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Modeling the Pragmatic Legitimacy of Public Organizations Based on Good Governance Principles

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ABSTRACT

As public expectations become more complex and scrutiny of public-sector performance intensifies, organizational legitimacy and good governance have become central concerns for managers and policymakers. Inefficiency, limited transparency, internal resistance, and political pressure can weaken the legitimacy of public organizations and erode public trust. This study develops a context-sensitive model of pragmatic legitimacy for Iranian public organizations based on good-governance principles. An applied qualitative design using grounded theory was adopted. Fourteen academic and executive experts in public administration, public policy, and governance were selected through purposive sampling supported by snowball referrals, with recruitment continuing until theoretical saturation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding. Initial coding produced 362 preliminary labels; after comparison, removal of duplication, and conceptual consolidation, 336 retained open-code statements were organized into six axial categories and 18 selective themes. The model identifies sociocultural, governance-administrative, and international-technological drivers; structural reform, transparency, accountability, anti-corruption, and public-participation strategies; cultural-social, structural-institutional, and legal-regulatory contextual conditions; external intervention, intra-organizational resistance, and systemic inefficiency as intervening conditions; and transparency, citizenship rights, efficiency, and organizational development as the core phenomenon. Expected outcomes include stronger legitimacy and public trust, greater transparency and accountability, lower corruption, improved efficiency, and higher service quality. The findings show that pragmatic legitimacy is not a single organizational attribute but a dynamic outcome of alignment among institutional conditions, stakeholder expectations, administrative capabilities, and credible governance practices.

Keywords: organizational legitimacy; governance; good governance; pragmatic legitimacy; public organizations; grounded theory

Introduction

Legitimacy is the generalized judgment that an organization's actions are appropriate within socially constructed systems of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995). In public administration, legitimacy is especially consequential because public organizations exercise authority, allocate collective resources, and deliver services under conditions of political visibility. Their continued capacity to act depends not only on formal legality but also on citizens' willingness to regard their decisions, procedures, and outcomes as acceptable.

Iranian public organizations have faced persistent challenges associated with fragmented information systems, uneven use of digital technologies, weak complaint-handling processes, limited citizen participation, administrative complexity, and declining trust. When legitimacy directly affects public cooperation, resource access, and implementation capacity, these weaknesses threaten both institutional credibility and operational effectiveness. The problem is therefore not merely reputational; it concerns the practical ability of public bodies to fulfill their mandates.

Pragmatic legitimacy is particularly relevant in this setting because it is grounded in stakeholders' judgments of whether an organization responds to their interests and produces valued benefits (Suchman, 1995). Good governance offers an actionable institutional basis for these judgments through transparency, accountability, participation, fairness, effectiveness, and the rule of law. These principles connect procedural integrity with service outcomes and can therefore help public organizations rebuild trust through observable, verifiable conduct rather than symbolic claims alone.

Despite extensive scholarship on organizational legitimacy, fewer studies have developed an empirically grounded model that connects pragmatic legitimacy to good-governance practices in Iranian public organizations. Existing work often treats legitimacy, trust, accountability, or service quality separately. The present study addresses this gap by identifying the causal, strategic, contextual, intervening, core, and consequential components of pragmatic legitimacy and integrating them into a single paradigm model.

The study asks: What grounded model explains pragmatic organizational legitimacy based on good-governance principles in public organizations in Tehran?

Theoretical Background

Organizational legitimacy

Organizational legitimacy is both an institutional resource and a social judgment. It can facilitate access to resources, strengthen stakeholder support, reduce resistance, and stabilize organizational relationships. At the same time, legitimacy remains audience-dependent: organizations may attempt to influence it, but they cannot confer it on themselves. Contemporary research therefore emphasizes the evaluative processes through which individuals and collectives judge organizational appropriateness (Bitektine et al., 2020; Schoon, 2022).

Suchman's (1995) influential typology distinguishes pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy rests on the perceived interests of an organization's immediate audiences (Suchman, 1995). It includes exchange judgments about direct benefits, influence judgments about responsiveness to broader interests, and dispositional judgments about whether the organization appears trustworthy and well intentioned. Moral legitimacy is a normative evaluation of whether organizational outputs, procedures, structures, and leaders are 'the right thing to do.' Cognitive legitimacy arises when organizational arrangements are understandable, taken for granted, or perceived as necessary.

These forms are analytically distinct but empirically connected. Transparent procedures can produce moral approval, make organizational conduct more comprehensible, and reassure stakeholders that the organization is responsive to their interests. Conversely, opacity, corruption, inconsistent procedures, and disregard for citizen expectations can simultaneously weaken pragmatic, moral, and cognitive support. Micro-level research further shows that legitimacy judgments vary with evaluators and conditions of uncertainty (Díez-Martín et al., 2022), reinforcing the need for context-sensitive models.

Pragmatic legitimacy and stakeholder responsiveness

From a pragmatic perspective, a public organization is legitimate to the extent that stakeholders experience it as useful, responsive, and aligned with their interests. The relationship resembles a social exchange, but the relevant benefits extend beyond narrow individual gain. Citizens may support an institution because it delivers reliable services, protects collective interests, provides fair opportunities to participate, or demonstrates credible responsiveness to communities. Where outcomes are difficult to measure, visible participation and transparent decision processes can act as evidence of responsiveness.

Empirical research supports this emphasis on audience evaluation. Islam et al. (2022) show how organizations navigate tensions between pragmatic and moral legitimacy in anti-bribery disclosure (Islam et al., 2022). Fujikura and Oe (2023) demonstrate that pragmatic legitimacy shapes investors' interpretations of environmental activity (Fujikura & Oe, 2023), while Castellano and Ivanova (2017) show how organizations use signals to establish legitimacy across institutional contexts (Castellano & Ivanova, 2017). Although these studies concern firms, the underlying mechanism—stakeholders evaluating credible alignment between claims, conduct, and interests—is directly relevant to public organizations.

Good governance as an institutional basis for legitimacy

Good governance translates broad expectations of appropriate public authority into observable institutional practices. International frameworks consistently emphasize accountability, transparency, participation, effectiveness, fairness, and rule-governed administration (Oecd, 2020; United Nations Development Programme, 1997). These principles matter for legitimacy because they shape both what public organizations achieve and how they achieve it. Service quality without procedural fairness may not generate durable support, while transparent procedures without administrative competence may fail to satisfy citizens' practical expectations.

The conceptual link is therefore reciprocal. Good-governance practices provide evidence from which stakeholders form legitimacy judgments; legitimacy, in turn, provides the trust and cooperation needed to implement reforms. This relationship is conditioned by legal capacity, organizational culture, political intervention, technological infrastructure, public awareness, and the independence of oversight mechanisms. A grounded model is appropriate because it can capture these interacting conditions rather than imposing a single linear explanation.

Methodology

Design

This applied qualitative study used grounded theory to develop an explanatory model from expert accounts. Grounded theory was selected because the research question concerns the relationships among conditions, actions, core processes, and consequences rather than the frequency of predefined variables. The analysis followed the iterative logic of open, axial, and selective coding described by Corbin and Strauss (2015) (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Reporting was also informed by the transparency principles of the COREQ framework for interview studies (Tong et al., 2007).

Participants and sampling

The study population comprised academics in public administration and experienced managers from Iranian public organizations. Participants were recruited purposively according to their ability to inform the research question, with snowball referrals used to identify additional information-rich experts. Academic participants were required to hold a doctorate in a relevant field, have at least 10 years of faculty experience, and have relevant publications or research experience. Executive participants were required to have at least 10 years of managerial experience in public organizations and substantive familiarity with governance or organizational-legitimacy issues.

Recruitment and analysis proceeded concurrently. Sampling ended after 14 interviews because subsequent interviews did not add substantively new concepts, category properties, or relationships; theoretical saturation was therefore judged to have been reached. Interviews were conducted in Tehran Province during spring 2025.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by the study objectives and theoretical background. The interview protocol introduced the study, gathered relevant participant characteristics, explained confidentiality, and organized the substantive questions around six domains: causal conditions, strategic actions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, the core phenomenon, and consequences. Follow-up prompts were used to clarify meanings, elicit examples, and examine relationships among concepts. Interviewing continued until the analytic categories were sufficiently developed.

Data analysis

Analysis began with close reading and open coding of the interview material. Initial labels were compared continuously, redundant expressions were merged, and conceptually similar codes were grouped. The first pass produced 362 preliminary labels. After consolidation, 336 retained open-code statements were organized into six axial categories: 36 causal, 60 strategic, 60 contextual, 60 intervening, 60 core, and 60 consequential codes. At the selective-coding stage, these categories were integrated into 18 higher-order themes and linked in a paradigm model.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

Three coders reviewed and compared the interview material and resulting codes. Disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached, providing analyst triangulation and reducing dependence on a single researcher's interpretation. The study also maintained an explicit link between retained codes, axial categories, selective themes, and the final model. Participants were informed of the study purpose and the confidentiality of their responses. No identifying interview material is reported.

Research Findings

Participant characteristics

The 14 participants included 11 men and three women. Most held a doctorate or higher qualification, and all had at least 10 years of relevant experience (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of interview participants

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Women	3	21.4
	Men	11	78.6
Work experience	10–15 years	4	28.6
	15–20 years	7	50.0
	>20 years	3	21.4
Education	Master's degree	2	14.3
	Doctorate or higher	12	85.7
Interview location	Tehran Province	14	100.0

Open and axial coding

Open coding identified a broad set of conditions, actions, capacities, barriers, and anticipated outcomes. Continuous comparison reduced duplication while preserving the substantive range of expert accounts. Tables 2–7 present the 336 retained open-code statements and their axial-category assignments.

Table 2. Retained open codes for causal conditions

Axial category	Open code
Causal conditions	Growing citizen awareness
Causal conditions	Rising public demands for accountability
Causal conditions	Expansion of independent media
Causal conditions	Emerging social transformations
Causal conditions	Pressure from civil-society institutions
Causal conditions	Growth of information technology
Causal conditions	Economic globalization
Causal conditions	Higher levels of public education
Causal conditions	Expansion of online public spaces
Causal conditions	Greater information transparency
Causal conditions	Lessons from previous governance experience
Causal conditions	Growth of social networks
Causal conditions	Pressure from public opinion
Causal conditions	Administrative-system inefficiency
Causal conditions	Organized corruption
Causal conditions	Social crises
Causal conditions	Economic crises
Causal conditions	Environmental crises
Causal conditions	Managerial conflicts of interest
Causal conditions	Generational turnover among managers
Causal conditions	Pressure from international institutions
Causal conditions	New legal requirements
Causal conditions	System-wide administrative policies
Causal conditions	Developments in citizenship rights
Causal conditions	Political-legitimacy crises
Causal conditions	Regional developments
Causal conditions	Regional competition
Causal conditions	Public distrust
Causal conditions	Demands for financial transparency
Causal conditions	Demands for administrative justice
Causal conditions	Development of social capital
Causal conditions	Technological change
Causal conditions	Changes in management models
Causal conditions	Human-capital crises
Causal conditions	Weak organizational accountability
Causal conditions	Pressure from oversight bodies

Table 3. Retained open codes for strategic actions

Axial category	Open code
Strategic actions	Formulating a transparency charter
Strategic actions	Establishing an accountability system
Strategic actions	Developing citizen-participation processes
Strategic actions	Establishing public-oversight platforms
Strategic actions	Institutionalizing administrative ethics
Strategic actions	Strengthening an accountable organizational culture
Strategic actions	Designing anti-corruption policies
Strategic actions	Improving financial transparency
Strategic actions	Creating a one-stop government-service portal
Strategic actions	Implementing a performance-management system
Strategic actions	Developing e-government
Strategic actions	Improving public-information processes
Strategic actions	Developing feedback mechanisms
Strategic actions	Launching public-opinion survey systems
Strategic actions	Establishing social-oversight mechanisms
Strategic actions	Strengthening the rule of law
Strategic actions	Ensuring fair regulation
Strategic actions	Making policymaking transparent
Strategic actions	Supporting independent oversight bodies
Strategic actions	Developing public-service standards
Strategic actions	Promoting distributive justice
Strategic actions	Creating a performance-monitoring system
Strategic actions	Strengthening media accountability
Strategic actions	Expanding access to information
Strategic actions	Streamlining executive processes
Strategic actions	Making administrative processes transparent
Strategic actions	Reviewing the organizational structure
Strategic actions	Strengthening managerial accountability
Strategic actions	Enhancing institutional accountability
Strategic actions	Improving complaint-handling mechanisms
Strategic actions	Establishing continuous reporting systems
Strategic actions	Monitoring recruitment processes
Strategic actions	Applying merit-based selection
Strategic actions	Managing conflicts of interest
Strategic actions	Implementing open-management policies
Strategic actions	Improving stakeholder communication
Strategic actions	Developing social-responsibility strategies
Strategic actions	Developing organizational diplomacy
Strategic actions	Improving public-service evaluation
Strategic actions	Ensuring transparency in financial processes
Strategic actions	Strengthening managerial-performance evaluation
Strategic actions	Creating social-dialogue mechanisms
Strategic actions	Protecting whistleblowers
Strategic actions	Updating policymaking processes
Strategic actions	Continuously monitoring performance transparency
Strategic actions	Using smart-administration tools
Strategic actions	Designing a conflict-of-interest management system
Strategic actions	Making the decision chain transparent
Strategic actions	Defining transparent goals and missions
Strategic actions	Developing managerial incentive and sanction policies
Strategic actions	Creating accountable local-level structures
Strategic actions	Designing internal-control mechanisms
Strategic actions	Strengthening engagement with civic organizations
Strategic actions	Creating project-transparency mechanisms
Strategic actions	Improving data governance
Strategic actions	Improving human-resource management processes
Strategic actions	Designing an integrated communication system
Strategic actions	Developing strategies to increase public trust
Strategic actions	Creating permanent advisory structures
Strategic actions	Continuously monitoring stakeholder satisfaction

Table 4. Retained open codes for contextual conditions

Axial category	Open code
Contextual conditions	A public culture of demanding accountability
Contextual conditions	Level of social trust
Contextual conditions	Citizens' awareness of their rights
Contextual conditions	General educational attainment
Contextual conditions	A societal culture of accountability
Contextual conditions	Historical patterns of administrative conduct
Contextual conditions	Quality of government-citizen interaction
Contextual conditions	Presence of free and independent media
Contextual conditions	Level of media transparency
Contextual conditions	Public access to information
Contextual conditions	Organizational culture of transparency
Contextual conditions	Clear and effective superior laws
Contextual conditions	Legal framework for administrative accountability
Contextual conditions	Anti-corruption laws and regulations
Contextual conditions	Position of civil-society institutions
Contextual conditions	Public willingness and capacity to participate
Contextual conditions	Capacity of oversight institutions
Contextual conditions	Degree of administrative decentralization
Contextual conditions	Societal commitment to justice
Contextual conditions	Judicial independence
Contextual conditions	Effectiveness of political parties
Contextual conditions	Efficiency of the electoral system
Contextual conditions	Legitimacy of power structures
Contextual conditions	Constructive executive-legislative interaction
Contextual conditions	Legislative support for transparency
Contextual conditions	A public culture of reporting wrongdoing
Contextual conditions	Independence of watchdog media
Contextual conditions	Robust communication infrastructure
Contextual conditions	Access to information technology
Contextual conditions	Level of e-government development
Contextual conditions	Presence of citizen arbitration bodies
Contextual conditions	A culture of respecting citizenship rights
Contextual conditions	Independence of nongovernmental organizations
Contextual conditions	Effectiveness of public education
Contextual conditions	Social cohesion
Contextual conditions	Historical legitimacy of public institutions
Contextual conditions	Level of social welfare
Contextual conditions	Participation of professional organizations
Contextual conditions	Institutionalized work ethic
Contextual conditions	Quality of interaction with the private sector
Contextual conditions	Transparent resource-management systems
Contextual conditions	A healthy organizational culture
Contextual conditions	Equity in resource distribution
Contextual conditions	Public belief in government effectiveness
Contextual conditions	The role of elites in shaping public opinion
Contextual conditions	Public belief in the necessity of transparency
Contextual conditions	Capacity for cooperation among oversight bodies
Contextual conditions	Transparent performance-evaluation processes
Contextual conditions	Stability of administrative structures
Contextual conditions	Organizational openness to oversight
Contextual conditions	Accountability of public managers
Contextual conditions	Meritocracy in recruitment
Contextual conditions	Availability of successful governance models
Contextual conditions	A culture of legal compliance
Contextual conditions	Effective dispute-resolution mechanisms
Contextual conditions	Clearly defined corruption-reporting structures
Contextual conditions	A culture of interaction across management levels
Contextual conditions	Availability of accountable management models
Contextual conditions	Legal standing of accountability institutions
Contextual conditions	The role of public education in institutionalizing transparency

Table 5. Retained open codes for intervening conditions

Axial category	Open code
Intervening conditions	Managerial resistance to change
Intervening conditions	Closed and traditional organizational cultures
Intervening conditions	Conflicts of interest at managerial levels
Intervening conditions	Political influence within the organization
Intervening conditions	External pressure from special-interest stakeholders
Intervening conditions	Absence of a transparent accountability mechanism
Intervening conditions	Intervention by superior authorities in executive decisions
Intervening conditions	Weak internal-oversight structures
Intervening conditions	Financial and administrative corruption at multiple levels
Intervening conditions	Lack of an effective employee-incentive system
Intervening conditions	Managerial instability and frequent turnover
Intervening conditions	Weaknesses in performance evaluation
Intervening conditions	Lack of transparency in financial processes
Intervening conditions	Conflicting or contradictory laws
Intervening conditions	Weak legal oversight
Intervening conditions	Inadequate training for managers and employees
Intervening conditions	Influence of political and economic pressure groups
Intervening conditions	Absence of citizen-oversight mechanisms
Intervening conditions	Ineffective reward and sanction systems
Intervening conditions	Weak strategic planning
Intervening conditions	Corruption in tendering and contracting
Intervening conditions	Weak interagency interaction
Intervening conditions	Frequent changes in macro-level policies
Intervening conditions	Instrumental use of accountability rules
Intervening conditions	Public distrust of oversight agencies
Intervening conditions	Weak information and communication technology
Intervening conditions	Inadequate e-government infrastructure
Intervening conditions	Lack of political support for transparency
Intervening conditions	Extra-legal intervention by parallel institutions
Intervening conditions	Employee resistance to accountability
Intervening conditions	Imbalanced allocation of financial resources
Intervening conditions	Lack of independence among oversight bodies
Intervening conditions	Limited specialized human resources
Intervening conditions	Economic pressure on organizations
Intervening conditions	Insufficient appropriations and budgets
Intervening conditions	Conflicts among national macro-policies
Intervening conditions	Politicization of the administrative system
Intervening conditions	Weak culture of openness to transparency
Intervening conditions	Poor communication with civil-society institutions
Intervening conditions	Partisan interests influencing decisions
Intervening conditions	Overlapping mandates among oversight bodies
Intervening conditions	Shifts in managerial approaches after changes of government
Intervening conditions	Opaque appointment processes
Intervening conditions	Resistance to information disclosure
Intervening conditions	Complex and inefficient administrative structures
Intervening conditions	Underperformance by internal-oversight units
Intervening conditions	Short-term and unstable policies
Intervening conditions	Failure to update administrative laws
Intervening conditions	Inadequate media-accountability systems
Intervening conditions	Resistance to new technologies
Intervening conditions	Absence of a long-term vision for administrative reform
Intervening conditions	Patronage-oriented political culture in some agencies
Intervening conditions	Limited capacity for electronic oversight
Intervening conditions	Conflict between executive and oversight policies
Intervening conditions	Absence of a transparent public-information system
Intervening conditions	Narrow scope of accountability to citizens
Intervening conditions	Absence of mechanisms to address systemic corruption
Intervening conditions	Informal and opaque structures in decision-making
Intervening conditions	Disregard for independent expert opinion
Intervening conditions	Weak systems for evaluating organizational transparency

Table 6. Retained open codes for the core phenomenon

Axial category	Open code
Core phenomenon	Transparency of information and decisions
Core phenomenon	Accountability to the public
Core phenomenon	Equitable access to services
Core phenomenon	Efficiency in public-service delivery
Core phenomenon	Rule of law at all levels
Core phenomenon	Respect for citizenship rights
Core phenomenon	Active citizen participation in decision-making
Core phenomenon	Effective oversight of agency performance
Core phenomenon	Commitment to administrative ethics
Core phenomenon	Prevention of corruption in the administrative system
Core phenomenon	Strengthening social capital
Core phenomenon	Building public trust in the organization
Core phenomenon	Respect for meritocratic principles
Core phenomenon	Fairness and impartiality in decision-making
Core phenomenon	Alignment with national policies serving the public interest
Core phenomenon	Alignment of policies with societal needs
Core phenomenon	Commitment to financial accountability
Core phenomenon	Respect for human-rights principles in management
Core phenomenon	Enhanced financial transparency
Core phenomenon	Employee empowerment
Core phenomenon	Equal employment opportunities
Core phenomenon	Development of organizational justice
Core phenomenon	Implementation of performance management
Core phenomenon	Improved human-resource productivity
Core phenomenon	Professional accountability
Core phenomenon	Implementation of knowledge management
Core phenomenon	Use of modern technologies in management
Core phenomenon	Respect for stakeholder rights
Core phenomenon	Accountability of senior managers
Core phenomenon	Effective internal controls
Core phenomenon	Transparent budgeting processes
Core phenomenon	Respect for cultural diversity within the organization
Core phenomenon	Fair treatment of employees and service users
Core phenomenon	Evidence-informed policymaking
Core phenomenon	Accountability to public opinion
Core phenomenon	Employee ownership of organizational goals
Core phenomenon	Protection of citizens' confidential information
Core phenomenon	Development of an accountable organizational culture
Core phenomenon	Prevention of conflicts of interest
Core phenomenon	Support for innovation and creativity
Core phenomenon	Implementation of sustainable-development policies
Core phenomenon	Transparency in recruitment and promotion
Core phenomenon	Professional ethics in interactions
Core phenomenon	Transparent mechanisms for public oversight
Core phenomenon	Transparent citizen-relationship systems
Core phenomenon	Participatory evaluation systems
Core phenomenon	Enhanced organizational social accountability
Core phenomenon	Accurate and timely public information
Core phenomenon	Commitment to organizational social responsibility
Core phenomenon	Action against rent-seeking and structural corruption
Core phenomenon	Transparency in contracts and transactions
Core phenomenon	Respect for public needs and views
Core phenomenon	Promotion of an accountability culture
Core phenomenon	Commitment to continuous performance improvement
Core phenomenon	Rule of law in resource management
Core phenomenon	Use of independent expert opinion
Core phenomenon	Transparent internal-audit mechanisms
Core phenomenon	A system for responding to public complaints
Core phenomenon	Stronger organizational communication with stakeholders
Core phenomenon	A comprehensive performance-reporting system

Table 7. Retained open codes for consequences

Axial category	Open code
Consequences	Greater public trust in government
Consequences	Stronger social capital
Consequences	Reduced administrative corruption
Consequences	Higher public satisfaction with government services
Consequences	Greater accountability among public managers
Consequences	A more efficient administrative system
Consequences	More transparent decision-making
Consequences	Greater political legitimacy of government
Consequences	Stronger government-citizen interaction
Consequences	Fewer social conflicts
Consequences	Greater social justice
Consequences	Higher credibility of public organizations
Consequences	Improved government financial transparency
Consequences	More efficient resource allocation
Consequences	Stronger citizen oversight of government performance
Consequences	Greater organizational responsibility
Consequences	Higher satisfaction among public employees
Consequences	Greater legal legitimacy of executive agencies
Consequences	Reduced social dissatisfaction
Consequences	Prevention of rent-seeking and systemic corruption
Consequences	Greater social cohesion
Consequences	Higher information transparency across society
Consequences	Greater acceptance of public policies
Consequences	A stronger role for nongovernmental organizations
Consequences	Lower monitoring and inspection costs
Consequences	More transparent operation of government systems
Consequences	Improved social security
Consequences	More effective public policies
Consequences	Greater managerial accountability to the media
Consequences	Improved lawmaking and implementation processes
Consequences	A stronger culture of accountability in society
Consequences	Higher professional standing of managers
Consequences	More attractive public services
Consequences	A narrower government-citizen gap
Consequences	More participatory management
Consequences	A more competitive environment for public-service provision
Consequences	Greater organizational productivity
Consequences	Greater international legitimacy
Consequences	Reduced social pressure on government
Consequences	A stronger culture of lawfulness
Consequences	Higher-quality public policymaking
Consequences	Greater transparency in auctions and tenders
Consequences	Greater trust in oversight structures
Consequences	Greater symbolic capital for public organizations
Consequences	Fewer protests and acts of civil disobedience
Consequences	Greater creativity and innovation in organizations
Consequences	Greater trust in digital government services
Consequences	A stronger professional-ethics culture
Consequences	Reduced abuse of power
Consequences	Stronger internal-oversight capacity
Consequences	Improved crisis management in public organizations
Consequences	Lower costs arising from corruption and inefficiency
Consequences	More efficient human-resource management
Consequences	More transparent government-citizen communication
Consequences	More public-private partnerships
Consequences	Improved positions in global governance indicators
Consequences	Greater business confidence in government
Consequences	More cooperation among executive agencies
Consequences	A more favorable public image of government
Consequences	Improved government-media relations

Selective coding and category integration

At the selective-coding stage, conceptually related axial categories were integrated into higher-order themes. The resulting 18 themes specify the model's causal drivers, strategies, context, intervening conditions, core phenomenon, and consequences (Table 8). This step moved the analysis from descriptive code lists to an explanatory account of how pragmatic legitimacy can be developed and sustained.

Table 8. Selective themes and their relationship to the main category

Selective theme	Axial category	Main category
Sociocultural factors	Causal conditions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Governance and administrative factors	Causal conditions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
International and technological factors	Causal conditions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Structural and institutional reforms	Strategic actions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption strategies	Strategic actions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Participation and engagement with society	Strategic actions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Cultural and social factors	Contextual conditions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Structural and institutional factors	Contextual conditions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Legal and regulatory factors	Contextual conditions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Authoritarian and extra-organizational interventions	Intervening conditions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Intra-organizational resistance and obstructive behavior	Intervening conditions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Systemic disruption and process inefficiency	Intervening conditions	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Transparency and legitimacy	Core phenomenon	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Good governance and organizational citizenship rights	Core phenomenon	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Efficiency and organizational development	Core phenomenon	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Legitimacy and public trust	Consequences	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Transparency, accountability, and reduced corruption	Consequences	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations
Efficiency, organizational development, and service quality	Consequences	A good-governance model of pragmatic legitimacy in public organizations

Paradigm model

The final model positions sociocultural, governance-administrative, and international-technological factors as causal conditions. These drivers shape the core phenomenon—transparency and legitimacy, good governance and citizenship rights, and organizational efficiency and development. Structural reform, anti-corruption, accountability, and participatory engagement constitute the principal strategies. Their operation depends on cultural-social, structural-institutional, and legal-regulatory contexts and may be constrained by external intervention, internal resistance, and systemic inefficiency. When these relationships are managed coherently, the expected outcomes are stronger legitimacy and trust, lower corruption, and improved organizational performance and service quality.

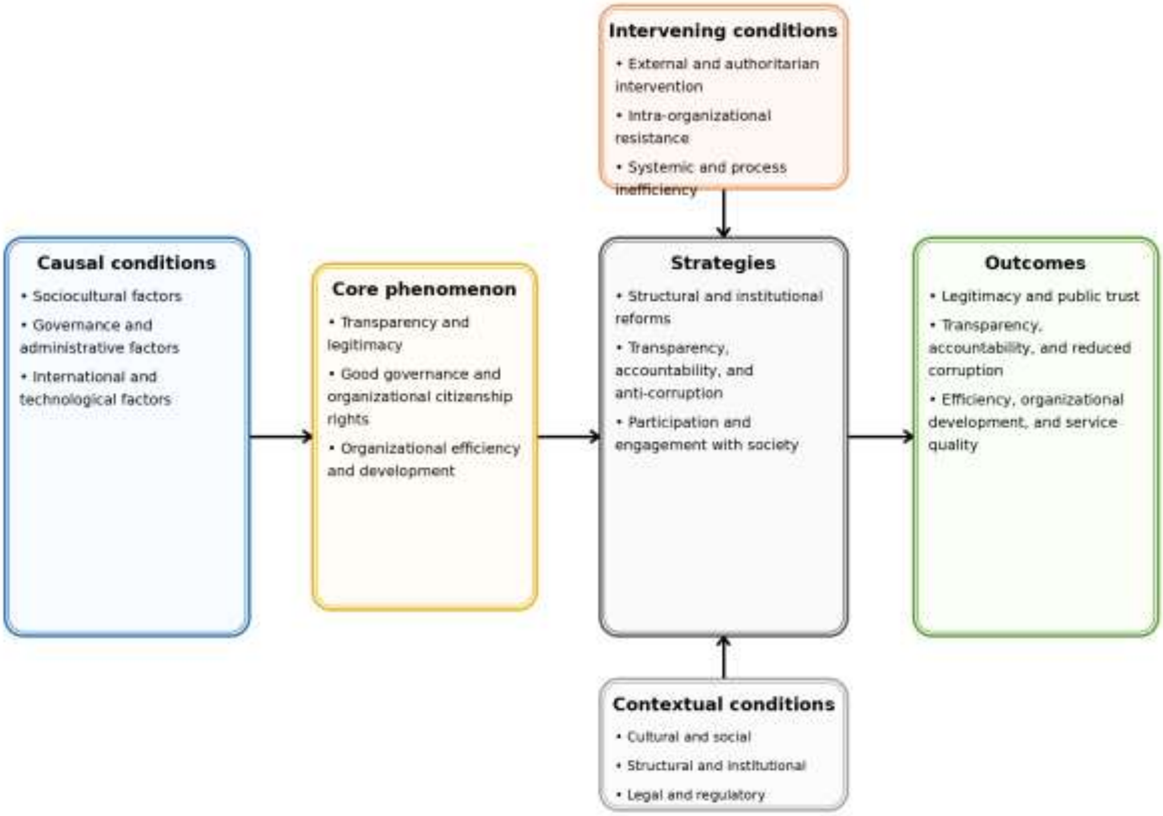

Figure 1. Paradigm model of pragmatic organizational legitimacy based on good governance

Discussion

The findings portray pragmatic legitimacy as a dynamic institutional accomplishment rather than a fixed organizational possession. Public organizations earn and retain legitimacy when stakeholders can observe a credible alignment among public needs, legal and ethical standards, administrative conduct, and service outcomes. This interpretation is consistent with Suchman's (1995) account of pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) and with later research that treats legitimacy as an audience-based judgment (Bitektine et al., 2020).

The causal conditions show why legitimacy pressures intensify. Higher citizen awareness, expanded digital communication, stronger demands for transparency, public distrust, crises, international standards, and changing managerial expectations all increase the visibility of organizational performance. These forces make older, closed forms of administration less sustainable. They also expand the range of audiences whose judgments matter, thereby increasing the need for coherent information, participation, and responsiveness.

The strategic category translates these pressures into organizational action. Transparency charters, open decision chains, public reporting, conflict-of-interest controls, whistleblower protection, complaint systems, merit-based recruitment, digital governance, and continuous stakeholder feedback are not independent initiatives. Together they create a verifiable architecture of responsiveness. Their legitimacy effect depends on consistency: symbolic disclosure without meaningful accountability may satisfy immediate pragmatic demands but create a moral-legitimacy deficit when claims and practices diverge, as illustrated by Islam et al. (2022) (Islam et al., 2022).

Contextual and intervening conditions explain why formally similar reforms may produce different outcomes. Legal clarity, oversight independence, social trust, civic capacity, administrative stability, digital infrastructure, and a culture of lawfulness can enable implementation. Political interference, patronage, internal resistance, budget constraints, overlapping mandates, and opaque appointment systems can neutralize even technically sound reforms. The model therefore rejects a universal checklist approach and instead emphasizes institutional fit and implementation capacity.

The core phenomenon integrates procedural and performance dimensions. Transparency, citizenship rights, organizational justice, evidence-informed policymaking, confidentiality, professional ethics, and stakeholder communication address the quality of public authority. Efficiency, knowledge management, employee empowerment, innovation, and performance reporting address the capacity to deliver. Durable pragmatic legitimacy requires both: stakeholders must experience the organization as procedurally trustworthy and practically effective.

The consequence category extends beyond image or reputation. The model anticipates stronger public trust, social capital, policy acceptance, oversight credibility, interagency cooperation, employee satisfaction, service quality, and adaptive capacity, alongside reduced corruption, abuse of power, and monitoring costs. These outcomes can generate a reinforcing cycle in which better governance strengthens legitimacy and greater legitimacy facilitates cooperation with subsequent reforms.

Conclusion and Implications

This study develops a grounded model of pragmatic legitimacy for public organizations based on good-governance principles. The model shows that legitimacy emerges from the interaction of social and institutional pressures, an organizational core combining transparency and capacity, strategically coordinated governance reforms, enabling or constraining context, and intervening political and administrative barriers. The central practical implication is that legitimacy cannot be restored through communication alone. It requires observable changes in how decisions are made, resources are managed, citizens are heard, conflicts of interest are controlled, and services are delivered.

Practical recommendations

Reform managerial structures and leadership practices by expanding participatory management, appropriate decentralization, and employee empowerment.

Modernize processes through interoperable digital services, transparent information dashboards, and auditable e-government systems.

Reengineer administrative workflows and eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy while retaining clear accountability for decisions.

Publish contracts, expenditures, performance results, and policy rationales in accessible formats, subject to legitimate confidentiality requirements.

Establish protected reporting channels for corruption, rapid complaint handling, conflict-of-interest controls, and independent internal audit.

Align organizational rules with superior laws, remove contradictory procedures, and provide practical training on citizenship rights for staff and service users.

Protect managerial decisions from undocumented political interference and record escalations through formal oversight channels.

Reduce internal resistance by involving employees in reform design, resolving role conflicts, and linking incentives to transparent performance improvement.

Monitor public trust and stakeholder satisfaction periodically and use the results to revise service and accountability policies.

Recognize units and employees that achieve measurable improvements in service quality, transparency, and citizen satisfaction.

Limitations and future research

The model is based on 14 expert interviews conducted in Tehran Province and should be transferred to other administrative settings with caution. The study identifies perceived relationships but does not estimate their relative strength or test causal effects. Future research should validate the 18-theme structure with broader samples, compare different public-service sectors and provinces, incorporate citizen and frontline-employee perspectives, and develop measurable indicators for longitudinal evaluation of legitimacy and governance reform.

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Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

AI use statement

Artificial intelligence tools were used only to support language editing, translation refinement, formatting, and consistency checks. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy of the data, analyses, interpretations, citations, and final content of the manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles related to qualitative research were observed. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the confidentiality of their information and identities was preserved throughout the research process. The data were used only for scientific purposes.

Transparency of Data

Reasonable requests for research materials should be directed to the corresponding author, subject to university policies and participant confidentiality.

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