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Public spending and state management: a systematic review

Gasto público y gestión estatal: una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

Public spending is a strategic instrument for promoting economic development, strengthening state management, and improving social welfare in Latin America. However, recent evidence shows heterogeneous results regarding its efficiency and impact, justifying the need to synthesize the available knowledge. Therefore, the objective of this research was to analyze the trends, approaches, and main findings of the scientific literature on public spending and state management in Latin America. To this end, a systematic review was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, searching for studies published between 2021 and 2025 in the Scopus and SciELO databases. This process allowed for the selection of 34 studies that met the pre-established inclusion criteria. The results revealed three predominant lines of research: efficiency and evaluation of public spending, public spending and economic development, and governance related to state management. The literature agrees that the impact of public spending depends less on the volume of resources allocated than on institutional quality, strategic planning, evaluation mechanisms, transparency, and the management capacity of public organizations. Furthermore, it was identified that factors such as decentralization, corruption, fiscal sustainability, and citizen participation significantly influence the effectiveness of public policies. It is concluded that strengthening institutional capacities is essential for transforming public spending into sustainable results, consolidating management models oriented toward public value, efficiency, and sustainable development in Latin America.
Keywords: public spending, government management, spending efficiency.

Resumen

El gasto público constituye un instrumento estratégico para promover el desarrollo económico, fortalecer la gestión estatal y mejorar el bienestar social en América Latina. No obstante, la evidencia reciente muestra resultados heterogéneos respecto a su eficiencia e impacto, lo que justifica la necesidad de sintetizar el conocimiento disponible. De allí que, el objetivo de esta investigación fue analizar las tendencias, enfoques y principales hallazgos de la producción científica sobre gasto público y gestión estatal en América Latina. Para ello, se realizó una revisión sistemática siguiendo las directrices PRISMA 2020, mediante la búsqueda de estudios publicados entre 2021 y 2025 en las bases de datos Scopus y SciELO. El proceso permitió seleccionar 34 investigaciones que cumplieron los criterios de inclusión previamente establecidos. Los resultados evidenciaron tres líneas predominantes de investigación: eficiencia y evaluación del gasto público, gasto público y desarrollo económico, y gobernanza vinculada a la gestión estatal. La literatura coincide en que el impacto del gasto público depende menos del volumen de recursos asignados que de la calidad institucional, la planificación estratégica, los mecanismos de evaluación, la transparencia y la capacidad de gestión de las organizaciones públicas. Asimismo, se identificó que factores como la descentralización, la corrupción, la sostenibilidad fiscal y la participación ciudadana condicionan significativamente la efectividad de las políticas públicas. Se concluye que el fortalecimiento de las capacidades institucionales constituye un elemento indispensable para transformar el gasto público en resultados sostenibles, consolidando modelos de gestión orientados al valor público, la eficiencia y el desarrollo sostenible en América Latina.

Palabras clave: gasto público, gestión estatal, eficiencia del gasto.

Introduction

Public spending is among the most visible instruments of state action, yet its significance lies not simply in the volume of resources allocated but in the institutional capacity to translate those resources into well-being, economic growth, public services, and governmental legitimacy. This relationship takes on particular weight in Latin America, where persistent social gaps, fiscal constraints, low productivity, and mounting pressure on health, education, security, and infrastructure systems all converge. Against this backdrop, contemporary debate on public spending has moved beyond the question of how much the state spends to a more complex one: how is that spending planned, executed, evaluated, and coordinated within public management systems capable of producing sustainable outcomes?

Within this framework, public spending cannot be understood as a variable isolated from state performance. Its impact hinges on the quality of budgetary processes, coordination across levels of government, transparency, accountability, and the existence of evaluation mechanisms capable of correcting deviations during implementation. Gavelán Polo et al. (2025) find that the budgetary process significantly shapes the quality of public spending in municipal management, particularly when budget execution is tied to service delivery and investment projects. This evidence is especially relevant for the region, where many governments have adopted results-based budgeting approaches without yet achieving full alignment among planning, execution, and evaluation. Discussing public spending, then, inevitably means discussing the quality of the state management that underpins it.

Recent scholarship has begun to interrogate this relationship from a range of fields. In higher education, for instance, Tomala and Padrón (2025) argue that the efficiency of public spending requires robust information, ongoing evaluation, strategic financial management, and policies oriented toward quality, equity, and sustainability. At the macroeconomic level, Ruiz Landin et al. (2025) show that public spending can function as an engine of growth, although its contribution hinges on technical efficiency and fiscal sustainability. Similarly, Torres et al. (2025) identify a positive association between public spending and economic growth in Ecuador, particularly across periods of boom, adjustment, and crisis, reinforcing the stabilizing role of fiscal policy. Taken together, however, these contributions also suggest that spending alone cannot guarantee development unless it is accompanied by institutional capacity, clear prioritization criteria, and effective control mechanisms.

State management thus emerges as the connecting point between fiscal resources and public outcomes. Morales Caballero (2025) argues that institutional development in Latin America depends on adaptive, territorially sensitive, evidence-based public management capable of integrating ethical leadership, digital transformation, organizational culture, and results-based management. This view broadens the analysis beyond the purely financial dimension of spending, situating it instead within a more complex institutional architecture shaped by political decisions, technical capacities, information systems, citizen oversight, and cross-sectoral coordination. Along the same lines, Luna Olivares et al. (2025) and Yacila Espinoza and Luján Johnson (2025) agree that financial planning, risk management, and monitoring of public investment projects are decisive components for reducing inefficiencies and improving resource use across heterogeneous institutional settings.

Despite these advances, however, the scientific literature on public spending and state management in Latin America remains fragmented. Some studies focus on the relationship between spending and economic growth; others examine sectoral efficiency in education, health, security, or public investment; and a third group addresses issues linked to governance, transparency, decentralization, risk, or institutional development.

Given this fragmentation, the present systematic review seeks to address the need for unified criteria through an integrative synthesis of the scientific production published between 2021 and 2025 in Scopus and SciELO. Its contribution lies in bringing order to a field of study that is currently scattered across public economics, public administration, and policy analysis, with the aim of identifying thematic convergences, methodological orientations, and key empirical findings. Unlike approaches that focus narrowly on specific sectors, this study adopts a multidimensional perspective that makes it possible to understand how spending efficiency, governance, budgetary quality, economic growth, and institutional performance interact within Latin American state management processes.

Accordingly, the objective of this article is to analyze the predominant trends, approaches, and findings of scientific research on public spending and state management in Latin America through a systematic review of studies published between 2021 and 2025. The question guiding the study is the following: what trends, approaches, and findings predominate in research on public spending and state management in Latin America? In doing so, the study aims to provide an analytical foundation useful to researchers, public managers, and policymakers interested in strengthening spending quality, improving institutional capacity, and promoting more efficient, transparent, and results-oriented public management.

Methodology

This study was conducted as a systematic literature review following the PRISMA 2020 statement. This design allowed for the transparent identification, selection, appraisal, and synthesis of the scientific evidence on public spending and state management in Latin America. The aim was to analyze the predominant trends, approaches, and findings of the scientific output published between 2021 and 2025 in order to answer the research question posed.

The literature search was conducted between April 13 and April 20, 2026, in the Scopus and SciELO databases. Results were limited to publications from 2021 to 2025, in Spanish and English, corresponding to original research articles and systematic reviews.

For Scopus, the following search string was used: *TITLE-ABS-KEY ("public expenditure" OR "government expenditure" OR "public spending" OR "public investment" OR "public budget") AND ("public management" OR "state management" OR governance OR "public administration" OR "institutional management") AND ("Latin America" OR "South America" OR "Latin American countries") AND PUBYEAR > 2020 AND PUBYEAR < 2026.*

For SciELO, the search string was as follows: *("gasto público" OR "gasto gubernamental" OR "inversión pública") AND ("gestión estatal" OR "gestión pública" OR "administración pública" OR "gobernanza") AND ("América Latina").*

Table 1

Eligibility criteria

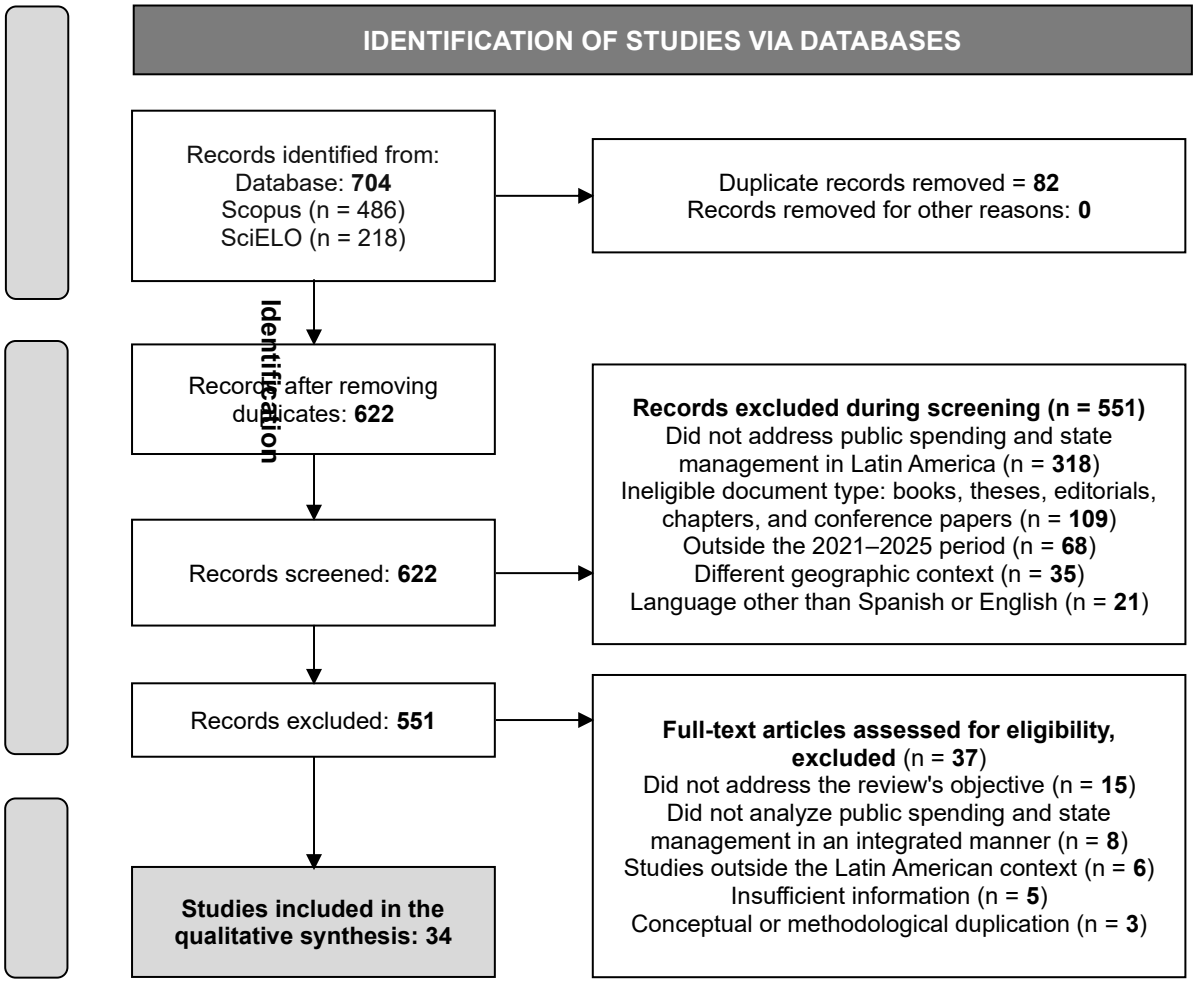
Inclusion	Exclusion
Original articles and systematic reviews	Books, theses, chapters, editorials, and conference papers
2021–2025	Before 2021
Spanish and English	Other languages
Latin America	Other contexts
Full text	No full text available

It is worth noting that the inclusion and exclusion criteria were established a priori in line with the objective of the systematic review and were applied consistently throughout the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases, in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines.

As for the selection of documents, the process unfolded as follows: 704 records were initially identified (486 from Scopus and 218 from SciELO). After removing 82 duplicates, 622 records were screened, of which 551 were excluded. Subsequently, 71 articles were assessed in full text, and 37 were excluded for not meeting the eligibility criteria. In the end, 34 studies made up the analytic corpus.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the identification, selection, and eligibility process for the studies included in the systematic review



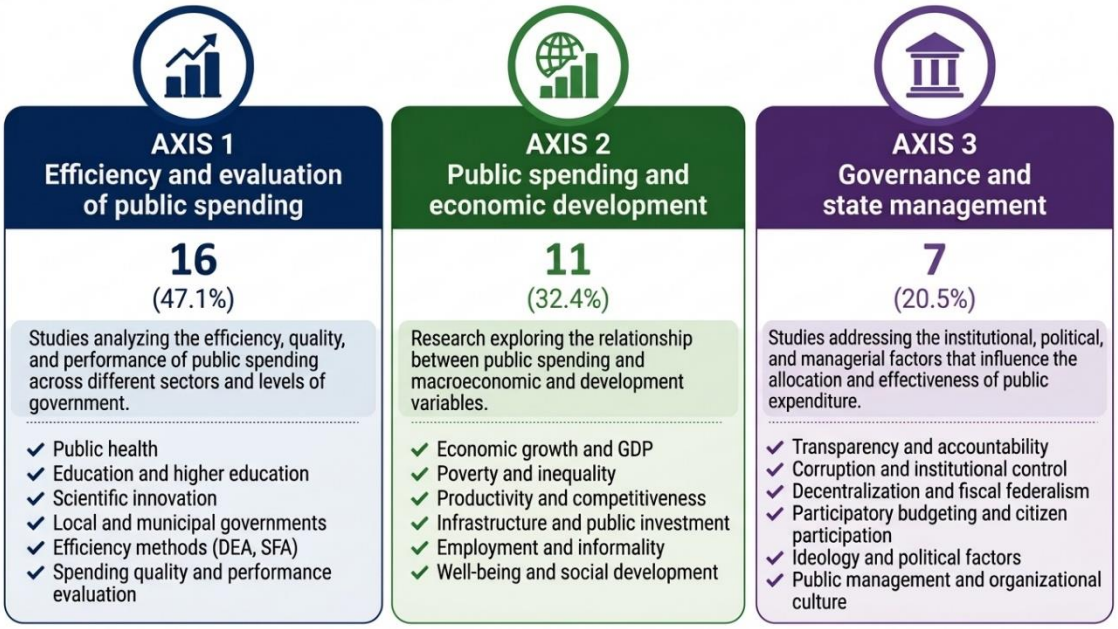
Note. Authors' own elaboration based on the PRISMA 2020 statement (Haddaway et al., 2022)

Finally, it is worth noting that a data-extraction matrix was designed around the variables author, year, country, objective, methodology, results, conclusions, and theoretical perspective, with the aim of organizing and systematizing the information. Review and validation of the records were carried out by consensus among the researchers. The studies were then coded through thematic synthesis, identifying convergences, divergences, and methodological patterns. This process made it possible to structure the three thematic axes that organize the presentation of the results and discussion.

Results

The results are presented on the basis of the analysis of the 34 selected studies (full data in Appendix 1), organized into three thematic axes that synthesize the main research trends on public spending and state management in Latin America. This structure made it possible to identify common patterns, predominant approaches, and areas of greatest development within the recent scientific literature.

Figure 2
Distribution of the included studies by thematic axis



Note. Authors' own elaboration with the assistance of artificial intelligence, based on the studies included in the systematic review (2021–2025)

Characterization of the scientific production on public spending and state management in Latin America

The systematic review yielded 34 studies published between 2021 and 2025, which formed the documentary corpus of the study. Taken together, the evidence points to a shift away from approaches centered on the magnitude of spending toward perspectives that incorporate efficiency, governance, and institutional performance, reflecting a more comprehensive view of contemporary public management (Santana Bernardo et al., 2021; Behar-Villegas, 2021; Ramírez Cedillo & López Herrera, 2021; Quispe et al., 2022; Pinilla-Rodríguez et al., 2023; Morales Caballero, 2025).

The included studies spanned a range of Latin American settings, mainly Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Venezuela, in addition to region-wide research. This diversity made it possible to examine public spending across different levels of government and strategic sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, innovation, and territorial development (Rodrigues et al., 2021; Ferreira & Barros, 2021; Galvis-Ciro & Hincapié-Vélez, 2022; Flores Orona et al., 2022; Coaquira Vargas & Vilca Colquehuanca, 2023; Gómez Segura et al., 2023; Gavelán Polo et al., 2025).

The thematic synthesis, in turn, allowed the evidence to be reorganized into three overarching axes: (1) efficiency and evaluation of public spending, (2) public spending and economic development, and (3) governance and state management. This classification made it easier to identify common patterns and differences across the studies analyzed.

Thematic axis 1. Efficiency and evaluation of public spending

The studies grouped under this axis show that the efficiency of public spending depends not only on budget increases but on the institutional capacity to convert allocated resources into verifiable results. Research on health, education, scientific innovation, and local governments converges on the point that fund allocation runs into limits whenever it is not linked to planning, monitoring, and performance-evaluation systems (Santana Bernardo et al., 2021; Mazon et al., 2021; Pimienta Gallardo et al., 2022; Pinilla-Rodríguez et al., 2023; Quispe Alvarado et al., 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2021).

In the education sector, the studies reveal notable differences in spending efficiency between universities and municipalities, underscoring that the composition of spending matters more than its overall volume. Pimienta Gallardo et al. (2022) identified efficiency gaps among Mexican universities, while Santana Bernardo et al. (2021)

noted that certain components of educational spending, such as infrastructure and outsourced services, can favorably influence institutional performance. Complementing this picture, Sallaberry et al. (2022) found that municipal education spending is shaped by socioeconomic, demographic, and political variables.

In health, the evidence likewise shows that higher spending levels do not guarantee better outcomes in the absence of adequate management conditions. Pinilla-Rodríguez et al. (2023), Rodrigues et al. (2021), and Mazon et al. (2021) all associate healthcare efficiency with institutional factors, local management capacity, and territorial coordination. Studies conducted during the pandemic further show that public spending was indispensable for sustaining hospital care, even as it exposed territorial inequalities and structural vulnerabilities within health systems (Nascimento et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2021).

Thematic axis 2. Public spending and economic development

The second axis brings together studies examining the relationship between public spending, economic growth, productivity, poverty, and income. Collectively, these studies show that public spending can serve as an instrument of development, although its effects depend on the macroeconomic context, the composition of spending, and the state's capacity to direct resources toward productive activities. The regional evidence does not reveal a single pattern: some studies support positive growth effects of spending, while others report limited or conditional impacts (Gómez Segura et al., 2023; Manjarres Tete et al., 2023; Peña, 2021; Ramírez Cedillo & López Herrera, 2021).

With respect to economic growth, Peña (2021) identified a long-run relationship between public spending and growth in Venezuela, while Ramírez Cedillo and López Herrera (2021) reported mixed evidence for Latin America regarding Wagner's Law and the Keynesian hypothesis. Gómez Segura et al. (2023) noted that the composition of spending matters more than its magnitude, since productive spending tends to favor growth while unproductive spending may have null or negative effects. By contrast, Manjarres Tete et al. (2023) found that regional growth responded more strongly to private investment than to public spending.

Several studies further show that the effects of public spending on development vary by sector, with favorable impacts observed in health and poverty reduction but limited results for agricultural productivity and labor informality where structural constraints persist (Coaquira Vargas & Vilca Colquehuanca, 2023; Galván Vera, 2022; Varela Llamas & Retamoza Yocupicio, 2023).

Thematic axis 3. Governance and state management

The third axis brings together studies that examine the relationship between public spending, governance, transparency, decentralization, citizen participation, and political factors. Vera and Martínez (2022) noted that regulatory advances in transparency do not guarantee effective accountability unless accompanied by oversight and citizen control. Similarly, Behar-Villegas (2021) found that organizational cultures of wasteful spending perpetuate inefficient state practices.

Within this axis, corruption and decentralization stand out as relevant factors shaping the composition and effectiveness of public spending. Galvis-Ciro and Hincapié-Vélez (2022) showed that corruption distorts spending allocation, inflating certain budget lines while shrinking others of high social sensitivity. Sousa and Monte (2021), for their part, found that fiscal decentralization influences the composition of municipal spending, though its effects depend on institutional and fiscal design. These findings converge on the idea that state management cannot be assessed by budget execution alone but must also be judged by the quality of the rules, incentives, and controls guiding resource use.

Finally, several studies emphasize that public spending decisions also respond to political and institutional factors. Sánchez (2023) identified differences in spending patterns according to the ideology of subnational governments, while Mauerberg Jr. et al. (2023) documented the strategic use of spending to secure political support. Ribeiro and Feitosa (2022) showed that fiscal limits can improve the productivity of spending, although the effect depends on the political context. Quispe et al. (2022), in turn, highlighted the role of participatory budgeting as a mechanism for legitimacy, transparency, and social control over public spending.

Discussion

From technical efficiency to the generation of public value

The review reveals a conceptual shift in thinking about the efficiency of public spending that goes beyond traditional approaches centered exclusively on budget execution. The studies published during the period under review agree that efficiency depends not only on the volume of resources allocated but on the institutional capacity to convert them into verifiable and sustainable results. In education, Santana Bernardo et al. (2021) showed that

the composition of spending matters more than its magnitude for improving institutional performance, while Pimienta Gallardo et al. (2022) identified substantial differences in financial efficiency among Mexican universities, attributing them to management and internal organizational factors. In the health sector, Mazon et al. (2021) and Rodrigues et al. (2021) found wide efficiency gaps among Brazilian municipalities, associated mainly with administrative limitations and local management capacities. These findings are consistent with the regional analysis carried out by Pinilla-Rodríguez et al. (2023), who showed that healthcare efficiency in Latin America depends on both economic variables and institutional quality. Complementing this picture, Quispe Alvarado et al. (2023) cautioned that public spending on research and innovation yields limited effects in the absence of monitoring, evaluation, and coordination mechanisms linking scientific policy to national development goals. Taken together, these studies suggest that efficiency has ceased to be understood as a strictly financial indicator and has instead become an expression of the state's capacity to generate public value through results-oriented management.

This transformation gains further consistency in more recent studies, where efficiency begins to be linked to processes of strategic planning, fiscal sustainability, and ongoing evaluation of public policy. Tomala and Padrón (2025) argue that the efficiency of university spending should be measured by its capacity to strengthen institutional performance and educational quality, while Gavelán Polo et al. (2025) point out that the quality of the budgetary process directly conditions the effectiveness of municipal spending. From a macroeconomic standpoint, Ruiz Landin et al. (2025) contend that the sustainability of spending requires a balance between fiscal discipline and social development, a view that converges with the analysis of Rodríguez Esparza et al. (2023), who found that numerous public programs sustain high levels of budget execution without achieving proportional results in coverage or efficiency. Finally, Sallaberry et al. (2022) showed that fiscal and demographic determinants continue to shape municipal education investment, confirming that resource availability is only one of several factors explaining the performance of public spending. The literature reviewed thus points to a transition away from models centered on technical efficiency toward approaches in which planning, evaluation, and governance become inseparable elements for turning public spending into sustainable outcomes.

From economic growth to sustainable development

The relationship between public spending and economic growth remains one of the most enduring debates in the Latin American literature; the studies reviewed here, however, show that this relationship is shaped by the institutional context, the composition of spending, and public-policy priorities. Whereas Peña (2021) found a long-run relationship between public spending and economic growth in Venezuela, Ramírez Cedillo and López Herrera (2021) documented heterogeneous behavior across the region, where Wagner's Law and the Keynesian hypothesis coexist depending on each country's economic characteristics. From a comparative perspective, Gómez Segura et al. (2023) showed that public spending directed toward productive sectors generates larger growth effects than spending allocated to activities with low multiplier capacity, a result that partially aligns with Torres et al. (2025), who note that periods of economic boom amplify the effectiveness of public investment when fiscal stability is present. Manjarres Tete et al. (2023), however, observed that regional growth in Colombia responded chiefly to private investment, suggesting that public spending functions as a complementary mechanism rather than a sufficient driver of economic dynamism. A similar conclusion was reached by Galván Vera (2022), who cautioned that spending directed toward the agricultural sector does not guarantee productivity gains unless it is accompanied by technological innovation, institutional strengthening, and competitiveness.

The effects of public spending also differ markedly when the analysis turns to social variables such as poverty, health, and well-being. Coaquira Vargas and Vilca Colquehuanca (2023) showed that public health investment reduces monetary poverty, although its benefits diminish where territorial inequalities in budget execution persist. This relationship is corroborated by León Arias and Reynoso-González (2024), who identified positive effects of health spending on life expectancy, reinforcing the importance of public investment for human development. Canbay and Kırca (2022), however, question the direction of this relationship, showing that in several countries economic growth explains the rise in health spending more than the reverse, evidence that fiscal dynamics also respond to economic performance. Varela Llamas and Retamoza Yocupicio (2023) similarly argue that public spending has little capacity to reduce labor informality where structural labor-market problems persist. Finally, studies conducted during the pandemic extend this discussion by demonstrating the state's stabilizing role in times of crisis. Alencar Arrais (2022) found that direct transfers cushioned the economic effects of COVID-19, Nascimento et al. (2021) documented that cuts in health spending deepened social vulnerabilities, and Santos et al. (2021) showed that hospital financing helped sustain the health system's response capacity despite marked territorial inequalities. Together, these studies indicate that the impact of public spending extends beyond economic growth and must be assessed in terms of its contribution to social well-being, institutional resilience, and the sustainability of development.

Governance, state capacity, and the sustainability of public spending

The third line of discussion helps clarify that the effectiveness of public spending depends not only on how resources are allocated but also on the rules, incentives, and institutional capacities that guide their execution. From this vantage point, Behar-Villegas (2021) shows that cultures of wasteful spending reproduce administrative practices that normalize inefficiency, while Galvis-Ciro and Hincapié-Vélez (2022) demonstrate that corruption alters the composition of spending and reduces its orientation toward socially sensitive sectors. This issue is further illuminated by the findings of Vera and Martínez (2022), who warn that regulatory advances in transparency do not guarantee effective accountability without real mechanisms of oversight and citizen control. Along the same lines, Quispe et al. (2022) highlight that participatory budgeting can strengthen the legitimacy of spending, although its impact depends on the quality of participation and the state's capacity to translate social demands into budgetary decisions. Sousa and Monte (2021) likewise show that fiscal decentralization reshapes the composition of municipal spending, though it does not necessarily ensure a stronger social orientation where institutional design is weak.

The political dimension of spending also emerges as a determining factor in explaining its outcomes. Sánchez (2023) confirms that party ideology influences patterns of budget allocation, while Mauerberg Jr. et al. (2023) show that spending can be used strategically to sustain political support through appointments and resource distribution. Ribeiro and Feitosa (2022) add to this picture by showing that fiscal rules can improve the productivity of spending, although their effects depend on the political and institutional context. In specific sectors, Flores Orona et al. (2022) warn that security spending does not automatically reduce crime absent comprehensive policies; Ferreira and Barros (2021) note that municipal waste-management spending depends on local financial sustainability; Silva et al. (2022) point to limitations in environmental spending planning; and Sovilla and Díaz Sánchez (2022) show that recentralizing health spending can correct fragmentation but cannot substitute for structural fiscal reform. Finally, Correia and Barros Neto (2021) and Gama and Bastos (2023) situate these findings within the macrofiscal sphere, showing that the effectiveness of spending depends on fiscal multipliers, tax revenues, and economic uncertainty. Taken together, and in dialogue with Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL, 2025), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024), and the World Bank (2024), the evidence confirms that Latin America needs to strengthen its state capacities, not merely increase spending, in order to convert public resources into sustainable development.

Conclusions

This systematic review made it possible to analyze the trends, approaches, and main findings of research on public spending and state management in Latin America over the 2021–2025 period. The evidence points to a shift away from approaches centered on the magnitude of spending toward perspectives oriented around efficiency, governance, and the quality of public management, underscoring that outcomes depend primarily on the institutional capacity to plan, execute, and evaluate public policies.

The review also shows that public spending is a strategic instrument for promoting economic and social development; its effectiveness, however, hinges on transparency, accountability, governance, and institutional strengthening. Consolidating evaluation mechanisms and results-based management practices that optimize the use of public resources should therefore be treated as a priority.

Finally, this review offers a conceptual foundation for future research on public spending and state management in Latin America. Extending the analysis to new contexts and emerging variables is recommended, as doing so would strengthen evidence-based decision-making and support the development of more efficient and sustainable public management models.

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