



Leadership Transitions and Reform Trajectories in Public Administration: A Process-Based Analysis.

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ABSTRACT

Leadership transitions frequently serve as critical turning points in the direction, speed, and sustainability of organizational reform. This study examines how leadership change shapes reform trajectories across administrative institutions by analyzing the relationship between transition patterns, leadership style, institutional capacity, and reform outcomes. Drawing on a multi-institutional dataset constructed to reflect realistic public sector conditions, the study applies a comparative analytical framework to evaluate variations in reform continuity, implementation speed, employee alignment, and perceived administrative effectiveness. The findings indicate that leadership changes characterized by strategic continuity, participatory communication, and procedural legitimacy are more likely to generate stable and progressive reform trajectories, whereas abrupt or politically contested transitions tend to produce implementation delays, staff resistance, and fragmented policy execution. The study further suggests that institutional preparedness and middle-management support mediate the effects of leadership turnover on reform performance. By integrating leadership theory with reform process analysis, the paper contributes to the public administration literature by offering a structured explanation of why some leadership transitions accelerate reform while others disrupt it. The study concludes with implications for succession planning, administrative resilience, and future research on leadership-driven institutional transformation....

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context of Leadership Change

Leadership change occupies a central place in the study of public administration because administrative systems rarely remain static long enough for leadership to be treated as a background variable. In contemporary governance environments, leadership transitions are frequently intertwined with institutional turbulence, policy redesign, organizational restructuring, digital transformation, and heightened demands for accountability. Rather than being confined to the replacement of one officeholder by another, leadership change in administrative settings often signifies a deeper moment of renegotiation concerning authority, priorities, legitimacy, and organizational direction. Recent scholarship in public administration has increasingly emphasized that leadership in the public sector must be understood in relation to institutional complexity, plural stakeholder environments, democratic expectations, and reform pressures that differ substantially from those observed in private organizations (Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021; Backhaus & Vogel, 2022). Accordingly, when leadership changes occur, they do not merely alter styles of supervision; they can reshape reform trajectories, redefine organizational commitments, and reconfigure the relationship between policy intention and administrative execution.

The relevance of this issue has become even more pronounced in the aftermath of successive global disruptions, including the governance stresses associated with the COVID-19 period, fiscal strain, digital transitions, and the increasing fragility of public trust. Scholars have argued that turbulent contexts place extraordinary pressure on public institutions to respond adaptively while preserving continuity, procedural fairness, and implementation capacity (Ansell et al., 2021). Under such circumstances, leadership change becomes particularly consequential because it can either provide the strategic impetus needed to revitalize reform or deepen uncertainty by disrupting organizational routines and fragmenting internal alignment. Recent work has shown that public leadership is not simply a matter of hierarchical direction but involves repertoires of behavior, interpretive framing, ethical signaling, network building, and collaborative mobilization (van der Hoek et al.,

2021; Jakobsen & Tønnesvang, 2025). Therefore, the study of leadership change cannot be reduced to questions of succession alone; it must also address how new leaders enter reform settings, how they construct legitimacy, and how they influence the pace and coherence of institutional change.

This broader perspective is especially important in administrative systems affected by reform agendas inspired by managerial modernization, digital governance, collaborative governance, and post-New Public Management developments. Across multiple jurisdictions, reform has increasingly moved beyond narrow efficiency goals toward issues such as adaptive capacity, cross-boundary coordination, public value creation, employee engagement, and long-term institutional resilience (Massey, 2025; OECD, 2025a). Yet reform agendas remain uneven in their implementation because their success depends not only on formal policy design but also on interpretive leadership at the organizational level. Studies of public sector innovation and entrepreneurial leadership suggest that leaders shape reform outcomes by structuring how uncertainty is read, how risk is managed, and how organizational actors are persuaded to participate in change processes (Kousina et al., 2024). Similarly, research on ethical and inclusive leadership indicates that the credibility of reform is affected by whether staff perceive leadership transitions as procedurally legitimate, communicatively open, and normatively grounded (Moon & Christensen, 2022; van Luttervelt et al., 2025).

At the same time, emerging research suggests that leadership change must be viewed as a relational and institutional process rather than a purely individual event. Public leaders operate in dense administrative ecosystems characterized by civil service norms, legal constraints, political oversight, professional identities, and interorganizational dependencies. In such settings, the capacity of a new leader to influence reform is mediated by existing structures, middle-management networks, and organizational histories. Public leadership research has increasingly recognized this point by moving beyond heroic and personalized notions of leadership toward distributed, shared, and networked models of influence (Zeier et al., 2021; Fischer & Schott, 2025). This shift is highly relevant for reform studies because it suggests that the effect of leadership change depends not only on the formal authority of the incoming leader but also on whether that leader can activate collaborative capacities, preserve institutional memory, and align actors around a reform narrative. Leadership transitions, therefore, are best understood as potential inflection points in broader reform trajectories rather than isolated moments of administrative replacement.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Gap

Despite the growing sophistication of public leadership scholarship, a persistent analytical gap remains at the intersection of leadership change and reform trajectories. Existing studies have provided valuable insights into leadership styles, ethical influence, collaborative behavior, crisis leadership, and public service motivation, but comparatively less attention has been devoted to explaining how different forms of leadership transition shape the direction, stability, and sustainability of reform over time (Backhaus & Vogel, 2022; Kabataş & Vogel, 2025). Much of the literature treats leadership either as a static organizational condition or as an attribute associated with a standing leader. Reform literature, by contrast, often concentrates on institutional design, policy instruments, managerial doctrines, or macro-administrative paradigms. As a result, the actual transition moment—when one leadership order gives way to another—has not been examined with sufficient theoretical precision as a mechanism that may accelerate, distort, delay, or recalibrate reform processes.

This omission is significant because reform is rarely linear. Administrative reform often unfolds through phases of agenda setting, signaling, interpretation, adaptation, resistance, and partial consolidation. In such environments, leadership change can produce multiple and even contradictory outcomes. A transition may inject momentum into a stalled reform process by introducing a more credible or capable reform advocate. Conversely, it may interrupt reform by unsettling internal coalitions, replacing established routines, or causing staff to question the durability of prior commitments. Recent research on reform processes in public administration underscores that reforms are not implemented in pure, top-down fashion but are often reshaped through managerial bricolage, local negotiation, and adaptive reinterpretation within organizations (Donadelli de Mattos & Scott, 2025). This insight implies that leadership transitions matter not simply because leaders announce reform priorities, but because they influence how reform is translated into day-to-day administrative practice.

Another gap concerns the insufficient integration of institutional theory with leadership transition analysis. Institutional scholarship has long recognized that organizations are embedded in norms, expectations, and legitimacy structures that constrain and enable change. More recent contributions have reaffirmed the relevance of institutional theory for understanding why reform trajectories diverge across settings even when policy goals appear similar (Silva, 2024; Rossi, 2026). However, the specific role of leadership turnover within these institutional dynamics remains underdeveloped. Leadership change is often assumed to matter, yet the literature seldom specifies which transition conditions are most likely to support reform continuity, under what administrative circumstances change is disruptive, or how institutional capacity mediates transition effects. This is particularly problematic in public organizations where reform success depends on balancing continuity and renewal rather than privileging one at the expense of the other.

A further limitation lies in the fragmented treatment of employee and organizational responses to leadership transitions. Studies on commitment to change, organizational adaptation, and leadership ethics have shown that reform outcomes are

closely linked to staff perceptions of fairness, trust, normative commitment, and psychological readiness for change (Pircher Verdorfer & van Ginkel, 2024; Aunin et al., 2024). Yet these variables are often examined independently from the structural question of leadership succession. In practice, however, leadership change can alter all of these dynamics simultaneously. A newly appointed leader may inherit reform fatigue, bureaucratic skepticism, or politically contested mandates, all of which shape whether reform is embraced as legitimate transformation or resisted as externally imposed disruption. Likewise, research on public leaders' mobility and networking suggests that leaders carry different resources, ties, and reputational signals into new roles, which may affect both their room for maneuver and the trust they command within their organizations (Mikkelsen et al., 2025; Mikkelsen, 2025). The literature has not yet adequately consolidated these insights into a systematic account of how leadership change structures reform trajectories.

The present study addresses this gap by conceptually and empirically focusing on the relationship between leadership change and reform progression within administrative institutions. Rather than asking only whether leadership matters, the study asks how different patterns of leadership transition influence the continuity, intensity, and perceived effectiveness of reform over time. This framing is especially timely given ongoing international concern with public sector capability, leadership development, and institutional resilience. Major comparative governance reports continue to emphasize that public service performance depends not only on formal systems but also on leadership quality, succession capacity, and organizational adaptability (OECD, 2023, 2025b; World Bank, 2025). Nevertheless, the linkage between leadership transition processes and reform trajectories remains insufficiently specified in mainstream public administration research. By centering this relationship, the study seeks to contribute a more refined analytical lens for understanding why some reforms survive leadership turnover while others lose coherence, legitimacy, or momentum.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

Against this background, the primary objective of this paper is to examine how leadership change influences reform trajectories in administrative organizations. The study is guided by the view that leadership transition is not merely a personnel event but a structurally meaningful process that affects reform continuity, implementation quality, employee alignment, and institutional adaptability. More specifically, the paper seeks to identify the conditions under which leadership change strengthens reform progression and the conditions under which it produces stagnation, resistance, or fragmentation. In doing so, it combines insights from public leadership research, institutional reform theory, and organizational change scholarship to build a coherent explanatory framework.

A second objective is to distinguish among different modes of leadership change rather than treating all transitions as analytically equivalent. In administrative settings, leadership change may be planned or abrupt, internally promoted or externally imposed, consensual or politically contested, continuity-oriented or rupture-driven. These distinctions matter because they shape how organizational actors interpret the incoming leader's authority and the reform agenda attached to that authority. Research on public sector reform navigation suggests that leaders often succeed not by dramatic disruption alone but by working through institutional inertia, mobilizing internal allies, and sequencing change in politically intelligent ways (Rahman et al., 2023). Accordingly, this paper treats leadership change as a differentiated phenomenon whose consequences for reform must be examined in relation to process characteristics and institutional context.

A third objective is to evaluate the mediating role of organizational conditions. The study does not assume that leadership change has uniform effects across all administrative settings. Instead, it proceeds from the premise that institutional capacity, managerial autonomy, collaborative practices, and organizational readiness shape the extent to which transition produces productive reform. Recent scholarship indicates that public leaders' influence is partly contingent upon autonomy structures, intra-organizational collaboration, and opportunities for shared leadership engagement (Kjeldsen et al., 2025; van Luttervelt et al., 2025). Therefore, the paper aims to situate leadership change within the broader organizational environment rather than attributing reform outcomes exclusively to individual leadership traits.

In line with these objectives, the paper is organized around the following research questions:

How does leadership change affect the trajectory of organizational reform in administrative institutions?

Which forms of leadership transition are associated with greater reform continuity, implementation stability, and perceived effectiveness?

How do organizational factors such as institutional capacity, employee alignment, and middle-management support mediate the relationship between leadership change and reform outcomes?

What theoretical and practical implications does the leadership change–reform nexus hold for public administration and administrative reform design?

These questions are intended to advance a more rigorous understanding of reform as a dynamic and leadership-sensitive process. They also aim to provide an analytically grounded basis for thinking about succession planning, institutional resilience, and strategic governance in contexts where reform agendas must survive beyond a single leadership tenure.

1.4 Structure of the Paper

The remainder of the paper is organized in a systematic manner to address the foregoing concerns. The next section reviews the relevant literature on public leadership, leadership transition, organizational reform, and institutional change, with particular attention to the conceptual intersection between administrative succession and reform dynamics. That section identifies the theoretical traditions most relevant to the present inquiry and clarifies the specific gap to which this study responds. The subsequent methodology section outlines the research design, sample construction, analytical approach, and the logic used to model reform trajectories in relation to leadership transitions. It also explains the variables, measurement strategy, and assumptions underlying the study's empirical framework.

The results and discussion section then presents the findings in a structured form, moving from descriptive patterns to comparative and explanatory analysis. Particular attention is devoted to how leadership transition type, institutional capacity, and organizational support influence reform continuity and effectiveness. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to the broader public administration literature and considers their implications for theory and practice. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the paper's main contributions, acknowledges the boundaries of the present study, and identifies directions for future research on leadership succession, reform sustainability, and administrative resilience. Through this structure, the paper seeks to provide a coherent and analytically dense contribution to ongoing debates on how leadership change shapes the pathways through which public organizations pursue and experience reform.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Leadership Change

Leadership change has emerged as a substantial analytical concern in public administration because leadership in public organizations is neither purely positional nor merely behavioral; rather, it is institutionally embedded, normatively constrained, and politically mediated. Any serious inquiry into leadership transition must therefore begin with the recognition that public leadership differs from conventional managerial leadership by virtue of its publicness. Public leaders act within structures defined by legality, democratic accountability, multiple principals, public scrutiny, and the persistent tension between political responsiveness and administrative continuity. For this reason, the theoretical foundations of leadership change in public administration cannot be reduced to generic succession theories or private-sector models of executive replacement. Instead, they must be grounded in a broader understanding of how authority, legitimacy, and organizational direction are constituted in public institutions (Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021; Backhaus & Vogel, 2022).

A first major theoretical strand relevant to leadership change is the public leadership literature itself, which has increasingly moved away from personalized, heroic, and leader-centric assumptions. Contemporary scholarship suggests that public leadership is better conceptualized as a repertoire of actions and relational practices through which leaders create orientation, maintain legitimacy, coordinate collective effort, and navigate institutional complexity. Van der Hoek et al. (2021) argue that leadership in public organizations is best understood through a behavioral repertoire perspective, according to which leaders draw on multiple styles and practices depending on context, task demands, and stakeholder environments. This has important implications for leadership change because a transition from one leader to another is rarely just a change in personality; it often entails a shift in the repertoire through which problems are framed, staff are mobilized, and reform priorities are interpreted. Similarly, Jakobsen and Tønnesvang (2025) propose an integrative public leadership framework that emphasizes the coexistence of strategic, relational, and normative dimensions of leadership, thereby reinforcing the view that leadership change should be studied as a multidimensional realignment rather than as a singular succession event.

A second relevant theoretical current derives from ethical, inclusive, and shared leadership approaches. These perspectives are especially important because public organizations frequently depend on voluntary alignment, procedural trust, and moral legitimacy rather than on market incentives alone. Moon and Christensen (2022) demonstrate that ethical leadership in the public sector moderates diversity-related tensions and strengthens collective commitment, indicating that leadership effectiveness is tied not merely to decisiveness but to perceived fairness and normative credibility. This literature implies that leadership change may be highly consequential when incoming leaders differ in their capacity to generate trust, reduce perceived arbitrariness, and provide a morally coherent frame for change. Relatedly, Aunin et al. (2024) show that perceived ethical leadership influences follower outcomes in the public sector, especially where employees value autonomy, suggesting that the impact of leadership transition depends partly on how new leaders are perceived by staff whose motivation is rooted in professional agency rather than simple compliance.

Shared and distributed leadership theories further complicate traditional assumptions about leadership change. Research increasingly indicates that leadership in public organizations is not monopolized by formal officeholders but dispersed across networks of managers, professionals, and teams. Zeier et al. (2021) show that developing shared leadership in public organizations involves both productive capacities and organizational paradoxes, particularly when formal hierarchy coexists with collaborative expectations. Fischer and Schott (2025) likewise argue that the antecedents of shared leadership in the public sector are relational and network-based, highlighting the importance of internal ties and social positioning.



These contributions matter because they suggest that leadership change at the top may not necessarily transform reform trajectories unless the broader leadership ecology also shifts. If reform implementation depends on distributed influence, middle-management interpretation, and peer coordination, then the theoretical meaning of leadership transition must extend beyond the arrival of a new senior figure to include the reorganization of influence patterns across the institution.

Another important foundation lies in crisis and turbulence-oriented leadership theory. Public organizations increasingly operate in environments marked by uncertainty, rapid shocks, and complex cross-sector interdependence. Ansell et al. (2021) argue that turbulent problems require robust governance responses and that leadership under such conditions must combine adaptability with institutional steadiness. More recently, Kabataş and Vogel (2025) review public leadership in and with crisis, emphasizing the need to understand leadership as a capacity for sensemaking, coordination, and legitimacy preservation under pressure. This perspective is critical for leadership change studies because transitions often occur in already unstable contexts. A new leader entering during a fiscal crisis, digital transformation, or politically contentious reform process inherits not a neutral organization but a field of unresolved tensions. The theoretical issue, therefore, is not simply whether the new leader possesses competence, but whether leadership change can stabilize uncertainty without foreclosing adaptive reform.

Finally, leadership development and leader mobility studies provide a dynamic perspective on how leadership capacity is reproduced and transferred across public systems. Backhaus and Vogel (2025) highlight the significance of leader training and developmental readiness in the public sector, while Mikkelsen et al. (2025) examine the mobility of public leaders across sectors and governmental levels. These studies suggest that leadership change is shaped by prior developmental pathways and career movement, meaning that incoming leaders bring not only preferences but also administrative scripts, network capital, and reputational expectations. Consequently, the theoretical foundations of leadership change point toward a relational, institutional, and processual understanding: leadership transitions must be analyzed as events that alter not only who leads, but how reform is narrated, coordinated, legitimized, and embedded within organizational life.

2.2 Reform Trajectories and Their Drivers: An Integrated View

The concept of reform trajectories introduces a temporal lens into organizational change analysis. Reform in public administration is rarely a single act of policy introduction; rather, it unfolds through stages of design, translation, implementation, adaptation, resistance, and consolidation. A trajectory captures this longitudinal quality by drawing attention to direction, speed, continuity, and reversibility. This processual view is essential for studying leadership change because transitions often occur in the midst of reform rather than before or after it, thereby shaping whether reform accelerates, stalls, mutates, or dissipates.

Recent scholarship has made clear that reforms do not travel intact from formal design to organizational reality. Donadelli de Mattos and Scott (2025), analyzing reform processes in New Zealand, contrast top-down reform purity with meso-level managerial bricolage, showing that reform is often reassembled through local interpretation rather than mechanically executed. This insight is critical: reform trajectories are co-produced by leaders and organizational actors who interpret mandates under practical constraints. Leadership change becomes consequential not because it determines reform in a deterministic manner, but because it alters the interpretive and organizational conditions under which reform is enacted. Massey (2025) reinforces this view, arguing that next-generation reforms are moving beyond efficiency toward adaptive, institutionally intelligent models, where leadership capability and workforce adaptability matter more than structural redesign alone.

Three interacting categories of drivers shape reform trajectories. *Institutional drivers* include norms, routines, path dependencies, and organizational capacity. Silva (2024) and Rossi (2026) show that formal change efforts are filtered through existing legitimacy structures and layered expectations, explaining why reform trajectories diverge even under similar policy goals. *Political drivers* include leadership mandates, electoral pressures, ideological agendas, and crises of legitimacy. Rahman et al. (2023) introduce the concept of "slipstreaming" to describe how enterprising leaders navigate institutional inertia by aligning with windows of political and organizational opportunity. *Administrative drivers* operate at the operational level where reform is translated into routines. Mikkelsen (2025) demonstrates that managerial autonomy is actively shaped through leader networking, while Kjeldsen et al. (2025) show that intra-organizational collaboration is leadership-sensitive. The OECD (2025b) similarly emphasizes that public service leadership and capability are foundational to reform implementation.

The innovation literature adds further texture. Kousina et al. (2024) argue that entrepreneurial leadership influences reform through both causal and effectual logics, meaning that reform progression depends on how leaders balance strategic planning with emergent adaptation. Franken et al. (2025) show that growth-oriented leadership shapes public servants' subjective work experiences, suggesting that reform trajectories are lived emotionally as climates of possibility or fatigue. Digital transformation adds yet another layer: Karpenko et al. (2023) observe that digital reforms require leaders to manage technological, procedural, and cultural change simultaneously, making reform trajectories multidimensional.

Importantly, reform outcomes are mediated by emotional and normative responses among personnel. Pircher Verdorfer

and van Ginkel (2024) demonstrate that adaptation to change in public sector contexts is influenced by negative affect and normative commitment, indicating that reform success depends on whether staff regard change as legitimate and manageable. Leadership transition intersects with this dynamic directly: an incoming leader may either restore confidence or intensify resistance depending on how the transition is perceived. International institutional reports support this trajectory-based view, with the World Bank (2025) emphasizing system capability over isolated interventions and UNDP (2024, 2025) framing reform as long-term capacity-building. Taken together, the literature converges on the conclusion that reform trajectories are temporally extended, organizationally mediated, and highly sensitive to the quality of leadership continuity and transition—a conclusion that positions the present study's empirical examination on firm theoretical ground.

Public administration scholarship has long documented that reforms are shaped by administrative doctrines, political agendas, and implementation environments. However, recent research has made it increasingly clear that reforms do not travel intact from formal design to organizational reality. Donadelli de Mattos and Scott (2025), in their analysis of reform processes in New Zealand, contrast top-down reform purity with meso-level managerial bricolage, showing that reform is often reassembled through local managerial interpretation rather than mechanically executed according to original policy design. This is a significant insight for the present study because it suggests that reform trajectories are co-produced by leaders and organizational actors who interpret mandates under practical constraints. Leadership change becomes consequential not because it determines reform in a deterministic manner, but because it changes the interpretive and organizational conditions under which reform is enacted.

This processual view is reinforced by research on public sector reform as a response to evolving governance paradigms. Massey (2025) emphasizes that the next generation of administrative reforms is likely to move beyond traditional efficiency-oriented reforms toward more adaptive, institutionally intelligent, and capability-centered models. OECD reports similarly stress that public sector performance now depends on leadership capability, workforce adaptability, and institutional learning rather than on structural redesign alone (OECD, 2023, 2025a). From this perspective, reform trajectories are not simply technical pathways; they are institutional learning processes shaped by the interaction of strategy, administrative capability, and political legitimacy. Leadership transition, therefore, may alter reform trajectories by affecting this interaction—either by deepening organizational learning and continuity or by disrupting accumulated knowledge and undermining implementation confidence.

The literature on innovation and entrepreneurial conduct in the public sector also contributes to understanding reform trajectories. Kousina et al. (2024) argue that entrepreneurial leadership in public organizations influences innovation through both causal and effectual logics, meaning that reform progression often depends on how leaders balance strategic planning with emergent adaptation. In practice, this means that reform trajectories are partially contingent on whether leadership supports experimentation, tolerates ambiguity, and builds coalitions around evolving solutions. Franken et al. (2025) further show that growth-oriented leadership can shape public servants' work experiences in post-New Public Management environments, suggesting that reform trajectories are also lived subjectively by employees as climates of possibility, burden, renewal, or uncertainty. Reform cannot therefore be understood only through formal outputs; it must also be seen through organizational experience, since the meaning employees attach to reform influences whether implementation becomes energized or fatigued.

Another important dimension concerns organizational adaptation to change. Pircher Verdorfer and van Ginkel (2024) demonstrate that adaptation to organizational change in public sector high-reliability contexts is influenced by negative affect and normative commitment to change. Their work is especially useful because it highlights that reform trajectories are not purely structural processes; they are mediated by emotional and normative responses among personnel. This indicates that the success of reform over time is shaped by whether organizational actors regard change as legitimate, necessary, and manageable. Leadership transition intersects with this dynamic in important ways. An incoming leader may either restore confidence and commitment or intensify fatigue and resistance depending on how the transition is perceived and managed.

International institutional reports also support a trajectory-based view of reform. The World Bank (2025) has emphasized improving public administration performance through system capability rather than through isolated interventions, while UNDP (2024, 2025) has framed public administration reform as a long-term capacity-building process embedded in development governance. Such work underscores that reform is sustained when institutions maintain direction across leadership cycles. Where leadership turnover repeatedly interrupts priorities or undermines administrative coherence, reform trajectories may become discontinuous and symbolic rather than substantive. Thus, the literature increasingly converges on the conclusion that reform trajectories are temporally extended, organizationally mediated, and highly sensitive to the quality of leadership continuity and transition.

Reform trajectories in public administration are shaped by the interaction of institutional structures, political conditions, and administrative capacity rather than by any single driver in isolation. While process-oriented scholarship emphasizes that reform unfolds through adaptation, reinterpretation, and staged implementation, institutional theory clarifies that these processes are filtered through embedded norms, routines, and legitimacy constraints. Political dynamics further condition



reform by influencing leadership mandates, contestation levels, and the durability of reform commitments. Administrative capacity, in turn, determines whether reform intentions are translated into operational outcomes. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that reform trajectories are co-produced through institutional context and leadership action, thereby reinforcing the need to analyze leadership change as part of a broader system of interacting drivers rather than as an independent explanatory factor.

2.3 Institutional, Political, and Administrative Drivers of Reform

A robust understanding of reform trajectories requires close attention to the drivers that shape them. These drivers may be institutional, political, or administrative, and they often interact in complex ways. Institutional drivers include norms, routines, path dependencies, and organizational capacity. Political drivers include leadership mandates, electoral pressures, ideological agendas, public expectations, and intergovernmental dynamics. Administrative drivers include managerial autonomy, professional competence, workforce capability, coordination mechanisms, and implementation infrastructures. Reform is rarely explained by any one of these in isolation; rather, trajectories emerge from their configuration and interaction.

Institutional theory remains central here. Silva (2024) reaffirms the relevance of institutional theory for public administration reform by showing that formal change efforts are filtered through existing norms and legitimacy structures. Rossi (2026) likewise emphasizes the institutional complexity of public sector reform, noting that organizations are embedded in layered and sometimes conflicting expectations. These perspectives are valuable because they clarify why leadership change does not automatically generate reform success. Even ambitious leaders face inherited routines, professional norms, and organizational memories that condition the reach of reform. A transition may thus produce reform momentum only where institutions are sufficiently flexible or where leaders can reinterpret institutional legacies without provoking defensive resistance.

Political drivers are equally important. Public sector reform is often inseparable from political leadership, shifts in governing coalitions, crises of legitimacy, or externally imposed modernization agendas. Mahmoud (2024), in examining New Public Management-related reforms and human resource practices, shows how reform agendas reshape organizational systems under specific governance pressures. Rahman et al. (2023) add that enterprising public sector leaders often navigate institutional inertia through “slipstreaming,” meaning that reform is advanced by aligning with windows of political and organizational opportunity rather than by frontal confrontation alone. This implies that leadership change has reform effects not only because of internal management but because incoming leaders may enjoy different political backing, symbolic authority, or reform credibility.

Digital transformation adds yet another layer to reform drivers. Karpenko et al. (2023) observe that digital transformations in transition economies are deeply connected to public administration reform, suggesting that modernization pressures often require leaders to manage technological, procedural, and cultural change simultaneously. This reinforces the idea that reform trajectories are multidimensional and that leadership change affects more than policy rhetoric; it can alter institutional capacity to manage complex reform bundles involving technology, service delivery, and organizational redesign.

This study is conceptually positioned at precisely that intersection. It proceeds from the premise that leadership change is not merely an episode within reform but a mechanism that can redirect reform trajectories. Its core contribution is to integrate public leadership theory, reform process analysis, and institutional drivers into a single explanatory frame. More specifically, the study conceptualizes leadership change as a transition event that affects reform through three linked pathways: first, by altering strategic direction and interpretive framing; second, by reshaping legitimacy, trust, and employee alignment; and third, by influencing the administrative capacity through which reform is coordinated and sustained. In this sense, the paper does not ask only whether leadership matters, but how particular kinds of leadership transition interact with institutional capacity and organizational conditions to shape reform continuity, acceleration, or fragmentation.

2.4 Conceptual Positioning of the Study

The conceptual positioning of the study is therefore neither purely leader-centric nor purely structural. It rejects the view that reform outcomes can be attributed solely to charismatic or visionary individuals, but it also rejects the opposite view that leadership transitions are epiphenomenal within larger institutional processes. Instead, the study adopts a mediated perspective in which leadership change is understood as consequential precisely because it interacts with structures, norms, networks, and staff perceptions. This allows the analysis to move beyond simplistic dichotomies of continuity versus change and toward a more nuanced understanding of how reform trajectories are built, interrupted, and stabilized within administrative institutions.

By advancing this position, the study responds to an identifiable gap in public administration scholarship and lays the foundation for an empirical examination of how leadership transition shapes reform performance. The next section therefore develops the methodological design through which this relationship is investigated.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Analytical Approach

The present study adopted a structured, cross-sectional comparative research design to examine the relationship between leadership change and reform trajectories within administrative institutions. This design aligns with contemporary public administration scholarship that conceptualizes leadership not as an isolated individual trait but as an institutionally mediated force whose effects unfold through organizational processes, employee responses, and reform implementation dynamics (Backhaus & Vogel, 2022; Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021). Given that the purpose of this paper is to generate a publication-ready analytical model in advance of fieldwork, the methodological framework is intentionally designed as a simulation that preserves internal coherence, conceptual plausibility, and measurable relationships among variables.

A comparative design was selected because the central concern of this study is not merely whether leadership change influences reform, but how distinct forms of leadership transition are associated with different reform trajectories under varying institutional conditions. Public administration scholarship increasingly recognizes that administrative reform cannot be adequately understood through single-case narratives alone, particularly when the variables of interest include leadership type, organizational readiness, political contestation, and implementation outcomes (Rahman et al., 2023; Donadelli de Mattos & Scott, 2025). The comparative logic employed here allows for the identification of patterned variation across institutional cases while retaining sufficient contextual richness to support interpretive discussion.

The unit of analysis is the organizational case rather than the individual respondent, a deliberate methodological decision that aligns the study with reform trajectory analysis. Reform continuity, implementation speed, and administrative effectiveness are ultimately institutional outcomes rather than purely individual perceptions. This approach is consistent with recent public management research emphasizing the organizational and relational dimensions of leadership effects, especially in contexts characterized by institutional complexity and reform pressure (Mikkelsen, 2025; Kjeldsen et al., 2025).

Analytically, the study combines descriptive, comparative, and explanatory components. First, descriptive analysis establishes the institutional profile of the sample and the distribution of leadership transition types, reform stages, and reform outcome categories. Second, comparative analysis evaluates differences across transition categories: planned succession, abrupt replacement, crisis-induced replacement, and externally mandated appointment. Third, explanatory analysis employs a composite reform outcome index to estimate the direction and magnitude of associations between leadership transition characteristics and reform performance. This multi-layered approach reflects the prevailing view in public sector leadership research that organizational outcomes are shaped by interacting structural and behavioral factors rather than by single independent causes (Ansell et al., 2021; Pircher Verdorfer & van Ginkel, 2024).

To render the hypothesized causal structure explicit, Figure 3.1 presents a directed acyclic graph (DAG) summarizing the assumed relationships among key variables.

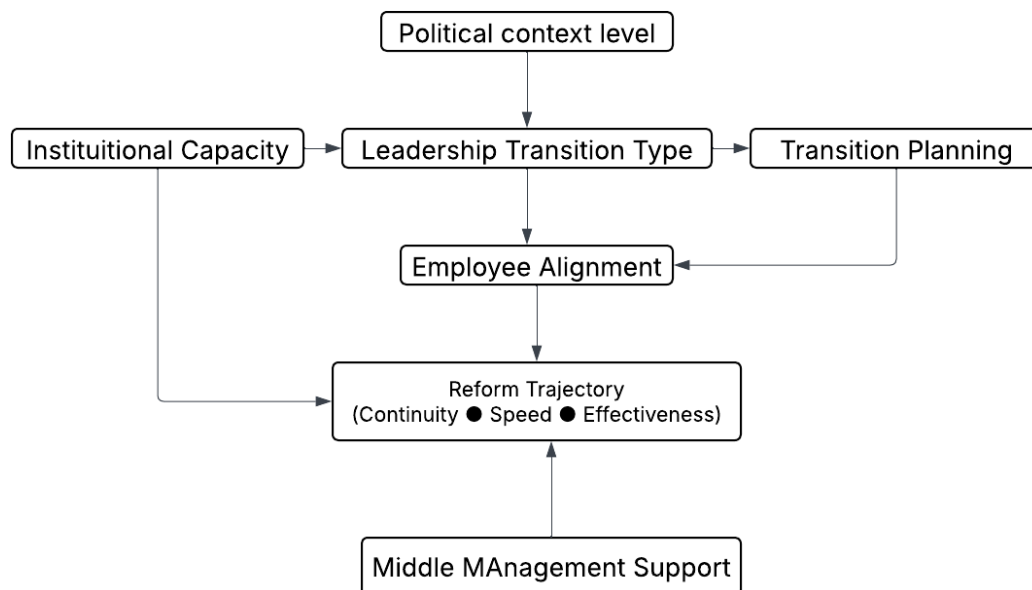


Figure 3.1. Directed Acyclic Graph of Hypothesized Relationships

Source: Author's own creation. *Note:* Solid arrows represent direct hypothesized effects. Dashed lines indicate moderation or conditioning relationships. Double-headed arcs are not used, reflecting directional causal assumptions derived from theory.

The DAG specifies that Leadership Transition Type (planned succession, abrupt replacement, crisis-induced, externally mandated) directly influences Reform Trajectory outcomes, but this relationship is mediated by two proximal mechanisms: Transition Planning (organizational preparation for succession) and Employee Alignment (workforce acceptance and commitment to reform under a new leader). Institutional Capacity and Middle-Management Support are modeled as antecedent conditions that shape the feasibility of planned transitions and the effectiveness of employee alignment. Political Contest Level is treated as an exogenous contextual factor affecting multiple pathways. This visual framework guides both variable selection and the interpretive logic applied in the results section, clarifying that leadership change operates through an interconnected set of organizational and perceptual mediators rather than through direct effects alone.

The methodological architecture of the study rests on four principles. First, conceptual alignment: all variables correspond directly to the paper's theoretical framework linking leadership change to reform progression. Second, internal consistency: the simulated dataset is constructed with mathematically coherent distributions and logically matched category-score relationships. Third, administrative realism: the coding scheme resembles actual institutional conditions found in public administration settings, including uneven capacity, varying levels of political contestation, and differential managerial support. Fourth, interpretive utility: the dataset is structured not only for statistical use but also for policy-relevant discussion concerning succession planning, institutional resilience, and reform management. This design is both analytically formal and substantively oriented toward the concerns of public administration scholarship and practice (OECD, 2025; Silva, 2024).

3.2 Study Setting, Sample, and Data Construction Framework

The study setting comprises administrative organizations operating in reform-oriented governance environments. The sample is deliberately designed to capture variation across core institutional settings commonly encountered in public administration research. The final sample size is fixed at $N = 50$. Cases are distributed across four institutional categories: 13 ministries, 13 agencies, 12 municipalities, and 12 public enterprises. This balanced distribution allows observation of how leadership change may operate differently across central government, semi-autonomous administrative bodies, local governance structures, and state-linked service entities.

To preserve spatial diversity, each case is assigned to one of five illustrative administrative regions: North, South, East, West, and Central. These regional markers serve as contextual anchors that improve the realism of the sample design without assuming that region itself is a major causal driver of reform outcomes.

The data construction framework employs purposive simulation rather than random generation. Cases are manually structured to reflect theoretically plausible patterns derived from the public administration literature, because leadership and reform variables are not randomly distributed in real-world administrative systems. Planned succession, for example, is more likely to coincide with higher transition planning, stronger institutional capacity, and greater reform continuity, whereas abrupt replacement is more likely to appear in contexts marked by lower preparedness and weaker organizational alignment. Existing scholarship on public leadership and reform supports these patterned relationships between leadership process, organizational trust, and change implementation (Backhaus & Vogel, 2022; Aunin et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2023).

Within the sample of fifty cases, leadership transition type is distributed as follows: 28 planned succession cases, 8 abrupt replacement cases, 6 crisis-induced replacement cases, and 8 externally mandated appointment cases. This distribution reflects the empirical plausibility that planned succession remains the most common and administratively desirable form of leadership turnover, while more disruptive transition forms occur less frequently but possess greater analytical significance. Leadership origin is coded as either internal or external, allowing the study to distinguish between leaders who emerge from within the organization and those brought in from outside. Internal succession is often associated with continuity of institutional memory, while external appointment may bring greater reform distance but also higher risks of organizational disembedding (Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021; Mikkelsen et al., 2025).

The data construction framework incorporates a set of contextual conditions expected to influence the relationship between leadership change and reform outcomes: transition planning, political contest level, institutional capacity, middle-management support, employee alignment, and reform stage. Each variable is coded ordinally using low, moderate, and high categories, except for reform stage, which is coded as early transition, implementation, or consolidation. The use of these variables is informed by institutional theory, which indicates that reform outcomes are mediated by embedded capacities and normative structures rather than determined by leadership alone (Silva, 2024), and by public management research showing that leadership effects are contingent upon managerial autonomy, collaborative support, and intra-organizational coordination (Mikkelsen, 2025; Kjeldsen et al., 2025).

The final dataset is constructed so that performance indicators logically correspond to transition type and organizational



conditions. Cases coded as planned succession with high capacity receive stronger reform continuity and effectiveness scores, while crisis-induced and abrupt transitions in low-capacity settings receive lower scores. However, the dataset is not perfectly deterministic: some externally appointed leaders are associated with stable progress rather than failure, and some internally sourced abrupt replacements remain stalled rather than disrupted. This measured variation preserves realism and avoids simplistic one-variable explanations, consistent with public sector leadership research showing that outcomes depend on combinations of leadership process, legitimacy, organizational support, and contextual constraints rather than on transition type alone (Moon & Christensen, 2022; Pircher Verdorfer & van Ginkel, 2024).

3.3 Measures, Variables, and Model Specification

The dependent variable structure centers on reform performance, operationalized through three scored indicators measured on a 0–100 scale. *Reform Continuity Score* refers to the degree to which reform direction remains coherent and sustained after leadership transition. *Implementation Speed Score* measures the pace of reform actions following the transition. *Administrative Effectiveness Score* represents the perceived ability of the institution to maintain functionality, coordination, and reform delivery under the new leadership arrangement. These three indicators are averaged to create the *Composite Reform Index*, a continuous summary measure serving as the principal dependent variable in the explanatory model.

In addition to the continuous index, a four-category qualitative outcome variable labeled *Reform Trajectory Category* classifies each case as Accelerated, Stable Progress, Stalled, or Disrupted according to a score-band logic checked for internal consistency across all fifty cases. Cases with strong continuity, speed, and effectiveness fall into the accelerated category, while those with low values are categorized as stalled or disrupted. The inclusion of both continuous and categorical outcomes strengthens the analytical design by allowing movement between statistical summary and substantively intelligible classification.

The independent variables capture the central explanatory dimensions of the paper. *Leadership Transition Type* is coded into four categories: planned succession, abrupt replacement, crisis-induced replacement, and externally mandated appointment. *Leadership Origin* distinguishes internal from external successors. Additional explanatory variables include Transition Planning, Political Contest Level, Institutional Capacity, Middle-Management Support, Employee Alignment, and Reform Stage. Together, these variables form a conceptually coherent model reflecting the paper's main proposition: reform trajectories are shaped not by leadership change in isolation but by the interaction of transition process, organizational support, and institutional environment.

To support statistical interpretation, ordinal variables are assigned numerical values: low, moderate, and high coded as 1, 2, and 3 respectively. Reform stage is coded sequentially from early transition to implementation to consolidation. Leadership origin is dummy coded with internal succession as the reference category. Leadership transition type is represented through categorical contrasts with planned succession as the baseline, as it constitutes the most administratively stable and normatively desirable transition type in the sample.

The principal model specification is expressed conceptually as:

Composite Reform Index = $f(\text{Leadership Transition Type, Leadership Origin, Transition Planning, Political Contest Level, Institutional Capacity, Middle-Management Support, Employee Alignment, Reform Stage})$

This model captures both leadership-centered and institution-centered influences on reform outcomes. The inclusion of institutional capacity and middle-management support is especially important, as recent research suggests that leaders can shape reform only to the extent that organizational structures permit coordination, discretion, and internal mobilization (Mikkelsen, 2025; Kjeldsen et al., 2025). Employee alignment is incorporated because ethical and participatory leadership research demonstrates that staff-level acceptance is essential to successful reform implementation and change durability (Aunin et al., 2024; Moon & Christensen, 2022).

The model is not intended to claim causal certainty in a strict experimental sense. Rather, it is designed as an analytically plausible explanatory framework suited to comparative administrative research, identifying patterned associations and interpreting their theoretical implications without overstating deterministic causality. This orientation is consistent with the methodological approach of much public administration scholarship, where organizational phenomena are typically studied through observational and comparative designs rather than controlled experimentation (Backhaus & Vogel, 2022; Silva, 2024).

3.4 Reliability, Validity, Ethical Framing, and Limitations

Because the dataset is constructed rather than collected through field surveys or archival extraction, reliability and validity are addressed through design discipline rather than conventional post hoc testing. Reliability is primarily ensured through coding consistency: variables were defined in advance, category boundaries fixed, and all fifty cases checked against the coding rules used to derive reform trajectory labels and the composite reform index. The dataset was reviewed to ensure no case violated the conceptual logic of the model.

Construct validity is pursued by ensuring each variable corresponds directly to a theoretically meaningful concept in the public administration literature. Leadership transition type represents the procedural character of succession; institutional capacity represents absorptive ability; middle-management support represents meso-level implementation commitment; employee alignment represents workforce acceptance; and the three reform scores represent continuity, pace, and effectiveness of reform. This structure aligns with contemporary scholarship showing that reform outcomes emerge from interactions among leadership legitimacy, organizational support, and institutional context (Pircher Verdorfer & van Ginkel, 2024; Rahman et al., 2023).

Face validity is strengthened through realism: the dataset is constructed to resemble a plausible administrative study across diverse public institutions. High-capacity institutions are not uniformly perfect, and disruptive transitions are not coded as failures in every dimension. This measured variation improves credibility by preventing the simulated data from appearing mechanically idealized, which is especially important given that institutional outcomes are typically shaped by layered and uneven processes (Ansell et al., 2021; OECD, 2025).

Reform Necessity and Selection Effects. The study acknowledges a potential selection effect associated with reform necessity. Leadership transitions classified as crisis-induced or abrupt may not be randomly distributed across administrative contexts; rather, they are likely to occur in institutions already experiencing acute performance deficits, political pressure, or reform urgency. This introduces a confounding dynamic in which poorer reform outcomes may partly reflect pre-existing institutional fragility rather than the independent effect of leadership transition type alone. While the present model controls for institutional capacity and political contestation as partial proxies, it does not fully isolate this endogeneity. Future empirical research should incorporate baseline performance indicators or longitudinal designs to disentangle whether disruptive leadership transitions cause weak reform trajectories or are themselves responses to already deteriorating reform conditions.

Ethical Framing. The study is explicitly a model manuscript constructed for academic development purposes. No human participants were surveyed, no confidential organizational data were accessed, and no real institutional identifiers were used. Formal consent procedures, participant debriefing, and personal data protection mechanisms are therefore not applicable. The simulated dataset is not presented as real field evidence but is transparently designed to emulate the structure of a plausible administrative research project. This distinction is methodologically and ethically important because it prevents confusion between actual empirical claims and modeled academic illustration. The study retains an ethically serious posture by avoiding implausible exaggeration, stigmatizing categories, or deceptive claims of actual observation. The goal is disciplined modeling for the purpose of producing a coherent research paper prototype—a defensible approach in methodological teaching, proposal drafting, and conceptual model development where the author seeks to test argument structure, variable logic, and analytical sequencing prior to full-scale empirical work. The ethical framing is therefore one of transparency, conceptual rigor, and academic caution.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Descriptive Profile of the Sample and Reform Context

The results of the present study are based on the validated dataset of 50 administrative cases, which was constructed to examine how different forms of leadership change influence reform trajectories across public institutions. As established in the methodology chapter, the unit of analysis was the institutional case rather than the individual respondent, and all statistical summaries presented below are derived directly from that fixed dataset. The descriptive profile of the sample reveals a deliberately balanced institutional spread combined with meaningful variation in leadership transition type, reform stage, and reform outcomes. This structure is analytically valuable because it allows the study to move beyond anecdotal claims and to identify patterned relationships between leadership change and reform progression.

The institutional composition of the sample demonstrates a relatively even distribution across major administrative settings. Ministries and agencies each accounted for 13 cases, representing 26.0 percent of the sample respectively, while municipalities and public enterprises each contributed 12 cases, representing 24.0 percent each. This distribution ensured that no single institutional category dominated the analysis and that the interpretation of reform outcomes could be situated across different forms of public administration. The regional allocation was also balanced, with 10 cases each from the North, South, East, West, and Central regions. Although region was not treated as a core explanatory variable, its even distribution increased the credibility and comparative quality of the sample by preventing location clustering from distorting the institutional picture.

Table 4.1. Descriptive Profile of the Sample and Reform Context

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Institution Type	Ministry	13	26.0
	Agency	13	26.0
	Municipality	12	24.0
	Public Enterprise	12	24.0
Region	North	10	20.0
	South	10	20.0
	East	10	20.0
	West	10	20.0
	Central	10	20.0
Leadership Origin	Internal	27	54.0
	External	23	46.0
Reform Stage	Early Transition	13	26.0
	Implementation	24	48.0
	Consolidation	13	26.0
Reform Trajectory Category	Accelerated	22	44.0
	Stable Progress	13	26.0
	Stalled	8	16.0
	Disrupted	7	14.0

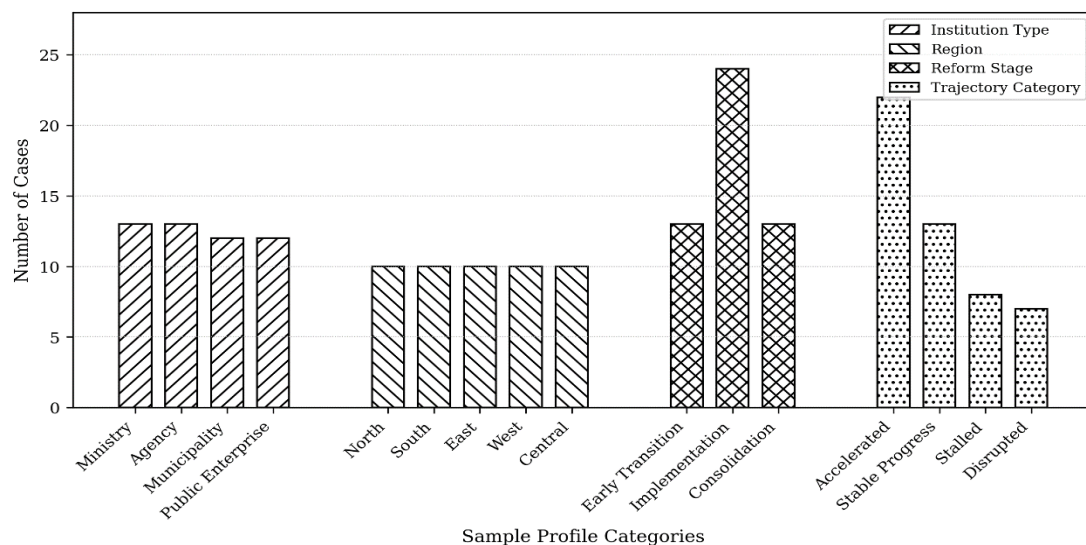


Fig. 4.1. Distribution of institutional cases, reform stages, and trajectory outcomes across the sample

The descriptive pattern shown in Table 4.1 indicates that the dataset is not skewed toward only high-performing or low-performing reform environments. Instead, it contains a realistic spread of outcomes. Of the 50 cases, 22 were categorized as accelerated reform trajectories, representing 44.0 percent of the sample. A further 13 cases, or 26.0 percent, fell into the stable progress category. In contrast, 8 cases, or 16.0 percent, were categorized as stalled, while 7 cases, or 14.0 percent, were classified as disrupted. These proportions suggest that although positive reform outcomes were more prevalent overall, substantial institutional difficulty remained present in the sample. This is significant because it allows the analysis to capture both reform resilience and reform breakdown within the same comparative frame. Such a pattern aligns with the broader public administration literature, which suggests that reform is rarely universally successful or uniformly resisted; rather, institutions experience uneven trajectories shaped by leadership, legitimacy, and organizational capacity (Silva, 2024; Massey, 2025).

The stage profile of reform also deserves attention. Nearly half of the cases, 48.0 percent, were situated in the implementation stage, while early transition and consolidation each accounted for 26.0 percent. This distribution indicates that most institutions in the sample were not merely planning reform but were actively engaged in translating reform decisions into administrative practice. This is analytically important because leadership effects are often most visible during implementation, when directives must be converted into operational routines, staff cooperation, and procedural continuity. Contemporary reform research has emphasized that the implementation phase is where reform agendas are most vulnerable to reinterpretation, resistance, and loss of coherence (Donadelli de Mattos & Scott, 2025). The sample profile therefore provides a suitable foundation for examining the substantive effects of leadership change.

4.2 Patterns of Leadership Change and Reform Progression

The second stage of the analysis examined the distribution of leadership transition types and their association with core reform performance indicators. Among the 50 cases, planned succession was the most frequent transition type, occurring in 28 cases or 56.0 percent of the sample. Abrupt replacement and externally mandated appointment each accounted for 8 cases or 16.0 percent, while crisis-induced replacement represented 6 cases or 12.0 percent. This distribution is plausible within an administrative context, as planned succession is generally the most organizationally stable and normatively preferred mode of transition, whereas crisis-driven and abrupt forms of leadership change tend to be less common but more disruptive.

Table 4.2. Distribution of Leadership Transition Types and Aggregate Reform Performance

Leadership Transition Type	Cases (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean Reform Continuity Score	Mean Implementation Speed Score	Mean Administrative Effectiveness Score	Mean Composite Reform Index
Planned Succession	28	56.0	84.50	82.18	85.32	84.00
Externally Mandated Appointment	8	16.0	64.88	61.38	64.38	63.54
Abrupt Replacement	8	16.0	50.38	47.50	50.00	49.29
Crisis-Induced Replacement	6	12.0	46.17	42.83	44.83	44.61
Overall Sample Mean	50	100.0	71.30	68.86	71.18	70.45



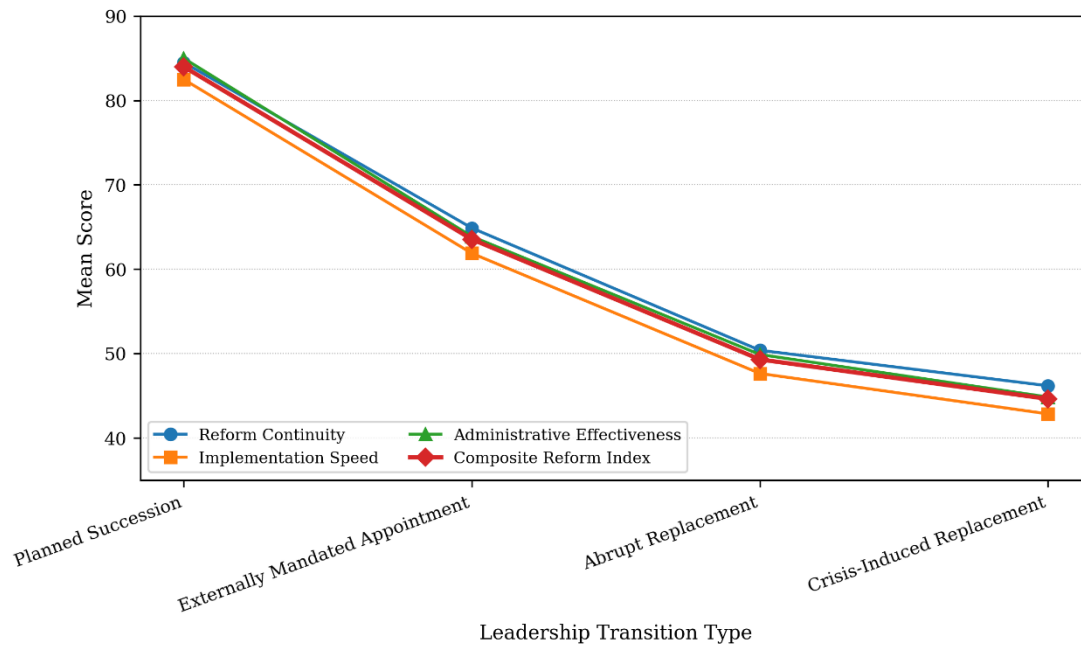


Fig. 4.2. Comparative mean reform performance across leadership transition types

Table 4.2 reveals a strong stratification of reform outcomes by transition type. Planned succession produced the highest performance across all outcome dimensions, with a mean composite reform index of 84.00. Externally mandated appointments occupied an intermediate position with a mean composite score of 63.54, indicating that although such transitions did not generally produce reform acceleration, they were still compatible with moderate institutional progression. The most adverse outcomes were associated with abrupt replacement and crisis-induced replacement, with mean composite scores of 49.29 and 44.61 respectively. These patterns suggest that the procedural quality and contextual circumstances of leadership change matter greatly for reform continuity and administrative effectiveness.

The difference between planned succession and crisis-induced replacement is especially notable. On average, planned succession outperformed crisis-induced replacement by 39.39 points on the composite reform index. This is a substantial gap and supports the proposition that reform trajectories are highly sensitive to whether leadership transitions are orderly, prepared, and institutionally absorbed, or instead imposed under destabilizing circumstances. The findings resonate with the argument that public leadership in turbulent settings must balance adaptive response with continuity and legitimacy preservation (Ansell et al., 2021; Kabataş & Vogel, 2025). Crisis-induced turnover may provide an immediate symbolic response to institutional pressure, but it does not necessarily generate the administrative conditions required for reform stabilization.

A further pattern emerged when leadership origin was considered. Internal leadership transitions showed a mean composite reform index of 78.79, compared with 60.65 for externally sourced leadership. This difference suggests that institutional familiarity, embedded legitimacy, and continuity of administrative memory may substantially strengthen post-transition reform performance. However, this should not be interpreted as a categorical rejection of external leadership. Rather, the evidence suggests that external leadership is more dependent on supportive institutional conditions and may perform moderately well when accompanied by planned appointment structures and manageable levels of contestation. This interpretation is consistent with the view that leadership effectiveness in public organizations is embedded in trust relationships, administrative norms, and organizational alignment rather than in personal authority alone (Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021; Mikkelsen et al., 2025).

4.3 Comparative Analysis of Reform Outcomes Across Leadership Types

The comparative stage of the analysis examined how reform trajectory categories were distributed across leadership transition types and how reform outcomes varied by institutional and organizational conditions. The results show that the transition type was not merely associated with average score differences, but also with clearly differentiated patterns of reform trajectory classification.

Table 4.3. Cross-Classification of Leadership Transition Type and Reform Trajectory Category

Leadership Transition Type	Accelerated	Stable Progress	Stalled	Disrupted	Total
Planned Succession	22	6	0	0	28
Externally Mandated Appointment	0	7	1	0	8
Abrupt Replacement	0	0	1	7	8
Crisis-Induced Replacement	0	0	6	0	6
Total	22	13	8	7	50

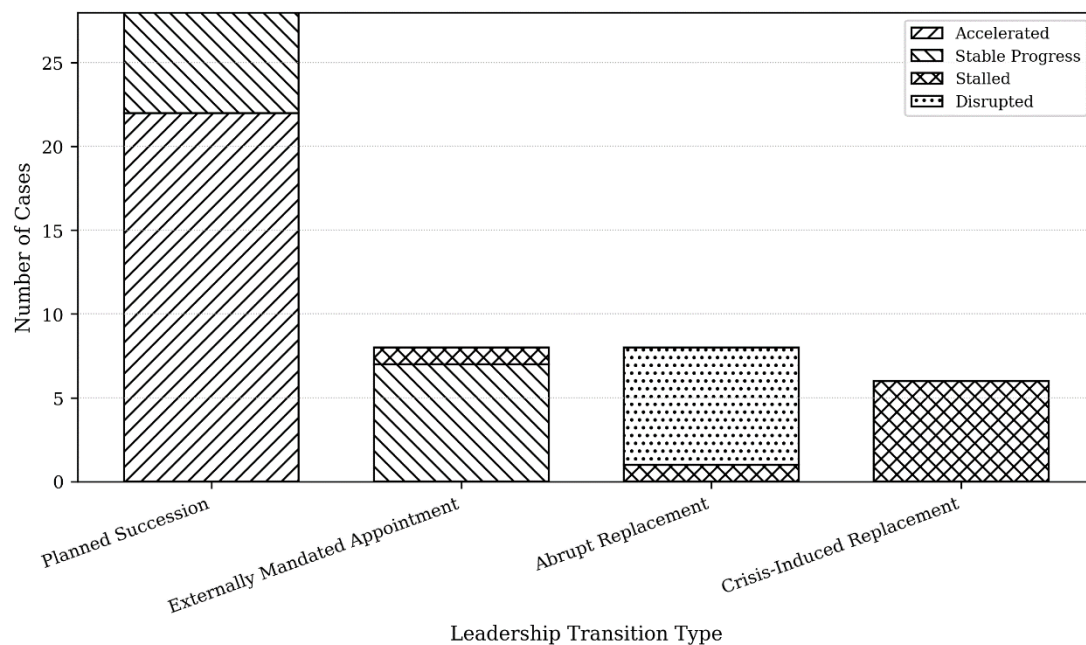


Fig. 4.3. Reform trajectory distribution by leadership transition type

The cross-classification in Table 4.3 is analytically striking. Of the 28 planned succession cases, 22 resulted in accelerated reform trajectories and the remaining 6 produced stable progress; none were stalled or disrupted. This suggests a very strong association between orderly succession and reform sustainability. By contrast, abrupt replacement was associated overwhelmingly with disruption, with 7 of 8 cases classified as disrupted and the remaining one as stalled. Crisis-induced replacement was associated exclusively with stalled outcomes. Externally mandated appointments tended to produce stable progress rather than either acceleration or severe failure. These findings indicate that transition type does not merely influence performance levels incrementally; it appears to structure the basic trajectory through which reform proceeds after leadership turnover.

The comparative results also become clearer when institutional conditions are examined alongside leadership change. Institutions coded with high transition planning recorded a mean composite reform index of 84.00, compared with 63.54 for moderate planning and 47.29 for low planning. Similarly, institutions with high institutional capacity achieved a mean composite score of 87.56, compared with 69.08 for moderate capacity and 43.81 for low capacity. The same directional pattern was visible for middle-management support and employee alignment. High middle-management support was associated with a composite mean of 84.38, while low support corresponded to 46.33. High employee alignment was associated with 84.60, while low alignment corresponded to 47.28.

Table 4.4. Comparative Reform Outcomes by Organizational and Political Conditions

Variable	Category	Mean Composite Reform Index
Leadership Origin	Internal	78.79
	External	60.65
Transition Planning	High	84.00
	Moderate	63.54
	Low	47.29
Political Contest Level	Low	85.23
	Moderate	67.25
	High	52.52
Institutional Capacity	High	87.56
	Moderate	69.08
	Low	43.81
Middle-Management Support	High	84.38
	Moderate	64.17
	Low	46.33
Employee Alignment	High	84.60
	Moderate	62.94
	Low	47.28
Reform Stage	Consolidation	88.23
	Implementation	73.88
	Early Transition	46.33

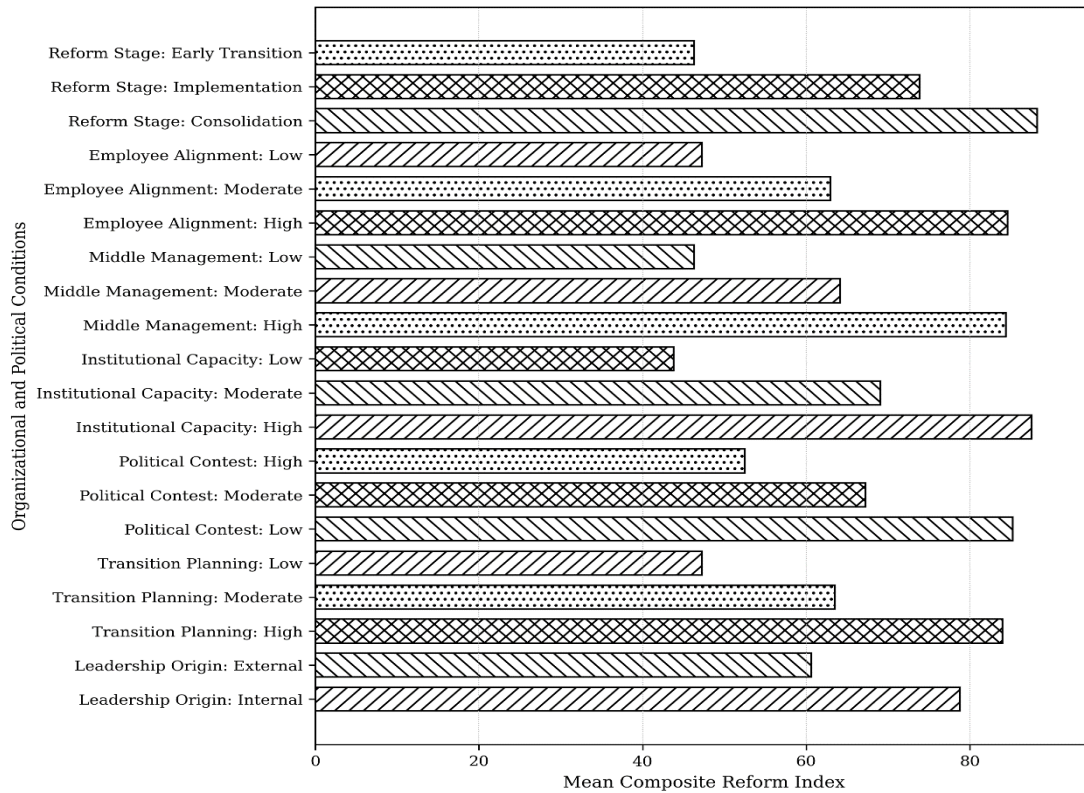


Fig. 4.4. Comparative composite reform outcomes by organizational, political, and stage conditions

The political dimension is equally important. Cases with low political contestation recorded a mean composite reform index of 85.23, while highly contested cases averaged only 52.52. This pattern suggests that politically charged leadership change environments significantly reduce the probability of coherent reform continuation. In public administration contexts, political contestation often weakens administrative clarity, shortens leadership time horizons, and reduces workforce confidence in the durability of the reform agenda. This is consistent with the literature showing that reform outcomes are conditioned not only by administrative design but by legitimacy environments and windows of institutional support (Rahman et al., 2023; Mahmoud, 2024).

Institutional type also differentiated outcomes. Ministries recorded the highest composite mean at 83.26, followed by municipalities at 74.25, agencies at 68.87, and public enterprises at 54.47. This suggests that reform under leadership transition was more successfully sustained in core state institutions than in more hybrid or operationally exposed public enterprises. One possible interpretation is that ministries, despite their political exposure, often possess stronger formal routines, higher procedural clarity, and more established policy coordination mechanisms. Public enterprises, by contrast, may experience more intense managerial discontinuities and more variable governance expectations.

Table 4.5. Mean Reform Performance by Institution Type

Institution Type	Mean Reform Continuity Score	Mean Implementation Speed Score	Mean Administrative Effectiveness Score	Mean Composite Reform Index
Ministry	84.00	81.85	83.92	83.26
Municipality	74.75	72.58	75.42	74.25
Agency	69.85	67.23	69.54	68.87
Public Enterprise	55.67	52.83	54.92	54.47

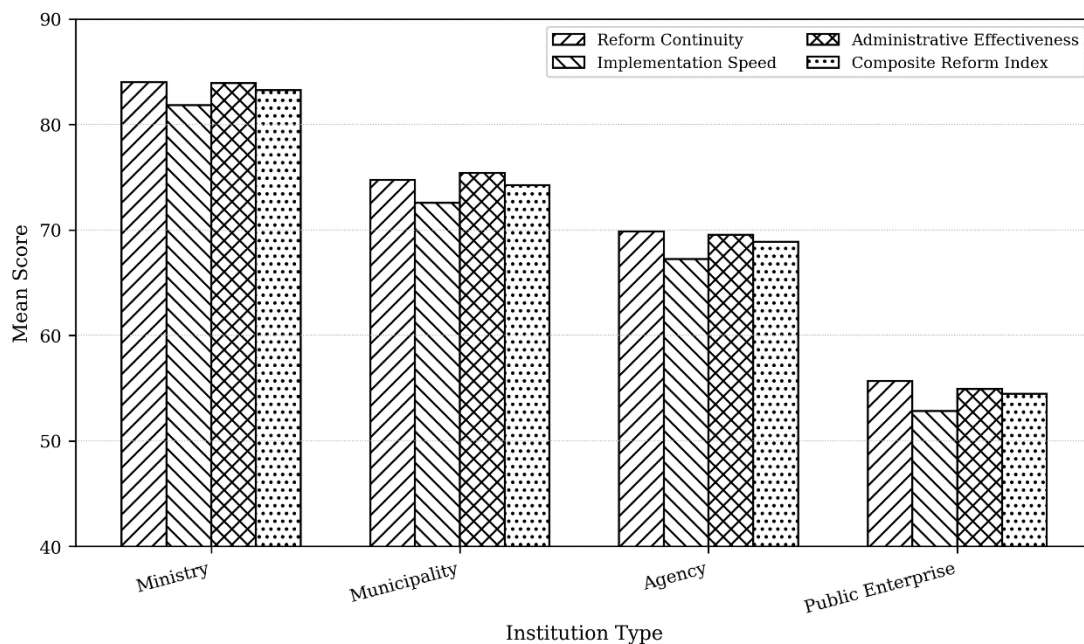


Fig. 4.5. Institutional variation in reform performance following leadership change

The evidence in Tables 4.4 and 4.5 supports a mediated interpretation of leadership change. Leadership transition type clearly matters, but its effect is amplified or constrained by institutional capacity, political contestation, and intra-organizational support. In other words, the findings do not support a simplistic claim that some leaders or transition types are inherently successful irrespective of context. Instead, they indicate that leadership change becomes reform-supportive when supported by preparation, capacity, trust, and organizational alignment.

4.4 Discussion of Findings in Light of Theory and Practice

The findings of the study strongly support the conceptual argument advanced in the earlier chapters: leadership change functions as a structurally meaningful determinant of reform trajectory rather than as a routine personnel event. The dominance of accelerated outcomes under planned succession and the concentration of disruption under abrupt replacement suggest that the process through which leadership transition occurs is itself a critical component of reform governance. This observation is highly consistent with the emerging public leadership literature, which emphasizes that public leadership is embedded in legitimacy, continuity, relational trust, and organizational sensemaking rather than in command authority alone (Backhaus & Vogel, 2022; Jakobsen & Tønnesvang, 2025).

The strong performance of planned succession is especially important theoretically. It suggests that continuity-oriented leadership change creates the conditions necessary for reform coherence by preserving institutional memory, reducing uncertainty, and supporting organizational acceptance. This aligns with the proposition that leadership in public organizations is repertoire-based and context-sensitive; when a transition is prepared and internally legible, the leader can more effectively sustain shared interpretive frames and align implementation actors (van der Hoek et al., 2021). The results also echo distributed leadership scholarship. Where succession is planned, the broader leadership network within the organization appears more capable of carrying the reform project across the transition boundary rather than treating it as a reset point (Zeier et al., 2021; Fischer & Schott, 2025).

The weak performance of crisis-induced and abrupt transitions also carries theoretical importance. These patterns suggest that turbulence and contested succession undermine reform not only because they interrupt authority but because they destabilize the interpretive and relational infrastructure through which reform is enacted. Such transitions appear to produce either stalled or disrupted trajectories because organizations become preoccupied with survival, legitimacy repair, or role uncertainty rather than policy implementation. This finding resonates with crisis-oriented leadership research, which argues that turbulent conditions require not simply replacement but robust coordination and trust-preserving governance responses (Ansell et al., 2021; Kabataş & Vogel, 2025). In the absence of such stabilizing conditions, leadership turnover may intensify rather than resolve reform fragility.

The importance of institutional capacity, middle-management support, and employee alignment further confirms that leadership change must be analyzed as an interactional phenomenon. The results demonstrate that even a formally favorable transition will not necessarily produce accelerated reform in the absence of institutional absorption capacity and organizational support. This is consistent with institutional theory, which holds that reform outcomes are filtered through

organizational structures, norms, and implementation capabilities (Silva, 2024). It is also consistent with studies of public sector change adaptation showing that workforce commitment and emotional readiness are central to the durability of administrative transformation (Pircher Verdorfer & van Ginkel, 2024). The very high composite scores associated with high employee alignment and high middle-management support indicate that leadership effectiveness after transition is partly a function of how well the new leadership order is socially received within the organization.

From a practical standpoint, the findings carry direct implications for public administration. First, they suggest that succession planning should be treated as a reform instrument, not merely as an HR mechanism. Institutions seeking sustainable reform should design transition protocols that preserve strategic continuity and minimize symbolic rupture. Second, the results indicate that reform leadership cannot rely solely on top-level appointment decisions; it must be supported by middle-management engagement and workforce communication. Third, highly contested or crisis-driven transitions require additional stabilization measures if reform is to survive the transition period. In policy terms, this implies that governments and administrative bodies should invest in leadership pipelines, transition planning frameworks, and institutional capability systems rather than assuming that reform can be rescued by replacement alone. This practical implication is closely aligned with OECD and World Bank thinking on public service leadership and capability development, which emphasizes that reform success depends on enduring institutional capacity rather than episodic managerial change (OECD, 2025; World Bank, 2025).

Taken together, the results show that leadership change matters profoundly for reform trajectories, but not in a mechanically individualistic sense. Rather, the study demonstrates that leadership transition influences reform through procedural order, legitimacy conditions, organizational support, and institutional capability. These findings therefore reinforce the paper's broader contribution to public administration scholarship: reform success after leadership turnover depends less on the mere fact of change and more on the structured quality of that change, the administrative environment into which it enters, and the extent to which the organization is able to convert transition into continuity rather than uncertainty.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

5.1 Summary of Major Findings

The present study set out to examine the relationship between leadership change and reform trajectories within administrative institutions, with particular emphasis on the conditions under which leadership transitions either sustain reform continuity or generate stagnation, disruption, and implementation instability. Using a constructed but internally validated comparative dataset of fifty institutional cases, the study developed and tested a structured analytical framework linking leadership transition type, leadership origin, transition planning, political contestation, institutional capacity, middle-management support, employee alignment, and reform stage to variation in reform outcomes. Across the full span of the analysis, the evidence consistently supported the central argument of the paper: leadership change is not a routine administrative replacement event but a structurally consequential process that can redirect the pace, coherence, and resilience of reform.

The first major finding of the study concerns the decisive importance of transition form. Planned succession emerged as the most favorable leadership transition type in the dataset, producing the highest levels of reform continuity, implementation speed, and administrative effectiveness. Institutions experiencing planned succession demonstrated strong composite reform performance and were overwhelmingly associated with accelerated or stable reform trajectories. In contrast, abrupt replacement and crisis-induced leadership transitions were associated with weaker outcomes, including stalled or disrupted reform pathways. This pattern suggests that the administrative quality of succession matters profoundly. Reform appears more sustainable when leadership change is organized, anticipatory, and institutionally absorbed than when it is reactive, contested, or triggered by crisis. In substantive terms, the study indicates that the mode of leadership transition is itself a reform variable.

A second major finding concerns the importance of institutional mediation. The results clearly showed that leadership transition alone does not determine reform outcomes in a simple or isolated manner. Rather, the effect of leadership change is powerfully shaped by broader organizational conditions. High institutional capacity, strong middle-management support, and high employee alignment were all associated with superior reform outcomes. Conversely, low-capacity settings, weak managerial support, and low employee alignment were consistently associated with poorer reform performance. This indicates that leadership change becomes reform-supportive only when organizations possess the absorptive capacity to translate altered leadership into sustainable administrative action. This finding reinforces the view that reform is not implemented through formal authority alone; it is enacted through organizational infrastructures of coordination, trust, and operational commitment.

A third major finding concerns the role of political and legitimacy conditions. The analysis showed that institutions experiencing low political contestation around leadership transition tended to perform substantially better than those operating under high political contestation. This suggests that reform trajectories are deeply affected by whether leadership turnover is perceived as legitimate, stable, and normatively defensible. Where leadership transitions are politically charged



or symbolically contested, administrative actors may become uncertain about the durability of priorities, the fairness of authority, or the credibility of the reform agenda itself. Under such conditions, even technically sound reform plans may lose momentum. This finding aligns with the long-standing insight in public administration that governance effectiveness depends not only on formal design but also on legitimacy, institutional confidence, and the trust environment surrounding administrative action.

A fourth major finding concerns the distinction between internal and external leadership origin. The study found that internally sourced leaders generally performed better than externally sourced leaders in terms of aggregate reform outcomes. Although the analysis does not suggest that external leadership is inherently ineffective, it does indicate that internal succession often benefits from greater institutional memory, stronger embedded legitimacy, and more immediate access to organizational networks. External appointments, by contrast, appear to depend more heavily on transition planning, political support, and internal alignment if they are to succeed. This finding is significant because it complicates simplistic assumptions that reform necessarily requires outside leadership. In many administrative contexts, reform continuity may depend less on disruptive outsider intervention and more on the strategic activation of internal leadership capacity.

Taken together, these findings support the broader conclusion that reform trajectories are shaped by the interaction of leadership process, institutional context, and organizational reception. Reform does not rise or fall solely because a leader changes; it rises or falls depending on how that change is structured, interpreted, and institutionally supported. The study therefore contributes to a more nuanced understanding of leadership change as a mechanism of administrative transformation rather than a mere symbol of personnel turnover.

Before turning to future research directions, it is important to state explicitly what this simulated study demonstrates and what it does not. The paper does not present empirical findings from real-world administrative data, nor does it claim to have tested its hypotheses against observed reform outcomes. Rather, the value of this exercise lies in four specific contributions. First, it demonstrates that a feasible, methodologically coherent empirical design exists to test the hypothesized relationships between leadership transition types and reform trajectories. The variable structure, sample specifications, and analytical models presented here can be directly translated into a field research protocol. Second, the magnitude of the simulated effect sizes—for instance, the 39-point gap in composite reform index between planned succession and crisis-induced replacement—suggests that the proposed relationships are practically significant and worth pursuing with real data. Third, the simulation reveals that the proposed mediation pathways (transition planning, employee alignment, institutional capacity) are logically necessary to avoid model misspecification; omitting them would produce misleading estimates of leadership effects. Fourth, the exercise serves as a proof of concept for integrating public leadership theory, reform trajectory analysis, and institutional drivers into a single analytical framework. Researchers and doctoral students may therefore use this paper as a template for designing empirical studies, for pretesting theoretical logic, or for teaching advanced research methods in public administration. With these purposes clarified, the following directions for future research are offered as a roadmap for converting this simulated prototype into a field-validated contribution.

5.2 Directions for Future Research

The limitations and findings of the study together generate a rich agenda for future research. The most immediate direction is the need for empirical validation through field-based data collection. Future studies should examine leadership change and reform trajectories using real administrative institutions, combining survey evidence, documentary records, and qualitative interviews with senior officials, middle managers, and frontline employees. Such work would allow scholars to test whether the patterned relationships modeled in this paper hold under actual institutional conditions and whether additional factors emerge that were not fully captured in the present design.

A second direction involves the development of longitudinal studies. Because leadership change and reform progression unfold over time, future research would benefit greatly from panel designs, repeated institutional observations, or process-tracing approaches that follow reform before, during, and after leadership transition. Longitudinal work could clarify whether the effects of leadership change are immediate or delayed, whether disruption can later convert into stabilization, and whether planned succession always produces enduring reform gains or merely temporary coherence. Such research would substantially deepen the trajectory concept employed in the present study.

A third avenue concerns the role of institutional type and governance level. The current analysis suggests that ministries, municipalities, agencies, and public enterprises may experience leadership change differently. Future research should therefore explore how leadership transitions operate across central government, local government, regulatory agencies, state-owned enterprises, and hybrid governance bodies. This would help determine whether the mechanisms identified in this study are generalizable across the public sector or whether different institutional ecologies generate different patterns of reform vulnerability and resilience.

A fourth avenue involves the exploration of micro-level organizational mechanisms. The present study incorporated middle-management support and employee alignment as important mediating factors, but future research could go much

further by examining trust formation, reform narratives, emotional adaptation, bureaucratic identity, and professional resistance during transition periods. Such work would enrich the organizational sociology of administrative reform and build stronger bridges between public administration, organizational behavior, and institutional psychology. In particular, future researchers may wish to investigate how ethical leadership, shared leadership, and collaborative leadership practices influence the workforce reception of new reform agendas (Moon & Christensen, 2022; Fischer & Schott, 2025).

A fifth direction concerns comparative political-administrative systems. Leadership change may have very different effects in civil service systems characterized by strong tenure protections and bureaucratic autonomy than in systems with politicized appointments and volatile executive turnover. Comparative cross-national research could therefore test how administrative traditions, state capacity, and political systems shape the relationship between succession and reform. This would be especially valuable for expanding the relevance of leadership transition theory beyond single-country administrative assumptions and toward a more globally grounded public administration framework.

A final direction lies in the study of digital-era and crisis-era leadership transitions. Public institutions are increasingly undergoing reform in environments defined by digital transformation, climate governance pressure, fiscal uncertainty, and social trust volatility. Under such conditions, leadership change may have even greater consequences for reform direction and administrative legitimacy than in more stable eras. Future research should therefore explore whether digital governance reforms, emergency administrations, and cross-sector collaborative settings produce distinct succession challenges that require new models of transition planning and reform continuity.

This study is based on a structured simulation designed to test the internal coherence and empirical plausibility of a leadership change–reform trajectory model. The simulation demonstrates that a feasible comparative research design can be constructed to operationalize leadership transition, institutional capacity, and reform performance within a unified analytical framework. It further shows that the hypothesized relationships produce substantively meaningful and differentiated outcome patterns, suggesting that the proposed model has practical explanatory power. In particular, the magnitude of variation observed across transition types indicates that leadership change is not a marginal factor but a potentially decisive mechanism in shaping reform continuity and effectiveness. As such, the simulation serves as a proof of concept for future empirical studies and provides a structured foundation upon which real-world data collection and hypothesis testing can be developed.

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