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Legal Accountability in Algorithmic Governance and Public Decision-Making in Administrative Law

Ritika Sharma
Delhi School of Public Policy and Governance, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India
Corresponding author: ritika.sharma@dsppgdu.in

Abstract

The increasing use of algorithmic systems in public administration has reshaped how administrative decisions are produced, justified, and reviewed. At the same time, legal accountability frameworks have not developed at a comparable pace, creating tension between automated decision support and the principles of lawful public administration. This study examines how legal accountability should be reconstructed when public decision-making is shaped by opaque or semi-autonomous algorithmic systems. The research employs a qualitative normative design based on conceptual analysis of legal accountability, administrative law, and governance. It uses close reading and analytical categorization to examine the changing relation between responsibility, reviewability, justification, and system-mediated decision processes. The analysis is organized around the legal dimensions of transparency, contestability, and institutional oversight as the core structure of algorithmic accountability. This approach is appropriate because the study addresses a legal-conceptual problem concerning the transformation of public authority rather than a measurable behavioral outcome. The discussion indicates that conventional accountability models are inadequate because they rely on human-centered assumptions that become unstable under distributed and opaque algorithmic governance. Legal accountability in algorithmic governance needs to be understood as a composite obligation that reconnects public authority with intelligible explanation, effective challenge, and institutional control. The study contributes to the field by offering an integrated framework that links administrative law, legal theory, and governance analysis in the evaluation of algorithmically shaped public decision-making.

Keyword

algorithmic governance; legal accountability; public administration; administrative law

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of algorithmic systems in public administration has changed how public decisions are produced, processed, and justified (Gules-Guctas, 2025). Government institutions now use data-driven systems to assist classification, prediction, prioritization, and evaluation in many administrative settings. This development has introduced a new layer of decision-making that operates through technical procedures rather than direct human reasoning alone (Brauneis & Goodman, 2017). As algorithmic tools become more embedded in administrative routines, they also influence the structure of authority within public institutions. Public decision-making is therefore no longer shaped only by legal rules, bureaucratic discretion, and institutional procedures. It is increasingly shaped by computational systems that mediate how facts are interpreted and how outcomes are generated. This transformation creates an important context for examining how law should respond to algorithmic governance (Langer, 2024).

The growing dependence on algorithmic systems raises a serious problem for legal accountability in public administration. Administrative law traditionally assumes that

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public decisions can be traced to identifiable actors who can justify and defend their actions. That assumption becomes difficult to maintain when decisions are shaped by opaque or semi-autonomous systems (Cohen & Suzor, 2024). In practice, affected individuals may face decisions that are difficult to understand, challenge, or review through ordinary legal mechanisms. This problem is not abstract because algorithmic decision systems can directly affect access to public services, administrative status, and governmental treatment. When legal responsibility becomes blurred, the legitimacy of public authority may also become uncertain. For this reason, the issue of accountability in algorithmic governance has strong real-world relevance.

Existing scholarship has already recognized that algorithmic governance raises normative and institutional concerns. Many discussions focus on technical ethics, especially issues of fairness, bias, transparency, and explainability (Rieder & Hofmann, 2020). Other discussions focus on regulatory compliance by examining whether algorithmic systems meet formal procedural or policy standards (Enarsson et al., 2021). These contributions are valuable because they show that algorithmic systems can create risks for rights, equality, and due process. They also demonstrate that governance by algorithms is not merely a technical matter but a public and legal concern. In addition, earlier work has made clear that automation can affect the role of human judgment within administrative decision-making. What is already known, then, is that algorithmic systems reshape important dimensions of public governance.

Even so, important aspects of the problem remain insufficiently clarified at the legal-conceptual level. Existing debates often treat ethics, compliance, and accountability as separate questions rather than as parts of a unified legal problem. As a result, there is still limited understanding of how law should reconstruct responsibility when decision-making is distributed across humans, institutions, and systems. There is also insufficient clarity on how legal review should function when evidence is generated through opaque computational processes (Feng & Chandra, 2025). The same uncertainty applies to justification, because algorithmically shaped decisions may not produce reasons in forms that law can easily assess. What remains unknown is not simply whether algorithms are risky, but how legal accountability itself must be reformulated under algorithmic conditions. This unresolved question creates a major conceptual weakness in current discussions of public decision-making.

The central research gap emerges from the disconnect between technological transformation and legal reconstruction. On one side, public administration is increasingly shaped by algorithmic systems that alter responsibility, discretion, and evidence production. On the other side, legal analysis has not fully developed a coherent framework for understanding accountability under these changed conditions (Matteucci, 2021). Fragmented approaches make it difficult to explain how transparency, reviewability, and justification should operate together in algorithmic governance. A narrow focus on ethics does not fully answer legal questions about responsibility and institutional control. A narrow focus on compliance also does not fully address how public authority remains legitimate when automation shapes decisions. The gap, therefore, lies in the absence of an integrated legal account of algorithmic accountability within transformed public decision-making frameworks.

Filling this gap is important because accountability is a foundational requirement of lawful public administration. Without a coherent legal framework, algorithmic governance may weaken the ability of institutions to justify decisions in a legally recognizable way. It may also reduce the capacity of individuals to contest decisions that affect their rights or interests. A failure to address this issue risks normalizing decision structures in which authority is exercised without clear responsibility. That condition would undermine the principles that traditionally distinguish lawful administration from

arbitrary power. Strengthening the legal understanding of accountability is therefore necessary not only for theory but also for the protection of institutional legitimacy. The need to fill the gap is justified by the increasing role of algorithms in shaping administrative authority itself (Engelmann, 2023).

This article is guided by several interconnected research questions that arise from the gap identified above. First, how does algorithmic governance challenge conventional legal accountability in public administration. Second, why are traditional frameworks of responsibility, reviewability, and justification inadequate when administrative decisions are shaped by algorithmic systems. Third, how should algorithmic accountability be understood as a legal obligation rather than as a purely technical or ethical concern. Fourth, what elements are necessary for reconstructing accountability within transformed public decision-making frameworks. These questions direct attention to the legal meaning of transparency, contestability, and institutional oversight. They also focus the discussion on how law can respond to distributed and opaque forms of decision production (Kemper & Kolkman, 2018).

The urgency of this inquiry lies in the speed with which algorithmic systems are being integrated into public governance without equally developed legal accountability structures. As automation becomes more normalized, the risks associated with unclear responsibility and weak review mechanisms may also become more deeply embedded. This makes the issue urgent not because algorithmic governance is entirely new, but because legal adaptation has remained conceptually incomplete. The article contributes by bringing together administrative law, legal theory, and governance analysis into a single framework of accountability. It clarifies that the problem is not only whether algorithms can be regulated, but how public decision-making itself is being transformed by them. By focusing on legal accountability as a composite obligation grounded in transparency, contestability, and institutional oversight, the discussion provides a more coherent basis for understanding algorithmic governance. This contribution helps readers see why the future of public decision-making depends on a stronger legal response to automation.

2. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using a normative-conceptual analytical framework to examine legal accountability in algorithmic governance. A qualitative approach was selected because the research problem concerns the meaning, structure, and transformation of legal responsibility rather than the measurement of behavioral frequency or causal effect. The study focused on how accountability is conceptually reconstructed when administrative decisions are shaped by algorithmic systems that complicate responsibility, reviewability, and justification (Elo et al., 2014). The analytical framework combined administrative law, legal theory, and governance analysis to assess how legal obligations are challenged by opaque and distributed forms of public decision-making. This design was appropriate because the study sought to clarify concepts, identify internal tensions in existing accountability models, and develop a coherent understanding of legal obligations under algorithmic conditions. A quantitative design would not adequately capture the normative and interpretive dimensions of the problem, especially where the central issue lies in the legal meaning of transparency, contestability, and institutional oversight. For these reasons, a qualitative normative design provided the most suitable foundation for addressing the study's theoretical and institutional concerns (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

The data source consisted of conceptual and textual materials derived from the article's central arguments on algorithmic governance, legal accountability, and public decision-making. Data collection was conducted through close reading, categorization of

core concepts, and systematic extraction of arguments related to responsibility, reviewability, justification, opacity, and distributed decision-making. The unit of analysis was the concept of legal accountability in algorithmically shaped public administration, while the broader analytical population consisted of legal and governance principles embedded in public decision-making frameworks (Cole, 2023). The primary analytical instrument was a concept matrix used to organize recurring themes and relations among key legal dimensions. The main analytical dimensions included transparency, contestability, institutional oversight, evidentiary opacity, distributed responsibility, and the shifting boundary between human discretion and automated judgment. Trustworthiness was strengthened through conceptual consistency, transparent analytical steps, and close alignment between the research questions, theoretical framework, and textual evidence used in the analysis. Because the study did not involve human participants, informed consent and confidentiality were not operational research requirements; however, ethical consideration was maintained through accurate representation of source arguments, careful handling of concepts, and avoidance of distortion or unsupported claims.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the study identified the basic assumptions of conventional legal accountability in public administration, particularly the expectation that public decisions are attributable to identifiable actors, supported by reviewable reasons, and open to institutional scrutiny. Second, the analysis examined how algorithmic governance unsettles these assumptions by introducing distributed forms of decision production, evidentiary opacity, and partial displacement of human judgment. Third, the study organized these tensions into an integrated legal framework by examining how transparency, contestability, and institutional oversight function as interconnected dimensions of accountability. This procedure enabled the research to move from descriptive mapping of conceptual problems to systematic reconstruction of the accountability framework without departing from the article's internal logic. Throughout the analysis, interpretations were limited to what could be supported by the conceptual structure of the study materials. In this way, the method remained theory-driven, text-based, and analytically focused on the legal transformation of public decision-making under algorithmic governance.

3. Result and Discussion

Text Algorithmic governance disrupts the legal architecture of public administration because it changes how authority is exercised without removing the public consequences of administrative action. Conventional accountability assumes that a decision can be traced to a legally recognized official who can explain the reasons, defend the evidentiary basis, and submit the decision to review. That model becomes unstable when administrative outputs are shaped by systems that classify, rank, predict, or recommend through processes that are not fully visible to affected persons or even to public officials themselves (Liu et al., 2019). The legal problem is therefore not limited to technological opacity. It concerns the weakening of the link between public power and answerable decision-making. This explains why conventional accountability frameworks are inadequate for algorithmic governance. They were designed for human-centered administration and are less capable of addressing distributed responsibility, mediated judgment, and system-dependent justification (Scassa, 2020).

The inadequacy of existing frameworks becomes more visible when algorithmic systems are treated as neutral instruments rather than as structuring elements of decision-making. In many administrative settings, officials may still issue the final decision, yet the substantive direction of that decision is heavily shaped by automated scoring, pattern recognition, or system-generated classifications. Formal human involvement does not

automatically preserve accountability when the operative reasoning has already been delegated to an opaque system. Legal review in such situations may remain procedurally available, but its substance is weakened because the basis of judgment is difficult to reconstruct in intelligible legal terms. This condition answers the question of how algorithmic governance challenges conventional legal accountability. It does so by preserving the appearance of administrative legality while altering the underlying conditions that make legality meaningful, especially attribution, explanation, and reviewability (Tsarouhas & Grigoriadis, 2025).

The legal significance of this transformation lies in the fragmentation of responsibility across multiple actors and institutional layers. Administrative officials, software developers, external vendors, data managers, and supervisory bodies may all participate in the production of a decision, yet none of them alone fully owns the final outcome. Such fragmentation complicates the legal identification of responsibility because administrative law normally requires a decision-maker who can be held answerable within an institutional chain of control (Oswald, 2018). In algorithmic governance, responsibility becomes dispersed without becoming irrelevant. The decision still affects legal status, access to benefits, or public treatment, but the path of accountability becomes more difficult to establish. This gap between public effect and legal attribution demonstrates that accountability cannot remain tied to the traditional image of an individually authored administrative act. A broader framework is required to capture how public authority is exercised through socio-technical arrangements.

What is already visible in current debates is an overreliance on partial responses. Ethical discourse has emphasized fairness, bias, and explainability, while regulatory approaches have often focused on compliance, documentation, and procedural safeguards. These responses are important, yet they do not fully answer the legal question of how responsibility should be reconstructed when decision-making authority is partially embedded in algorithmic systems (Panagopoulou, 2024). Ethics may identify what is normatively desirable, but legal accountability requires institutional duties, review structures, and standards of justification. Compliance may establish formal controls, but it does not necessarily secure meaningful contestation by affected persons or effective oversight by public institutions. The discussion therefore confirms the research gap identified in the introduction. The core weakness in existing scholarship is not the absence of concern, but the absence of an integrated legal framework that links transparency, contestability, and institutional oversight into a coherent structure of public accountability.

This article addresses that gap by conceptualizing algorithmic accountability as a composite legal obligation rather than as a single requirement. Transparency is necessary because affected individuals and reviewing institutions must be able to understand the basis on which a decision was shaped. Yet transparency alone is insufficient if the information disclosed is too technical, too abstract, or too inaccessible to support legal challenge (Ananny & Crawford, 2018). Contestability is equally necessary because legal accountability requires the possibility of questioning, correcting, and reviewing administrative action. Even so, contestability without institutional capacity becomes largely symbolic, particularly when public authorities lack the expertise or authority to interrogate system outputs. Institutional oversight completes this framework by ensuring that accountability is not reduced to private explanation or case-by-case complaint, but is embedded in public mechanisms of supervision, control, and correction. This responds directly to the question of how algorithmic accountability should be understood as a legal obligation. It is not an optional governance ideal, but a composite structure required to preserve lawful administration under automated conditions. The relationship among these dimensions can be clarified through the following analytical scheme.

Table 1. Composite Legal Accountability Framework

Analytical dimension	*Core legal function*	*Accountability risk when absent*	*Required institutional response*
Transparency	Makes the basis of administrative decision-making intelligible and reviewable	Decisions appear lawful but reasons remain inaccessible or untestable	Duty to provide understandable explanation, documentation, and traceability
Contestability	Enables affected persons to challenge, question, and seek correction of decisions	Rights of review become formal rather than effective	Accessible appeal procedures, reason-giving duties, and mechanisms for human reconsideration
Institutional oversight	Ensures supervision, control, and correction beyond individual complaints	Accountability becomes fragmented and privatized	Administrative supervision, audit authority, legal review standards, and oversight allocation
Responsibility attribution	Connects decisions to answerable actors within public authority	Diffusion of blame across officials, vendors, and systems	Clear designation of accountable authority despite distributed technical roles
Evidentiary reviewability	Allows legal institutions to assess the basis and logic of outcomes	Evidence cannot be meaningfully examined due to opacity or complexity	Standards for record-keeping, model disclosure, and reviewable evidentiary chains
Human discretion boundary	Preserves the role of public judgment in legally significant decisions	Automation displaces responsibility while retaining formal human signatures	Rules specifying when human judgment must intervene, override, or justify adoption of outputs

The framework in Table 1 demonstrates that algorithmic accountability cannot be secured by isolated reforms. A system may disclose technical information and still remain legally unaccountable if affected persons cannot use that information to challenge a decision. Likewise, a right to appeal is weak if the institution reviewing the case lacks access to the logic, evidentiary basis, or operational limits of the system that shaped the administrative outcome. Oversight mechanisms are also ineffective when responsibility is distributed in ways that allow each actor to disclaim legal ownership of the final decision. The table therefore shows that accountability is relational rather than additive. Each dimension supports the others, and failure in one dimension reduces the effectiveness of the entire framework. This is why the article rejects fragmented approaches and instead reconstructs accountability as a composite legal obligation grounded in interdependence between explanation, challenge, and supervision (Baykurt, 2022).

This reconstruction also clarifies how public decision-making frameworks are being transformed by algorithmic systems. The change does not merely concern the introduction of a new administrative tool. It alters the procedural logic through which decisions become legally intelligible. Traditional public administration assumes that reasons are generated within institutional deliberation and can later be articulated in legal review. Algorithmic systems often invert this structure by producing outputs through computational operations whose internal logic may be inaccessible, probabilistic, or dependent on large-scale data processing. The official may then justify the decision by referring to the system rather than by presenting a fully independent administrative rationale. Such a shift weakens justification because the decision is no longer grounded primarily in reasons that law can easily examine. It also weakens reviewability because

legal scrutiny depends on access to evidence and reasoning in forms recognizable to adjudicative and administrative institutions (Bateman, 2019).

The movement from human-centered reasoning to system-mediated judgment also changes the meaning of discretion. In conventional administration, discretion refers to a legally structured space in which officials interpret rules, weigh facts, and justify choices. Under algorithmic governance, discretion may be narrowed, displaced, or reconfigured through system design, risk thresholds, classification rules, and default recommendations. Human actors may retain formal authority while losing substantive control over how outcomes are generated. This explains why the boundary between human discretion and automated judgment has become a central legal issue. The problem is not whether machines replace officials in absolute terms, but whether institutional actors remain genuinely capable of understanding, questioning, and taking responsibility for the outputs they adopt (Binns, 2017). Legal accountability becomes fragile when human involvement is reduced to procedural endorsement. Public decision-making then appears administratively regular while becoming normatively thinner in terms of answerable judgment. The discussion also shows why evidentiary opacity has a particularly destabilizing effect on administrative legality. Public decisions are normally expected to rely on facts and reasons that can be examined by affected persons, supervisory institutions, and reviewing bodies. Algorithmic systems may generate outputs from data correlations, weighted variables, and internal processing logics that are difficult to translate into reviewable evidence. When this occurs, law faces a serious challenge because it cannot test the adequacy of justification without some intelligible evidentiary chain. The issue is not simply lack of disclosure in a technical sense. It is the loss of legal visibility over how the administrative outcome was shaped. This answers the research question concerning how public decision-making frameworks should be reformulated. They must be reformulated around standards that preserve evidentiary reviewability, not merely operational efficiency or formal record production (Saldanha et al., 2022).

A more coherent framework therefore requires public law to treat algorithmic systems as part of the administrative decision structure rather than as external technical support. Once they are recognized as internal to the exercise of public authority, legal duties can be redistributed more clearly. The accountable authority must remain identifiable even when decision production is distributed. Public institutions must be required to explain the operational role of algorithmic systems in terms that are intelligible to law and accessible to affected persons. Review mechanisms must be capable of examining not only the final administrative output but also the system-dependent process through which that output emerged. This recommendation follows directly from the gaps identified in the introduction. Without such reconstruction, legal accountability remains tied to an outdated model of administrative action and fails to respond to the actual architecture of algorithmic governance (Suksi, 2020). The same logic supports a more specific institutional recommendation. Transparency duties should be framed around legal intelligibility rather than mere technical disclosure, because information that cannot support challenge does not satisfy accountability in a meaningful sense. Contestability must be designed as an effective right to question and seek revision of algorithmically shaped decisions, including the possibility of substantive human reconsideration. Institutional oversight must be assigned clear authority to audit, review, and intervene where automated systems influence legally significant outcomes. These measures should not be treated as separate compliance items. They form a connected accountability infrastructure that allows administrative law to operate under new conditions of governance. Such a framework strengthens the legal position of affected

individuals while also protecting public institutions from the erosion of legitimacy that follows from opaque and weakly reviewable decision systems.

The broader contribution of this discussion is that it repositions algorithmic governance as a problem of legal order rather than as a peripheral issue of technological management. Administrative law cannot remain effective if it focuses only on who signs the final decision while ignoring how decision authority is substantively organized within socio-technical processes (Butler, 2025). The article therefore answers the research questions by showing that conventional accountability is inadequate, that algorithmic accountability must be conceptualized as a composite legal obligation, and that transformed public decision-making requires a reconstructed framework of responsibility, reviewability, and justification. It also addresses the identified research gaps by integrating administrative law, legal theory, and governance analysis into a more coherent account of accountability. This makes the discussion relevant not only to doctrinal debate but also to institutional reform. As algorithmic systems continue to shape public administration, the legal durability of public decision-making will depend on whether accountability is embedded within the design and supervision of governance itself.

4. Conclusion

The expansion of algorithmic governance has altered the legal foundations of public decision-making by introducing opaque, distributed, and system-mediated forms of administrative judgment. Conventional accountability frameworks are increasingly insufficient because they were developed for human-centered administrative action, where responsibility, justification, and reviewability could be more clearly located within identifiable institutional actors. The discussion established that algorithmically shaped decisions complicate these assumptions by diffusing responsibility across technical and administrative arrangements, weakening evidentiary visibility, and narrowing the practical space for meaningful legal review. Under these conditions, accountability can no longer be understood as a single procedural requirement. It must be reconstructed as a composite legal obligation grounded in transparency, contestability, and institutional oversight so that public authority remains legally answerable even when decision processes are shaped by automated systems.

The main contribution lies in advancing a more integrated legal-conceptual framework for understanding accountability in algorithmic public administration. By bringing administrative law, legal theory, and governance analysis into one analytical structure, the discussion clarifies that the core challenge is not only the presence of new technology, but the transformation of the institutional conditions through which legality is maintained. This perspective moves beyond fragmented debates that treat ethics, compliance, and accountability as separate domains, and instead positions algorithmic accountability within the internal architecture of lawful administration. The framework strengthens current scholarship by explaining how transparency, contestability, and oversight function as interdependent legal dimensions rather than isolated regulatory tools. In doing so, it provides a clearer basis for analyzing how public decision-making can remain legitimate when authority is increasingly exercised through socio-technical systems.

Future research needs to extend this framework into more specific administrative settings in order to examine how legal accountability operates across different forms of algorithmic decision-making. Greater attention is needed to the institutional design of review mechanisms, especially in situations where administrative officials rely heavily on automated outputs that are difficult to translate into legally intelligible reasons. Further inquiry is also necessary on the allocation of responsibility across public agencies, private

vendors, and technical infrastructures, particularly where authority is formally public but operationally distributed. Comparative legal studies would be valuable for assessing how different administrative systems respond to opacity, evidentiary complexity, and the changing boundary between human discretion and automated judgment. Deeper doctrinal and governance-oriented research in these areas would help refine the legal standards required to preserve accountability as algorithmic systems become more deeply embedded in public administration.

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