

Administrative Reforms in Latin America: A Systematic Review of Structural Challenges, Participatory Governance, and Innovation

Reformas administrativas en América Latina: Revisión sistemática de los desafíos estructurales, gobernanza participativa e innovación

Norma Milena Cabezas Torres

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8240-1403>

ncabezast@ucvvirtual.edu.pe

Universidad César Vallejo

Lima - Peru.

Pablo Antonio La Serna La Rosa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7065-012X>

plasernaro12@ucvvirtual.edu.pe

Universidad César Vallejo

Lima - Peru.

Mauricio Acevedo Carrillo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8699-6176>

macevedoca@ucvvirtual.edu.pe

Universidad César Vallejo

Lima - Peru.

Shiriam Alejandra Araujo Rossel

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0698-1715>

saaraujor@ucvvirtual.edu.pe

Universidad César Vallejo

Lima - Peru.



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Abstract

The study explores the approaches and challenges of administrative reforms in Latin America through a systematic review of 25 articles selected from databases such as Scopus and SciELO. The research was structured in five thematic axes: political context, decentralization, technological innovation, structural challenges and citizen participation. The methodology applied included rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as a detailed qualitative analysis to ensure the relevance and quality of the results. The findings highlight that administrative reforms are deeply conditioned by political crises, structural inequalities and technological gaps. However, significant progress has been made in decentralization and in the promotion of participatory governance models. These results underscore the need to overcome structural barriers through comprehensive approaches that incorporate technology, promote equity, and strengthen transparency in governance. In conclusion, the success of administrative reforms in the region depends on the ability to design sustainable strategies that respond to social demands and strengthen the legitimacy of institutions.

Keywords: administrative reforms, decentralization, citizen participation.

Resumen

El estudio explora los enfoques y desafíos de las reformas administrativas en América Latina a través de una revisión sistemática de 25 artículos seleccionados de bases de datos como Scopus y SciELO. La investigación se estructuró en cinco ejes temáticos: contexto político, descentralización, innovación tecnológica, desafíos estructurales y participación ciudadana. La metodología aplicada incluyó criterios rigurosos de inclusión y exclusión, así como un análisis cualitativo detallado para garantizar la relevancia y calidad de los resultados. Los hallazgos destacan que las reformas administrativas están profundamente condicionadas por crisis políticas, desigualdades estructurales y brechas tecnológicas. No obstante, se evidencian avances significativos en descentralización y en la promoción de modelos de gobernanza participativa. Estos resultados subrayan la necesidad de superar barreras estructurales mediante enfoques integrales que incorporen tecnología, fomenten la equidad y refuercen la transparencia en la gestión pública. En conclusión, el éxito de las reformas administrativas en la región depende de la capacidad para diseñar estrategias sostenibles que respondan a las demandas sociales y fortalezcan la legitimidad de las instituciones.

Palabras clave: reformas administrativas, descentralización, participación ciudadana.

Introduction

The analysis of the political origin of administrative reforms allows for an understanding of their implementation and the results obtained, as they are profoundly influenced by the political and social context in which they develop. Various studies, such as those by Llano (2019) and Traverso and Pavez (2024), examine the political conditions that give rise to reforms, highlighting how social crises drive the creation of key institutions, such as welfare ministries in Chile. Additionally, Polga-Hecimovich (2021) warns that presidentialism can generate inefficient bureaucratic structures, aligning with Barzola-Plúas (2022) findings on institutional tensions in Ecuador. These reflections demonstrate that administrative reforms in Latin America not only respond to social contexts but are also shaped by internal political dynamics that condition their success or failure.

From a historical perspective, understanding the processes of administrative transformation in the region requires contextualizing changes in relation to the political and technological challenges of each era. Quiroz (2024) examines the political-administrative reorganization of Chile between 1974 and 1978, describing it as a conflictual and fragmented process. This analysis is complemented by Montecinos (2021), who argues that the Fourth Industrial Revolution imposes new challenges on public administration, requiring technological adaptation in a context of global change. Both authors agree that, although historical contexts differ, common structural challenges persist regarding the institutional capacity to respond to emerging demands.

Decentralization emerges as a central axis for improving administrative effectiveness, particularly in strategic sectors such as health and territorial management. Studies by Zarychta and Wong (2024), focused on the Honduran case, emphasize the need for a solid institutional design and accountability mechanisms. Madrid (2023), in his evaluation of the deconcentration of power in Ecuador, and Mendoza (2020), highlighting the lack of meritocracy as a barrier to civil service professionalization, concur that the success of decentralization depends on overcoming structural obstacles and designing systems that promote efficiency and equity.

International comparisons enrich the analysis of administrative reforms. Gazarian (2023) and Akkoyunlu (2021), when comparing the cases of Brazil and Turkey, underscore the role of merit and training. In Venezuela, Gutiérrez (2023) addresses the obstacles linked to the lack of economic freedom, while Espejel and Cedillo (2023) explore how populism conditions public management in Mexico. These perspectives illustrate a contrast between countries pursuing technical modernization and others constrained by adverse political dynamics.

In this context, the incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICT) stands out as a key tool for improving efficiency, transparency, and citizen participation. Chica-Vélez and Salazar-Ortiz (2020) emphasize that technological innovation is essential for transforming public organizations. However, Barragán (2022) warns about the persistent digital divides in Ecuador, indicating that, beyond infrastructure, inclusive policies are needed to ensure equitable access to these tools.

Digital government also emerges as a strategic pillar in the modernization of the public sector. Morales, Morillo, and Tobar (2020) identify it as a mechanism to strengthen transparency; Cardozo (2020) highlights its relationship with institutional development; and Arenas (2021) underscores the importance of systematic evaluations to ensure the effectiveness of digital programs. These views converge on the need to integrate technology with rigorous planning and evaluation.

From a structural viewpoint, reforms face significant political and social obstacles. Ugarte, Rivero, and Bautista (2021) note the limitations imposed by these factors, while López (2022) highlights the fragmentation of

evaluation policies in Mexico. Cruz-Osorio (2020), in turn, identifies corruption as a global challenge that undermines reformist advances. These perspectives point to the necessity of political will, institutional cohesion, and transparency to achieve sustainable transformations.

The quality of public services is another crucial axis. Ochoa-Tataje et al. (2024) and Gutiérrez (2023) advocate for more equitable and efficient structures, while Díaz (2023) posits access to services as a fundamental human right. These approaches agree on the need to universalize the quality of public services to promote economic and social development.

Finally, citizen participation and democratic controls are considered essential elements for the success of reforms. Córdova (2024) and Segura-Márquez et al. (2024) argue that increased participation strengthens institutional legitimacy and enhances the effectiveness of public policies. Participatory governance is thus established as a foundational basis for sustainable and socially legitimate reforms.

The general objective of this research is to analyze and compare the different approaches, results, and challenges of administrative reforms in public management implemented in various Latin American countries. Through a thorough review of existing literature, the aim is to identify the political, social, and structural factors that influence the effectiveness of these reforms, addressing the question: What are the different approaches, results, and challenges of administrative reforms in public management implemented in various Latin American countries, and what are the political, social, and structural factors that influence their effectiveness?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a systematic review design, aimed at critically analyzing administrative reforms in Latin America from a comparative and contextual perspective. The research was based on a structured search of indexed scientific literature, prioritizing rigor, transparency, and traceability throughout the methodological process.

Search strategy and source selection

The collection of empirical evidence was carried out through an exhaustive bibliographic search in internationally recognized academic databases: Scopus, ScienceDirect, and SciELO. Boolean operators and advanced search strings were employed, combining controlled vocabulary and specific keywords such as: "Administrative Reforms," "Local Governance," "Presidentialism," "Public Management," and "Latin America," complemented by the descriptor "systematic review."

The initial search yielded a total of 84 potentially relevant documents. Subsequently, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, in accordance with methodological standards for qualitative systematic reviews:

Inclusion criteria:

- Articles published between 2019 and 2024.
- Peer-reviewed publications.
- Studies that explicitly addressed administrative reform processes in the Latin American context.
- Documents available in Spanish or English.
- Research with a solid empirical or theoretical focus, including primary data or applicable analytical models.

Exclusion criteria:

- Studies with weak methodologies or unclear design descriptions.
- Works with ambiguous or unverifiable results.
- Narrative reviews without systematic data extraction or structuring.
- Duplicate articles or those not accessible in full text.
- Publications prior to 2019.

After applying these filters, a final sample of 25 scientific articles was consolidated, meeting the necessary parameters of rigor, thematic relevance, and timeliness for analysis.

Qualitative analysis process

The analysis was developed through a thematic and comparative procedure, following the phases proposed by the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for systematic reviews of qualitative studies:

Cabezas, N., La Serna, P., Acevedo, M., & Araujo, S. (2026). Administrative Reforms in Latin America: A Systematic Review of Structural Challenges, Participatory Governance, and Innovation. *Revista InveCom*, 6 (1). 1-11

1. Initial coding: A comprehensive and repeated reading of each selected article was conducted, recording key information on data extraction sheets. This information was systematized around five main variables: (a) country of study, (b) objective of the article, (c) methodology used, (d) main findings, and (e) contributions to the debate on administrative reform.

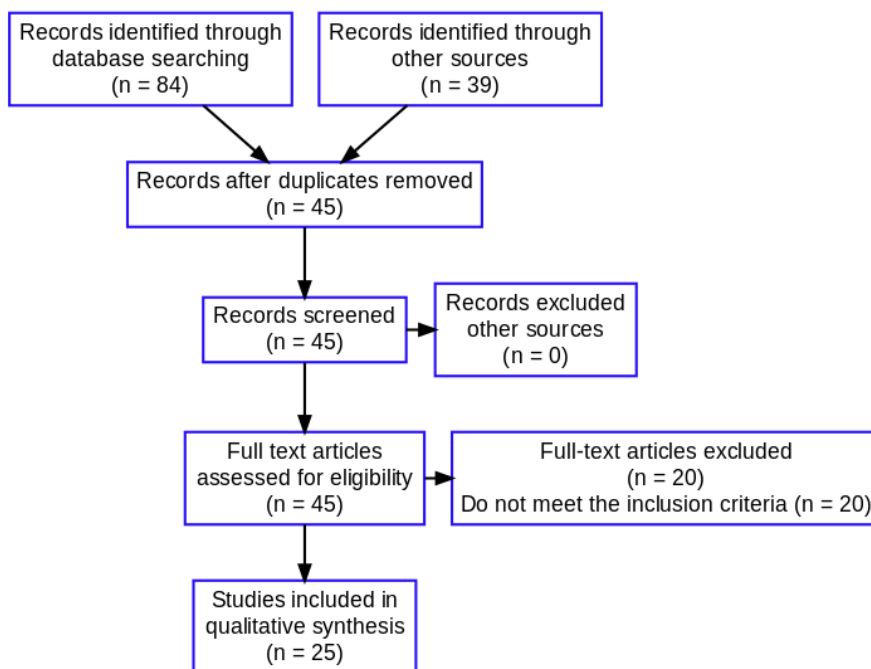
2. Thematic grouping: Based on the previous coding, emerging patterns, discursive convergences, and analytical tensions among the studies were identified. This step allowed for the construction of analytical categories such as: multilevel governance, institutional resistance, technical vs. political bureaucracy, and transparency and citizen participation.

3. Contrast and cross-validation: The methodological approaches of each research study were compared to ensure epistemological homogeneity and verify comparability across national contexts. This triangulation was based on criteria of analytical robustness, argumentative consistency, and empirical relevance.

4. Critical quality assessment: Each article was evaluated according to its scientific and methodological contributions, using the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) tool, supplemented with elements from the PRISMA guidelines, to assess the transparency, replicability, and comprehensiveness of the evidence.

On the whole, this methodological chapter ensures a systematic, transparent, and replicable process that supports the validity of the findings and allows for the generation of an updated map of public administration transformations in Latin America, from a critical and comparative perspective.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram showing the article selection process



Source. Content generated from <https://hollyhartman.shinyapps.io/PRISMAFlowDiagram/>

The findings of this review highlighted several determining factors in the implementation and effectiveness of administrative reforms in Latin America, such as: the alignment of political interests with technical objectives, appropriate institutional design, and accountability mechanisms. Additionally, it was observed that technical capacity and inter-institutional coordination are essential elements for the success of the reforms.

The relevance of this research lies in the need to identify strategies that contribute to optimizing public management and strengthening state institutions in the region. The reviewed studies align with the general objective of this research: to conduct a comprehensive review of administrative reforms in Latin America, providing valuable lessons for researchers and decision-makers.

Table 1: Distribution of articles by country

Country	Number of Articles	Percentage (%)
Ecuador	5	20
Brazil	5	20
Latin America (regional studies)	4	16
Chile	3	12
Mexico	3	12
Venezuela	3	12
Argentina	1	4
Honduras	1	4
Total	25	100.0%

Figure 2: Distribution of articles by country

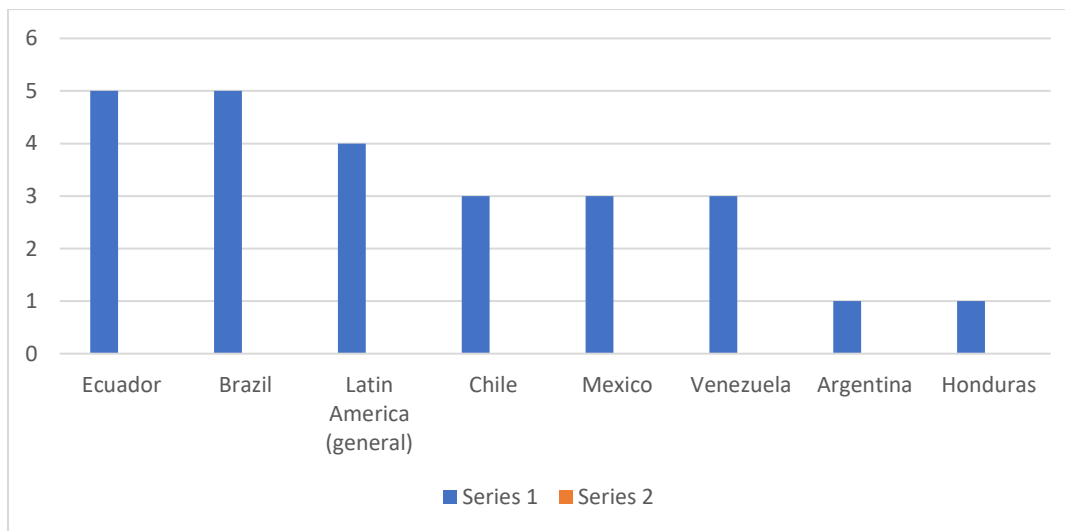


Table 1 and Figure 2 illustrate the distribution of the articles included in the study. A significant contribution from Ecuador, Brazil, and general studies on Latin America is observed, collectively representing 56% of the publications. This finding reveals a predominant interest in analyzing administrative reforms in these contexts, likely motivated by the particular governance challenges and the frequency of political changes in these countries.

Latin America (general): This category groups comparative studies or regional analyses that are not linked to a specific country and are typically published in specialized international or regional journals focusing on Latin American studies.

Results

The following table groups the 25 analyzed articles, organized according to thematic axes: political and historical context, decentralization and civil service professionalization, technology and innovation in public administration, and structural and social challenges.

Table 2: Political, social, and structural factors in administrative reforms in Latin America

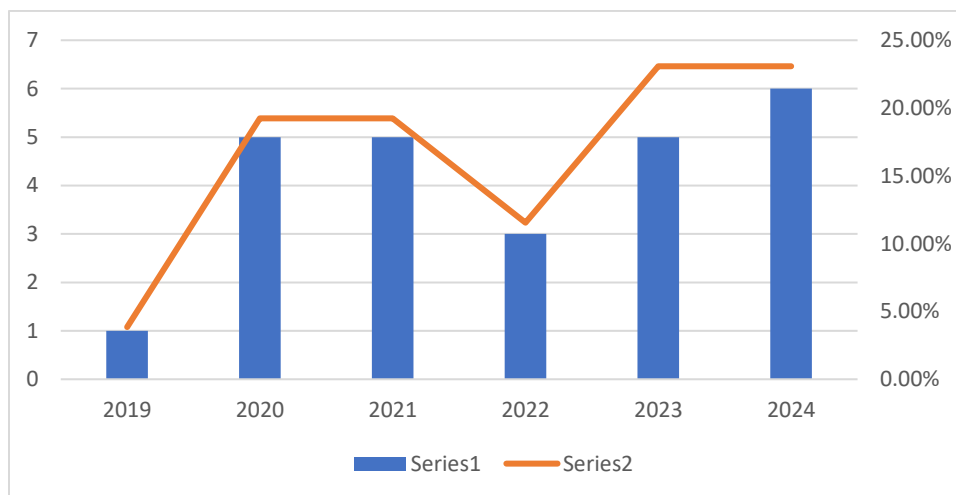
Thematic Axis	Author(s)	Year	Key Data
Political and Historical Context	Llano	2019	Highlights the influence of social and political crises on the creation of key institutions.
	Traverso & Pavez	2024	Analyzes the impact of health crises in Chile as a catalyst for administrative reforms.
	Quiroz Rojas	2024	Examines the fragmentation and political tensions in Chile's administrative reorganization.
	Polga-Hecimovich	2021	Warns about the risks of presidentialism in generating inefficient bureaucratic structures.
	Barzola-Plús	2022	Analyzes the institutional tensions generated by the centralization of power in Ecuador.
	Akkoyunlu	2021	Compares administrative reforms in Brazil and Turkey, highlighting the importance of meritocracy and efficiency.
Decentralization and Civil Service Professionalization	Zarychta & Wong	2024	Underlines the need for robust institutional designs for effective decentralization in Honduras.
	Mendoza Pincay	2020	Identifies the lack of meritocracy as a structural obstacle to civil service professionalization.
	Madrid Tamayo	2023	Analyzes institutional changes resulting from the deconcentration of power in Ecuador.
	Gazarian	2023	Examines strategies for administrative professionalization in Brazil.
	Gutiérrez	2023	Discusses the challenges of professionalization in a context of political and economic instability.
	Espejel & Cedillo	2023	Analyze how populism has modified public management in Mexico, prioritizing short-term measures over administrative sustainability.
Technology and Innovation in Public Administration	Chica-Vélez & Salazar-Ortiz	2020	Highlight that innovation and governance are essential for transforming public organizations.

	Barragán	2022	Identifies digital gaps as persistent obstacles in administrative modernization.
	Morales, Morillo & Tobar	2020	Emphasizes the role of digital government in improving transparency and citizen participation.
	Cardozo	2020	Highlights the importance of technology in implementing inclusive policies.
	Arenas Caruti	2021	Emphasizes the need for systematic evaluations in a context of technological modernization.
	Montecinos	2021	Analyzes the challenges and opportunities of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in modernizing public administration in the region.
Structural and Social Challenges	Ugarte, Rivero & Bautista	2021	Identify institutional fragmentation and resistance to change as primary barriers.
	Cruz-Osorio	2020	Qualifies corruption as a structural obstacle limiting the effectiveness of reforms.
	Díaz	2023	Examines access to public services as a fundamental right in Latin American countries, highlighting common challenges in implementation.
	Ochoa-Tataje et al.	2024	Analyze the quality of public services and the need for more equitable structures.
	Gutiérrez	2023	Highlight the importance of equitable structures in the provision of public services.
	Córdova Jaimés	2024	Underlines the importance of citizen participation and democratic controls for the success of reforms.
	Segura-Márquez et al.	2024	Emphasize the relationship between democratic controls and institutional legitimacy.
	López Rodríguez	2022	Analyzes the lack of cohesion and continuity in evaluation policies as a key obstacle to administrative development.

Table 3: *Distribution of articles by year of publication*

Year of Publication	Number of Articles	Percentage
2019	1	4%
2020	5	20%
2021	5	20%
2022	3	12%
2023	5	20%
2024	6	24%
Total	25	100%

Figure 3: *Distribution of articles by year of publication*



Discussion

This systematic review provides a comprehensive view of the approaches, outcomes, and challenges associated with administrative reforms in Latin America, based on the analysis of 25 studies published between 2019 and 2024. The comparison of these works allowed for the identification of common trends, analytical divergences, and contextual factors that decisively influence the implementation and sustainability of these reforms.

One of the most recurrent findings in the reviewed literature is the significant weight of the political and historical context. In this regard, Llano (2019) argues that social and political crises have acted as catalysts for significant institutional changes, creating conditions that enable the reconfiguration of administrative apparatuses. Traverso and Pavez (2024), while studying the administrative restructuring in Chile during the pandemic, reinforce this idea by demonstrating how health crises drive structural reforms. Similarly, authors like Polga-Hecimovich (2021) and Barzola-Plús (2022) warn about the adverse effects of presidentialism and the centralization of power, which tend to generate inefficient bureaucratic structures. In a comparative line, Akkoyunlu (2021) analyzes the cases of Brazil and Turkey, emphasizing the need for meritocratic and effective systems to counter these limitations.

The tensions between the political and administrative spheres have also been a focal point of attention. Quiroz (2024), while studying the dynamics in Chile during the 1970s, shows how internal conflicts fragment state management. Montecinos (2021) links these challenges to a broader process of institutional transformation driven

by the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Despite temporal and geographical differences, the studies agree that reforms must be sensitive to the historical and political fabric of each country, avoiding the uncritical application of foreign models.

Regarding decentralization strategies, their potential to strengthen institutional capacity, especially in areas like health and territorial management, is highlighted. Zarychta and Wong (2024) document how a solid institutional design can enhance accountability in Honduras. This finding aligns with what Mendoza (2020) and Madrid (2023) propose, identifying the lack of meritocracy and weak power deconcentration as structural obstacles in countries like Ecuador.

The political dimension of reforms has also been explored through the lens of populism. Espejel and Cedillo (2023) warn that, in contexts like Mexico, reforms tend to prioritize immediate measures at the expense of institutional sustainability. This pattern is also observed in the studies by Gazarian (2023) and Gutiérrez (2023), who analyze the precariousness of the civil service in Brazil and Venezuela, emphasizing that administrative professionalization is hindered by persistent political and economic barriers.

The technological component occupies a central place in contemporary debates about administrative reform. Various studies concur that the incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICT) represents an opportunity to improve transparency, citizen participation, and operational efficiency. Chica-Vélez and Salazar-Ortiz (2020) argue that innovation must be articulated to effective governance models, while Barragán (2022) warns about the digital gaps that still persist in countries like Ecuador. Morales et al. (2020), Cardozo (2020), and Arenas Caruti (2021) highlight the need for systematic evaluations and inclusive planning to ensure that digital government does not deepen existing inequalities. In this vein, Montecinos (2021) reflects on the challenges posed by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, particularly regarding the sustainability of technological reforms in the region.

Structural obstacles continue to limit the scope of reforms. Cruz-Osorio (2020) defines corruption as a “global pandemic” that undermines institutional efforts in Latin America. Complementarily, Ugarte et al. (2021) and López (2022) identify institutional fragmentation and the lack of cohesion in evaluation policies as elements that hinder the monitoring and consolidation of reform processes.

Furthermore, the studies by Díaz (2023) and Ochoa-Tataje et al. (2024) propose that reforms should be oriented toward equity in the provision of public services, considering universal access as a human right. This line of argument reinforces the idea that reforms cannot be limited to technical efficiency but must integrate redistributive and participatory approaches.

Finally, there is a consensus on the importance of citizen participation and democratic controls in the success of reforms. Córdova (2024) and Segura-Márquez et al. (2024) emphasize that participatory governance models not only strengthen institutional legitimacy but also enhance the effectiveness of public policies. These studies agree that citizens must be active participants in the design, implementation, and evaluation of reforms, which in turn promotes their sustainability and adaptation to emerging social demands.

Conclusions

The analysis of the 25 studies included in this systematic review allows for the identification of several fundamental conclusions regarding the nature, challenges, and opportunities of administrative reforms in Latin America.

First, the success of administrative reforms is strongly conditioned by the socio-political context of each country. Social, health, and political crises have often acted as triggers for significant institutional changes. However, these reforms can only consolidate when they adapt to the historical and political particularities of each nation. In this sense, excessive centralization of power and presidentialism present persistent obstacles that tend to erode the efficiency of public management.

Decentralization, on the other hand, emerges as a promising avenue to improve state capacity and respond more effectively to local needs. Nevertheless, its effective implementation requires overcoming structural barriers such as the lack of meritocratic criteria, politicization of appointments, and tensions between levels of government. In this context, the professionalization of the civil service becomes an essential requirement for advancing toward a more equitable, competent, and sustainable public administration.

Moreover, the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) constitutes a transformative axis in contemporary institutional dynamics. Digital government, when planned inclusively, can significantly contribute to transparency, efficiency, and citizen participation. However, digital gaps persist that limit equitable access to these tools, especially in contexts of high territorial and socio-economic inequality.

Factors such as systemic corruption, institutional fragmentation, and structural inequalities continue to restrict the scope and effectiveness of many reforms. To address these challenges, it is crucial to strengthen institutional cohesion, improve evaluation mechanisms, and promote policies that guarantee universal access to quality public services as a basic human right.

Finally, the studies emphasize the importance of citizen participation at all stages of the reform process. A participatory governance model based on democratic control not only increases the legitimacy of institutions but also enhances the adaptability and sustainability of public policies in response to changing social demands.

In summary, these findings suggest the urgency of adopting a comprehensive approach to administrative reforms in Latin America—one that combines technological innovation, effective decentralization, professionalization of the state apparatus, and active citizen participation, while decisively addressing the historical inequalities that persist in the region.

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