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The Impact of Ethical Leadership on Public Sector Performance: Exploring the Mediating Role of CSR and Organizational Politics and the Moderating Influence of Social Capital

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Abstract

Existing literature indicates that ethical leadership has a significant effect on various organizational results. Accordingly, based on social learning theory and social exchange theory, the present research conducts an empirical investigation into how ethical leadership affects performance in public sector organizations, with particular emphasis on the mediating roles of perceived organizational politics and corporate social responsibility, alongside the moderating influence of organizational social capital. Data were gathered through a quantitative, cross-sectional web-based survey employing convenience sampling, involving 292 employees from federal government and federal member state levels in Somalia. The analysis was performed via structural equation modeling (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS4 software. Findings demonstrate that ethical leadership has direct impacts on organizational performance, perceived organizational politics, and corporate social responsibility. Moreover, perceived organizational politics partially mediates the link between ethical leadership and organizational performance. The research provides actionable suggestions for public sector entities and decision-makers to improve performance by promoting ethical leadership. It also addresses a gap in the literature by investigating the connection between ethical leadership and performance in public organizations, particularly within the Somali context. The inclusion of multiple mediating and moderating elements has enhanced insight into the mechanisms through which ethical leadership shapes public sector organizational performance.

Keywords: Organizational social capital, Organizational performance, Ethical leadership, Perceived organizational politics, Corporate social responsibility

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Introduction

Over the last ten years, academic researchers have shown considerable interest in ethical leadership (EL) [1]. In the 21st century, organizational performance (OP) in the public sector has emerged as a key issue in public management and has drawn substantial attention in public administration scholarship over recent decades [2, 3], amid growing demands from the public for increased studies in this domain [4]. Perceived organizational politics (POP) has been established as an important factor in assessing the advantages that ethical leadership brings to organizations [5].

Earlier research has suggested that leaders should adopt fundamental ethical values—like beneficence, justice, and truthfulness—to elevate performance in the public sector [6]. Numerous previous investigations have highlighted the need to explore the contribution of ethical leadership to public organization performance and have advocated for additional studies in



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this field. Leaders who exhibit ethical behavior promote a culture of learning to enhance performance [7], instill ethical standards, provide organizations with a competitive advantage [8, 9], affect clarity of objectives and success in projects [10], and act as a steadying element, allowing public organizations to reevaluate objectives during worldwide challenges to maintain competitiveness [11]. In addition, ongoing scandals involving the ethical conduct of public officials emphasize the necessity for more investigations into ethical leadership in government settings [12]. Strong performance in the public sector is vital for growth, stability, and effective service provision in countries recovering from conflict, such as Somalia. Yet, the dynamics among these elements in the Somali setting remain unexamined and unclear. Exploring this could yield important knowledge for efforts to strengthen the public sector during Somalia's reconstruction phase. Moreover, Somalia's past marked by civil conflict, widespread corruption, and political turmoil has profoundly affected its public institutions, impeding their capacity to provide services and reach targeted performance outcomes [13]. This distinctive environment offers a promising setting to analyze the connections among ethical leadership (EL), organizational performance (OP), the suggested mediators (corporate social responsibility (CSR) and organizational politics (POP)), and the moderator (organizational social capital (OSC)). According to the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS) [14], inadequate institutional effectiveness and poor service provision represent major problems facing public organizations in Somalia. In light of this legacy of fragile institutions, emphasizing ethical leadership that prioritizes transparency and accountability is essential for restoring confidence, securing resources, and ultimately boosting performance in Somalia.

Multiple factors shape organizational ethics, among which leadership stands out as particularly significant [15, 16]. Together with the lack of prior examination of an innovative framework linking ethical leadership to public sector performance—incorporating CSR and organizational politics as mediators and organizational social capital as a moderator—these reasons justify and encourage detailed investigation.

While many recent investigations have explored the connection between ethical leadership and organizational performance, predominantly in private enterprises [13, 17, 18], no earlier work, to our knowledge, has developed a model assessing ethical leadership's influence on public sector organizational performance through the processes of perceived organizational politics and CSR, along with the moderating impact of organizational social capital, within one integrated conceptual framework. As the initial effort to examine the interactions among all five constructs in a unified model, this research stands out for its originality, distinctiveness, and importance, adding to the current literature and providing a deeper comprehension of these interrelationships.

More specifically, five distinct gaps persist in this field. First, even after years of discussion and study, the field of ethical leadership continues to face fragmentation and ambiguity [19]. Many works remain largely descriptive and prescriptive in nature [5], with ongoing issues in theory, methods, and study design requiring further exploration [20]. Second, although various leadership approaches have been linked to diverse organizational results, limited attention has been given to a direct association between ethical leadership and organizational performance, with most focus on the private sector and minimal on public organizations [21]. Few investigations have clarified the processes by which ethical leadership affects performance, prompting calls for more work [19]. Third, studies linking ethical leadership and CSR have mostly targeted private industries, especially manufacturing and financial outcomes [22]. Fourth, there is scant integrated research on how perceived organizational politics influences performance in public settings, aside from the works of Vigoda [23] and Parker *et al.* [24]. Fifth, despite growing interest in ethics within social capital studies, empirical evidence remains limited [25].

In contrast to prior works that centered on private organizations (see Pirzada *et al.* [17]; Sanchez-Famoso *et al.*, [18]), this investigation focuses on the vital role of ethical leadership in public sector performance, critical for maintaining public confidence and delivering services. It explores how staff views of organizational politics—particularly favoritism rather than merit-based decisions—affect public sector outcomes, an underexplored issue with potential to reveal key obstacles. The study further advances by assessing social capital as a moderator, shedding light on how prevailing trust levels impact ethical leadership's efficacy in public organizations. By tackling these literature shortcomings, the work provides a fresh viewpoint on ethical leadership in public administration, especially in developing nations like Somalia. Insights into CSR's mediating function with performance, combined with social capital's moderating role, can inform public sector leaders and policymakers. Thus, the research probes the link between ethical leadership and public sector performance, with specific attention to the mediating influences of CSR and organizational politics, plus the moderating effect of social capital.

This research relies on social learning theory [26] and social exchange theory [27] to elucidate how ethical leadership affects organizational performance in the public sector, incorporating the mediating effects of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and perceived organizational politics, along with the moderating role of organizational social capital. According to social learning theory, people acquire positive behaviors by observing and emulating credible role models, providing a key lens for understanding how ethical leaders shape followers' desirable conduct [1]. Social exchange theory, in turn, provides a strong foundation for interpreting the link between ethical leadership practices and favorable employee responses; rooted in the principle of reciprocity, it suggests that individuals feel compelled to reciprocate benefits received from others [28]. By integrating these theories and exploring the mediating pathways of CSR and perceived organizational politics, as well as the

moderating influence of organizational social capital, the present investigation extends the literature on ethical leadership and public sector organizational performance.

Both social learning theory and social exchange theory shed important light on the connections among ethical leadership, public sector performance, and the intervening and conditioning variables of CSR, perceived organizational politics, and organizational social capital. Social learning theory emphasizes that individuals acquire knowledge through observation and interpersonal interactions. Ethical leaders cultivate a constructive atmosphere that promotes ethical conduct. As employees absorb the ethical principles demonstrated by their leaders, they exhibit more responsible behaviors that bolster CSR activities, strengthen public confidence, and elevate overall performance. This process encourages a collective commitment to beneficial results, prompting employees who recognize the value of their contributions to become more dedicated to advancing public welfare goals.

Social exchange theory centers on the evaluation of costs and rewards in relationships. Workers are more prone to adopt ethical practices when they view their interactions with leaders as equitable. Ethical leaders encourage transparent dialogue and teamwork, which enhance information exchange and effective resolution of issues—vital components for superior performance in public administration. Staff members who have faith in ethical leadership and align with organizational principles are more likely to engage proactively in CSR programs, including community service and outreach efforts. Such initiatives can improve societal views of the organization and build stronger social capital grounded in mutual trust and collaboration. Conversely, high levels of perceived organizational politics—in which personal ties overshadow merit in promotions—can weaken the advantages derived from ethical leadership and social exchange dynamics. This situation diminishes motivation for ethical actions, damages trust, and may impede achievement in public service delivery.

The robustness of internal organizational networks (social capital) can condition the application of both social learning theory and social exchange theory. Robust networks promote the dissemination of knowledge and cooperative efforts, reinforcing ethical practices and CSR undertakings. Furthermore, elevated social capital characterized by reliable relationships extending to the wider community can intensify the favorable outcomes of ethical leadership and CSR by encouraging partnerships between citizens and government entities, thereby establishing a more conducive setting for realizing public service objectives. Merging social learning theory's emphasis on observational learning and social influence with social exchange theory's focus on reciprocity and confidence yields a richer comprehension of how ethical leadership fosters ethical conduct, supports CSR, and ultimately boosts public sector performance. Organizational social capital acts as a moderator, shaping the potency of these mechanisms.

This investigation offers multiple contributions by addressing the shortcomings highlighted in previous work. First, it directly answers repeated scholarly appeals to explore the mediating and moderating pathways linking ethical leadership to organizational performance in public administration, where comprehensive integrative studies remain scarce [5]. Second, as far as we are aware, no earlier study examining ethical leadership and organizational performance has simultaneously included these specific mediators and moderator within one unified framework to explain ethical leadership's effects on public sector outcomes. Third, the research integrates two theoretical perspectives—social learning theory and social exchange theory—thereby progressing beyond prior investigations that predominantly depended on social learning theory alone. Moreover, given Somalia's ongoing efforts to rebuild its public institutions, employing a sample from public sector entities proves valuable in illustrating ethical leadership's influence on performance from a public administration viewpoint, through the mediators of CSR and perceived organizational politics, and moderated by organizational social capital. To the authors' knowledge, this represents the inaugural empirical examination of the relationship between ethical leadership and public sector organizational performance incorporating CSR and perceived organizational politics as mediators, with organizational social capital as a moderator, especially within the Somali setting.

Hypotheses Development and Literature Review

Ethical leadership and organizational performance

The core objective of every organization is to attain superior performance levels that support sustained development and achievement. Research by Arab [29] demonstrated that ethical leadership exerts an influence on organizational performance. In a similar vein, Lubis [30] found that ethical leadership contributes positively to organizational performance. In recent decades, the concept of ethical leadership has offered fresh perspectives for human resource practitioners, indicating that perceptions of organizational justice can improve various organizational results [31]. Although leadership is generally recognized for encouraging ethical practices within organizations, the dynamic between leaders' conduct and established ethical guidelines requires further investigation. Nonetheless, evidence shows that effectively managed organizations typically feature leaders who display model behavior and address issues preemptively, thereby lessening reliance on strict formal ethical policies [32]. Moreover, ethical leadership—defined by a leader's adherence to moral standards—can shape organizational performance [33].

Resick *et al.* [34] identified six key characteristics of ethical leadership: integrity and character, ethical awareness, focus on community and people, motivation, encouragement and empowerment, and oversight of ethical accountability. Despite some explorations of the link between ethical leadership and organizational performance, the public sector has received limited focus in broader research on leadership approaches and performance outcomes [35, 36]. In this research, public sector organizations are defined as governmental bodies [37].

Prior investigations have analyzed the connection between ethical leadership and organizational performance [13, 17, 18], but these have largely targeted private sector entities, which operate under different structures and procedures than public institutions. Consequently, the relationship has seldom been assessed specifically in public sector environments.

The anticipated beneficial effect of ethical leadership on organizational performance has generated substantial attention in management studies. Ethical leaders strengthen their organizations by establishing an environment of trust and integrity through their own high moral standards and consistent ethical actions. By motivating employees to act with responsibility and ethics, these leaders create a more engaged and efficient work setting. Bandura's [26] social learning theory asserts that people learn behaviors and abilities via direct involvement, observation, role modeling, and emulation. Applied to ethical leadership, this framework explains how followers adopt ethical practices by watching and interacting with their leaders, who serve as exemplars through reliable displays of ethical conduct.

Blau's [27] social exchange theory proposes that individuals evaluate the rewards and costs associated with interpersonal relationships. In the workplace, employees exchange their efforts and expertise for compensation, advancement opportunities, and acknowledgment. Within this perspective, ethical leadership cultivates a constructive reciprocal dynamic, leading to enhanced contributions from employees and better overall organizational results. Together, social learning theory and social exchange theory illuminate the pathways through which ethical leadership influences performance. The former highlights the role of observation, modeling, and reinforcement in building ethical norms, while the latter stresses elements like equity, mutual obligation, and implicit agreements that support a productive workplace and greater employee commitment. Integrating these lenses enables a more comprehensive view of how ethical leadership encourages ethical behavior and drives organizational success.

One earlier investigation indicated that various aspects of ethical leadership—such as fostering positive emotions, perspective-taking, role modeling, people-centered approaches, delegation of authority, and provision of ethical direction—each contribute positively to organizational performance, though to differing degrees [38]. Piccolo *et al.* [39] showed that ethical leadership increases employees' sense of task meaningfulness, which subsequently boosts performance. Ajulu described effective public sector performance as encompassing improved service provision, greater efficiency in resource management, the development of a results-driven culture, and reduced reliance on government funding alongside overall advancement. Although research on ethical leadership has yielded diverse findings [19], relatively few efforts have delved into the specific mechanisms by which it generates favorable performance outcomes. Existing works confirming a positive association between ethical leadership and performance [17, 18] have predominantly examined private organizations, with minimal attention to public sector settings, particularly in Somalia. To address this shortfall in the literature, the following hypothesis is proposed: H1: Ethical leadership positively affects organizational performance in the public sector

Ethical leadership, corporate social responsibility, and organizational outcomes

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) encompasses a company's commitment to adopting practices and policies that promote beneficial societal impacts beyond its core economic objectives, targeting external stakeholders [40]. Although substantial research has explored the connection between ethical leadership and CSR, the mechanisms through which ethical leadership enhances organizational outcomes via CSR remain underexplored, particularly within public sector entities where ethical standards are especially critical [41, 42]. Moreover, scholars have called for theoretical frameworks that integrate the interconnections among CSR, ethical leadership, and organizational outcomes [43].

This study draws on social learning theory, as outlined by Bandura [26], which posits that individuals acquire behaviors through observing, modeling, and interacting with others. In organizational contexts, this theory explains how employees adopt ethical norms by emulating their leaders' actions and choices. Leaders demonstrating ethical traits—such as integrity, equity, and commitment to ecological stewardship—serve as exemplars. Via observational learning, staff members assimilate these ethical standards and CSR-oriented values, manifesting them in organizational practices like equitable employment conditions and eco-friendly initiatives. When personnel view their institution as morally sound and socially accountable, they exhibit heightened motivation, efficiency, and retention, ultimately elevating key indicators like stakeholder approval and creative output.

Despite the rising prominence of ethical leadership and CSR, Matten and Moon [4] note that their practical application remains unclear. Empirical evidence indicates that ethical leadership exerts both direct [42] and indirect influences on CSR adoption [42, 44], while also fostering positive effects on CSR engagement and overall outcomes. Likewise, Alkhadra *et al.* [33] found that CSR serves as a strong and significant mediator in linking ethical leadership to organizational outcomes. Yet, certain investigations suggest that CSR only partially accounts for this linkage [33, 45].

Existing scholarship underscores that effective CSR efforts require backing from leadership across hierarchies [46]. An empirical analysis by Butt *et al.* [47] revealed that ethical leadership drives CSR, thereby boosting organizational outcomes. Additional evidence points to CSR substantially elevating performance levels [48]. In Iranian pharmaceutical firms, quality management was shown to mediate the association between social responsibility and organizational outcomes [49]. Furthermore, Rettab *et al.* (2009) identified a favorable link between CSR and organizational outcomes, a finding echoed by Kim and Thapa [45], who observed CSR mediating the tie between ethical leadership and outcomes.

The body of work examining ethical leadership, CSR, and organizational outcomes is extensive and expanding, yet it presents notable gaps. Primarily, investigations have predominantly centered on advanced economies, including nations like the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia [19]. This concentration restricts the applicability of results to diverse global settings, especially conflict-affected areas such as Somalia. A recent investigation by Arab [29] demonstrated that ethical leadership bolsters CSR, subsequently driving organizational outcomes. It further posited CSR as a mediating factor, implying that ethical leadership affects outcomes both directly and indirectly via CSR. Nonetheless, no existing research, to the authors' awareness, has examined CSR's mediating function in the association between ethical leadership and outcomes specifically within public sector institutions in the Somali setting. Grounded in these insights, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H2: CSR mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and public sector organizational performance.

Ethical leadership, perceived organizational politics, and organizational outcomes

Perceived organizational politics (POP) denotes an employee's personal assessment of the degree to which the work environment appears to favor the self-interests of certain individuals or groups over others [50]. Despite political dynamics being a prevalent and influential aspect of virtually all organizations, their consequences for public sector entities remain insufficiently explored [51]. Leaders' interpretations of organizational politics can profoundly shape their leadership approaches [52]; those experiencing elevated POP frequently develop strained ties with their institutions and show reduced inclination to adopt the principled conduct exhibited by exemplary leaders. Prior investigations have predominantly concentrated on employees' POP in response to ethical leadership [53]. While considerable scholarly and applied efforts have addressed organizational politics' influence on outcomes in private enterprises, scant in-depth analyses exist for the public domain beyond the contributions of Vigoda [23] and Parker *et al.* [24]. Accordingly, this research employs social learning theory [26] to elucidate how ethical leadership fosters depoliticized work settings. This theory maintains that people acquire constructive conduct by watching and emulating credible exemplars. Kalshoven *et al.* [1] highlighted its value as a key lens for understanding how principled leaders shape followers' preferred actions.

Influences on POP are typically grouped into organizational, job-related, and individual categories. Organizationally, POP correlates strongly with procedural fairness and concentration of authority. At the job level, reduced POP tends to occur when roles align with expectations, advancement opportunities exist, participation in decisions is encouraged, and supportive supervisor-subordinate bonds alongside collegial, reliable peer interactions prevail. Individually, certain traits moderate perceptions: employees who feel mastery over their surroundings or maintain optimistic dispositions generally report lower POP compared to those harboring skeptical or distrustful outlooks toward others [54].

Jamshed *et al.* [55] identified a significant positive association between ethical leadership and POP, while exploring how POP directly and indirectly affects organizational outcomes through task and relationship conflicts as mediators. Although the anticipated detrimental effect of task conflict on perceived performance lacked support, the negative influence of relationship conflict was confirmed. Nevertheless, the majority of research indicates that POP adversely affects organizational outcomes [51-53, 55, 56]. Such politics may appear as favoritism, favoritism toward kin or allies [57], rivalry over resources, personal disputes, power struggles, and alliance-building [58]. POP comprises three dimensions: "go along to get ahead," general political conduct, and policies on compensation and advancement. The first involves deliberate silence to protect personal gains; general political conduct includes manipulating others and events to advance self-interests and objectives [59]. Reward structures also drive employees' political actions [60].

Research has positioned POP as an important mediator linking ethical leadership to outcomes, noting individual variations in these dynamics. These connections are reportedly moderated by political skill, as adept individuals better navigate and mitigate the typical downsides of POP [53]. Ultimately, while ethical leadership bolsters organizations, its benefits may depend on diminishing POP [5]. Such insights provide conceptual and evidentiary support for POP mediating the association between ethical leadership and organizational outcomes, alongside political skill moderating this process [53].

The scholarship addressing ethical leadership, POP, and organizational outcomes offers insightful perspectives on their intricate interplay. Yet, it remains nascent, with much of the work centered on private enterprises and overlooking public institutions, particularly within the Somali setting. Contextual factors in prior studies warrant caution, as most originated in sectors like healthcare, education, finance, and manufacturing, with limited attention to governmental bodies. By addressing this void, the study proposes:

H3: Perceived organizational politics mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and public sector organizational performance.

Ethical leadership, organizational social capital, and organizational performance

The concept of social capital refers to valuable resources embedded in an organization's network of relationships, facilitated through levels of knowledge exchange, reciprocal trust, and collective alignment toward shared objectives among employees [61]. An increasing body of research has demonstrated the beneficial effects of social capital on organizational outcomes [62], yet there remains limited empirical insight into the mechanisms for building such capital inside firms [25]. Notably, prior investigations have not explored the potential moderating effect of organizational social capital on the association between ethical leadership and organizational performance, highlighting the distinctive contribution of the present research.

Certain frameworks divide social capital into three key dimensions—structural, relational, and cognitive—while assessing organizational performance through criteria like efficiency, equity, responsiveness, and overall effectiveness. For example, Andrews [62] found that the relational and cognitive components of organizational social capital were linked positively to outcomes in public organizations. According to this work, the structural component showed no connection to performance, whereas aspects of organizational design (including specialization and decentralization) influenced how social capital related to public sector results. Thus, supervisors' ethical leadership plays a key role in influencing the structural, relational, and cognitive elements of social capital [25].

Drawing on Bandura's [26] social learning theory, this research argues that employees can acquire norms of appropriate behavior by observing exemplary figures. The theory suggests that individuals, being inherently social, can internalize values that promote personal growth and societal contribution [63].

That said, the connections between social capital and performance in public organizations might differ across various types of governmental entities. Earlier scholarly contributions have highlighted the relationship between ethical leadership and the development of social capital [25]. Such works propose that leaders who establish clear ethical norms encourage staff to prioritize the welfare of colleagues and the institution. Through ethical leadership practices, managers can foster among team members a deeper identification that transcends mere economic or contractual ties to the entity [5, 63]. As far as the researchers are aware, no earlier investigation has examined how organizational social capital moderates the link between ethical leadership and performance in public sector organizations. Accordingly, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H4. Organizational social capital serves as a positive moderator in the association between ethical leadership and organizational performance, with the association becoming more pronounced at greater levels of organizational social capital. The proposed framework builds on identified gaps and supporting evidence from prior studies, particularly within Somalia's public sector context (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. Theoretical model

Methods

Population, sample, and data collection procedure

The study targeted employees working in public sector organizations in Somalia, encompassing both federal and state government levels, to validate the proposed theoretical framework empirically. A quantitative research approach was adopted to investigate how ethical leadership (EL) influences organizational performance (OP) in the public sector, with corporate social responsibility (CSR) and perceived organizational politics (POP) acting as mediating factors, and organizational social capital (OSC) serving as a moderator. Techniques involving mediation and moderation are commonly applied in management and social science studies to elucidate the pathways of influence (mediation) and the contextual factors that alter relationships (moderation) [64]. Given the extensive prior research on private sector contexts, this investigation concentrated exclusively on public institutions. Directors and senior officers were selected as respondents because of their direct involvement in daily

operations, which positions them ideally to assess leadership behaviors and overall organizational outcomes. Surveys were administered to senior civil servants across national ministries, state-level ministries, directorates, departmental units, and executive agencies.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Initial contact was made with director generals from various ministries at federal and state levels, who granted approval for data gathering among staff in their units. Data were collected via a cross-sectional design using an online survey distributed through Google Forms links. To reduce incomplete responses, all items were set as mandatory. The questionnaire included a cover letter outlining the research aims, guaranteeing participant anonymity and confidentiality, and emphasizing voluntary involvement, thereby securing informed consent. Contact details for the researcher were also provided for any inquiries.

Prior to full-scale data collection, a pilot study was carried out to verify the psychometric properties of the instrument. Thirty employees from the public sector reviewed the items for relevance, comprehensibility, and reliability. Feedback indicated that the questions were clear and appropriate, leading to no alterations in the adapted scales. Reliability was further assessed via Cronbach's alpha (α), with values exceeding 0.70 across the instrument, deemed satisfactory [65].

Following pilot validation, 450 surveys were sent to director generals through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and email for onward distribution to subordinates. Response rates were enhanced by sending two follow-up reminders: one after the first week and another in the third week, via WhatsApp groups, email, and departmental meetings. For determining an appropriate sample size in the context of structural equation modeling (SEM), Soper's [66] online statistical calculator for SEM was employed. Inputs included a medium anticipated effect size of 0.25, a power level of 0.8, and a significance level of 0.05, along with 5 latent constructs and 29 observed indicators. The tool recommended a minimum of 229 respondents. Out of the 450 distributed surveys, 292 valid responses were obtained, yielding a 64.8% response rate. Examination of the submitted forms revealed no missing data or outliers, allowing all 292 cases to be retained for analysis. Data gathering occurred between 16 December 2022 and 10 January 2023.

Profile of respondents

Among the respondents, males constituted 90.4% and females 9.6%. In terms of age distribution, 64.7% fell within the 26–35 age bracket, while 15.8% were aged 18–25. Work experience showed that 37.3% had 4–6 years, 33.2% had 1–3 years, and 20.9% (61 individuals) had 7–9 years. Educationally, 49.70% held bachelor's degrees, 43.20% possessed master's degrees, and 3.10% had completed only high school. Marital status indicated that 63.70% were married and 35.60% (104 individuals) were single. A detailed summary of respondent demographics is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Sample frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation (N = 292)

Demographic Variables	Percentage	Frequency	Mean	SD
Gender			1.10	0.295
Male	90.40	264		
Female	9.60	28		
Age (years)			2.08	0.704
18–25	15.80	46		
26–35	64.70	189		
36–45	15.80	46		
46–55	3.10	9		
>55	0.70	2		
Work Experience (years)			2.05	0.940
1–3	33.20	97		
4–6	37.30	109		
7–9	20.90	61		
>9	8.60	25		
Educational Qualification			3.36	0.706
High school	3.10	9		
Diploma	3.10	9		
Bachelor	49.70	145		
Master	43.20	126		
PhD	1.00	3		
Marital Status			1.65	0.492
Single	35.60	104		
Married	63.70	186		
Divorced	0.70	2		

Study measures

Data collection relied on a 29-item questionnaire. All statements were evaluated using a five-point Likert-type scale, where 1 indicated “strongly disagree” and 5 represented “strongly agree.”

Ethical Leadership (EL): This variable was captured through a six-item instrument adapted from Brown *et al.* [63]. Representative statements include “My leader lives his or her personal life in an ethical manner,” “My leader prioritizes the welfare of the public,” and “My leader takes action against staff who breach ethical guidelines.”

Organizational Performance (OP): Performance in the organization was assessed via a seven-item measure originally developed by Brewer and Selden [67], encompassing both internal processes and external outcomes. Illustrative items are “The output from my unit delivers good value to taxpayers,” “Over the last two years, my unit’s productivity has increased,” and “Staff in my organization demonstrate strong teamwork.”

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): Perceptions of CSR were evaluated using a six-item scale from Lee *et al.* [68]. Example statements include “My organization maintains processes to address all public complaints,” “Senior management tracks any adverse effects of our operations on the surrounding community,” and “My organization actively works to improve conditions in the local area.”

Perceived Organizational Politics (POP): This construct was measured with a five-item scale adapted from Vigoda-Gadot & Meisler [69]. Sample items include “In this workplace, advancement depends more on connections than on performance,” “Top performers typically receive promotions here,” and “Some colleagues try to advance by undermining others.”

Organizational Social Capital (OSC): A five-item instrument adapted from Andrews and Mostafa [70] was utilized to gauge OSC. Illustrative statements are “Staff in my organization hold shared goals and aspirations,” “Employees here actively work toward common objectives and missions,” and “Colleagues in my organization communicate openly and truthfully with each other.”

Findings

The proposed framework was examined using SmartPLS version 4 software, employing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), a variance-based technique [71]. This approach is well-suited for multifaceted models with several variables and does not require strict assumptions regarding data normality.

Assessment of the measurement model

The initial phase in PLS-SEM involves validating the measurement model, covering indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Indicator loadings for all items met or exceeded the standard threshold of 0.708, apart from POP1, which was excluded because of inadequate loadings. Items POP3 and POP5 were maintained to ensure adequate coverage of the construct’s domain.

Internal consistency was verified using both Cronbach’s alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR). As indicated in **Table 2**, values for Cronbach’s alpha and CR across all constructs were above the accepted level of 0.70. Convergent validity was confirmed through average variance extracted (AVE), with all figures surpassing the minimum requirement of 0.50 (**Table 2**).

Discriminant validity was tested via the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) method [72]. All HTMT ratios remained below the strict cutoff of 0.90, as reported in **Table 3**, thus establishing satisfactory discriminant validity.

Table 2. Indicator Loadings, Reliability, Validity, and Collinearity Statistics (VIF)

Construct	Outer Loadings	Indicator	CR	α	AVE	VIF
CSR	0.789	CSR1				1.997
	0.851	CSR2				2.506
	0.824	CSR3	0.925	0.903	0.674	2.304
	0.851	CSR4				2.574
	0.782	CSR5				1.912
	0.827	CSR6				2.288
EL	0.755	EL1				1.872
	0.816	EL2				2.215
	0.853	EL3	0.919	0.894	0.655	2.540
	0.825	EL4				2.257
	0.763	EL5				1.819
	0.839	EL6				2.341
OP	0.805	OP1				2.420
	0.831	OP2				2.563
	0.783	OP3				2.045
	0.606	OP4	0.919	0.897	0.622	1.388
	0.848	OP5				2.704
	0.842	OP6				2.645
	0.780	OP7				1.945
OSC	0.846	OSC1				2.465
	0.845	OSC2				2.472

	0.883	OSC3	0.939	0.919	0.756	3.062
	0.895	OSC4				3.232
	0.877	OSC5				2.797
POP	0.875	POP2				1.612
	0.545	POP3	0.791	0.703	0.504	1.369
	0.861	POP4				1.679
	0.462	POP5				1.348

Note; α : Cronbach's alpha, CR: composite reliability, AVE: average variance extracted, VIF: variance inflation factor, CSR: corporate social responsibility, EL: ethical leadership, OP: organizational performance, OSC: organizational social capital, POP: perceived organizational politics.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity Assessment Using the HTMT Criterion

Construct	CSR	EL	OP	OSC	POP	OSC × EL
CSR						
EL	0.858					
OP	0.780	0.757				
OSC	0.831	0.758	0.863			
POP	0.693	0.622	0.707	0.644		
OSC × EL	0.110	0.166	0.113	0.073	0.150	

Assessment of the structural model

Following the validation of the measurement model's reliability and validity, the subsequent phase in PLS-SEM involves evaluating the structural model [72]. The initial procedure in this evaluation is to assess multicollinearity through variance inflation factor (VIF) values. Multicollinearity does not pose an issue here, as all VIF scores presented in **Table 2** are under the established threshold of 5 [65].

Next, the hypothesized relationships were examined via bootstrapping with 10,000 subsamples. The analysis began by investigating the direct paths, specifically whether EL influences OP and also affects the mediators POP and CSR. Subsequently, the paths from POP and CSR to OP were evaluated. The mediation hypotheses were then tested by analyzing the indirect paths from EL to OP through POP and CSR. Lastly, the moderating role of OSC on the EL–OP link was explored. According to the findings in **Table 4**, EL exhibits a significant positive relationship with OP ($\beta = 0.162, t = 2.500, p = .006$), CSR ($\beta = 0.772, t = 30.615, p < .001$), and POP ($\beta = 0.616, t = 16.648, p < .001$). Consequently, H1, H2, and H3 are confirmed. In addition, POP demonstrates a significant positive effect on OP ($\beta = 0.162, t = 3.300, p < .001$), supporting H4. In contrast, the effect of CSR on OP is positive yet not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.078, t = 1.177, p = .120$), leading to the rejection of H5 (**Figure 2**).

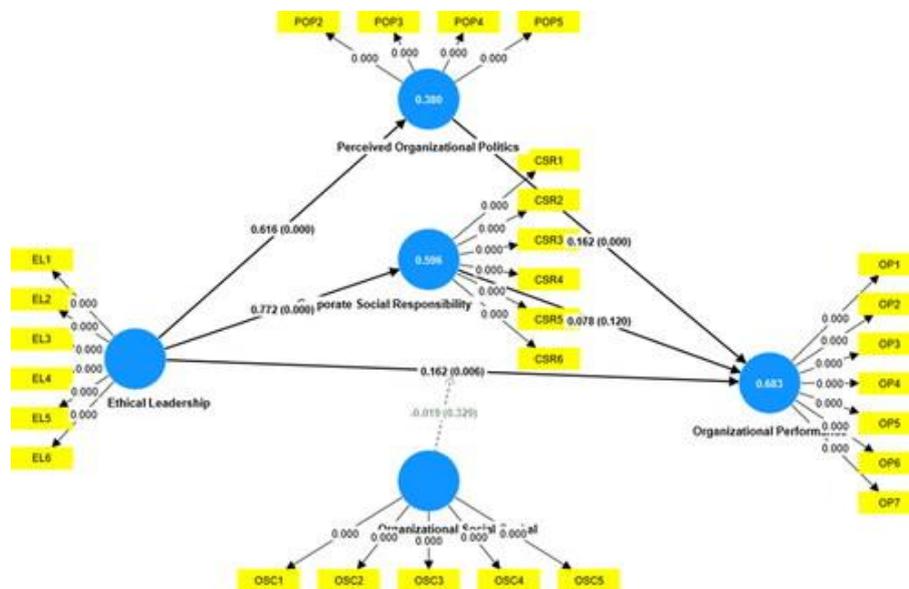


Figure 2. Structural model

Table 4. Results of Direct Effects

Hypothesis	β	p-value	t-value	Outcome
H1: EL → OP	0.162	.006	2.500	Supported
H2: EL → CSR	0.772	.001	30.615	Supported
H3: EL → POP	0.616	.001	16.648	Supported
H4: POP → OP	0.162	.001	3.300	Supported
H5: CSR → OP	0.078	.120	1.177	Not supported

Mediation analysis

A mediation analysis was performed to examine whether perceived organizational politics (POP) mediated the association between ethical leadership (EL) and organizational performance (OP). As shown in **Table 5**, the findings indicated that EL exerted a significant positive indirect effect on OP through POP ($\beta = 0.101$, $t = 3.336$, $p < .001$). The overall effect of EL on OP was also significant ($\beta = 0.323$, $t = 5.212$, $p < .001$), suggesting that POP played a partial mediating role in this relationship. Consequently, Hypothesis 6 received support. In contrast, the indirect influence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on the link between EL and OP was positive yet non-significant ($\beta = 0.061$, $t = 1.152$, $p = .125$), indicating an absence of mediation. Therefore, Hypothesis 7 was not supported.

Table 5. Mediation analysis

Total effect	β	t	p	Specific indirect effect	β	t	p	Result
	0.323	5.212	.001	H6: EL \rightarrow POP \rightarrow OP	0.101	3.336	.000	Supported
				H7: EL \rightarrow CSR \rightarrow OP	0.061	1.152	.125	Not supported

Note. Relationships are significant at $p < .05$, β = standardized beta coefficient.

The explanatory power of the model was assessed through the coefficient of determination (R^2). Findings indicated that ethical leadership (EL), corporate social responsibility (CSR), and perceived organizational politics (POP) collectively accounted for 68.3% of the variance in organizational performance (OP). Additionally, EL explained 59.6% of the variance in CSR and 38.0% of the variance in POP (**Table 6**). Predictive relevance of the constructs was further evaluated using Stone-Geisser's Q^2 statistic. As presented in **Table 6**, the Q^2 values for the endogenous variables CSR, POP, and OP all exceeded zero, confirming that the structural model possesses adequate predictive relevance.

Table 6. Model's predictive power

	Q^2	R^2
CSR	0.593	0.596
OP	0.646	0.683
POP	0.371	0.380

Moderation analysis

The research explored whether OSC acts as a moderator in the relationship between ethical leadership (EL) and organizational performance (OP). Initially, without considering the interaction term (OSC \times EL), the model explained 58% of the variance in OP ($R^2 = 0.580$), indicating that EL, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and perceived organizational politics (POP) collectively account for a substantial portion of OP fluctuations. When the interaction term was included, the explanatory power of the model rose to 68.3%, representing an additional 10.3% of variance accounted for by the inclusion of moderation. However, the analysis of the moderation effect revealed that OSC exerted a negative but statistically non-significant influence on the EL–OP relationship ($\beta = -0.019$, $t = 0.444$, $p = .329$), leading to the rejection of hypothesis H8. This suggests that changes in OSC do not meaningfully alter the impact of EL on OP (**Table 7**). The effect size for this moderating influence was $f^2 = 0.001$. Based on Cohen's [73] thresholds—0.02 for small, 0.15 for medium, and 0.35 for large effects—the moderation effect can be considered negligible and statistically insignificant.

Table 7. Moderation analysis

Hypothesis	β	t	p	Result
OSC \times EL \rightarrow OP	-0.019	0.444	.329	Not supported

Discussion

This study explored how ethical leadership (EL) influences organizational performance (OP) in public sector institutions, with perceived organizational politics (POP) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) acting as underlying mechanisms. Additionally, the research examined whether OSC moderates the relationship between EL and OP. Consistent with expectations, the findings indicate that EL exerts a positive and significant impact on OP in public sector organizations. These results are consistent with prior research [13, 17, 18, 29, 30, 33], and align with Kamalakannan's [38] observation that the dimensions of ethical leadership positively and significantly enhance organizational performance.

The findings provide support for both social learning theory [26] and social exchange theory [27]. From the social learning perspective, employees emulate and are inspired by ethical leadership behaviors, leading to improved performance outcomes. Social exchange theory suggests that moral and ethical leadership fosters a climate of fairness, reciprocity, and positive interpersonal interactions, motivating employees to perform at their highest potential, which in turn elevates overall organizational performance.

The implications of these results are particularly relevant for public sector institutions, where leaders' decisions directly affect the welfare of citizens and communities. Leaders who model ethical behavior can earn employees' trust and respect, fostering an environment conducive to enhanced organizational performance. In contexts like Somalia, EL may contribute to creating transparent, accountable, and ethical organizational cultures, ultimately improving decision-making, employee satisfaction and productivity, public trust, service delivery, and reducing corruption. By prioritizing ethical governance, equitable resource allocation, employee empowerment, citizen-centered services, and anti-corruption measures, public sector EL can play a pivotal role in overcoming systemic challenges.

In addition, consistent with earlier studies [17, 33, 42, 44], the study found a significant positive relationship between EL and CSR. This indicates that ethical leadership is essential for public sector institutions aiming to advance corporate social responsibility. In Somali public organizations, fostering EL can contribute to a more responsible and transparent society. Ethical leaders can integrate moral principles into decision-making, encourage awareness of the social and environmental consequences of organizational actions, and promote employee engagement in CSR initiatives. By role modeling ethical behavior and establishing clear guidelines, EL nurtures a work culture that prioritizes social responsibility and supports positive societal outcomes.

Furthermore, the research indicated that ethical leadership (EL) exerted a positive and significant influence on perceptions of organizational politics (POP). This outcome aligns with the conclusions drawn by Jamshed *et al.* [55], who identified a positive and significant association between EL and POP. The result implies that EL can foster a healthier and more efficient workplace by mitigating the negative consequences of political behaviors within the organization. On the other hand, these results conflict with more recent claims that documented a negative and significant link between EL and POP [52, 53, 56]. Given that the evidence both supports and challenges prior investigations, additional studies are essential to further clarify the connection between ethical leadership and perceived organizational politics.

In addition, the investigation demonstrated that POP directly and significantly positively affected organizational performance (OP). This finding highlights the importance of shaping employees' views of politics in the workplace to enhance overall performance. When politics are perceived positively, it may promote greater employee engagement and improved communication, thereby boosting performance outcomes. However, this contradicts a recent earlier study by Cheong & Kim [51], which found that perceived organizational politics had a negative and significant impact on organizational performance. As a result, this discrepancy underscores the necessity for further exploration into the nuanced nature of perceived organizational politics and its effects on performance, taking into account contextual factors and the specific forms of politics involved.

Lastly, the analysis showed that corporate social responsibility (CSR) had a positive yet insignificant effect on OP. This aligns with an earlier study by Mehralian *et al.* [49], which similarly reported a positive but insignificant relationship between CSR and OP. In contrast, numerous contemporary studies have found a positive and significant connection between CSR and OP [33, 48]. The outcome suggests that although CSR initiatives may contribute favorably to performance, they might not serve as a primary driver. Further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the link between CSR and organizational performance and to identify the circumstances under which CSR can exert a substantial influence.

The research also explored the mediating effects of POP and CSR in the link between EL and OP. Regarding POP, the results (**Table 5**) indicated partial mediation in the association between EL and OP. Although there is limited research on EL's impact in public sector settings, studies in the private sector have shown that POP mediates the relationship between EL and various organizational outcomes [56]. Similarly, Jamshed *et al.* [55] found that perceived organizational politics partially mediated the connection between ethical leadership and performance in a significant manner.

Moreover, the study evaluated CSR's mediating role in the EL–OP relationship. The results (**Table 5**) demonstrated that CSR did not mediate this association. This finding diverges from previous research that supported partial mediation by CSR in the link between EL and OP [33, 45]. Since the present research was carried out in public sector organizations, its results may vary from those obtained in private sector contexts. Therefore, this outcome calls for additional investigations to establish more definitive conclusions about CSR's mediating function in the relationship between EL and OP.

Finally, the investigation examined the moderating influence of organizational social capital (OSC) on the EL–OP relationship. The findings (**Table 7**) revealed a negative but insignificant moderating effect of OSC. Although there is scarce existing research specifically on OSC's moderating role in the EL–OP linkage, a recent study indicated that social capital did not moderate the association between CSR and performance.

Conclusion

In summary, the present research highlights the beneficial effects of ethical leadership on organizational performance within Somalia's public sector institutions. It further confirms the existence of favorable connections among ethical leadership, corporate social responsibility, and perceptions of organizational politics. The results show that perceived organizational politics serves as a partial mediator in the association between ethical leadership and organizational performance in the public

sector. Notably, corporate social responsibility did not exhibit a direct mediating effect in the link between ethical leadership and performance. Additionally, organizational social capital displayed a non-significant moderating influence on the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational performance, pointing to the need for additional investigations to explore its role within the unique setting of Somalia's public sector. These outcomes enrich social learning theory [26] by demonstrating how ethical leadership cultivates a workplace where staff members observe and adopt ethical conduct, thereby strengthening corporate social responsibility activities and shaping organizational politics, which in turn elevate overall performance. Moreover, the study reinforces social exchange theory [27] through evidence of the advantageous impacts of ethical leadership and organizational politics on performance, reflecting mutual exchanges involving trust, equity, and influence in the organizational context.

Theoretical and practical implications

This research yields numerous theoretical and practical contributions. From a theoretical perspective, it expands the existing literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR), ethical leadership (EL), perceived organizational politics (POP), organizational social capital (OSC), and organizational performance (OP) within public sector entities. Importantly, this investigation stands out from previous works that primarily examined the private sector. Ethical leadership in the public domain transcends profit motives; leaders here emphasize societal welfare and manage intricate political dynamics, requiring heightened attention to transparency, trust cultivation, and public involvement to support ethical choices and efficient public services. The study offers value to scholars, researchers, philanthropists, public sector managers, service-oriented organizations, practitioners, and policymakers concerned with enhancing organizational performance. Its insights can function as a guide for civil servants, government officials, philanthropists, and leaders of service-based entities in Somalia aiming to boost performance levels. By embracing ethical leadership principles and emphasizing CSR efforts alongside organizational social capital, they can attain optimal performance outcomes in the public sector. Future researchers may reference these results, and public sector scholars and professionals can leverage them to direct their initiatives toward CSR and ethical leadership more effectively. Overall, the work advances knowledge on the application of CSR, ethical leadership, perceived organizational politics, and organizational social capital in public institutions, shedding light on the understudied impact of ethical leadership in this domain.

Furthermore, academics can draw on these results to develop innovative concepts and models related to EL, CSR, POP, OSC, and public sector OP. Policymakers may apply the insights to refine policies and initiatives that encourage ethical leadership and advance corporate social responsibility in the public sector, thereby supporting improved performance. Managers, in turn, can use the outcomes to refine their own ethical leadership behaviors and implement CSR programs that enhance organizational results. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this represents the pioneering effort to investigate the complex interplay between EL and public sector OP in Somalia, incorporating the mediating mechanisms of POP and CSR, along with the moderating influence of OSC, all within an integrated theoretical model. Distinguishing itself from earlier studies that largely centered on private sector contexts, this research makes a substantial addition to the literature by focusing on the public sector environment.

Limitations and directions for future research

Although this study offers notable theoretical and practical value while advancing the understanding of EL, CSR, POP, OSC, and OP, it is not without certain constraints. Firstly, while numerous leadership approaches exist, the analysis concentrated solely on the ethical variant. Subsequent investigations could explore alternative styles, including transformational, Islamic, or responsible leadership. Secondly, the sample comprised managers and staff from public sector organizations; replicating the study with private sector participants would be advantageous. The third constraint involves the exclusive use of quantitative methods. Given that this is a pioneering effort in Somalia, upcoming research might adopt mixed-methods or qualitative approaches to obtain richer insights into ethical leadership and performance in public sector settings. Building on the initial empirical support provided here for the underexplored mediating functions of CSR and perceived organizational politics, as well as the moderating effect of organizational social capital, it is recommended that future work employ mixed-methods designs and re-examine the proposed model to establish causal links among variables and corroborate the current results.

Fourthly, the hypothesized model was evaluated using a sample of approximately 292 managers and employees from Somalia's public sector institutions. This focus on a single sector and country raises concerns about the broader applicability of the findings to other industries or nations. Future inquiries could incorporate cross-sectoral and cross-national samples to deepen comprehension of the identified relationships, broaden the relevance of the outcomes, and formulate more robust practical recommendations. In conclusion, we recognize that the mediating roles of CSR and perceived organizational politics, together with the moderating role of organizational social capital, may not represent the sole mechanisms through which ethical leadership influences public sector organizational performance.

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