

The Big Five Barriers Before Merit: A Conceptual Framework for Anti-Merit Recruitment in Public Administration

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ABSTRACT

Merit-based public employment is widely associated with stronger bureaucratic competence, impartiality, and institutional legitimacy. Yet scholarships on anti-merit recruitment remain fragmented across separate literatures on nepotism, ethnic favoritism, religious discrimination, cronyism, and corruption. This article develops a conceptual framework that unifies these practices as rival principles of allocation operating before merit. The central argument is that merit in public employment rests on two jointly necessary foundations: competence and impartiality. Recruitment becomes anti-merit when sequentially; family ties, ethnic identity, religious affiliation, personal loyalty, or bribery become more decisive than qualification and fitness for office. The article theorizes these five distinct mechanisms through which merit is displaced: nepotism privileges kinship, tribalism privileges group identity, religion-based favoritism reshapes perceived fitness, cronyism rewards insider loyalty, and corruption commodifies access to employment. Although these mechanisms differ, they converge in weakening neutral competence, organizational trust, fairness in selection, and institutional legitimacy. The article contributes to public administration theory by integrating these barriers into a single framework of anti-merit recruitment. It distinguishes lawful inclusion from illegitimate favoritism, and clarifying the difference between religion as a basis for exclusion before appointment and religiosity as a possible source of motivation after appointment. It concludes by advancing a set of propositions for future empirical research and by outlining governance reforms that can strengthen merit-based recruitment in public institutions.

Keywords: Meritocracy, public employment, nepotism, tribalism, religion, cronyism, corruption, public administration

INTRODUCTION

Merit-based recruitment is a foundational principle of public administration because it links public employment to competence, impartiality, and institutional legitimacy. Public organizations are expected to appoint individuals based on qualification, experience, and fitness for office rather than on the basis of private ties, identity-based preference, or informal exchange. Where merit governs recruitment, institutions are more likely to develop professional norms, withstand arbitrary influence, and maintain public trust. Where merit is displaced, employment systems become vulnerable to favoritism, exclusion, and misallocation.

A substantial body of scholarship shows that meritocratic recruitment contributes to bureaucratic competence, organizational cohesion, predictability, and resistance to undue influence (Boräng et al., 2018; Cornell et al., 2020; Evans & Rauch, 1999; Krause et al., 2006; Nistotskaya & Cingolani, 2016; Rauch & Evans, 2000; Yu & Jennings, 2021). Merit is therefore not merely a procedural ideal. It is also a governance mechanism through which institutions improve performance, strengthen neutrality, and signal fairness to citizens and applicants. At the same time, research on patronage, politicization, and corrupt hiring shows that when recruitment is shaped by personal or political ties rather than qualification, competency outcomes are greatly reduced (Colonnelli et al., 2020; Hollibaugh, 2015; Kolvani & Nistotskaya, 2025; Weaver, 2021).

Yet the literature on anti-merit recruitment remains fragmented. Nepotism is often studied as kin-based favoritism, tribalism as ethnic favoritism or ethnic exclusion, religion as either a source of discrimination or a source of post-appointment motivation, cronyism as loyalty-based advancement, and corruption as bribery or illicit exchange. These are important distinctions but treating them separately can obscure their shared institutional significance. In each case, access to employment is shifted away from qualification and impartiality toward an alternative reason for allocation. What unites these practices is not that they are identical, but that they operate as sequential principles through which office and opportunity are distributed before merit is fully considered.

This article develops a conceptual framework for understanding how the five recurring barriers, namely, nepotism, tribalism, religion-based favoritism, cronyism, and corruption displace merit in public employment. The central argument is that merit should be understood as having two jointly necessary dimensions: competence and impartiality. Competence refers to the capacity of recruitment systems to identify and select individuals able to perform public functions effectively. Impartiality refers to the expectation that access to office should be governed by fair and neutral procedures rather than by kinship, group identity, personal loyalty, or payment. Anti-merit recruitment occurs when one or more rival principles of allocation become more decisive than these two foundations.

This article makes three contributions to the public administration theory. First, it integrates five practices that are typically addressed in separate literature into a single conceptual model of anti-merit recruitment. Second, it distinguishes the mechanisms through which each barrier operates while showing their common effects on fairness, organizational trust, neutral competence, and institutional legitimacy. Third, it advances a set of propositions that translate a broad conceptual claim into a form suitable for future empirical testing. In doing so, the article moves beyond a descriptive catalog of barriers and toward a theory of how merit is displaced in employment systems.

Merit as Competence and Impartiality

Merit in public employment is often invoked as a self-evident standard, yet its meaning is frequently left undertheorized. In this article, merit is understood as resting on two jointly necessary dimensions: competence and impartiality. Competence refers to the selection of individuals who possess the knowledge, skills, experience, and judgment required to perform public functions effectively. Impartiality refers to the use of fair and neutral procedures that allocate office without privileging kinship, ethnicity, religion, personal loyalty, or monetary inducement. Merit-based recruitment therefore does not concern technical qualification alone. It also concerns the procedural integrity through which access to public employment is decided.

This dual understanding matters because institutions may satisfy one dimension while weakening the other. A recruitment system may appear competence-oriented by selecting formally educated candidates yet still be non-meritocratic if access is distorted by ethnic favoritism, family connections, or bribery. Likewise, a procedurally open system may still fail to produce meritocratic outcomes if it does not adequately assess ability, experience, and fitness for office. Merit in public administration should therefore be understood not as a narrow measure of credentials, but as the combination of capable selection and fair allocation.

This conception is consistent with scholarship showing that merit-based bureaucracies strengthen organizational performance, predictability, resistance to arbitrary interference, and public trust (Cornell et al., 2020; Evans & Rauch, 1999; Kolvani & Nistotskaya, 2025; Rauch & Evans, 2000). Where recruitment is anchored in competence, institutions are more likely to attract capable personnel and sustain professional standards. Where recruitment is anchored in impartiality, institutions are more likely to command legitimacy because access to office is seen as fair rather than captured by private advantage. The value of merit, then, is not exhausted by efficiency. It also lies in the public assurance that office is allocated through set objective rules rather than favoritism.

Understanding merit as competence and impartiality also clarifies the nature of anti-merit recruitment. Recruitment becomes anti-merit not only when less qualified individuals are selected, but also when access to opportunity is structured by rival principles of allocation. These rival principles may include family relationships,

tribal or ethnic belonging, religious affiliation, personal loyalty, or bribery. Even when some selected individuals appear capable, the system remains anti-merit if the basis of selection is not neutral and open competition. The core issue is therefore institutional logic: whether employment is allocated through ability and fair procedure, or through access, identity, and exchange.

This distinction is especially important for public administration because public offices differ from purely private employment. Public institutions do not merely seek internal efficiency; they also carry obligations of fairness, neutrality, and legitimacy. A public employment system that privileges kinship, tribal identity, loyalty, or payment undermines not only workforce quality but also the normative credibility of the state. In this sense, merit is both an administrative principle and a democratic value. It helps explain why recruitment practices that distort access to public office should be treated not simply as managerial weaknesses, but as institutional threats to impartial governance.

Rival Principles of Allocation: The Conceptual Framework

The central claim of this article is that anti-merit recruitment is best understood as a struggle between merit and rival principles of allocation. Merit-based recruitment allocates public employment through competence and impartiality. It seeks to identify the most qualified candidate through procedures that are objective, fair, open, and neutral. Rival principles of allocation, by contrast, distribute access to office through personal, social, or even transactional advantage. They do not all operate through the same mechanism, but they share a common institutional effect: they weaken the extent to which qualification and fair procedure determine who is appointed.

This framework shifts attention away from viewing nepotism, tribalism, religion-based favoritism, cronyism, and corruption as merely separate ethical failures. Instead, it treats them as a family of related anti-merit mechanisms. Each introduces an alternative logic into recruitment. Under nepotism, office is allocated through kinship. Under tribalism, office is allocated through ethnic, clan, or communal belonging. Under religion-based favoritism, office is allocated through perceived faith similarity, religious identity, or judgments tied to belief. Under cronyism, the office is allocated through personal loyalty and insider relations. Under corruption, the office is allocated through money, bribery, or illicit exchange. In each case, the decisive question becomes not who is best qualified under fair competition, but who is best positioned within a non-merit structure of access.

The advantage of this framework is that it captures both commonality and difference. The commonality is that all five barriers displace merit by introducing alternative criteria of selection. The differences lie in the specific mechanism through which displacement occurs. Nepotism narrows access through family connection. Tribalism ties access to collective identity and political belonging. Religion-based favoritism turns belief or perceived moral affinity into a signal of fitness. Cronyism rewards insiders whose value lies in personal dependence or loyalty rather than demonstrated competence. Corruption commodifies access by converting public office into an object of exchange. These distinctions matter because they help explain why anti-merit recruitment can appear in different forms across organizations and political systems while still producing broadly similar institutional consequences.

The framework also clarifies that anti-merit recruitment is not reducible to the simple selection of less capable people. A system may occasionally appoint competent individuals even when access is shaped by favoritism or bribery. Yet such a system remains anti-merit because the basis of allocation is not neutral competition. The problem is therefore deeper than outcome alone. It concerns the governing logic of appointments. Once recruitment is structured by kinship, identity, loyalty, or payment, the institutional meaning of office begins to change. Public employment no longer appears as a reward for qualification under fair procedure, but as an advantage controlled by networks of access.

This shift has important organizational consequences. When rival principles of allocation become visible within employment systems, they alter not only who gets selected but also how institutions are understood by those inside and outside them. Employees may come to believe that performance matters less than proximity to power. Applicants may see access to employment as unequal from the outset. Citizens may interpret public institutions as captured by private interests rather than guided by public standards. In this way, the displacement of merit weakens organizational trust, neutral competence, and institutional legitimacy simultaneously.

The framework further shows that the five barriers need not operate in isolation. In practice, they may reinforce one another. Kinship networks may overlap with ethnic identity. Ethnic favoritism may be justified through political loyalty. Loyalty-based systems may become vulnerable to bribery. Religion-based preference may combine with communal or regional exclusion. Anti-merit recruitment is therefore often cumulative rather than singular. The interaction of rival allocation principles can make merit harder to defend even where formal rules appear intact. This is why the article treats the “big five” not simply as a list of bad practices, but as an interconnected set of pressures that compete against meritocratic order in public employment.

The final strength of this framework is that it helps distinguish lawful inclusion from illegitimate favoritism. Public institutions in diverse societies may properly seek representativeness, equal access, and protection against exclusion. These goals do not require abandoning merit. Rather, they require safeguarding impartiality while ensuring that access to recruitment is genuinely open. The conceptual problem arises when social identity, religious belonging, or informal loyalty ceases to be a background condition and becomes the operative criterion of appointment. The difference between inclusive public employment and anti-merit favoritism therefore lies in whether selection remains anchored in competence and impartiality.

Taken together, this conceptual framework explains why the five barriers should be studied as rival principles of allocation. Their shared significance lies not merely in their moral undesirability, but in the way they restructure access to office. By placing kinship, identity, loyalty, or payment ahead of qualification and fair procedure, they weaken the institutional foundations on which merit-based public employment depends.

The Five Anti-Merit Mechanisms

Nepotism

Nepotism is the allocation of employment opportunity through family relationship rather than qualification. Its most direct effect is exclusion: a more qualified candidate may be denied appointment because a relative of someone in authority is preferred. Yet its deeper significance lies in the signal it sends about how institutions operate. When kinship becomes an avenue to office, public employment is no longer experienced as an open competition but as access mediated by lineage and proximity to power. Chassamboulli and Gomes (2021) model nepotism as queue-jumping in public-sector hiring, while Colonnelli et al. (2020) show how discretion in recruitment can yield less competent selection. Nepotism thus weakens both the fairness of access and the credibility of institutional procedures.

Tribalism

In many contexts, especially in Africa, what is popularly called tribalism is more precisely ethnic favoritism: the preference for members of one’s own ethnic, clan, regional, or communal group in recruitment and appointment. Its force is especially pronounced in plural societies where public employment is intertwined with political inclusion, resource distribution, and group grievance. Simson (2019) shows that ethnic inequality in public employment can become a major source of tension in Kenya and Uganda, even where education still influences entry into the public service. This suggests that tribalism does not always eliminate qualification entirely but distorts competition within a pool of otherwise eligible candidates. Tribalism therefore undermines impartiality by making group identity, rather than neutral competition, a decisive factor in access to office.

Religion-Based Favoritism

Religion occupies a more complex position than the other barriers because it can operate both before and after appointment. As a pre-appointment factor, religion becomes anti-merit when religious affiliation functions as a proxy for trustworthiness, moral worth, or social similarity. Studies have shown that religious identity can shape callbacks, evaluations, and judgments of candidate suitability (Di Stasio et al., 2021; King & Ahmad, 2010; Madrid et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2013). In such cases, religion reshapes perceived competence itself rather than merely affecting social preference. Yet religion may also matter after appointment. Bednarczuk (2019), Freeman and Houston (2010), O’Connor and Shahwan (2024), and Ongaro and Tantardini (2024) suggest that religiosity may influence job satisfaction, ethical commitment, or administrative discretion. The key distinction is therefore

not whether religion matters at all, but how it matters. Religion-based favoritism in selection is anti-merit; personal religiosity after neutral appointment is analytically different and does not justify religious preference in hiring.

Cronyism

Cronyism privileges friends, loyal associates, and insiders rather than relatives. It overlaps with patronage, but its defining feature is the reward of personal loyalty over demonstrated competence. Hollibaugh (2015) frames this tension in terms of neutral competence versus patronage in executive appointments. In organizational settings, cronyism not only distorts who is hired or promoted; it also reshapes behavior within the workplace. Shaheen et al. (2017) show that perceived organizational cronyism is associated with psychological contract breach and workplace deviance. When employees believe that advancement depends on personal dependence or insider status rather than merit, trust in leadership erodes and professional norms weaken. Cronyism thus turns employment systems into networks of dependence rather than communities organized around competence.

Corruption

Corruption places money, bribery, or illicit exchange ahead of merit. In recruitment, its clearest form is the sale of jobs or the expectation that candidates must pay to be hired or promoted. Weaver (2021) shows that corrupt hiring can distort allocation even where some hired individuals are not uniformly low quality. This nuance is important, but it does not alter the central institutional problem. When access to employment is bought, office is no longer allocated through open competition. Corruption commodifies public employment and creates incentives for both exclusion at entry and abuse after appointment. Even where some outcomes appear administratively functional, the logic of the system remains anti-merit because payment, rather than neutral assessment, determines access.

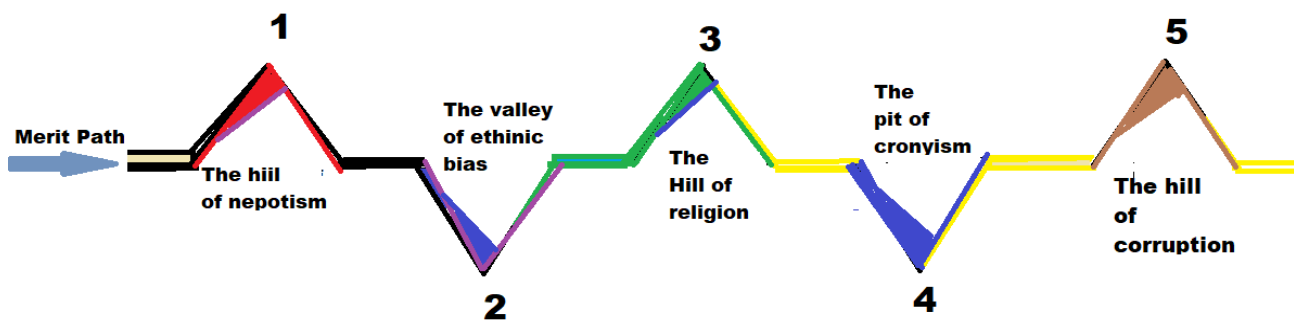


Fig.1. The merit path is disrupted by five anti-merit mechanisms: the hill of nepotism (1), the valley of ethnic bias/tribalism (2), the hill of cronyism (3), the pit of religion-based favoritism (4), and the hill of corruption (5). Although these barriers differ in form, each diverts recruitment and appointment away from competence and impartiality and toward kinship, identity, loyalty, or payment, thereby weakening fairness, neutral competence, and institutional legitimacy in public employment

Propositions

The conceptual framework developed in this article yields a set of propositions about how merit is displaced in public employment systems. These propositions are not offered as empirical findings, but as theoretically derived claims intended to guide future research on recruitment, organizational trust, impartiality, and institutional legitimacy.

Proposition 1: Merit-based public employment depends on the joint presence of competence in candidate selection and impartiality in recruitment procedure.

Proposition 2: Recruitment becomes anti-merit when rival principles of allocation become more decisive than competence and impartiality in determining access to employment.

Proposition 3: Nepotism weakens meritocratic recruitment by privileging family connection over qualification, thereby reducing fairness in access to office and confidence in organizational justice.

Proposition 4: Tribalism weakens impartiality in recruitment by privileging ethnic or communal belonging, especially in plural societies where public employment is tied to political inclusion and distributive grievance.

Proposition 5: Religion-based favoritism weakens neutral assessment in recruitment when religious affiliation functions as a proxy for trustworthiness, moral worth, or social similarity.

Proposition 6: Personal religiosity after merit-based appointment may positively influence job satisfaction, ethical commitment, or service orientation, but this post-appointment effect does not justify religion-based recruitment.

Proposition 7: Cronyism weakens neutral competence by rewarding insider loyalty and personal dependence over demonstrated ability, thereby increasing distrust, disengagement, and perceived unfairness within organizations.

Proposition 8: Corruption in hiring displaces merit by commodifying access to office, thereby increasing exclusion, misallocation, and incentives for later abuse of authority.

Proposition 9: The greater the combined presence of nepotism, tribalism, religion-based favoritism, cronyism, and corruption in recruitment, the weaker the resulting organizational trust, perceived fairness, and institutional legitimacy of public employment systems.

Proposition 10: Public institutions with stronger procedural safeguards, such as transparent vacancy announcements, written evaluation criteria, independent interview panels, conflict-of-interest rules, and anti-corruption enforcement, are more likely to preserve merit against rival allocation pressures.

Taken together, these propositions translate the article's central argument into a researchable conceptual model. They suggest that the study of anti-merit recruitment should move beyond isolated examination of single practices and instead focus on how different rival allocation principles interact to weaken competence, impartiality, and legitimacy in public employment. They also provide a basis for future empirical work using comparative case studies, surveys, interviews, or institutional analysis to test when and how these barriers become decisive in recruitment outcomes.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This article contributes to public administration scholarship by developing a unified conceptual framework for anti-merit recruitment in public employment. Existing research has generated important insights into nepotism, patronage, ethnic favoritism, religion in administration, organizational cronyism, and corruption. However, these topics are usually treated as separate problems located in different scholarly conversations. As a result, the field has lacked a common language for explaining how diverse forms of favoritism and exclusion can produce similar distortions in recruitment and appointment systems. This article addresses that gap by theorizing nepotism, tribalism, religion-based favoritism, cronyism, and corruption as related but distinct rival principles of allocation.

The first contribution is integrative. The article shows that the five barriers can be understood within a single framework centered on the displacement of merit. Rather than approaching each practice as an isolated ethical failure or contextual irregularity, the framework locates them within a broader struggle over how office is allocated. Merit-based recruitment allocates opportunity through competence and impartiality. Anti-merit recruitment allocates opportunity through kinship, ethnic identity, religious affiliation, personal loyalty, or bribery. This conceptual shift matters because it clarifies that the core problem is not merely the presence of undesirable practices, but the substitution of rival allocation logics for meritocratic selection.

The second contribution is analytical. Although the five barriers share a common anti-merit effect, they do not operate through the same mechanism. Nepotism privileges family connection. Tribalism privileges ethnic or

communal belonging. Religion-based favoritism privileges perceived faith similarity or penalizes religious difference. Cronyism privileges insider loyalty and personal dependence. Corruption privileges those able to pay or exchange favors. Treating these mechanisms as analytically distinct helps avoid conceptual flattening. It also makes it possible to explain why different forms of anti-merit recruitment may produce overlapping but not identical organizational consequences. Some distort access primarily at entry, others reshape workplace behavior after appointment, and others do both.

The third contribution is theoretical refinement around religion. Scholarship in public administration increasingly recognizes that religion may shape ethical reasoning, job satisfaction, and administrative discretion (Bednarczuk, 2019; O'Connor & Shahwan, 2024; Ongaro & Tantardini, 2024). Yet religion can also operate as a basis for exclusion or preferential treatment in recruitment (Di Stasio et al., 2021; King & Ahmad, 2010; Wright et al., 2013). This article clarifies that these are not the same phenomenon. Religion-based favoritism before appointment is anti-merit because it distorts neutral selection. Personal religiosity after appointment may still affect motivation or conduct, but that possible effect does not justify using religion as a criterion for access to office. By separating pre-appointment favoritism from post-appointment motivation, the article resolves an ambiguity that often weakens discussion of religion in public employment.

The fourth contribution is that the article translates a conceptual argument into researchable propositions. Conceptual articles are strongest when they do more than summarize prior literature. They should also provide a structure that future empirical work can test, refine, or challenge. By advancing propositions about how the five barriers affect competence, impartiality, organizational trust, and legitimacy, this article provides a bridge between theory-building and future empirical investigation. The framework can therefore support comparative studies, case-based inquiry, survey research, or mixed-methods work on public sector recruitment and appointment systems.

Taken together, these contributions move the discussion of anti-merit recruitment beyond moral denunciation and beyond fragmented issue-specific analysis. The article offers a more coherent vocabulary for understanding how public employment systems drift away from merit even when formal rules remain in place. In that sense, its contribution is not only to identify five barriers before merit, but to explain how they belong to a wider theoretical problem at the center of public administration: the conditions under which office is allocated by ability and impartiality rather than by access, identity, loyalty, or exchange.

Governance Implications

The conceptual argument advanced in this article has direct implications for the design of public employment systems. If anti-merit recruitment occurs when rival principles of allocation displace competence and impartiality, then the protection of merit depends less on rhetorical commitment alone than on institutional design. Public institutions do not preserve merit simply by declaring it. They preserve merit by building procedures that make favoritism, exclusion, and illicit exchange more difficult to translate into appointments.

The first implication is the importance of procedural transparency. Recruitment systems are more defensible when vacancies are publicly advertised, eligibility criteria are clearly stated in advance, and selection procedures are documented. Transparency reduces the ability of decision makers to manipulate entry points in favor of relatives, co-ethnics, co-religionists, political allies, or paying candidates. It also improves public confidence by making recruitment legible to applicants and external observers. Where access to information about jobs is restricted or selectively circulated, rival allocation principles gain room to operate before merit can be fairly assessed.

The second implication is the need for structured and evidence-based evaluation. Merit is most vulnerable where assessment criteria are vague, informal, or easily adjusted to justify predetermined outcomes. Written scoring guides, standardized interview procedures, documented justifications, and clear qualification thresholds help tie appointment decisions to competence rather than to personal preference. Such measures do not eliminate discretion entirely, but they make discretion more accountable. The more recruitment decisions must be explained in relation to explicit criteria, the harder it becomes to conceal nepotism, tribal favoritism, cronyism, or corruption beneath the language of ordinary selection.

The third implication is the value of institutional insulation and oversight. Independent interview panels, conflict-of-interest declarations, audit mechanisms, appeal procedures, and external review can reduce the concentration of unchecked appointment power. This matters because anti-merit recruitment often flourishes where access to office is controlled by a small number of actors whose decisions are weakly monitored. Insulation does not mean detaching recruitment from all democratic or administrative oversight. Rather, it means preventing public employment from becoming an instrument of personal reward, political dependence, or informal exchange.

The fourth implication concerns anti-discrimination and inclusion safeguards. In plural societies, the defense of merit must not become a cover for entrenched exclusion. Public employment systems should therefore combine impartial competition with lawful protections against discrimination on ethnic, religious, or communal grounds. Inclusive recruitment outreach, transparent shortlisting, equal-opportunity monitoring, and mechanisms for reporting discriminatory treatment can help institutions distinguish between fair representation and illegitimate favoritism. The goal is not a version of merit that ignores social inequality, but one that preserves competence and fairness while resisting capture by identity-based preference.

The fifth implication is the need for strong anti-corruption controls in recruitment and promotion. Where hiring decisions can be bought, merit is displaced even if some appointed individuals later prove capable. Public institutions should therefore treat recruitment corruption as a core governance problem rather than a peripheral administrative irregularity. Controls such as audit trails, rotation of panel members, declaration of interests, secure complaint channels, sanctions for bribery, and independent investigation capacity can reduce the conversion of office into a private commodity. Anti-corruption enforcement is especially important because once jobs are acquired through payment, appointees and officials may face incentives to recover private costs through later misuse of office.

A further implication is cultural as well as procedural. Institutions must foster norms of neutral competence in which advancement is seen to follow performance, qualification, and fair assessment rather than access to patrons or insiders. Formal rules matter, but they are not self-enforcing. Where employees believe that kinship, loyalty, or identity determine opportunity, organizational trust declines even in the presence of written merit rules. Public institutions therefore need visible and credible signals that rules are applied consistently, that favoritism is sanctionable, and that competence remains the legitimate basis of office.

These governance implications also suggest a broader lesson for reform. Anti-merit recruitment should not be approached only as a matter of individual misconduct. It is equally a matter of institutional vulnerability. Systems become susceptible to nepotism, tribalism, religion-based favoritism, cronyism, and corruption when procedures are opaque, discretion is weakly constrained, oversight is limited, and accountability is uncertain. Reform is therefore most effective when it addresses the structure of opportunity for anti-merit behavior rather than merely condemning its outcomes after the fact.

In this sense, the governance challenge is straightforward but demanding public employment systems must be designed so that qualifications and fair procedure are harder to displace. Transparent recruitment, structured evaluation, independent oversight, anti-discrimination protection, and anti-corruption enforcement do not guarantee perfect meritocracy. They do, however, reduce the institutional space within which rival principles of allocation can dominate. Where such safeguards are strong, merit is more likely to be preserved. Where they are weak, public offices become more vulnerable to allocation by access rather than ability.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the problem of anti-merit recruitment in public employment is best understood not as a collection of isolated abuses, but as a broader struggle between merit and rival principles of allocation. Merit-based employment depends on two conditions: competence and impartiality. When these conditions are displaced by kinship, ethnic identity, religious favoritism, personal loyalty, or bribery, recruitment ceases to function as a neutral search for the most qualified candidate and becomes instead a mechanism for distributing advantage.

The article's central contribution is to integrate nepotism, tribalism, religion-based favoritism, cronyism, and corruption into a single conceptual framework. In this framework, each barrier operates through a distinct mechanism, yet all converge in weakening fairness, neutral competence, organizational trust, and institutional legitimacy. By theorizing these practices together, the article provides a clearer vocabulary for understanding how public employment systems drift away from merit even when formal rules appear intact.

The article also clarifies an important distinction regarding religion. Religion may improperly shape access to employment when used as a criterion of selection, yet personal religiosity may still influence motivation or ethical conduct after appointment. That distinction helps refine how public administration scholars should think about identity, motivation, and discrimination in the study of recruitment and governance.

For public administration scholarships, the framework offers a basis for future empirical work on the conditions under which merit is displaced, the organizational consequences of anti-merit recruitment, and the institutional safeguards that can protect fair selection. For practice, the argument is straightforward: merit is not sustained by rhetoric alone. It requires institutional designs that make favoritism, exclusion, and illicit exchange harder to convert into public appointments. Where such safeguards are weak, the barriers before merit endure. Where they are strong, public employment is more likely to reward ability rather than access.

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