initiatives, and digital public services demonstrate that contexts marked

by inequality and institutional constraints can generate valuable and pragmatic contributions to the international debate on the ethical governance of AI.

It can therefore be concluded that the path toward ethical AI in the public sector requires moving beyond technological enthusiasm in favor of a stance of critical optimism, ensuring that automation serves to strengthen rather than weaken the democratic relationship between the state and its citizens. For public managers, this entails investing simultaneously in data infrastructure, digital literacy, and governance mechanisms. From an academic perspective, it is also important to acknowledge the analytical limitations of this study, including its exclusive reliance on the Web of Science database, its temporal focus on the period from 2021 to 2025, and its restriction to English-language publications. Although these choices contribute to methodological rigor, they may have excluded relevant contributions published in other languages or indexed in regional databases, potentially overlooking alternative perspectives and contextual nuances of the phenomenon.

In light of these limitations and the findings of the present review, future research should pursue more specific empirical and analytical agendas. Promising directions include comparative analyses of different regulatory approaches, such as European governance frameworks and the more pragmatic models emerging from the Global South; investigations into how AI affects the reduction, transformation, or reconfiguration of bureaucratic discretion in the day-to-day activities of public servants; and in-depth examinations of the direct impact of automated decision-making on citizens' trust in public institutions across diverse national contexts.

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