

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.