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Ethics as a Pillar of Democratic Governance: An Analysis of its Importance in Public Service

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the importance of ethics in the exercise of public office. It is argued that professional ethics goes beyond mere compliance with laws, norms, or provisions, but constitutes a central axis to claim legitimacy and administrative efficiency, strengthen citizen confidence and promote the fight against corruption in democratic institutions. Through literature review and conceptual analysis, it seeks to highlight how ethical principles, integrity, transparency and accountability, considered fundamental elements to prevent corruption, are aimed at ensuring that public administration truly serves the public interest.

1. INTRODUCTION

The public service is considered the backbone of every State, which is responsible for implementing policies and providing essential services to citizens. Historically, trust between the State and the citizens has been intrinsically linked to and determined by the ethical conduct of its servants. In the current context, marked by the growing demand for transparency and distrust in institutions, ethics has become an indispensable quality for the survival and quality of democracies. Currently, a country must prioritize attention to citizens with the provision of essential and quality public services, so that public servants make their own in return for what they receive and practice the necessary values to guide their behavior and inspire confidence in their citizens. (OECD, 2000).

In the development of this work, we propose to define public ethics and its fundamental principles; to analyze the relationship between the ethical dimension and the legitimacy of institutions; to examine the role of ethics as a mechanism for the prevention of corruption and, finally, to propose some alternative strategies for strengthening ethical behavior in public service.

All this considers that a good government, to be considered as such, needs to have individuals of integrity, responsible, honorable people, with a vocation and spirit of service who act without forgetting their duty to the community they represent. Ethical values, inserted in public servants and cultivated in an appropriate way, can make the art of governing more efficient, transparent, equitable and fair, as well as the exercise of public function. (Rodríguez Alba, J. et al. 2024).

In this paper we argue that ethics is a fundamental pillar in public office, essential for the legitimacy, effectiveness, and justice of a government, for the following reasons:

It builds trust and legitimacy. This is the foundation of democracy because the public function operates with resources and authority delegated by the people. The ethical conduct of public servants ensures that this authority is exercised for the benefit of citizens and not for personal purposes and provides institutional credibility, because the integrity of officials, free of corruption, is the basis for citizens to trust their institutions. In this sense, trust is crucial for political stability and social cohesion. Without it, citizens can opt for disinterest or civil disobedience.

It constitutes a guarantee of impartiality and justice. Which means that it is at the service of public interest: The central ethical principle is to prioritize the general interest over interests, political or economic. This translates into impartiality in decision-making and the distribution of resources. This is complemented by equity in treatment, since ethics guarantees that all citizens are treated fairly and equally, without discrimination or favoritism. It avoids nepotism and political patronage, ensuring that public services and opportunities are based on the merit of the people and the needs of the institution.

Improvement of the effectiveness and efficiency of management. This is manifested in the fight against corruption since ethics is the main preventive tool against corruption. By establishing principles of honesty and transparency, opportunities for the diversion of funds or the misuse of resources are minimized, allowing public money to be used for its intended purposes. This is linked to quality decision-making because codes of ethics promote responsibility and accountability. An ethical officer bases his or her decisions on the law, technical evidence, and the common good, not on personal pressures or benefits, resulting in more effective and sustainable public policies and services.

It allows the strengthening of the rule of law. Respect for legality is manifested when an ethical official not only complies with the law but also defends the constitutional and human rights principles that underpin it. Ethics goes beyond the law, filling legal gaps and guiding action in ambiguous situations. This is manifested when public servants become a model for society. Their ethical and transparent behavior promotes a culture of legality and civility in citizens, reinforcing respect for rules and institutions.

Ethics, therefore, transforms the public function from a mere exercise of power to a true public service, ensuring that the government fulfills its purpose of promoting well-being and justice for all its citizens.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article consists of a theoretical-conceptual and documentary analysis of the relationship between ethics, democratic governance, and public function. To this end, we have delved into the background of this research in different academic repositories, which has allowed us to design the work methodology in the terms explained below.

2.1. Type of Research

This research assumes a qualitative methodology. It focuses on understanding concepts, principles, values, and processes, rather than measurements. It has an analytical and explanatory character and tries to describe the role of ethics in public service and then analyze and explain why it is considered a fundamental pillar of democratic governance.

The methodological design that, for this case, we have adopted is documentary or bibliographic research. We have conducted systematic reviews of literature as a central task that involves the search, selection, reading and critical analysis of relevant primary and secondary sources. We then proceeded to the conceptual analysis, in the concern of defining and deepening the understanding of key concepts such as public ethics, democratic governance, public function and accountability.

The methodological process has been conducted in four phases. In the first, we have proceeded to the delimitation and search for information, which has allowed us to establish the theoretical framework, objectives and research questions and has consisted of the search for specialized literature, such as books, academic articles, documents of international organizations, codes of ethics, laws, using databases, repositories and relevant keywords.

In the second phase, we have proceeded to the selection and classification of the documents found, which has allowed us to filter the sources according to their relevance and academic quality. The classification of documents according to thematic axes, such as ethical theory, governance models, and specific cases in the exercise of public office.

In the third phase we conducted a critical analysis of the information collected, which allowed us to synthesize and confront theoretical positions, using the technique of content analysis to identify arguments, trends, and the interrelationship between key concepts such as ethics and governance. Here we have included a comparative analysis of codes of ethics or regulatory frameworks in different institutional contexts.

The fourth phase consists of the development of the proposal, which is the structuring of the central argument of the article. Grounded conclusions are generated that establish the importance of ethics as a pillar of the public function and lines of action are identified to strengthen its quality.

The instruments we have used are reading and summary sheets, to systematize the information from the sources. In addition, we have applied conceptual analysis matrices, to organize the definition and components of the key terms.

3. RESULTS

The Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2005, pointed out that corruption is the use of a position of influence for one's own benefit. In this sense, corruption undermines the foundations of society directly and indirectly at different scales; generating a problem in the social and economic structure of a country, which manifests itself in embezzlement, influence peddling, abuse of authority or illicit enrichment. By virtue of the studies carried out, it is known that in Finland the level of corruption is relatively low and this is essentially due to the establishment and maintenance of an order in its social structure that does not offer or enable corruption to become entrenched in its institutions and because of specific cultural strengths that are added value against the fight against corruption. Hence, the Finnish experience is modeled on the morality of its officials and public servants in decision-making and the impetus to achieve a culture of ethics in governance. (Farfán Pimentel, J. et al. 2022).

In this sense, the public institutions of the State are the means by which public goods and services are provided to meet the needs of the population in an effective and efficient manner, in such a way that there is an increase in the confidence that citizens have in their institutions and, in the long run, promote their strengthening. (Larrazábal Escárraga, J. A. 2021).

Thus, no public administration will be able to adequately conduct the purposes that the legal system assigns to it, without turning its back on ethical values. If the goodness of administrative action depends on ethics in administration, whatever its form of manifestation and the matter on which it falls, obviously and to a greater extent it will be required when the purpose pursued is that morality prevails in social relations. It is difficult for him to direct and exercise an action aimed at the defense of morality who lacks morality. A person who is an example of the contrary and even boasts of it can hardly demand dignified conduct.

3.1. Public ethics

In public service, responsibility is linked to the controls that must exist to channel the conduct of those in power and promote prudent policies. Montesquieu already warned about it when he stated that "it is known by eternal experience that every man invested with authority tends to abuse it, not stopping until he finds limits." Based on this premise, he concluded that, given the arrangement of things, it is necessary for power to control power. (Salcedo Aquino, R, 2021).

Public ethics refers to the set of principles and moral values that should guide the conduct of public servants in the performance of their functions. Unlike private ethics, it focuses on public interest as the supreme value. (Delgado-Arenas, et al. 2025).

3.2. Principles

Public ethics indicates the desirable values to be assimilated by people who perform a public function. It also offers criteria, as well as a scale of values, to find appropriate solutions to the dilemmas that arise in the exercise of public office. Proper public ethics necessarily presupposes good governance. (Rodríguez Alba, J., et al. 2024). In this context, the fundamental principles of public ethics are the following:

Integrity. Which is the requirement for all public servants to act with honesty and rectitude, avoiding conflict of interest.

Transparency. Principle related to the public scrutiny of decisions and actions, from which no public servant can or should escape.

Accountability. What in English is the famous and very generalized accountability, which consists of taking responsibility for the decisions made and the results obtained.

Impartiality. Which is trying to avoid preferential treatment to make decisions based solely on the law.

Probity. Which refers to honesty and rectitude in the management of public funds and goods.

3.3. Ethics as the foundation of effective governance

In defining the relevant scenario of ethics in the public service, which leads to effective and quality governance, we find the following key concepts.

Legitimacy and citizen trust. An ethical public service is a factor that determines the legitimacy of all government action. When citizens perceive that officials act with integrity and serve the common good, trust increases, which facilitates cooperation and compliance with laws, policies, and institutional norms. Lack of ethics, on the other hand, erodes the social fabric and weakens state authority.

Efficiency and quality of management. Ethics is not just a moral constraint; it is a catalyst for efficiency and quality. Corruption and lack of probity divert resources and distort decisions, leading to inefficient allocation and waste of public resources. An ethical environment promotes decision-making based on technical merit and public interest, improving the quality of services.

Public ethics and the fight against corruption. The absence of ethics is the breeding ground for corruption, defined as the abuse of a public office for private gain. Ethics operates as the first and most effective prevention mechanism, since it imposes codes of conduct, which establish clear expectations and limits to discretion.

A culture of whistleblowing, which fosters the development of an ethical environment, encourages the officials themselves to report irregularities.

Initiative-taking transparency, which deters corrupt acts by subjecting management to the public light. Integrity must be the central value that transforms reactive control systems, i.e., sanctions, into preventive systems, based on responsible self-regulation. (Ferraro, A., 2024).

3.4. Strategies for ethical strengthening

State organizations must possess and design strategies to strengthen ethical values. This requires a comprehensive approach that combines regulatory frameworks with the formation of an ethical organizational culture, such as the following:

Solid regulatory framework. This means the implementation and constant updating of Codes of Ethics and Conduct with clear and applicable sanction mechanisms.

Education and training, that is, the implementation of continuous ethical education programs that emphasize the sense of public service and decision-making based on values.

Ethical leadership, which is the commitment and example of senior authorities are crucial to permeate a culture of integrity throughout the organization.

Protection mechanisms, with the creation of secure and confidential channels for reporting (whistleblower protection). (Farfán Pimentel, et al. 2022).

The results of the research conducted show that there is a significant positive correlation between the application of the Code of Ethics of the Public Service and the improvement in public management. For example, a study in the Regional Government of Apurímac (2018) revealed that less than 5% of respondents always apply the Code of Ethics, but there is a high positive correlation ($r=0.899$) between ethical practice and improvement in public management. In addition, extremely high positive correlations are highlighted between the ethical duties of the public servant and the improvement in management ($r=0.927$), as well as between ethical prohibitions and public management ($r=0.898$). This implies that ethics in public service is a key factor in improving institutional performance.

Other research indicates a considerable inverse correlation between ethical conduct and acts of corruption in public officials, implying that more ethics reduce corruption, while less ethics increase it. In general terms, research agrees that promoting public ethics strengthens management and reduces corruption, constituting an essential foundation for the superior performance of public institutions.

4. DISCUSSION

If we understand ethics as the set of values and principles that, because they are fair and serve the general interest, are universal, it is key to identify which are those principles that should be common to all public servants. That is, if ethics is the set of virtues that allow us to evaluate people's behavior and determine if it is correct, we must know why those qualities matter within government. (Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2023).

4.1. Reaffirmation of the central argument

The findings of this documentary and conceptual research converge unequivocally on the central premise: public ethics is not an accessory, but the operational foundation on which the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic governance is sustained. (Anti-Corruption Network Peru, 2020). The systematic literature review, conducted in phases II and III, has allowed us to identify three major areas of theoretical convergence that function as pillars.

Ethics as a catalyst for trust and legitimacy. As a result of the analysis of the documents reviewed, a direct correlation is observed between the lofty standards of ethical conduct in the public service and the increase in citizen trust in democratic institutions. This means that democratic governance demands participation and social acceptance. Corruption and conflict of interest, which are evidence of ethical failures, function as corrosives of this trust, creating cynicism and detachment. It is argued that effective codes of ethics are not only normative but are instruments of social communication that legitimize the exercise of power.

Ethics as an effective governance mechanism and accountability. As a result of the analysis conducted and beyond the laws and formal controls, ethics is constituted as an informal but powerful internal control that guides the decisions of the official in little-known areas or in the face of decision dilemmas. On this point, we argue that modern governance requires flexibility and discretion on the part of the official to respond to complex problems. Without an ingrained "ethical sense," this discretion becomes a risk of abuse. Therefore, ethics facilitates accountability, which must not only be reactive, such as punishing the offense, but initiative-taking, that is, always promote transparent action, improving the quality of public policies. (Universidad Católica Santo Toribio de Mogrovejo, 2021).

Ethics and challenges of contemporary public service. As a result of the comparative analysis of ethical frameworks, in phase III, we found that the most robust systems actively address new challenges such as digital ethics, artificial intelligence and sensitive data management. At this point we discuss that traditional ethical models focused only on avoiding pecuniary corruption are insufficient. The public service of the twenty-first century requires an ethic of responsibility that integrates the values of impartiality, equity, and inclusion in the design and implementation of technologies. The lack of this ethical approach can lead to the reproduction of biases or the violation of rights on a large scale. (Universidad Continental, 2020).

Importance of communication. Communication in public administration consists of an exchange of cognitive realities that takes place between public organizations. The exchange between these organizations and key audiences, which is aimed at strengthening the fulfillment of their purpose through public services. This exchange materialized in an organic structure of territorial dimension, which articulates and delimits the legitimacy of power. Government communication is aimed at influencing key audiences for political and civic purposes, which is practiced by politicians and public officials. This influence is usually planned to establish and maintain beneficial relationships and interact with citizens to gain their support. Normally, public relations and corporate communication are used for this purpose. The communication of the public administration participates in the communication of the government because the administration serves the government. In short, communication is a concept that evokes the construction of relationships with intangible values. (Guerrero, Omar, 2021).

4.2. Main findings

The main findings of the research indicate a severe crisis in institutional integrity and trust, which has a negative impact on democracy, governance, and social development. More than 80% of the population expresses distrust in transparency and fair application of laws, evidencing low ethical compliance in public service. In addition, corruption diverts resources destined for social programs, deepens inequality and discriminates against vulnerable groups, weakening democratic institutions and eroding citizen trust.

Research highlights that the lack of ethics in public policy and the state function generates an inequitable allocation of resources, non-inclusive policies, and precarious working conditions, which contributes to the persistence of corruption. It points out the need to adopt ethics, values, and morals as a state policy to counteract these problems and achieve sustainable development by 2050.

These studies also highlight that corruption has strong cultural, political, and structural roots in Peru, and that combating it requires comprehensive strategies that include transparency, accountability, institution-building, and ethics education to rebuild social and democratic trust.

4.3. Measures to be taken by the institutions.

The main measures that public institutions must adopt to strengthen transparency and accountability in Peru are the following:

Improved legislation and regulation. Clear laws such as access to information laws, protection of corruption whistleblowers, and regulation of political financing must be implemented to ensure transparency and accountability in public management.

Strengthening of internal control mechanisms. Internal audits, financial controls, constant monitoring, and evaluation must be conducted with trained personnel and use of technology to record and track financial operations.

Promotion of citizen participation. Priority should be given to participatory budgets, citizen monitoring groups and complaint platforms that allow society to monitor management and report irregularities.

Implementation of open government and open data. Transparency portals, open data initiatives, and mobile applications must be installed to facilitate access to public information and the direct participation of citizens.

Promotion of a culture of transparency and accountability. That can be achieved with the training of officials in ethics and transparency, recognition of good practices, and the development of clear codes of conduct that guide public behavior.

These combined measures seek to prevent corruption, improve citizen trust, and strengthen democratic governance in Peru.

4.4. Synthesis and original contribution

The research conducted not only confirms the intrinsic value of ethics but also repositions it as a strategic resource for the survival and evolution of democracy. It is established that, while the law defines the "minimum required", ethics defines the "maximum aspirational" that the public servant must pursue, closing the gap between the norm and the citizen's expectation.

The main implication of these results is that any reform of democratic governance that ignores the formation and continuous strengthening of public ethics is doomed to failure.

Without intending to go into the substance of the statement, I will point out that the objective that every person must pursue is the good and that this is also the purpose of public life. Such a generic statement has notorious ethical and political implications. I do not intend to reveal them, but only to emphasize that, in a democratic, liberal society, no idea of good can be imposed on anyone. The resolution of this problem is done from material or formal presuppositions, it is a matter that each one must solve personally, and by no one can we be replaced in that task. Does that mean we can say nothing about it?

5. CONCLUSION

FIRST. Ethics in public service is much more than an ideal; it is an operational and democratic necessity. It constitutes the guarantee that power will be exercised for the benefit of all and not for personal enrichment. Strengthening public ethics not only combats corruption but also revitalizes faith in the state's ability to fulfill its mission. Investing in a culture of integrity is an investment in the quality of democracy.

SECOND. Public ethics is the main catalyst for citizen trust, being indispensable for the legitimacy of democratic governance. High ethical conduct in public service counteracts social cynicism and is more effective in generating institutional credibility than formal control mechanisms.

THIRD. Ethics functions as a powerful internal control mechanism that exceeds the legal framework that is the "minimum required". It is essential to guide the discretion of the official in making complex decisions, transforming accountability from a reactive or punitive process to an initiative-taking process based on constant transparency, that is, we move from normative legality to ethical discretion.

FOURTH. An ethic of expanded responsibility is needed. Traditional ethical frameworks are insufficient for today's challenges. The modern civil service demands an ethics of responsibility that actively addresses the implications of modern technologies (such as AI and data management). This ethic must ensure impartiality and equity in the digital age, avoiding the reproduction of biases and the violation of rights on a large scale.

FIFTH. Ethics is a strategic resource for governance. Ethics is not an accessory value, but a strategic resource for the survival and effectiveness of the democratic system. Its continuous strengthening is a sine qua non condition for any successful reform

since it defines the "maximum aspirational" of the public servant and closes the gap between the legal norm and the expectations of the citizenry.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Degollación Andrés Páucar-Coz, Isabel Angélica Quillatupa-Machuca, Elías Jesús Mejía-Mejía: Conceptualization, Investigation.

Isabel Angélica Quillatupa-Machuca, Elías Jesús Mejía-Mejía: Methodology, Laboratory Analysis.

Isabel Angélica Quillatupa-Machuca, Elías Jesús Mejía-Mejía: Data Curation, Formal Analysis.

Degollación Andrés Páucar-Coz, Isabel Angélica Quillatupa-Machuca, Elías Jesús Mejía-Mejía: Supervision, Writing—Review & Editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was not required for this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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