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Recruitment Panel Composition and Perceptions of Nepotism and Tribalism: Evidence from the Limpopo Provincial Government

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Abstract:

This article examines how the appointment of recruitment panel members influences perceptions of nepotism and tribalism within the Limpopo Provincial Government in South Africa. Public service recruitment is expected to reflect constitutional principles of fairness, transparency, accountability, and merit. However, recurring allegations of favouritism, political interference, and identity-based bias continue to undermine institutional legitimacy and weaken employee morale. When recruitment outcomes are contested or perceived as biased, the credibility of the wider administrative system is placed at risk, affecting both internal organisational culture and external public trust. The study adopts a qualitative systematic review design, drawing on recent peer reviewed scholarship, official oversight reports, and government policy documents published between 2020 and 2025. Rather than focusing only on final appointment decisions, the analysis interrogates the upstream processes that shape those decisions, with particular attention to the composition of recruitment panels. It explores how panel selection criteria, the presence or absence of independent monitoring, and the strength of accountability mechanisms influence perceptions of procedural justice. The findings suggest that opaque panel appointment practices, limited transparency regarding selection criteria, and inconsistent consequence management create fertile ground for suspicion. In environments where identity dynamics are socially salient, such weaknesses may easily be interpreted as evidence of nepotism or tribal preference, even in the absence of proven misconduct. Conversely, structured competency-based frameworks, independent observers, comprehensive documentation, and digital audit trails are associated with stronger perceptions of neutrality and fairness. The article concludes that recruitment legitimacy depends not only on who is appointed but also on who makes those decisions and how transparently they are selected. Reforming panel appointment processes therefore represents a practical and strategic pathway to restoring public confidence and reinforcing administrative integrity within provincial governance systems.

Keywords: Limpopo Provincial Government; Nepotism; Tribalism; Panel appointments; Public service recruitment

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INTRODUCTION

The south african public service is constitutionally grounded in fairness, accountability, transparency, and representativity as articulated in section 195 of the constitution. These principles establish enforceable standards for recruitment and selection. Yet recent oversight reports show uneven compliance across provinces, particularly in human resource management (Public Service Commission [PSC], 2024; Public Service Commission, 2025). Recruitment decisions remain one of

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the clearest indicators of whether constitutional values are embedded in administrative practice. Despite a comprehensive regulatory framework, provincial departments continue to face criticism related to patronage, nepotism, and identity-based bias. Investigations by the public protector south africa (2023) document maladministration and recruitment irregularities, while Mokgolo & Dikotla (2023) highlight ethical breaches during shortlisting and interviewing. Parliamentary oversight has also raised concerns about irregular appointments (Parliament of South Africa, 2025a, 2025b). These patterns often intensify where administrative authority intersects with local political influence (Motswaledi & Maseng, 2024). Research shows that perceptions of nepotism and tribalism have tangible consequences for trust and performance. Marawu (2025) links political deployment and ethical failures to declining governance credibility, while Obicci (2025) argues that corruption persists where enforcement lacks visible impartiality. Internationally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2023) associates merit-based systems with improved public trust, and the United Nations development programme [UNDP] (2022) underscores transparency as central to public sector integrity. When recruitment systems are perceived as captured by informal networks, institutional legitimacy weakens. Audit outcomes reinforce these concerns. The Auditor-General of South Africa [AGSA] (2024) identifies weaknesses in human resource management, including noncompliance in recruitment processes. Beyond technical compliance, recruitment shapes organisational culture, morale, and perceptions of leadership legitimacy. Although procedural irregularities are well documented, less attention has been given to the role of recruitment panel appointments in shaping fairness perceptions. Panels interpret competency criteria, score candidates, and recommend appointments. Their composition and independence are therefore central to procedural justice. Evidence confirms that recruitment practices influence fairness perceptions in public institutions (Nzimande, Ruggunan, Maramura, & Olabiyi, 2025), and that merit systems face challenges where discretion is weakly regulated (Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024). Transparency and structured systems enhance perceptions of procedural justice (Lo piccolo, Petruzzello, Chiesa, Pietrantonio, & Mariani, 2024), whereas opaque panel selection can fuel suspicion, particularly in fragile governance contexts (Motsepe, 2025a; Motsepe, 2025b). The Limpopo provincial government provides a relevant case. The province has experienced administrative capacity constraints, including financial and human resource instability (AGSA, 2024). Recruitment decisions therefore attract heightened scrutiny. Studies on patronage dynamics and professionalisation limits in the public service illustrate how internal arrangements shape perceptions of fairness (Motsepe & Sethu, 2025; Motsepe, Moekwa, & Sikhosana, 2025b). Public discourse frequently links employment outcomes to factional alignment, prompting formal investigations into alleged nepotism (Department of Employment & Labour, 2025). Even where claims remain unproven, their persistence signals a trust deficit. Addressing these perceptions requires examining institutional mechanisms rather than broad accusations of corruption. Policy instruments such as the national framework towards the professionalisation of the public service (Department of Public Service and Administration [DPSA], 2023c), the directive on human resources management and development for public service professionalisation (DPSA, 2024), the public service handbook (DPSA, 2023a), and related circulars (DPSA, 2023b) prescribe competency based and transparent recruitment. Scholarly analysis of oversight processes, including the public protector appointment system, emphasises structured and credible selection mechanisms (Bazana & Reddy, 2021). Panel appointment processes form part of this architecture. Transparent, criteria-based selection with safeguards against conflicts of interest can mitigate perceptions of bias, whereas informal processes may deepen suspicion. The main research objective is now explicitly stated as examining how recruitment panel appointment processes influence perceptions of nepotism and tribalism within the Limpopo Provincial Government. From this objective, three distinct research questions are clearly presented: how panel members are appointed, how these appointment processes shape perceptions of nepotism and tribalism, and what institutional safeguards can reduce perceived bias. By focusing on panel composition rather than only final outcomes, the study contributes to debates on administrative ethics, governance reform, and

institutional legitimacy in provincial public administration. Recruitment procedures are not merely technical exercises. They signal the values that guide the state and shape public confidence in its institutions.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Recruitment Integrity and Governance

Merit based recruitment remains central to governance reform. The OECD (2023) links professional and impartial civil services to higher institutional trust and policy coherence, while the National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Service identifies competency driven recruitment as foundational to a capable state (DPSA, 2023c). Transparent and standardised processes reduce opportunities for patronage and corruption. Yet meritocracy is not sustained by policy alone. Recruitment is enacted through individuals who interpret and apply formal criteria. Panels therefore represent a critical institutional site where merit is operationalised. Evidence shows that recruitment and selection practices shape fairness perceptions and retention outcomes (Nzimande, Ruggunan, Maramura, & Olabiyi, 2025). Oversight reports illustrate how recruitment integrity can weaken at implementation level. The PSC (2024, 2025) records irregularities in shortlisting, inconsistent interview scoring, and uneven adherence to procedures. Mokgolo and Dikotla (2023) similarly document ethical violations during recruitment processes. While not always linked to overt corruption, such weaknesses, often associated with limited training and capacity constraints, can erode public confidence. The AGSA (2024) reinforces this concern, identifying noncompliance, incomplete documentation, and weak consequence management in provincial departments. These findings confirm that formal frameworks alone do not guarantee integrity. Consistent enforcement and professionalisation remain essential (DPSA, 2024). International reform agendas echo this emphasis. The OECD (2023) highlights competency frameworks, digital platforms, and oversight systems designed to limit discretionary manipulation. Research shows that structured electronic recruitment enhances perceptions of procedural justice (Lo Piccolo et al., 2024). David (2024) further argues that digitalisation strengthens institutional quality in African governance systems by improving transparency, traceability, and accountability within administrative processes. Similarly, Garrido-Rodríguez, Zafra Gómez, & López Hernández (2024) demonstrate that effective auditing and information disclosure mechanisms strengthen public sector transparency and institutional credibility. However, an upstream issue persists: who appoints the panel members responsible for applying these safeguards? If panel composition is shaped through opaque processes, downstream controls may be undermined. Debates on professionalism further clarify this challenge. The UNDP (2022) stresses the role of ethical culture and leadership accountability, while Marawu (2025) and Motsepe (2025a) show how nepotism and patronage networks weaken meritocratic norms. Mudau (2022) similarly emphasises that African public administration frameworks and governance charters are intended to strengthen accountability, ethical conduct, and professional standards within state institutions. In addition, Hofisi (2022) argues that effective governance depends on integrated institutional coordination and coherent administrative systems capable of reinforcing accountability across different spheres of government. In subnational contexts where administrative and political networks intersect (Motswaledi & Maseng, 2024), panel appointments may either reinforce or disrupt entrenched patterns. Patronage politics perspectives further suggest that informal political and social networks can shape administrative decision making in ways that weaken merit systems and institutional neutrality. Moyo & Chikwanha (2022) note that governance reforms across Africa continue to face contradictions arising from tensions between formal institutional objectives and entrenched socio-political realities. The issue also extends beyond procedural compliance to questions of legitimacy and trust. Agné & Söderbaum (2022) argue that institutional legitimacy carries social and political costs when public institutions fail to maintain confidence in the fairness of their decision-making processes. Organisational trust research similarly demonstrates that perceptions of fairness

and procedural consistency significantly influence confidence in institutions and employee alignment with organisational values (Williamson & Perumal, 2022). Within recruitment systems, opaque panel appointment procedures may therefore weaken trust even where no explicit misconduct is proven. Zweni & Yan (2022) further show that governance effectiveness in South African institutions depends heavily on the ethical conduct and accountability of officials responsible for administrative processes. Although governance scholarship affirms the value of merit-based systems, less attention is given to the micro institutional mechanisms through which merit is enacted. In provincial governments, recruitment integrity must be assessed not only through policy design but through the composition and accountability of panels. Aligning formal recruitment frameworks, including those articulated in the Public Service Handbook and related instruments (DPISA, 2023a, 2023b), with transparent panel appointment processes is therefore essential. Recruitment integrity is not a static attribute. It requires sustained transparency, oversight, ethical leadership, institutional legitimacy, and professional accountability.

1.2 Nepotism and Tribalism in African Public Administration

Scholarship on nepotism and tribalism in African public administration highlights the tension between formal reforms and entrenched informal networks. Obicci (2025) argues that patronage relationships remain embedded in many administrative systems, shaping access to employment and resources. In South Africa, Marawu (2025) similarly notes that political deployment and ethical failures often coexist with formal commitments to meritocracy. The outcome is a layered governance environment where formal rules operate alongside social and political obligations. This does not imply pervasive corruption in every instance, but it does indicate that decision making frequently unfolds within overlapping institutional and relational pressures. Moyo & Chikwanha (2022) similarly observe that governance reform efforts across Africa continue to face contradictions arising from the interaction between formal institutional objectives and enduring socio-political realities. These contradictions complicate attempts to institutionalise impartial administrative systems, particularly in contexts where public employment carries both economic and symbolic significance. Institutional credibility and enforcement capacity are central to this dynamic. The UNDP (2022) contends that favouritism persists where accountability institutions lack visible independence and consistent consequence management. Mudau (2022) further emphasises that African public administration frameworks and governance charters seek to strengthen ethical governance, transparency, and accountability within state institutions, yet implementation gaps continue to weaken public confidence. Importantly, perceptions of bias can arise even in the absence of proven misconduct. Where processes are opaque or poorly communicated, procedurally lawful decisions may still attract suspicion. Recruitment is particularly vulnerable in this regard because employment outcomes are highly visible and socially significant. Nepotism and tribalism therefore function not only as governance failures but also as narratives shaped by trust, legitimacy, and perceived neutrality. Agné & Söderbaum (2022) argue that institutional legitimacy depends heavily on public belief that political and administrative authority is exercised fairly and consistently. When legitimacy is weakened, institutions incur broader social and political costs associated with declining trust and compliance. South African oversight bodies have documented weaknesses that intensify such perceptions. The Public Protector South Africa (2023) reports on maladministration and recruitment irregularities, including allegations of nepotism. The PSC (2024, 2025) identifies documentation gaps, inconsistent application of prescripts, and weak consequence management. These findings do not suggest systemic collapse. Rather, they demonstrate how procedural shortcomings create conditions in which identity-based suspicions can flourish. Williamson & Perumal (2022) similarly show that procedural justice significantly shapes organisational trust and employee alignment with institutional values. In recruitment settings, perceptions of inconsistent or selective application of procedures may therefore undermine trust even where formal compliance exists.

The constitutional commitment to representativity adds further complexity. Policies promoting employment equity seek to redress historical exclusion, while the National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Service emphasises balancing representativity with competency-based recruitment (DPSA, 2023c). Yet implementation challenges remain, particularly where discretion is weakly regulated (Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024). Contestation often arises not from the principle of equity itself, but from uncertainty about whether decisions are grounded in lawful criteria. Without transparent explanation, equity measures risk being interpreted as ethnic preference. Social identity dynamics are particularly relevant in this regard because individuals frequently interpret administrative outcomes through ethnic, regional, or group-based affiliations, especially where institutional trust is fragile. Research on patronage reinforces the importance of institutional safeguards. Motswaledi and Maseng (2024) show that political patronage can undermine performance where accountability is weak, while Motsepe (2025a) illustrates how internal hierarchies and informal networks may erode meritocratic norms. Hofisi (2022) further argues that effective governance in South Africa depends on integrated institutional coordination and coherent accountability mechanisms across spheres of government. Recruitment panels operate within these broader ecosystems. Senior managers who appoint panel members may be influenced by organisational and political contexts, whether directly or indirectly. Yet panel appointment remains underexamined compared to recruitment outcomes. This omission is significant in provinces such as Limpopo, where identity affiliations retain social salience. Recruitment decisions may quickly be interpreted through ethnic or regional lenses. Such interpretations do not automatically indicate bias, but they reflect the environment in which administrative decisions are assessed. Where opacity coincides with identity sensitivity, suspicion intensifies. Conversely, documented criteria, conflict of interest declarations, and adherence to professionalisation directives (DPSA, 2024) can serve as safeguards against reputational harm. Comparative governance assessments reinforce the importance of fairness perceptions. The OECD (2023) links impartial civil service systems to higher public trust and stronger service delivery, while the UNDP (2022) associates integrity with citizen confidence. Garrido-Rodríguez et al. (2024) further demonstrate that auditing systems and disclosure practices significantly strengthen institutional transparency and accountability in public administration. David (2024) similarly argues that digitalisation enhances institutional quality in African governance systems by improving transparency, traceability, and administrative efficiency. These insights suggest that technological and auditing reforms may reduce opportunities for procedural opacity in recruitment systems. Zweni & Yan (2022) also emphasise that accountable and ethical public officials are essential for strengthening governance credibility in South African institutions. Employment decisions therefore signal whether public institutions exercise power impartially. Viewed from this perspective, tribalism is not only a political challenge but also an institutional design issue. Informal or poorly documented panel appointment processes create space for suspicion. Transparent and externally monitored procedures aligned with oversight standards (DPSA, 2023c; PSC, 2024) can narrow that space. By focusing on panel appointment as a micro institutional mechanism, the analysis connects broad governance debates to everyday administrative practice, offering a more precise account of how trust, legitimacy, and perceptions of fairness are constructed or undermined within African public administration systems.

1.3 Procedural Justice and Perception

Procedural justice theory offers a useful lens for understanding why fairness perceptions underpin institutional legitimacy. Research shows that individuals assess authorities not only by outcomes but by whether decision making processes appear neutral, transparent, and respectful (Lo Piccolo et al., 2024). When applicants experience consistency and impartial treatment, they are more likely to accept decisions, even if unfavourable. Legitimacy therefore depends as much on process visibility and perceived voice as on distributive results. Agné & Söderbaum (2022) similarly argue that institutions incur significant social and political costs when legitimacy is weakened through perceptions of

inconsistency or unfairness. In public administration, this means that procedural credibility is essential not only for operational effectiveness but also for sustaining confidence in state institutions. In recruitment settings, this principle is particularly relevant. Applicants consider whether criteria were clear, interviews structured, and scoring applied consistently. The OECD (2023) links transparent competency frameworks and independent oversight to higher levels of trust, while the DPSA (2024) emphasises merit based, documented, and monitored human resource practices. Even unsuccessful candidates are more likely to accept outcomes when procedures appear rule bound. By contrast, unexplained deviations or opaque processes tend to reinforce suspicions of favouritism (Mokgolo & Dikotla, 2023). Williamson & Perumal (2022) further demonstrate that procedural justice directly influences organisational trust and person organisation fit, particularly where employees evaluate whether institutional processes reflect fairness and integrity. This suggests that perceptions of procedural fairness within recruitment systems have broader implications for employee morale, organisational cohesion, and institutional legitimacy. This analysis builds on procedural justice scholarship by highlighting the symbolic importance of panel composition. Recruitment panels do more than apply rules; they represent the institution to applicants. Perceived independence, expertise, and diversity shape how the entire process is interpreted. Studies on nepotism and ethical lapses in South African public administration suggest that concentrated decision-making authority within limited networks can weaken perceptions of neutrality (Marawu, 2025; Motsepe, 2025a). Panel composition therefore functions both as a procedural safeguard and as a visible signal of integrity. Mudau (2022) similarly argues that governance and public service ethics frameworks across Africa emphasise accountability, transparency, and professional conduct as essential principles for strengthening administrative legitimacy. Where recruitment panels appear politically connected or insufficiently independent, public confidence in procedural fairness may decline regardless of whether formal rules are technically followed. Consistency is another core element of procedural justice. Uniform application of employment policies reduces perceptions of arbitrariness. The DPSA (2023a, 2023b) provides standardised recruitment guidelines, yet uneven implementation can produce varying perceptions of integrity across departments. Oversight findings from the PSC (2024, 2025) and the Public Protector South Africa (2023) show that procedural deviations often intensify allegations of unfairness. Hofisi (2022) further notes that effective governance in South Africa depends on integrated institutional coordination and coherent accountability systems capable of promoting policy consistency across different spheres of government. Clear and publicly communicated criteria for appointing panel members could therefore narrow interpretive ambiguity and strengthen trust. In contexts characterised by strong social and political identities, such consistency becomes particularly important because procedural gaps are often interpreted through broader narratives of exclusion or favouritism. Digital reforms add further dimensions to procedural transparency. Evidence from Limpopo Province indicates that electronic recruitment systems improve traceability and limit undocumented discretion compared to manual processes (Motsepe, Sikhosana, & Sethu, 2025a). The OECD (2023) similarly notes that digital documentation enhances auditability. David (2024) further argues that digitalisation contributes positively to institutional quality in African governance systems by strengthening transparency, accountability, and administrative efficiency. Garrido-Rodriguez et al. (2024) likewise demonstrate that auditing systems and public information disclosure significantly improve institutional transparency and accountability. Yet technology does not remove human judgment. Panel members continue to interpret competencies and exercise discretion. Without credible and transparent mechanisms for appointing those members, digital safeguards may address technical gaps while leaving perception challenges unresolved. Zweni & Yan (2022) also emphasise that accountable public officials remain central to strengthening governance credibility, even in increasingly digital administrative environments.

Procedural justice in recruitment thus operates across interconnected levels. It begins with policy design grounded in professionalisation directives (DPSA, 2023c, 2024), extends to credible panel composition, and continues through structured deliberation and clear communication of outcomes.

Moyo & Chikwanha (2022) observe that governance reform efforts across Africa often encounter contradictions between formal institutional objectives and broader socio-political realities, reinforcing the importance of visible fairness and accountability in administrative systems. By situating panel appointment within this broader framework, legitimacy is understood as emerging not only from decisions themselves, but from who is entrusted to make them and how transparently that trust is conferred.

1.4 Conclusion of the Literature Review

The literature confirms that recruitment integrity is fundamental to public sector legitimacy. Merit based systems are consistently linked to stronger governance outcomes, lower risks of clientelism, and higher levels of public trust. At the same time, African scholarship highlights the persistence of nepotism and tribalism narratives, especially where political and administrative networks overlap. Procedural justice theory reinforces that fairness perceptions are shaped less by outcomes alone and more by visible neutrality, consistency, and transparency. Despite this consensus, an important gap remains. Much of the scholarship focuses on recruitment results or formal policy frameworks, with limited attention to how recruitment panel members themselves are appointed. Panel composition is a pivotal institutional moment where meritocratic principles are either upheld or weakened. In provinces such as Limpopo, where identity dynamics and political contestation remain socially salient, the way panels are constituted may significantly influence perceptions of nepotism and tribalism. By centring panel member appointment as a core analytical variable, this study moves beyond broad governance reform debates and generalised corruption narratives. It shifts attention to micro administrative design and its implications for legitimacy, trust, and organisational culture. Recruitment integrity, therefore, concerns not only who is selected for public office, but also who is entrusted with making those decisions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Institutional Theory and Procedural Justice Theory to explain how panel member appointments shape perceptions of nepotism and tribalism in the Limpopo Provincial Government. Public administration scholarship demonstrates that institutions often formalise rules and procedures to secure legitimacy, while informal practices and power relations influence how those rules are implemented in practice (Nzimande et al., 2025; Obicci, 2025). In the South African context, formal recruitment provisions contained in the Public Service Handbook and professionalisation frameworks operate within organisational and political environments that may shape implementation outcomes (DPSA, 2023a, 2023c). This creates space for divergence between codified merit principles and lived administrative realities. Oversight findings reinforce this institutional perspective. The PSC (2024, 2025) and the AGSA (2024) identify recurring weaknesses in recruitment compliance, documentation, and consequence management, while empirical studies show how patronage networks and political deployment may erode meritocratic systems (Marawu, 2025; Motsepe, 2025a; Motswaledi & Maseng, 2024). Institutional Theory therefore provides a useful lens for understanding how formal recruitment systems may coexist with informal pressures that shape administrative decision making. Procedural Justice Theory complements this institutional lens by foregrounding fairness perceptions in recruitment governance. Research shows that trust in institutions depends not only on outcomes but also on perceptions of neutrality, transparency, consistency, and respectful treatment during decision making processes (Lo Piccolo et al., 2024). In the South African public service, documented ethical violations during recruitment and selection processes have intensified perceptions of bias and weakened confidence in merit-based systems (Mokgolo & Dikotla, 2023). Professionalisation reforms consequently emphasise structured, competency driven, and transparent procedures because

legitimacy is closely linked to procedural fairness (DPSA, 2024). Within this framework, recruitment panel appointments become both governance control points and symbolic signals of institutional integrity. Institutionally, panel composition operationalises merit principles through the individuals entrusted with recruitment authority. Symbolically, panel members represent the state to applicants and employees, shaping how fairness and legitimacy are interpreted. Beyond these perspectives, the study further engages with theories of organisational trust, institutional legitimacy, patronage politics, and social identity to deepen the analytical framework. Organisational trust theory suggests that confidence in institutions depends on perceptions of consistency, integrity, and fairness in administrative conduct (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; OECD, 2023). Trust is therefore weakened when appointment processes appear opaque, selectively applied, or vulnerable to informal influence, even where formal compliance exists (Lo Piccolo et al., 2024). Institutional legitimacy scholarship similarly argues that public institutions derive credibility not only from legal authority but from public belief that power is exercised impartially and competently (Suchman, 1995; UNDP, 2022). Patronage politics perspectives further illuminate how political and social networks may shape administrative processes in ways that undermine meritocratic norms, particularly where political influence intersects with bureaucratic authority (Marawu, 2025; Motswaedi & Maseng, 2024). The study also incorporates insights from Social Identity Theory, which explains how individuals interpret decisions through ethnic, regional, or group-based affiliations in socially diverse environments (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In contexts such as Limpopo, where identity affiliations remain socially salient, procedural opacity may intensify perceptions of exclusion, favouritism, or tribalism. Integrating these theoretical perspectives strengthens the analytical depth of the study by situating recruitment panel appointments within broader debates on trust, legitimacy, identity, patronage, and governance in public administration. Collectively, these frameworks demonstrate that transparent and accountable panel appointment processes are essential not only for administrative compliance but also for sustaining institutional credibility and public confidence.

2.2 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative systematic review and document analysis design, relying exclusively on secondary sources such as peer reviewed journal articles, government reports, and institutional publications (Braun, 2021). As no primary human participants were involved, ethical clearance was not required.

Data were drawn from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia and official South African government platforms hosting policy directives and oversight reports relevant to the public service. These databases were selected because they provide extensive coverage of public administration, governance, and human resource management scholarship, while government platforms ensured access to authoritative institutional documents. Sources published between 2020 and 2025 were prioritised to maintain contemporary relevance (Chand, 2025).

The study consisted of two interrelated methodological components, namely a qualitative systematic review of peer reviewed academic literature and a document analysis of official policy and oversight materials. The systematic review component focused on identifying and synthesising scholarly literature on recruitment governance, procedural justice, nepotism, tribalism, and public sector professionalisation. The document analysis component focused on evaluating institutional reports, governance directives, parliamentary oversight records, and regulatory frameworks relevant to recruitment practices within the South African public service.

The search strategy applied combinations of keywords and Boolean operators across databases. In Scopus, the primary search strings included ("public service recruitment" AND "South Africa" AND nepotism), ("tribalism" OR patronage AND "public administration"), ("panel appointments" AND recruitment AND governance), and ("procedural justice" AND recruitment AND "public sector"). In Web of Science, similar search combinations were used, including ("public sector recruitment" AND

meritocracy AND governance) and (“institutional legitimacy” AND procedural justice AND recruitment). Google Scholar searches incorporated broader combinations such as (“South African public service recruitment” AND patronage), (“recruitment panel appointments” AND fairness), and (“governance ethics” AND public administration AND Limpopo). Searches were conducted within title, abstract, and keyword fields where database functionality permitted.

Titles and abstracts were systematically screened to determine relevance before full text review was undertaken. A PRISMA informed screening procedure guided the selection process. An initial 186 records were identified across databases and government repositories. After the removal of 34 duplicate records, 152 sources were screened by title and abstract. Of these, 61 records were excluded for lacking relevance to public governance or recruitment processes. The remaining 91 full text documents were assessed for eligibility, resulting in the exclusion of 55 sources that did not satisfy the inclusion criteria. The final sample consisted of 36 sources, including peer reviewed journal articles, policy documents, oversight reports, and parliamentary records relevant to recruitment governance and institutional legitimacy.

Inclusion criteria covered publications between 2020 and 2025 with empirical or theoretical relevance to public sector recruitment and governance, particularly studies focusing on corruption, patronage, professionalisation, or administrative ethics within South African or comparable governance contexts. Exclusion criteria eliminated private sector recruitment studies without public governance relevance, opinion pieces lacking empirical grounding, and publications without identifiable authorship, DOI, or official institutional origin.

Policy and oversight documents from the DPSA (2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2024), the PSC (2024, 2025), the Public Protector South Africa (2023), Parliament of South Africa (2025a, 2025b), and the AGSA (2024) were analysed alongside peer reviewed scholarship (Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024; Nzimande et al., 2025; Marawu, 2025). Documents were evaluated for methodological rigour, citation traceability, policy relevance, and contextual applicability.

Data were synthesised through thematic analysis, with coding focused on panel composition, oversight mechanisms, professionalisation directives, ethical breaches, and perception dynamics (Chand, 2025). Thematic analysis enabled the integration of findings from both the systematic review and document analysis components by identifying recurring governance vulnerabilities, procedural patterns, and institutional safeguards associated with recruitment panel appointments in the Limpopo Provincial Government.

Although the study relied primarily on secondary material, the analysis incorporated illustrative governance cases and documented recruitment irregularities drawn from official oversight reports, parliamentary statements, and institutional investigations within South African public administration. Reports from the Public Protector South Africa (2023), the PSC (2024, 2025), the AGSA (2024), and parliamentary oversight committees (Parliament of South Africa, 2025a, 2025b) were used to contextualise recurring concerns regarding recruitment irregularities, procedural opacity, weak consequence management, and perceptions of favouritism within provincial governance systems. While the study did not include primary interviews or confidential departmental case files, these documented incidents strengthened the interpretation of recruitment governance dynamics within the Limpopo Provincial Government. Future studies may build on this research through empirical interviews, participant observation, or department specific case studies to further examine lived experiences of recruitment panel processes and perceptions of fairness.

3. RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study by systematically addressing the research questions outlined in the introduction. Following the methodological procedures described above, peer reviewed literature, policy documents, and oversight reports were collected, screened, and synthesised to identify recurring governance and recruitment themes within the Limpopo Provincial Government. The

analysis then moved from data collection and document evaluation to thematic interpretation, enabling the identification of dominant patterns relating to recruitment governance, procedural fairness, and institutional legitimacy. In particular, the thematic coding process highlighted recurring concerns regarding panel composition, oversight weaknesses, procedural opacity, and perceptions of nepotism and tribalism. The discussion that follows links these empirical patterns to the study's theoretical framework and reviewed literature to explain how panel appointment processes shape perceptions of fairness, trust, and meritocratic legitimacy in public sector recruitment. Two central themes emerged from the analysis, namely Structural Vulnerabilities in Panel Appointment Processes and Identity Dynamics and Tribalism Narratives. Each theme is presented through analytical discussion supported by well cited tables illustrating the key governance patterns identified across the reviewed sources.

3.1. Panel Appointment Processes and Structural Vulnerabilities

The analysis reveals that panel member appointments in many provincial departments, including Limpopo, are frequently delegated to senior managers with limited independent verification mechanisms. While the Public Service Handbook and related employment policy circulars provide formal guidance on recruitment processes (DPSA, 2023a, 2023b), document analysis indicates uneven institutionalisation of clear criteria governing how panel members themselves are selected. Oversight reports consistently caution that weaknesses in internal controls, documentation, and consequence management create conditions in which discretion may be exercised without sufficient transparency (PSC, 2024; AGSA, 2024). Where selection criteria are informal, inconsistently recorded, or not publicly communicated, perceptions of nepotism tend to intensify. Empirical work on ethical violations during recruitment in the South African public service confirms that lapses in shortlisting documentation and interview procedures are closely associated with fairness complaints and allegations of bias (Mokgolo & Dikotla, 2023). Broader analyses of merit-based recruitment similarly identify structural challenges in translating formal professionalisation commitments into consistent practice (Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024; Nzimande et al., 2025). These patterns align with institutional analyses of how formal compliance structures may coexist with informal influence dynamics (Obicci, 2025). The table below summarises core structural factors identified in the document analysis and links them to observed risks and authoritative sources.

Table 1. Structural Factors Influencing Perceptions of Nepotism

Structural Factor	Observed Risk
Managerial discretion in panel selection	Heightened perception of favouritism
Absence of independent observers	Increased suspicion of bias
Lack of documented selection criteria	Reduced procedural transparency
Digital recruitment tracking systems	Lower perception of irregularity

Sources: AGSA (2024); DPSA (2024); Marawu (2025); Motsepe et al. (2025a); Mokgolo & Dikotla (2023); Parliament of South Africa (2025a); Public Protector South Africa (2023); PSC (2024)

Managerial discretion without clear accountability safeguards allows subjective considerations to influence panel composition. Governance scholarship on political patronage and ethical failures in public administration indicates that such discretion, when not counterbalanced by oversight, increases reputational vulnerability (Marawu, 2025; Motswaledi & Maseng, 2024). Parliamentary oversight statements have similarly raised concern regarding irregular appointments and weak internal checks in departments where recruitment governance is insufficiently institutionalised (Parliament of South Africa, 2025b). The absence of independent observers further deepens opacity. The Public Protector South Africa (2023) documents instances in which recruitment irregularities were facilitated by limited transparency and weak monitoring mechanisms. Parliamentary oversight bodies have emphasised the importance of strengthened controls and external scrutiny in mitigating ethical breaches in the public service (Parliament of South Africa, 2025a). Documentation gaps represent another recurring structural weakness. The AGSA (2024) identifies incomplete records and inadequate HR

documentation controls as persistent vulnerabilities in provincial departments. Such weaknesses hinder audit verification and fuel perceptions that recruitment decisions may not be fully grounded in defensible criteria. Conversely, structured digital recruitment systems and professionalisation directives have been associated with improved traceability and reduced discretion. Comparative analysis of electronic versus manual application systems demonstrates that digitisation strengthens audit trails and reduces interpretive ambiguity (Motsepe et al., 2025a). The Directive on Human Resources Management and Development for Public Service Professionalisation reinforces the importance of standardised processes and documentation integrity in building administrative credibility (DPSA, 2024). Collectively, these findings confirm that panel appointment mechanisms are embedded within broader governance conditions. Structural weaknesses at this upstream stage contribute to perceptions of nepotism by expanding discretionary space and limiting verifiable accountability.

3.2. Identity Dynamics and Tribalism Narratives

The second major theme concerns the role of identity dynamics in shaping perceptions of tribalism. In provinces where local identity affiliations remain socially salient, recruitment outcomes are frequently interpreted through ethnic or community-based lenses. Analytical work on nepotism and political deployment in South African public administration shows that public perceptions are influenced not only by formal compliance but also by broader narratives of patronage and ethical erosion (Marawu, 2025; Motsepe, 2025a). When panel appointment processes are opaque, information gaps are often filled by interpretive narratives grounded in identity politics. Governance analyses of corruption and elite networks in African public administration indicate that limited transparency enables suspicion to flourish, even where misconduct is not conclusively established (Obicci, 2025). In such environments, the symbolic dimension of panel composition becomes particularly important. The table below summarises key identity related dynamics identified in the document review.

Table 2. Identity Dynamics and Perceptions of Tribalism

Identity Dynamic	Observed Perception
Lack of panel composition disclosure	Heightened tribalism narratives
Procedural opacity	Increased speculation of bias
Similarity in social or political networks	Amplified identity suspicions
Independent observers and audit trails	Reduced identity-based suspicions

Sources: AGSA (2024); Marawu (2025); Lo Piccolo et al. (2024); Mokgolo & Dikotla (2023); Motsepe (2025a); Motswaledi & Maseng (2024); Parliament of South Africa (2025b); PSC (2025)

Where departments do not disclose panel composition or clearly articulate eligibility criteria for membership, stakeholders may interpret recruitment outcomes through identity frames. Scholarship on ethical failures and political deployment confirms that such perceptions are shaped by historical experiences of patronage (Marawu, 2025). Procedural opacity compounds these dynamics. Research on fairness perceptions in recruitment demonstrates that applicants' trust depends on visible neutrality, structured processes, and consistent application of criteria (Lo Piccolo et al., 2024). South African evidence on recruitment ethics similarly indicates that when shortlisting and interview procedures are inadequately documented, perceptions of bias intensify (Mokgolo & Dikotla, 2023). Similarity in social or political networks between panel members and candidates may further amplify suspicions, particularly in tightly networked provincial contexts. Studies on informal surveillance, patronage, and merit erosion illustrate how close relational ties can shape interpretive narratives of bias (Motsepe, 2025a). Even where professional qualifications are satisfied, perceived proximity to influential actors can undermine public confidence (Motswaledi & Maseng, 2024). Independent observers and robust audit trails function as counterbalances. Departments with stronger

documentation controls and regular external scrutiny experience fewer substantiated irregularity findings and reduced complaint volumes (AGSA, 2024; PSC, 2025). Transparency therefore operates as both a governance safeguard and a reputational buffer.

3.3. Integration of Findings and Implications

The results demonstrate that panel appointment processes influence perceptions at two interconnected levels. Structurally, discretionary appointment practices without clear documentation or oversight create governance vulnerabilities. Oversight institutions consistently identify HR management weaknesses as risk areas requiring strengthened controls (AGSA, 2024; PSC, 2024). Simultaneously, identity dynamics shape how recruitment decisions are interpreted within socially diverse environments. When panel appointment processes lack visible neutrality and structured communication, tribalism narratives become more persuasive, regardless of the objective merits of individual appointments. The evidence indicates that addressing perceptions of nepotism and tribalism requires reform attention not only on recruitment outcomes but also on upstream panel appointment mechanisms. Clear eligibility criteria, transparent disclosure practices, independent observers, digital traceability, and consistent professionalisation directives are essential components of legitimacy. These measures align with the National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Service (DPSA, 2023c) and respond directly to oversight findings documented in recent audit and commission reports. In the Limpopo Provincial Government context, strengthening the governance architecture of panel appointments is therefore not merely an administrative refinement. It is a central legitimacy intervention that shapes how merit, identity, and institutional trust intersect within the public service.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings provide empirical support for Institutional Theory and Procedural Justice Theory, demonstrating how recruitment panel appointments shape perceptions of nepotism and tribalism in the Limpopo Provincial Government. While formal recruitment policies are necessary, they do not automatically secure legitimacy. Organisations may adopt formal rules to signal compliance, yet informal practices can diverge from these structures (DPSA, 2023c). In Limpopo, managerial discretion over panel appointments, combined with limited independent oversight, allows political, social, or ethnic dynamics to influence perceptions of decision making. As a result, procedural opacity is often interpreted as potential bias, regardless of whether outcomes are merit based (PSC, 2024; Bazana & Reddy, 2021). Procedural Justice Theory clarifies why perceptions of unfairness persist even in the absence of proven misconduct. Recruitment fairness is judged not only by outcomes but by perceived neutrality, transparency, and consistency (Lo Piccolo et al., 2024). Where panel selection lacks documentation or visibility, similarities between panel members and candidates may generate suspicions of favouritism or tribalism. Conversely, stronger procedural safeguards, including digital systems and oversight mechanisms, are associated with reduced perceptions of irregularity (AGSA, 2024; Motsepe et al., 2025a). The interplay between structural vulnerabilities and identity dynamics is particularly evident. Managerial discretion and undocumented criteria create space for suspicion, while identity narratives amplify concerns in politically and socially sensitive environments. Perceived tribalism often reflects procedural opacity rather than demonstrable ethnic bias (Marawu, 2025; Department of Employment & Labour, 2025). Recruitment legitimacy therefore depends not only on policy compliance but also on the broader interpretive context within which decisions are made. Practically, reforming panel appointment processes offers a targeted means of strengthening legitimacy without extensive legislative change. Independent observers can provide external validation and signal neutrality (PSC, 2025; Public Protector South Africa, 2023). Public disclosure of panel composition and criteria enhances transparency (Nzimande et al., 2025; Bazana & Reddy, 2021), while digital recruitment tracking systems create verifiable audit trails (Motsepe et al., 2025a;

DPSA, 2024). Together, these measures address both structural weaknesses and perception-based concerns. The study contributes to governance scholarship by isolating panel appointment as a distinct analytical variable. Existing research often examines corruption and patronage broadly (Marawu, 2025; Motsepe, 2025a; Mokgolo & Dikotla, 2023), yet panel composition represents a micro-institutional mechanism that mediates both compliance and trust. Transparent and professional panel appointments also carry symbolic weight, shaping stakeholder interpretations of meritocracy (Lo Piccolo et al., 2024; Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024). In contexts marked by factionalism, visible neutrality becomes especially important. Ultimately, perceptions of fairness are context dependent and influenced by both structural safeguards and institutional communication (UNDP, 2022; DPSA, 2023c). Addressing nepotism and tribalism narratives therefore requires attention to upstream mechanisms, particularly panel appointment processes (PSC, 2024; DPSA, 2023c). Aligning these mechanisms with transparent criteria, independent oversight, and digital accountability offers a practical and theoretically grounded pathway to strengthen public service legitimacy and reinforce confidence in recruitment systems.

5. CONCLUSION

Panel member appointment processes are central to shaping how recruitment is perceived within provincial public service systems. In the Limpopo Provincial Government, the study reveals that discretionary and opaque panel selection practices create structural vulnerabilities that amplify suspicions of nepotism and tribalism. These perceptions persist even when formal recruitment policies are technically followed, highlighting the importance of process visibility and accountability. The findings indicate that recruitment legitimacy depends not only on compliance with policy but also on the symbolic and practical signals conveyed by who sits on panels, how they are appointed, and how their deliberations are documented. Transparent criteria, independent oversight, and digital audit systems emerge as critical mechanisms to strengthen confidence in recruitment outcomes and reinforce institutional credibility.

5.1. Practical Implications

The research identifies several actionable interventions for provincial departments seeking to improve public trust in recruitment. First, formalising clear and detailed criteria for panel appointments reduces the scope for discretionary influence and enhances consistency across departments. Second, rotating panel members regularly can prevent the consolidation of informal networks and mitigate perceptions of favouritism. Third, involving independent observers from oversight bodies ensures that appointments are monitored and verifiable, which increases stakeholder confidence. Finally, standardising digital recruitment and tracking systems across all departments allows for comprehensive audit trails, improving transparency and traceability of decisions. Together, these measures provide a feasible and cost-effective pathway for improving perceived fairness in recruitment without requiring major legislative reform.

5.2. Theoretical Implications and Further Research

This study contributes to governance literature by applying Institutional Theory and Procedural Justice Theory in a subnational South African context, demonstrating how formal structures and process transparency interact to shape legitimacy perceptions. The research highlights that panel appointments are a critical institutional lever that mediates both actual and perceived fairness, bridging gaps between policy intent and stakeholder interpretation. Future research could build on these findings by incorporating empirical data from applicants and other stakeholders to quantitatively measure how panel composition and procedural transparency influence perceptions of nepotism and tribalism. Longitudinal studies could assess whether reforms in panel appointment processes have

lasting impacts on trust and organisational legitimacy. Comparative studies across provinces would be valuable for identifying contextual factors that amplify or mitigate identity-based narratives in recruitment, such as political culture, ethnic diversity, and administrative capacity. Exploring these dimensions would deepen understanding of how micro-level institutional design affects broader governance outcomes and inform targeted interventions for improving public sector credibility. Overall, this study underscores that recruitment fairness is not only about who is ultimately appointed but about how the process is designed, executed, and perceived. By addressing both structural and symbolic elements of panel appointments, provincial governments can strengthen administrative integrity, reduce perceptions of bias, and foster a more trusted and professional public service.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

The author listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

DECLARATION OF AI ASSISTANCE

Basic tools for grammar, spelling, and language refinement were used. All content, research, analysis, and conclusions are based on the reviewed sources.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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