

WHEN INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS PERFORM: PATRONAGE, LOCAL CULTURE, AND CIVIL SERVANT PERFORMANCE IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how local culture, patronage networks, and social embeddedness relate to civil servant performance in Indonesia. It contributes an institutional account that distinguishes cultural norms, vertical exchanges, and relational embeddedness and tests their joint associations. A cross-sectional survey of 370 civil servants in four South Sulawesi local governments was analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling. Local culture relates positively to self-reported performance through direct and indirect paths involving social embeddedness. Patronage networks show the largest positive direct association with performance. Social embeddedness also relates positively to performance and modestly weakens the patronage–performance association. The findings are consistent with a conditional relational account, but measurement overlap and the survey design limit claims about institutional substitution and public value. Public managers should strengthen peer cooperation and transparent resource access while protecting merit-based appointments and evaluating citizen-facing outcomes.

Keywords: Civil Servant Performance; Informal Institutions; Local Culture; Patronage Networks; Social Embeddedness

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's local bureaucracies combine formal merit rules with cultural obligations and political relationships. Research on Indonesian elections documents how political dependence can obstruct civil service reform (Berenschot, 2018). Comparative work also distinguishes legal merit requirements from their implementation in personnel decisions (Schuster, 2017). Civil servants may therefore encounter formal performance expectations alongside informal demands for loyalty, reciprocity, and mutual assistance. This coexistence raises a specific question: how do cultural commitments and different relational arrangements jointly relate to individual work performance?

Existing scholarship already recognizes that informal arrangements can support coordination or distort personnel selection. Colonnelli et al. (2020) show how political connections can displace competence in public hiring, whereas Jiang (2018) identifies performance incentives within patron–client relations in China. A systematic review also finds that network effects vary across public management settings and that contextual combinations remain insufficiently examined (Hu et al., 2023). These findings leave a narrower explanatory issue. Patronage accounts explain vertical access and obligations, while network accounts explain relational support; neither alone specifies how culturally grounded embeddedness may condition the performance association of patronage among incumbent officials. The study examines this joint relationship without claiming that prior scholarship ignores informal coordination.

The framework distinguishes normative content, vertical exchange, and relational positioning. Local culture refers to individual endorsement of shared values that prescribe appropriate workplace conduct. Patronage networks refer to perceived access and obligations associated with influential superiors and politically or familially connected appointments. Social embeddedness refers to perceived integration into supportive relationships with colleagues and the community. Embeddedness is a relational mechanism, rather than an informal institution equivalent to cultural rules or patronage obligations. This distinction follows work that separates informal rules from particularistic relationships and examines the effects of network structure (Barbalet, 2023; Hu et al., 2023). The study asks whether local culture has a direct and an indirect association with performance through embeddedness, and whether embeddedness conditions the patronage–performance association.

The study contributes a testable joint specification of these relationships. Its proposed mechanism is functional overlap: peer and community relationships may provide some information and assistance otherwise obtained through vertical ties. The indirect path examines whether embeddedness is consistent with a relational channel for cultural commitments; the interaction examines whether stronger embeddedness accompanies a weaker patronage–performance association. This specification extends the application of institutional and network perspectives to incumbent officials, rather than introducing a new general theory of informal institutions (Hu et al., 2023; Pepinsky et al., 2017). Evidence from South Sulawesi provides a contextual test. Cross-sectional associations cannot establish resource substitution, and individual self-reports cannot establish institutional effectiveness.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Institutional theory explains how formal rules, social expectations, and cultural understandings guide organizational conduct. Informal institutions require shared expectations and mechanisms that sustain compliance; the presence of a relationship alone does not establish an institution (Barbalet, 2023). Bureaucratic rules prescribe merit, hierarchy, and procedure, while informal obligations may concern loyalty, reciprocity, and responsibility. Comparative administrative research shows that formal and informal conditions can jointly relate to organizational burdens (Kaufmann et al., 2018). The present model examines officials' perceptions of cultural commitments and relational arrangements within this institutional setting. It does not measure institutional enforcement or aggregate cultural properties directly.

Merit-centered explanations emphasize impartial recruitment and accountable management. These explanations remain essential because patronage can weaken competence and ethical conduct (Colonnelli et al., 2020; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2018). They do not, by themselves, specify how incumbent officials use interpersonal support to accomplish tasks under

uneven formal coordination. Research distinguishes personnel practices from legislation and recognizes the relevance of administrative context (Schuster, 2017). The analytical task is therefore to examine how distinct informal arrangements relate to work outcomes while retaining merit and impartiality as institutional standards. A positive individual performance association cannot establish that an informal arrangement improves the bureaucracy.

The embedded institutional framework organizes this task around two propositions. Cultural commitments may relate to performance partly through supportive relationships, and horizontal support may overlap with some resources obtained through vertical exchanges. Social embeddedness represents the relational channel and proposed boundary condition. Functional substitution would be plausible if peers provide comparable resources, officials can use them without patron approval, and tasks permit some discretion. Network research supports examining context-dependent relational effects (Hu et al., 2023). The model tests an indirect association and an interaction; it does not observe resource flows, switching between providers, or changes in patron dependence. Substitution therefore remains a theoretical interpretation that requires further evidence.

Local culture supplies normative expectations about dignity, responsibility, honesty, and mutual assistance. The instrument represents *siri'* and *pacce* through personal and family dignity and responsibility toward colleagues. Officials who endorse these values may regard work obligations as moral commitments, which could support diligence and service conduct. The construct captures individual endorsement of selected local values, rather than a comprehensive measure of Bugis–Makassar culture or a government-level norm. Meta-analytic evidence links organizational culture to effectiveness within broader organizational systems (Hartnell et al., 2019). That evidence motivates the normative argument but does not establish the specific association of *siri' na pacce* with civil servant performance. The study tests that contextual expectation.

H1. Local culture is positively associated with civil servant performance.

Norms of solidarity and mutual assistance may encourage civil servants to sustain supportive relationships. Shared expectations can make cooperation more predictable and encourage participation in collective activities. Individual endorsement of local values should therefore accompany stronger perceived integration with colleagues and the community. Research links supportive interpersonal conditions to psychological safety and relational configurations to performance (Brennecke & Stoemmer, 2018; Frazier et al., 2017). These findings motivate a relational channel; they do not directly establish the cultural relationship measured here. Cultural commitments and embeddedness may also develop together, so the proposed direction remains a theoretical ordering.

H2. Local culture is positively associated with social embeddedness.

Patronage can connect incumbent officials to resources and influential decision makers, but it can also reward loyalty and preferential access. These mechanisms must remain distinct. Evidence from Brazil identifies adverse selection through political connections (Colonnelli et al., 2020), whereas evidence from China identifies patron-linked performance incentives (Jiang, 2018). Multitasking research shows that patronage may redirect effort toward favored tasks (Feng et al., 2025). The positive hypothesis concerns a possible association with incumbent officials' self-reported task and service performance. The present indicators combine resource access, loyalty-based opportunities, and perceived favoritism in appointments. Their aggregate coefficient cannot identify which mechanism accounts for the association. It also cannot establish that patronage improves recruitment, fairness, or public service outcomes.

H3. Patronage networks are positively associated with civil servant performance.

Social embeddedness captures perceived participation, trust, and support in relationships with colleagues and the community. These ties may provide practical knowledge and assistance that help officials complete tasks. The framework emphasizes horizontal support, but the indicators do not map network direction, density, or actual exchanges. Embeddedness should therefore be interpreted as perceived relational integration. Network–performance research supports the broader resource-access argument (Brennecke & Stoemmer, 2018). Research in Thailand also connects social capital and participation to public-sector performance, although its

aggregate outcomes differ from individual self-reports (Suebvises, 2018). The present hypothesis applies this argument to officials perceived work performance.

H4. Social embeddedness is positively associated with civil servant performance.

The positive paths from local culture to embeddedness and from embeddedness to performance imply an indirect association. Cultural commitments may support relationships that aid and reinforce work expectations. Evidence on culture and effectiveness and on networks and performance motivates these constituent links (Brennecke & Stoemmer, 2018; Hartnell et al., 2019). The mediated specification tests whether the observed covariance is consistent with this relational account. A cross-sectional indirect effect does not establish temporal transmission, and alternative orderings remain possible.

H5. Local culture has a positive indirect association with civil servant performance through social embeddedness.

The framework proposes that embeddedness conditions the patronage–performance association through potential overlap in relational resources. Officials with stronger peer and community support may have alternative sources of information and assistance. Vertical access could then have less incremental relevance to their work performance. This prediction requires accessible and comparable support; it need not hold for resources controlled exclusively by patrons or for tasks with little discretion. Public network research supports attention to relational structure and context, and service-delivery research identifies the relevance of bureaucratic autonomy (Hu et al., 2023; Rasul & Rogger, 2018). Neither establishes the proposed interaction. A negative interaction would be consistent with functional overlap but would not demonstrate that horizontal ties replace patronage or reduce its institutional costs.

H6. The positive association between patronage networks and civil servant performance weakens as social embeddedness increases.

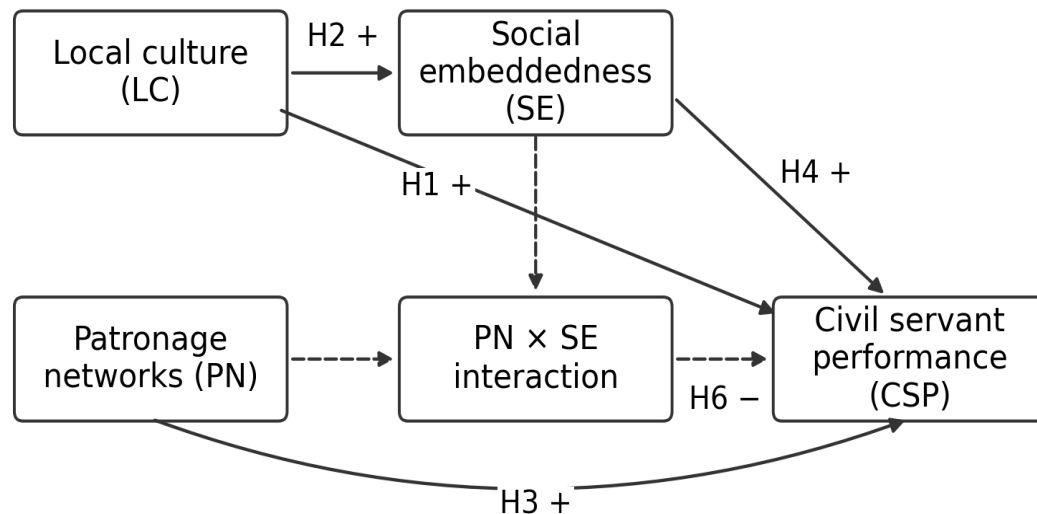


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the hypothesized relationships

Note. Solid arrows show H1–H4. H5 is the indirect route LC → SE → CSP. Dashed inputs form the interaction, whose path to CSP tests H6. Signs indicate hypothesized directions, not established causal effects.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

The study uses a cross-sectional explanatory survey to examine a theory-driven model with an indirect path and an interaction. PLS-SEM was selected to estimate a variance-oriented model and a latent interaction within a common analytical procedure. The estimator choice follows guidance on theoretical specification, measurement quality, and the distinction between explanation and prediction (Benitez et al., 2020; Hair et al., 2019). Shapiro–Wilk tests reportedly

rejected univariate normality for the indicators ($p < .001$); they do not test multivariate normality. Non-normal indicators and short scales do not independently establish the superiority of PLS-SEM. Robust covariance-based SEM is a relevant alternative for the reflective specification. The present estimates should be interpreted within the stated estimator and measurement assumptions.

Population, Sampling Frame, and Sample Size

The population comprised 10,126 permanent civil servants (*Pegawai Negeri Sipil*) in four local governments in South Sulawesi Province: Makassar City, Gowa Regency, Bone Regency, and Maros Regency. We selected these units to cover one metropolitan city, one peri-urban regency, and two predominantly rural regencies. The sampling frame came from the official staffing records of each regional civil service agency (*Badan Kepegawaian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia*) as of 31 December 2024. Contract staff, officials on study leave, and officials with less than one year of tenure were excluded because they lacked a complete annual performance cycle.

The population precision calculation suggested approximately 370 respondents for $N = 10,126$, using a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and a population proportion of 0.50. The reported G*Power 3.1 calculation required 129 observations for four predictors, $f^2 = 0.15$, $\alpha = .05$, and power = .95. This calculation targets a medium regression effect and does not establish adequate power for the smaller interaction. PLS-SEM sample adequacy depends on the smallest effect of interest (Kock & Hadaya, 2018). The initial sampling design used proportional allocation by local government (Table 1) and random selection from each staffing list. Replacement and nonresponse may alter realized inclusion probabilities, so the final sample does not warrant an unqualified probability-sampling claim.

Table 1. Sampling frame and sample allocation

Local government	Type	Population (N)	Share (%)	Sample (n)
Makassar City	Metropolitan	3,912	38.6	143
Gowa Regency	Peri-urban	2,486	24.6	91
Bone Regency	Rural	2,215	21.9	81
Maros Regency	Rural	1,513	14.9	55
Total		10,126	100.0	370

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection took place from February 3 to April 30, 2025. Trained enumerators delivered paper questionnaires in sealed envelopes and collected them in sealed boxes after five working days. Unavailable respondents and unusable forms were replaced within the same stratum and work unit until each allocation contained usable responses. The replacement rule-maintained sample quotas but may have favored available employees. The study distributed 452 questionnaires and received 409 (90.5%). Exclusions comprised 21 forms with more than 10% missing items, 11 with straight lining across all items, and 7 that failed the attention check. The final sample contained 370 usable responses with no remaining missing values. Reported early late comparisons found no significant indicator differences ($p > .05$). These comparisons cannot establish representativeness or rule out selection related to rank, political connections, or availability.

Measures

The model specifies reflective indicators on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Item development combined adaptation and interviews with eight senior officials. Two bilingual scholars translated and back translated the instrument. Five experts assessed content validity, with reported item-level indices of at least 0.80, and a pilot with 40 civil servants outside the sample refined wording. The initial instrument contained four items per construct. PN2 and SE4 were removed because their reported loadings were below 0.60; Table 2 presents the retained items. Deletion can narrow content coverage and influence the structural estimates.

Reliability thresholds alone cannot establish the validity of these study-specific adaptations (Hair et al., 2020).

Table 2. Construct measures (retained items)

Construct	Code	Item
Civil servant performance (CSP)	CSP1	I achieve the targets set in my annual performance plan (SKP).
	CSP2	I complete my tasks with the quality my supervisor expects.
	CSP3	I complete my tasks within the set time.
	CSP4	I serve the public in a responsive and courteous manner.
Local culture (LC)	LC1	I regard my work as a matter of personal and family dignity (<i>siri</i>).
	LC2	I feel responsible for colleagues who face difficulties at work (<i>pacce</i>).
	LC3	Honesty in local tradition guides my conduct at work.
	LC4	Mutual assistance guides how I cooperate with colleagues.
Patronage networks (PN)	PN1	My ties with influential officials help me obtain work resources.
	PN3	Personal loyalty to a superior affects my assignments and opportunities.
	PN4	Political or family ties help officials obtain strategic positions in my unit.
Social embeddedness (SE)	SE1	I take part in social activities with colleagues outside working hours.
	SE2	I trust colleagues to help me when I face problems at work.
	SE3	My relationships with colleagues and the community support my work.

The indicators require several interpretive boundaries. Local culture measures individual value endorsement, and performance combines perceived target achievement, quality, timeliness, and responsive service. Patronage indicators capture resource access (PN1), loyalty-based assignments and opportunities (PN3), and perceived political or family influence on appointments in the unit (PN4). PN4 concerns the organizational environment rather than the respondent's own connection. Treating these indicators as reflective expressions of one latent perception is provisional; their distinct content also warrants comparison with a multidimensional or formative specification. The existing results cannot isolate resource access from favoritism. Embeddedness captures perceived participation and support rather than observed network structure. The questionnaire also recorded gender, age, education, rank, and tenure for sample description and potential robustness analysis.

Common Method Bias

We applied procedural and statistical remedies. Procedurally, the questionnaire guaranteed anonymity, separated the predictor and outcome sections, and used different item stems. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test showed that one factor explained 31.4% of the variance, below the 50% threshold. A full collinearity test produced variance inflation factors between 1.38 and 2.41, below the 3.3 threshold. These diagnostics do not rule out common method bias. Reviews recommend combining procedural controls with more informative designs and statistical checks (Jordan & Troth, 2020; Podsakoff et al., 2024). The single-source design remains a limitation.

Analytical Procedure

We estimated the model in SmartPLS 4 (version 4.1.0). The PLS algorithm used the path weighting scheme, a maximum of 3,000 iterations, a stop criterion of 10^{-7} , and standardized indicator data. The algorithm converged in 6 iterations. The analysis followed five steps. Indicator assessment used a 0.70 loading guideline, with conditional retention between 0.60 and 0.70 to preserve content coverage when AVE exceeded 0.50. Internal consistency was examined through Cronbach's α , ρ_A , and ρ_C , using 0.70 as a reference point. Convergent validity was

examined through AVE, and construct separation through the Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT. An HTMT threshold of 0.90 was used as a screening criterion. These statistics must be interpreted jointly with item content; favorable composite reliability does not resolve low α , low ρ_A , or discriminant-validity concerns (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2020). We checked indicator and inner-model VIF values against a threshold of 3.0. SRMR and NFI are reported for the saturated and estimated models. These approximate indices supplement measurement and structural assessment. They cannot establish correct construct specification or independently validate the substantive model (Benitez et al., 2020). The reported bootstrap procedure used 10,000 subsamples, percentile intervals, two-tailed testing, $\alpha = .05$, and a fixed seed. Table 6 presents standardized structural coefficients, bootstrap means and standard deviations, t statistics, p values, and f^2 values. The analysis reports R^2 and PLSpredict $Q^2_{predict}$ using 10 folds and 10 repetitions. Predictive assessment requires indicator-level errors and comparison with a linear-model benchmark; positive $Q^2_{predict}$ alone cannot establish a predictive-performance category (Shmueli et al., 2019). The indirect association was evaluated with the reported bootstrap procedure. The interaction used a two-stage approach and standardized product terms, with conditional slopes evaluated at social embeddedness levels of -1 SD and $+1$ SD (Benitez et al., 2020). The model assumes independent observations, although respondents are nested within work units and local governments. Shared organizational conditions may affect both relational perceptions and performance. The reported inference has not established independence through intraclass correlations or cluster-adjusted estimates. The structural findings therefore require caution, particularly for the small interaction.

RESULTS

The sample includes both genders and is concentrated among mid-career officials. Most respondents hold a bachelor's degree and rank III (Table 3). These characteristics describe the respondents; they do not establish that the realized sample represents the underlying staff structure.

Table 3. Respondent profile (n = 370)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	194	52.4
	Female	176	47.6
Age (years)	< 30	41	11.1
	30–39	118	31.9
	40–49	134	36.2
	≥ 50	77	20.8
Education	High school or diploma	63	17.0
	Bachelor's degree	228	61.6
	Master's degree or higher	79	21.4
Civil service rank	II	52	14.1
	III	238	64.3
	IV	80	21.6
Tenure (years)	< 10	109	29.5
	10–20	161	43.5
	> 20	100	27.0

Measurement Model

The measurement results provide mixed evidence (Table 4). Thirteen of 14 retained loadings exceed 0.70. SE1 loads at 0.625 and was retained to preserve participation content; AVE above 0.50 does not remove its weaker indicator reliability. Composite reliability ranges from 0.798 to 0.874, and all AVE values exceed 0.50. Patronage networks and social embeddedness have Cronbach's α values of 0.668 and 0.621 and ρ_A values of 0.671 and 0.648. These short scales may be sensitive to unequal loadings, but their low consistency estimates remain unresolved limitations. Indicator VIF values range from 1.120 to 1.876. Favorable AVE and

composite reliability provide supplementary evidence, not an unqualified validation of the measures (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2020).

Table 4. Reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Item	Loading	VIF	α	ρ_A	ρ_C	AVE
Civil servant performance	CSP1	0.788	1.751	0.775	0.778	0.856	0.598
	CSP2	0.815	1.876				
	CSP3	0.719	1.533				
	CSP4	0.767	1.488				
Local culture	LC1	0.800	1.423	0.808	0.809	0.874	0.635
	LC2	0.824	1.705				
	LC3	0.822	1.792				
	LC4	0.738	1.826				
Patronage networks	PN1	0.752	1.285	0.668	0.671	0.819	0.601
	PN3	0.781	1.325				
	PN4	0.792	1.291				
Social embeddedness	SE1	0.625	1.120	0.621	0.648	0.798	0.572
	SE2	0.831	1.377				
	SE3	0.797	1.355				

The Fornell–Larcker comparisons satisfy the reported criterion because each square root of AVE exceeds the corresponding interconstruct correlations (Table 5). HTMT provides a less favorable assessment. Patronage–performance (0.907) and patronage–embeddedness (0.901) exceed the 0.90 screening threshold. The reported bootstrap intervals excluded unity, but exclusion of perfect correlation does not establish separation under the stricter threshold (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). Patronage resource access and embeddedness support may overlap in item meaning, and PN4 also introduces a different referent. Discriminant validity therefore remains unresolved. The structural associations should be interpreted as provisional pending complete interval reporting and theoretically justified measurement sensitivity analyses.

Table 5. Discriminant validity: Fornell–Larcker (lower triangle, $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ on diagonal) and HTMT (upper triangle)

Construct	CSP	LC	PN	SE
CSP	0.773	0.783	0.907	0.837
LC	0.623	0.797	0.803	0.774
PN	0.684	0.594	0.775	0.901
SE	0.586	0.552	0.620	0.756

Collinearity and model fit

Inner-model VIF values range from 1.69 to 1.91, which does not indicate severe predictor collinearity. SRMR is 0.066 for the estimated model and 0.035 for the saturated model; the corresponding NFI values are 0.912 and 0.953. The estimated model also reports $d_{\text{ULS}} = 0.461$, $d_{\text{G}} = 0.092$, and $\chi^2 = 173.002$. These indices describe the reported model. Without bootstrap discrepancy bounds, d_{ULS} and d_{G} do not establish exact fit, and favorable approximate indices do not resolve construct overlap.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Tests

The model explains 56.3% of the observed variance in self-reported civil servant performance ($R^2 = 0.563$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.558$) and 30.5% in social embeddedness ($R^2 = 0.305$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.303$). Reported Q^2_{predict} values are 0.372 and 0.298, respectively. Positive values are consistent with improvement over the naïve benchmark in the reported prediction procedure. They do not establish superiority to a linear model or medium predictive power (Shmueli et al., 2019). Table 6 reports statistically significant coefficients in the hypothesized directions. This support is conditional on the provisional measurement specification and the unadjusted individual-level inference.

Table 6. Standardized structural results from 10,000 bootstrap subsamples

H	Path	β	M	SD	t	p	95% CI	f^2	Decision
H1	LC $\rightarrow$ CSP	0.286	0.283	0.049	5.853	<.001	NR	0.108	Supported
H2	LC $\rightarrow$ SE	0.552	0.554	0.037	14.918	<.001	NR	0.439	Supported
H3	PN $\rightarrow$ CSP	0.389	0.389	0.057	6.842	<.001	NR	0.191	Supported
H4	SE $\rightarrow$ CSP	0.172	0.174	0.053	3.257	.001	NR	0.041	Supported
H5	LC $\rightarrow$ SE $\rightarrow$ CSP	0.095	0.097	0.030	3.138	.002	NR	—	Supported
H6	PN $\times$ SE $\rightarrow$ CSP	-0.070	-0.068	0.032	2.224	.026	NR	0.011	Supported

Note. β = original standardized coefficient; M = bootstrap mean; SD = bootstrap standard deviation; CI = percentile confidence interval; NR = interval bounds not reported. Reported significance uses two-tailed tests. Hypothesis support concerns associations under the reported model. The interaction f^2 is below the conventional 0.02 reference for a small effect; statistical significance does not establish substantive institutional substitution.

Patronage networks have the largest reported direct coefficient for performance ($\beta = 0.389$), followed by local culture ($\beta = 0.286$) and social embeddedness ($\beta = 0.172$). These point estimates do not establish statistically different coefficient magnitudes. The local culture–embeddedness path has $f^2 = 0.439$. Construct overlap limits the interpretation of the patronage coefficient as a distinct resource-access relationship.

The direct local culture–performance coefficient ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < .001$) and the indirect coefficient through embeddedness ($\beta = 0.095$, $p = .002$) are positive and statistically significant. This pattern is consistent with complementary partial mediation in the specified model. Their sum is 0.381, and the indirect-to-total ratio is 24.9%. These quantities describe the model decomposition; they do not establish a causal share transmitted through relationships or exclude reverse ordering.

The interaction coefficient is negative ($\beta = -0.070$, $p = .026$), with a very small incremental effect size ($f^2 = 0.011$). The reported conditional patronage slopes are 0.459 at low embeddedness (-1 SD) and 0.319 at high embeddedness ($+1$ SD). Figure 2 visualizes their different gradients, while Figure 3 presents the statistical display from the PLS-SEM. The association remains positive at both levels, but slope-specific significance cannot be assessed without confidence intervals. The pattern is consistent with modest attenuation, rather than demonstrated substitution between resource providers. The individual-level estimates do not establish robustness to demographic controls or organizational clustering.

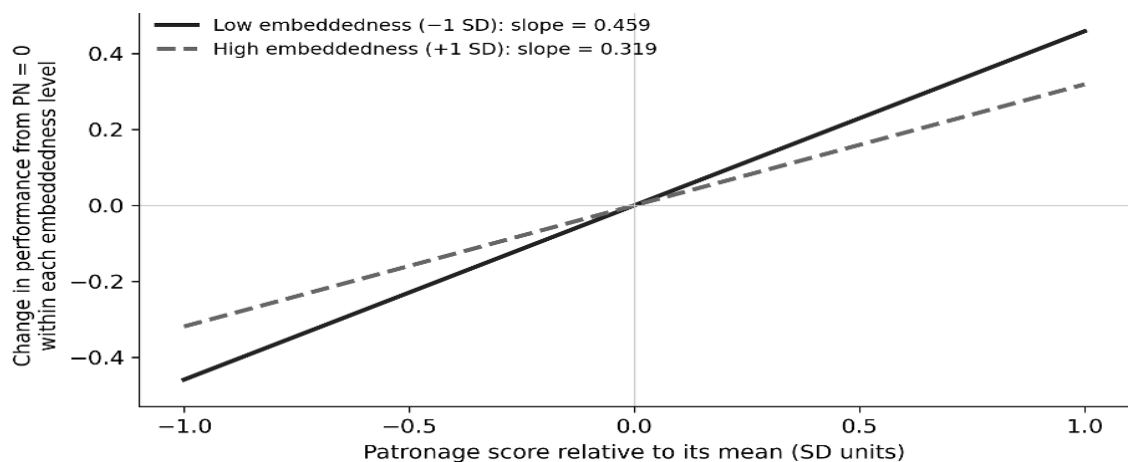


Figure 2. Conditional patronage slopes at low and high social embeddedness

Note. Lines reproduce the reported slopes and show changes from PN = 0 within each embeddedness level. They do not compare absolute performance levels across groups. Confidence bands and slope-specific tests require bootstrap output and are not shown.

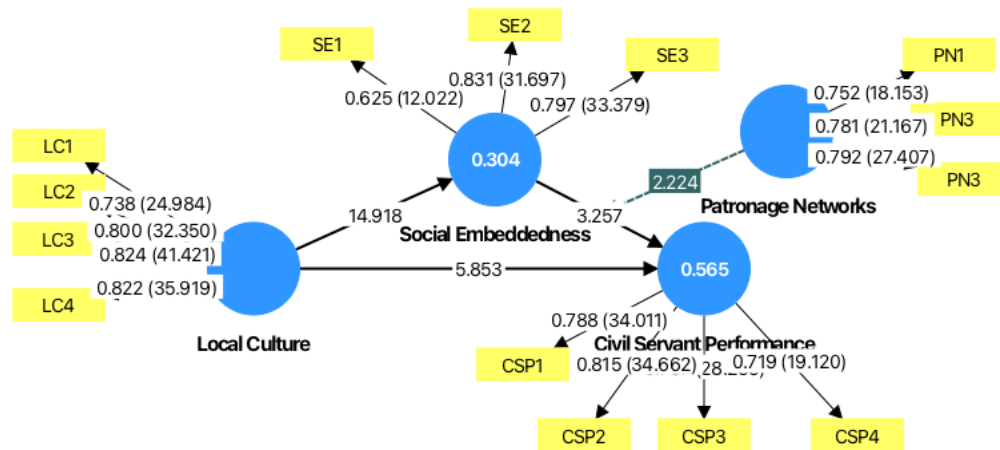


Figure 3. Model Findings

DISCUSSION

The findings support a conditional relational account of self-reported civil servant performance. Local culture has direct and indirect associations with performance, and embeddedness accompanies a weaker patronage–performance association. The contribution lies in examining cultural commitments, vertical exchanges, and perceived relational integration within the same model. The evidence does not establish that informal arrangements improve public administration or that officials replace patrons with peer support. Measurement overlap and the cross-sectional design qualify the proposed coordination and substitution mechanisms.

The local culture findings are consistent with a relational channel for normative commitment. Officials who endorse dignity, responsibility, honesty, and mutual assistance also report stronger embeddedness and better performance. Culture may support work expectations and relationships that facilitate assistance, but the survey does not observe these processes over time. This interpretation complements culture–effectiveness research and evidence that merit recruitment can strengthen public service motivation (Hartnell et al., 2019; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021). Local norms may support formal performance expectations, yet their compatibility with impartial service remains an empirical question. Strong obligations to insiders could also restrict cooperation with outsiders.

The positive patronage coefficient requires a distinction between individual task accomplishment and institutional effectiveness. Resource access and patron-linked incentives offer plausible interpretations, consistent with Jiang (2018). The present scale also includes loyalty-based opportunities and perceived favoritism, so the coefficient cannot establish that coordination gaps explain the finding. Evidence on adverse selection and Weberian conduct shows why political access can undermine merit even alongside favorable individual self-reports (Colonnelli et al., 2020; Kuipers, 2026). Patronage may privilege connected officials, redirect effort toward visible tasks, or encourage favorable self-assessment. Multitasking research also shows that task priorities can change under patronage incentives (Feng et al., 2025). The study does not measure resource equality, organizational legitimacy, citizen satisfaction, or public value.

The negative interaction is consistent with limited functional overlap between vertical access and relational support. Stronger embeddedness accompanies a weaker patronage–performance association, but the attenuation is modest and the association remains positive. Network scholarship emphasizes that relational effects depend on structure and context (Hu et al., 2023). The proposed substitution mechanism would require evidence that comparable resources move through peer ties and that officials become less dependent on patrons. The current survey observes neither process. Construct overlap, common reporting tendencies, and shared organizational conditions provide alternative explanations that require sensitivity analysis before the interaction can sustain a stronger theoretical claim.

The framework contributes an analytical distinction between cultural content, patronage obligations, and relational integration. It treats embeddedness as a proposed channel and boundary condition, rather than classifying every informal relationship as an institution. Institutional and network perspectives already recognize political and relational influences on

service delivery (Barbalet, 2023; Pepinsky et al., 2017). The extension concerns their joint specification among incumbent officials. The results generate a conditional proposition: accessible horizontal support may reduce the incremental performance relevance of vertical access. They do not validate a new general theory or show why patronage persists across bureaucracies. Research should also separate task performance from ethical conduct because these outcomes can respond differently to motivational conditions (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2019).

Public managers can use the findings to guide evaluated reforms in peer cooperation and resource access. Team projects, peer mentoring, and communities of practice may broaden practical assistance across work units. Network research favors assessing these initiatives within their organizational context (Hu et al., 2023). Performance and integrity programs can connect local values of dignity and responsibility to impartial service obligations. Evidence on merit recruitment and ethical behavior supports combining normative commitment with institutional safeguards (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2019; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021; Oliveros & Schuster, 2018). These proposals require evaluation; the study does not establish their effects.

Transparent budget access, clear escalation procedures, and documented workflows may reduce discretionary barriers to task completion. Research on bureaucratic management and managerial productivity supports attention to organizational capacity, while performance-management research emphasizes coherent evaluation and development systems (Fenizia, 2022; Rasul & Rogger, 2018; Schleicher et al., 2018). Local governments should evaluate these reforms through administrative completion records, service quality, and the distribution of resources across connected and unconnected staff. The relevant reform goal is equitable access to work support, rather than higher self-reported output alone.

Merit-based recruitment, transparent rotation criteria, and independent oversight remain necessary. A positive patronage coefficient among incumbent officials provides no justification for preferential appointments. Experimental and comparative evidence supports protecting nondiscretionary selection and impartial bureaucratic conduct (Colonnelli et al., 2020; Kuipers, 2026; Oliveros & Schuster, 2018). Citizen-facing indicators and fairness assessments should accompany individual performance ratings. This combination would allow managers to distinguish improved task completion from unequal treatment or political capture.

The findings also define priorities for validation. Single-source self-reports remain vulnerable to method bias despite the reported procedural remedies and diagnostics (Jordan & Troth, 2020; Podsakoff et al., 2024). Item deletion, low consistency estimates, and high HTMT values require comparison of distinct patronage dimensions, alternative measurement specifications, and retained-item sensitivity (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). Administrative measures can strengthen outcome validation (Fenizia, 2022). Longitudinal and multilevel designs should examine temporal ordering, organizational clustering, and actual resource exchanges. Indicator-level prediction benchmarks and fully reported control estimates are also needed before stronger predictive, or robustness claims are warranted.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER STUDY

This study advances the understanding of civil servant performance by demonstrating how local culture, social embeddedness, and patronage relationships jointly shape performance within Indonesian local government institutions. The findings indicate that local culture contributes to self-reported performance both directly and indirectly through social embeddedness, suggesting that culturally grounded values become organizationally relevant when translated into interpersonal trust, cooperation, and shared responsibilities. Social embeddedness also modestly weakens the positive relationship between patronage and performance, indicating that stronger horizontal relationships may reduce employees' relative dependence on vertical patronage arrangements. These findings extend the literature on public sector performance by distinguishing the normative influence of local culture, the resource-related function of patronage, and the relational integration provided by social embeddedness. The study contributes a conditional relational perspective in which different sources of organizational support may partially overlap rather than operate independently. However, the findings do not establish that social embeddedness replaces patronage or that the observed performance relationships necessarily generate greater institutional effectiveness or public value. Instead, they suggest that civil servant

performance reflects an interplay between cultural expectations, organizational relationships, and access to workplace support within the distinctive institutional environment of local government.

Several limitations warrant consideration and provide opportunities for further research. The cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data restrict causal interpretation and introduce potential common method bias. Respondent replacement, unexamined organizational clustering, limited internal consistency in some measures, and unresolved construct separation further constrain the robustness and generalizability of the findings. The relatively small moderating effect also requires cautious interpretation. Future studies should employ longitudinal and multilevel designs to examine how cultural values, patronage exchanges, and social embeddedness evolve across organizational hierarchies and institutional settings. More refined measurements should distinguish legitimate resource support, interpersonal loyalty, and preferential treatment to clarify whether patronage operates through functional assistance or organizational favoritism. Integrating administrative performance records, supervisor assessments, and citizen evaluations would also establish whether these relational mechanisms contribute to measurable improvements in public service delivery. From a managerial perspective, local government institutions should strengthen horizontal collaboration through structured peer mentoring, cross-unit knowledge sharing, and inclusive workplace participation while ensuring transparent access to information, assignments, and organizational resources. These initiatives should complement merit-based personnel management rather than reinforce informal privileges or personal dependencies. Public managers should institutionalize clear resource-allocation procedures, strengthen accountability for preferential treatment, and evaluate relational management practices against service quality, administrative fairness, and equitable treatment of citizens to translate culturally grounded workplace relationships into sustainable public sector performance.

ETHICAL DISCLOSURE

The Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Lamappapoleonro reviewed and approved the study protocol (approval No. 017/KEPK/UL/I/2025, dated 20 January 2025). The four regional civil service agencies granted research permits before data collection. All respondents received written information on the study purpose, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw without consequence. Respondents gave informed consent before they completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire collected no names, employee identification numbers, or other identifying data. Completed forms were stored in a locked cabinet, and the digital data file was stored on a password-protected drive accessible only to the research team. The study complies with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki for research involving human participants.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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