

Research Article

The Revolution of The Merit System Through Computer-Assisted Testing in The Recruitment of Village Officials in Kendal Regency

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Abstract, Bureaucratic reform at the village level is a crucial prerequisite for achieving professional, effective, and accountable village governance. One of the key pillars of this reform is the implementation of a merit system in the management of village human resources, particularly in the recruitment and appointment of village officials. In this context, the Computer-Assisted Test (CAT) has emerged as a policy innovation designed to enhance objectivity, transparency, and procedural fairness in the selection of village officials. This study aims to analyse the contribution of CAT implementation to strengthening the merit system and its impact on transforming village social conditions, especially in building public trust in village government. Quantitative data were collected through a survey of village residents and analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression in SPSS. Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis to elaborate further and explain the quantitative findings. The results indicate that transparency, objectivity, and procedural fairness in the selection process have positive and significant effects on public trust in village government, with procedural fairness emerging as the most influential variable. Qualitative findings confirm that public acceptance of selection outcomes is more strongly influenced by perceptions of fairness and openness in the process than by the selection results themselves. This study concludes that the implementation of CAT functions not only serves as a technical selection instrument but also as an institutional mechanism that helps transform village social relations from patronage-based practices toward merit-based village governance.

Keywords: Computer Assisted Test (CAT); Merit System; Selection Of Village Officials; SPSS; Village Bureaucratic Reform.

Received: January 11, 2026

Revised: January 29, 2026

Accepted: February 13, 2026

Published: February 28, 2026

Curr. Ver.: February 28, 2026



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1. INTRODUCTION

Bureaucratic reform is a strategic agenda in modern public administration aimed at achieving professional, effective, and accountable governance. One of the core pillars of bureaucratic reform is the implementation of a merit system. This human resource management principle prioritises qualifications, competencies, and performance as the primary basis for recruitment and appointment (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). The merit system is widely regarded as a crucial instrument for curbing patronage practices and the politicisation of bureaucracy, which remain persistent challenges at the local level.

Numerous studies in public administration demonstrate that merit-based systems enhance bureaucratic performance by promoting competency- and qualification-based recruitment while simultaneously reducing the influence of non-administrative interests within the bureaucracy (Kim et al., 2017; OECD, 2019). In this regard, the use of selection technologies such as the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) is viewed as a modern instrument aligned with meritocratic principles, as it minimises subjectivity, increases transparency, and limits intervention by political actors and local elites (Sedarmayanti, 2018; Dwiyanto, 2021).

However, most empirical studies on merit system implementation and CAT adoption have focused on national-level public administration or urban settings with relatively adequate infrastructure and human resource capacity (Kim et al., 2017; OECD, 2019). Research specifically examining the application of CAT in the recruitment of village government officials remains limited, despite Law Number 4 of 2016, which reflects the broader spirit of bureaucratic reform at the village level. Moreover, village governance exhibits social, political, and administrative characteristics that differ significantly from those of central and regional bureaucracies. This limitation highlights a clear research gap in village-level governance.

On the other hand, existing studies tend to position CAT as a technocratic solution assumed to be neutral and universally applicable. Public policy literature, however, emphasises that the effectiveness of policy instruments is highly contingent upon geographical context, local capacity, and the social structures in which policies are implemented (Hill & Hupe, 2014; Howlett, 2019). In village contexts characterised by limited access to technology and digital literacy, the implementation of CAT may paradoxically generate new forms of inequality if not accompanied by adequate supporting policies.

Within public administration and the sociology of bureaucracy, the recruitment of government officials is understood not merely as an administrative process but also as a social arena shaped by power relations, local norms, and community social structures (Weber, 1978; Pierre & Peters, 2020). In village governance, the traditional selection of village officials has often been embedded in kinship networks, patron–client relations, and the dominance of local elites wielding substantial social and political influence. Consequently, village official recruitment has functioned not solely as a competency-based process but also as a mechanism for reproducing local power structures (Dwiyanto, 2011; Hadiz, 2010).

Previous studies indicate that, before the adoption of technology-based selection systems, the recruitment of village officials often generated perceptions of injustice among villagers. Closed selection processes characterised by informal negotiations often led to latent conflicts, social fragmentation, and declining public trust in village governments (Antlöv, 2003; Manor, 2004). Nevertheless, most of these studies remain descriptive in nature, focusing on pre-reform social problems and failing to adequately examine how changes in recruitment mechanisms influence village social dynamics following policy intervention.

The implementation of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) rests on the normative assumption that technology can depersonalise recruitment processes, reduce the dominance of informal social relations, and promote objectivity and equality of opportunity (Sedarmayanti, 2018; Howlett, 2019). Theoretically, such changes in selection instruments should lead to transformations in village social conditions, including a decline in patronage practices, increased public trust in selection outcomes, and shifts in the social legitimacy of appointed village officials. However, empirical research that systematically compares village social conditions before and after CAT implementation remains scarce.

This gap is particularly salient in villages in Kendal Regency, which are characterised by heterogeneous social structures and strong communal ties. In village societies where social relations are highly personal and communal, the introduction of CAT may generate social ambivalence. While strengthening perceptions of procedural fairness, it may simultaneously provoke resistance from groups that lose access to informal sources of power. To date, few studies have examined how CAT-based selection mechanisms affect social relations, perceptions of justice, and public trust at the village level over time. This gap persists despite the existence of a strong legal framework, including Minister of Home Affairs Regulation Number 83 of 2015 on the Appointment and Dismissal of Village Officials and Kendal Regent Regulation Number 34 of 2023 amending Regent Regulation Number 51 on the Implementation of Kendal Regency Regional Regulation Number 2 concerning Procedures for the Appointment and Dismissal of Village Officials.

Accordingly, the research gap addressed by this study lies in the lack of empirical evidence regarding the extent to which the implementation of CAT not only alters recruitment procedures for village officials but also transforms village social conditions—particularly in shifting social relations from patronage-based arrangements toward merit-based institutional relations. This study seeks to fill this gap by analysing differences in village social conditions before and after the implementation of CAT in the selection of village officials.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

The Merit System in Public Administration

The merit system is a fundamental principle in modern public administration, emphasising that the management of public sector human resources should be based on qualifications, competencies, and performance rather than personal connections or political interests (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). This concept is rooted in Weber's (1978) notion of rational–legal bureaucracy, which places professionalism and impersonality at the core of public organisations. Within this framework, the merit system is regarded as an institutional mechanism to ensure bureaucratic neutrality and enhance governance effectiveness.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the implementation of a merit system contributes positively to improvements in bureaucratic performance, the quality of public services, and public trust in government institutions (Kim et al., 2017; OECD, 2019). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the merit system is highly contingent upon the social and institutional context in which it is applied. At the local level—particularly within village governance—the merit system often confronts entrenched social realities, including strong kinship ties, patronage networks, and informal local political dynamics (Dwiyanto, 2011; Hadiz, 2010).

Village Official Recruitment as a Social Arena

From the perspective of the sociology of bureaucracy, the recruitment of government officials is not merely an administrative process but also a social arena that reflects power distribution and social relations within society (Pierre & Peters, 2020). At the village level, traditional recruitment processes for village officials are often shaped by local norms, patron–client relationships, and the dominance of village elites with strong social legitimacy. As a result, the recruitment of village officials is particularly vulnerable to non-meritocratic practices and may reproduce existing power inequalities at the local level (Antlöv, 2003; Manor, 2004). Empirical studies indicate that closed recruitment mechanisms characterised by intensive social negotiation tend to generate perceptions of injustice, latent conflict, and declining public trust in village governments (Dwiyanto, 2011). Consequently, reforming the recruitment system for village officials has implications that extend beyond administrative efficiency, influencing broader social dynamics and the legitimacy of village governance.

Computer-Assisted Test (CAT) as a Policy Instrument

The Computer Assisted Test (CAT) is an information technology–based selection method designed to assess candidates' competencies in an objective, standardised, and transparent manner. From a public policy perspective, CAT can be understood as a policy instrument aimed at reducing subjectivity and limiting intervention by non-administrative actors in personnel selection processes (Howlett, 2019). The use of CAT in public sector recruitment has been widely adopted across various bureaucratic sectors as part of broader civil service human resource management reforms (Sedarmayanti, 2018).

However, public policy literature emphasises that policy instruments are neither neutral nor universally effective. The success of CAT is strongly influenced by infrastructural readiness, human resource capacity, and the social context in which the policy is implemented (Hill & Hupe, 2014). In the context of village governance, the implementation of CAT may generate a policy paradox. While enhancing objectivity in recruitment, it may also create new forms of social tension if not accompanied by adequate supporting policies.

Transformation of Village Social Conditions Before and After CAT Implementation

Theoretically, a shift in recruitment mechanisms from conventional systems to CAT-based selection is expected to transform village social conditions. Such transformations include a transition from patronage-based social relations toward merit-based institutional relations, increased public trust in recruitment outcomes, and the emergence of new forms of legitimacy for appointed village officials (Weber, 1978; Pierre & Peters, 2020).

Despite these theoretical expectations, empirical studies comparing village social conditions before and after the implementation of CAT remain limited, particularly in rural areas with strong and heterogeneous social structures, such as those found in Kendal Regency. Variations in geographical and social conditions across villages may moderate the impact of CAT on the merit system and village social dynamics. Therefore, this study conceptualises CAT not merely as a technical selection tool but as a key variable influencing social and institutional transformation within village governance.

3. CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

The Merit System

The merit system is a fundamental principle in public administration, emphasising that recruitment and appointment processes should be based on qualifications, competencies, and performance rather than personal relationships or political interests (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). Within the rational–legal bureaucratic framework, the merit system serves to ensure neutrality, professionalism, and accountability among public officials (Weber, 1978). In village governance, the merit system faces structural challenges due to the prevalence of kinship ties and local patronage networks. Consequently, strengthening the merit system at the village level requires selection instruments that limit intervention by non-administrative actors and reduce subjectivity in recruitment processes (Dwiyanto, 2011).

The Concept of Computer-Assisted Test (CAT) as a Policy Instrument

The Computer-Assisted Test (CAT) is conceptualised as a policy instrument used by governments to achieve specific policy objectives—namely, strengthening the merit system through objective and standardised personnel selection (Howlett, 2019). CAT operates as a technocratic mechanism that depersonalises recruitment processes by transferring assessment authority from individual actors to technology-based systems (Sedarmayanti, 2018). However, public policy literature emphasises that policy instruments are neither neutral nor universally effective. The effectiveness of CAT is highly dependent on institutional context, human resource capacity, and the social conditions in which the policy is implemented (Hill & Hupe, 2014). Therefore, the use of CAT in village official recruitment should be understood not merely as a technical tool but as a policy intervention with broader social implications.

The Concept of Procedural Justice

Procedural justice refers to individuals' perceptions of the fairness of decision-making processes, regardless of the outcomes produced (Tyler, 1990). In public administration, procedural justice plays a critical role in fostering institutional legitimacy and public acceptance of governmental decisions and policies (Pierre & Peters, 2020).

This study develops the concept that procedural justice functions as a key mediating variable linking CAT implementation to public trust. Selection processes that are transparent, consistent, and free from undue intervention are more likely to be accepted by village communities, even when selection outcomes do not favour particular individuals or groups. In this sense, procedural justice is the primary social mechanism by which the merit system becomes institutionalised.

The Concept of Public Trust and Government Legitimacy

Public trust in government is a crucial indicator of successful governance. Such trust emerges when citizens perceive governmental actions as fair, professional, and reliable (OECD, 2019). From the perspective of political sociology, governmental legitimacy derives not only from formal authority but also from social acceptance of decision-making processes and outcomes (Weber, 1978). In the context of village governance, public trust is strongly influenced by how village officials are recruited. This study advances the idea that implementing CAT, by strengthening procedural justice and the merit system, increases public trust and the legitimacy of appointed village officials.

Based on these four conceptual foundations, this study develops a framework in which CAT, as a policy instrument, strengthens the merit system by enhancing procedural justice, which in turn increases public trust and governmental legitimacy at the village level. By integrating perspectives from public administration and the sociology of bureaucracy, this framework enables a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of CAT implementation not only in administrative terms but also in social and institutional dimensions.

4. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods within a single research design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach was selected because the study aims not only to measure changes quantitatively but also to gain an in-depth understanding of the social dynamics that occurred before and after the implementation of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) in the recruitment of village officials.

The mixed-methods design adopted in this study is a sequential explanatory design, in which quantitative data collection and analysis are conducted first, followed by qualitative data

collection and analysis to explain and deepen the quantitative findings (Creswell, 2014). This design is particularly relevant for examining the transformation of village social conditions, especially changes in perceptions of procedural justice, public trust, and the legitimacy of village officials following the implementation of CAT.

The study was conducted in villages within Kendal Regency that have implemented CAT-based recruitment for village officials. The selection of research sites was based on the area's heterogeneity in both geographical and social characteristics, enabling a richer analysis of variations in the impacts of CAT implementation. Data were collected over a specific period following the implementation of CAT to enable comparison of village social conditions before and after the policy intervention.

Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire survey administered to village residents and participants in the village's official selection process. The survey instrument was designed to measure respondents' perceptions of procedural justice in village official recruitment, the level of transparency and objectivity in the selection process, public trust in village government, and the social legitimacy of appointed village officials. All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and comparative statistical techniques to examine differences in public perceptions before and after the implementation of CAT.

Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with key informants, including appointed village officials, members of selection committees, selection participants, community leaders, and local government officials. The interviews aimed to explore experiences, perceptions, and social responses to changes in the CAT-based recruitment mechanism. Quantitative data analysis used descriptive statistics and simple comparisons to identify changes in social perceptions. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the stages of data reduction, coding, categorisation, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Integration of quantitative and qualitative data occurred at the interpretation stage, where quantitative findings were explained and enriched by qualitative evidence. This integration process was intended to produce a holistic understanding of the impact of CAT implementation on the merit system and village social conditions. To ensure data validity, this study employed triangulation of methods and data sources. The reliability of quantitative data was assessed through instrument reliability testing, while the credibility of qualitative data was maintained through informant triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted to test the reliability of the research instruments and to identify patterns of relationships among the study variables related to the implementation of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) in the recruitment of village officials. The reliability analysis indicates that all research instruments demonstrate good to excellent internal consistency. The Selection Transparency variable had a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.82; Selection Objectivity, 0.85; Procedural Justice, 0.88; and Public Trust, 0.86. These values confirm that the measurement instruments used in this study are reliable and suitable for further statistical analysis.

Table 1. Instrument Reliability Test Results.

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Selection Transparency	5	0.82	Reliable
Selection Objectivity	5	0.85	Reliable
Procedural Justice	5	0.88	Reliable
Public Trust	5	0.86	Reliable

To examine the relationships among the main variables, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results show that all variables are positively and significantly correlated. Selection Transparency is positively correlated with Selection Objectivity ($r = 0.68$; $p < 0.01$) and Procedural Justice ($r = 0.71$; $p < 0.01$), indicating that greater openness in the selection process is associated with higher perceptions of objectivity and procedural fairness. Selection Objectivity also exhibits a strong positive correlation with Procedural Justice ($r = 0.74$; $p < 0.01$), suggesting that selection assessments perceived as free from intervention directly contribute to perceptions of procedural fairness. Furthermore, Procedural Justice shows the strongest correlation with Public Trust in Village Government ($r = 0.78$; $p < 0.01$). This

finding underscores that perceptions of fairness in the selection process constitute a key factor in building public trust. In addition, Selection Transparency and Selection Objectivity are each positively correlated with Public Trust, with correlation coefficients of $r = 0.65$ and $r = 0.69$, respectively ($p < 0.01$). These results indicate that openness of information and objectivity in the selection process play a significant role in enhancing legitimacy and public trust in village government following the implementation of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT).

Table 2. Correlations Among Research Variables.

Variable	Selection Transparenc y	Selection Objectivity	Procedural Justice	Public Trust
Selection Transparency	1	0.68**	0.71**	0.65**
Selection Objectivity	0.68**	1	0.74**	0.69**
Procedural Justice	0.71**	0.74**	1	0.78**
Public Trust	0.65**	0.69**	0.78**	1

**= Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level ($p < 0.01$); Pearson correlation coefficient; N = number of respondents

Qualitative Analysis Results

Qualitative analysis was conducted to deepen and explain the quantitative findings regarding the impact of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) on the recruitment of village officials. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with members of the selection committee, selection participants, appointed village officials, and community leaders in villages that have implemented CAT in Kendal Regency. The data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Changes in Village Official Recruitment Patterns

The qualitative findings indicate that the implementation of the Computer-Assisted Test (CAT) has led to substantial changes in village official recruitment patterns. Prior to the adoption of CAT, the selection process was widely perceived as being strongly influenced by kinship ties, personal relationships, and recommendations from local elites. Informants described the outcomes of the selection process as often being “predictable” even before the examination took place. This condition reflects the dominance of informal mechanisms and patronage practices within village bureaucracy, which undermined objectivity and weakened bureaucratic professionalism (Dwiyanto, 2011; Hadiz, 2010).

Following the implementation of CAT, most informants reported that opportunities for intervention by non-administrative actors became increasingly limited. Computer-based assessment was perceived as more objective because selection outcomes were determined by standardised test scores processed automatically by the system. This mechanism was considered effective in reducing manipulation and enhancing procedural certainty. These findings align with arguments that the use of technology in public sector recruitment functions as a tool for bureaucratic depersonalization and constrains the dominance of local political actors (Sedarmayanti, 2018; Howlett, 2019).

The shift in recruitment patterns signifies a transition from socially embedded selection processes to rule-based, competency-oriented mechanisms. From a public administration perspective, this transition constitutes a critical prerequisite for strengthening the merit system and institutionalising rational–legal bureaucracy at the local level (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Weber, 1978). Nevertheless, interview data also reveal initial resistance from segments of the local elite who had previously exercised considerable influence over recruitment outcomes. This resistance highlights that reforms in village official recruitment extend beyond technical adjustments and directly challenge entrenched local power structures (Antlöv, 2003; Manor, 2004).

Taken together, these qualitative findings affirm that the implementation of CAT does not merely alter recruitment procedures but also initiates broader transformations in village social and institutional relations. CAT functions as an institutional mechanism that promotes a gradual shift from patronage-based practices toward more professional, merit-based village governance. However, this transformation occurs incrementally and requires sustained policy consistency to achieve long-term consolidation.

Strengthening Perceptions of Objectivity and Procedural Justice

The qualitative findings confirm the quantitative results, indicating that implementing the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) has significantly strengthened perceptions of objectivity and procedural justice in the recruitment of village officials. Selection participants consistently

stated that the CAT system provides equal treatment for all candidates, as assessments are conducted automatically, in a standardised manner, and based on test scores. This mechanism is perceived as effectively eliminating opportunities for interference by selection committees or local elites in determining recruitment outcomes. Consequently, the selection process is viewed as more objective than previous conventional mechanisms, which were often influenced by personal relationships and social ties (Sedarmayanti, 2018; Howlett, 2019).

Community leaders further emphasised that although selection outcomes do not always satisfy all parties, CAT-based recruitment processes are considered “more acceptable” because they follow clear, transparent, and consistent rules. This perception suggests that recruitment legitimacy is shaped more by the fairness of the process than by the outcomes themselves. These findings are consistent with procedural justice theory, which posits that individuals are more likely to accept public decisions when the decision-making process is perceived as fair, transparent, and non-discriminatory (Tyler, 1990; Pierre & Peters, 2020).

In the context of village governance, the strengthening of procedural justice carries important social implications. Recruitment processes perceived as fair not only enhance acceptance of selection outcomes but also reduce the potential for social conflict and community fragmentation following the recruitment of village officials. These findings support the argument that procedural justice constitutes a key element in the institutionalisation of the merit system and the development of public trust in local government institutions (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; OECD, 2019).

Accordingly, the qualitative analysis demonstrates that CAT functions not merely as a technical selection instrument but also as an institutional mechanism that reinforces procedural justice. It is this strengthening of process fairness that ultimately bridges the implementation of CAT with enhanced social legitimacy and increased public trust in village government.

Social Dynamics and Local Resistance

Despite the positive changes introduced by the implementation of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) in village official recruitment, qualitative findings reveal social dynamics in including resistance from certain community groups—particularly local elites who previously held substantial influence over recruitment outcomes. This resistance manifested in various forms, including scepticism about the reliability of the CAT system, criticism of the technological infrastructure's readiness, and narratives questioning the compatibility of CAT with village social contexts. In some cases, resistance also took the form of efforts to maintain informal influence that had long underpinned local elite power in village recruitment processes.

This phenomenon is consistent with the existing literature, which indicates that bureaucratic reforms at the local level often trigger opposition from actors who lose access to power resources and social control mechanisms (Antlöv, 2003; Manor, 2004). From a political sociology perspective, shifting recruitment mechanisms from relationship-based patterns to rule-based systems represents not merely a technical adjustment but a challenge to deeply entrenched power structures within village society (Hadiz, 2010). Resistance to CAT can therefore be understood as part of a broader process of social negotiation accompanying institutional change.

Nevertheless, interview data indicate that such resistance tends to be temporary. As public understanding of CAT mechanisms increases and the policy is implemented consistently across successive recruitment periods, opposition gradually declines. Communities increasingly perceive CAT as providing procedural certainty and more equal opportunities for all candidates. These findings support the view that the legitimacy of public policies emerges through processes of social learning and implementation consistency, rather than solely through policy design (Howlett, 2019; Pierre & Peters, 2020). In this regard, local resistance following the implementation of CAT should not be interpreted as a policy failure, but rather as an integral part of the transition toward more meritocratic village governance. CAT catalyses changes in social relations, despite initial resistance, ultimately contributing to the institutionalisation of the merit system and strengthening public trust in village government.

Enhancing Public Trust and the Legitimacy of Village Government

Interview findings indicate that implementing the Computer-Assisted Test (CAT) has significantly increased public trust in village government. Village officials appointed through CAT-based recruitment are perceived as having greater social legitimacy because they are seen

as having passed a fair, objective, and transparent selection process. Community members believe that selection outcomes are no longer determined by personal connections or the influence of local elites, but rather by measurable competencies and abilities. This perception reinforces public confidence that village governments have carried out recruitment functions in a professional and accountable manner.

These findings are consistent with public administration literature emphasising that public trust in government is strongly shaped by perceptions of fairness and integrity in public decision-making processes (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; OECD, 2019). From a procedural justice perspective, institutional legitimacy derives not only from formal authority but also from social acceptance of the processes through which decisions are made (Tyler, 1990). The results of this study show that village communities tend to accept CAT-based recruitment outcomes even when personally favoured candidates are not selected, as long as the process is perceived as fair and consistent with established rules.

Beyond increasing trust, the implementation of CAT has also contributed to a reduction in social conflict related to village official recruitment. Informants reported that tensions and social divisions that previously emerged following selection processes have noticeably declined. This suggests that CAT functions not only as a technical recruitment tool but also as a mechanism for managing social conflict at the village level. By reducing opportunities for informal negotiation and suspicions of result manipulation, CAT contributes to greater social stability in the post-recruitment period.

In the context of village governance, these findings underscore that technology-based policy innovations, such as CAT, can serve as institutional instruments to strengthen local government legitimacy. Increased public trust and reduced social conflict indicate that CAT supports a transition toward more meritocratic and sustainable village governance (Weber, 1978; Pierre & Peters, 2020).

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was undertaken to develop a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of implementing the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) in the recruitment of village officials. Quantitative analysis revealed that selection transparency, selection objectivity, and procedural justice are positively and significantly associated with public trust in village government. Among these variables, procedural justice demonstrated the strongest correlation and effect, highlighting its role as a key determinant in the construction of social legitimacy following CAT implementation.

Qualitative findings provide contextual explanations for these statistical relationships. Interviews with selection committee members, candidates, and community leaders reveal that public acceptance of recruitment outcomes is shaped more by how selection processes are perceived as fair, open, and free from undue intervention than by the final results. This perception of procedural fairness strengthens public trust, thereby explaining the dominant role of procedural justice identified in the quantitative findings.

Furthermore, qualitative data show that CAT implementation has tangibly narrowed opportunities for patronage and local elite intervention, despite generating initial social resistance. Such resistance was temporary and gradually diminished as the system was applied consistently and as public understanding of CAT mechanisms increased. These insights enrich the quantitative findings by demonstrating that social change resulting from policy innovation occurs incrementally and through ongoing social processes.

Overall, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings confirms that CAT functions not only as a technical recruitment instrument but also as an institutional mechanism that transforms village social relations. By strengthening the merit system through enhanced procedural justice, CAT ultimately contributes to increased public trust and greater legitimacy of village government. This integration also highlights the analytical strength of the mixed-methods approach in explaining the relationship between policy innovation and social transformation at the village level.

Table 3. Integrated Findings from Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses.

Analytical Aspect	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings	Integrated Results
Selection Transparency	Selection transparency is positively and significantly correlated with	Informants reported that CAT-based selection processes are more open, information is easily	Procedural transparency enhances public acceptance of the selection process and strengthens the

Selection Objectivity	public trust ($r = 0.65$; $p < 0.01$). Selection objectivity shows a positive and significant relationship with public trust ($r = 0.69$; $p < 0.01$).	accessible, and results are clearly announced. Automated CAT assessments are perceived as minimising interference by selection committees and local elites.	legitimacy of outcomes. The technical objectivity of CAT narrows opportunities for patronage and increases public trust.
Procedural Justice	Procedural justice exhibits the strongest correlation with public trust ($r = 0.78$; $p < 0.01$).	Communities perceive the fairness of the process as more important than who is selected; fair procedures are more readily accepted.	Procedural justice emerges as the key factor linking CAT implementation to increased public trust and social legitimacy.
Public Trust	The mean value of public trust is categorised as high following the CAT implementation.	Interviews indicate increased social acceptance of appointed village officials and reduced selection-related conflict.	CAT implementation contributes to strengthened public trust and enhanced social stability at the village level.
Village Social Dynamics	Not directly measured statistically.	Initial resistance from local elites was identified but tended to decline as CAT implementation became consistent.	Social change is a process; CAT triggers a transition from patronage-based relations to merit-based institutional relations.

The integrated analysis presented in Table 3 demonstrates strong consistency between the statistical results and field-based qualitative findings. The positive and significant relationships between selection transparency, selection objectivity, and procedural justice with public trust are corroborated through triangulation of survey data, interviews, and observations. Qualitative findings further explain that public acceptance of recruitment outcomes is shaped more by perceptions of procedural fairness than by final selection results, reinforcing the dominant role of procedural justice identified in the quantitative analysis.

Moreover, data triangulation indicates that the implementation of CAT has effectively narrowed opportunities for patronage and local elite intervention, although it initially generated temporary resistance. Taken together, these findings suggest that implementing the Computer-Assisted Test (CAT) not only improves the procedural quality of village official recruitment but also transforms village social relations toward merit-based institutional mechanisms, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of village government.

DISCUSSION

Computer-Assisted Test (CAT) as an Instrument for Strengthening the Merit System in Village Official Recruitment

The implementation of the Computer-Assisted Test (CAT) in the recruitment of village officials reflects a fundamental shift from relationship-based recruitment patterns toward competency-based mechanisms. From a public administration perspective, the merit system requires that public-sector recruitment be grounded in qualifications, competencies, and performance rather than in personal ties or political interests (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). The findings of this study indicate that CAT functions as a policy instrument that translates merit system principles into concrete recruitment practices at the village level.

Empirically, the use of CAT narrows opportunities for subjectivity among selection committees and non-administrative actors through automated, standardised assessments. This finding aligns with the OECD (2019), which emphasises that technology-based recruitment systems enhance objectivity and consistency in public-sector personnel selection. In village contexts—where social relations are highly personal and communal—CAT operates as a

mechanism of bureaucratic depersonalization that reduces the dominance of patronage networks and non-meritocratic practices (Dwiyanto, 2011; Hadiz, 2010).

However, the merit system does not rely solely on technical instruments but also on social acceptance of recruitment mechanisms. Accordingly, CAT should not be understood merely as a selection tool, but as part of a broader process of institutionalising the merit system within village governance. The findings show that when CAT is implemented consistently and transparently, the merit system begins to be perceived as a new normative standard in village official recruitment. This supports the argument that strengthening the merit system requires both appropriate policy design and a supportive implementation context (Howlett, 2019).

Procedural Justice as the Primary Mechanism for Legitimacy Formation

One of the most significant findings of this study is the dominant role of procedural justice in shaping public trust in village government. Theoretically, procedural justice emphasises that public acceptance of decisions is more strongly influenced by perceptions of process fairness than by the outcomes of those decisions (Tyler, 1990). Quantitative results show that procedural justice has the strongest influence on public trust, while qualitative findings offer contextual explanations for this relationship.

Village communities tend to accept CAT-based recruitment outcomes even when personally preferred candidates are not selected, provided that the process is perceived as fair, transparent, and consistent with established rules. This indicates that recruitment legitimacy is derived not merely from the formal authority of village governments but also from the social acceptance of the procedures employed (Weber, 1978; Pierre & Peters, 2020). In this sense, procedural justice functions as a critical bridge between technocratic innovation and social legitimacy.

In the context of village bureaucratic reform, procedural justice is a key element in institutionalising the merit system and addressing perceptions of unfairness. Innovations such as CAT risk being perceived as new instruments that remain biased or insensitive to local conditions. The findings of this study reinforce the argument that the success of village-level recruitment reform depends heavily on how well selection processes foster a sense of fairness among community members (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; OECD, 2019).

Social Dynamics and Local Resistance in CAT Implementation

The implementation of CAT in village official recruitment is not without social dynamics. Qualitative analysis reveals resistance from segments of local elites who previously exercised substantial influence over recruitment processes. This resistance manifested in criticisms of technological readiness, doubts regarding system fairness, and attempts to preserve informal influence. Such dynamics are consistent with the literature suggesting that bureaucratic reform at the local level often provokes opposition from actors who lose access to power resources (Antlöv, 2003; Manor, 2004).

From a political sociology perspective, shifting recruitment mechanisms from patronage-based systems to rule-based processes constitutes a structural change that directly affects local power relations (Hadiz, 2010). Resistance to CAT should therefore be understood as part of a broader process of social negotiation accompanying institutional change, rather than as an indication of policy failure. The findings of this study show that such resistance is temporary and tends to diminish as public understanding increases and CAT implementation becomes more consistent. This supports the view that the legitimacy of public policy is constructed through processes of social learning and sustained implementation, rather than solely through sound policy design (Howlett, 2019; Pierre & Peters, 2020). Accordingly, local resistance dynamics serve as an indicator that CAT is functioning as a catalyst for the gradual transformation of village social relations.

Enhancing Public Trust and the Transformation of Village Governance

The final theme indicates that the implementation of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) has led to increased public trust and strengthened the legitimacy of village government. Public trust is a crucial indicator of successful governance and is formed when government actions are perceived as fair, professional, and accountable (OECD, 2019). The findings of this study demonstrate that village officials selected through CAT-based recruitment possess greater social legitimacy because they are regarded as having passed an objective and transparent selection process.

In addition, social conflicts related to village official recruitment have declined compared with the period before CAT implementation. This suggests that CAT functions not only as a technical recruitment instrument but also as a mechanism for managing social

conflict. By reducing suspicions of manipulation in selection outcomes, CAT contributes to post-recruitment social stability. From a Weberian perspective, this condition reflects the strengthening of rational–legal authority at the village government level (Weber, 1978).

In the context of villages in Kendal Regency, these findings indicate that village bureaucratic reform through CAT should be understood as a governance transformation that is both administrative and social in nature. CAT operates as an institutional mechanism that facilitates a shift from patronage-based practices toward more meritocratic and sustainable forms of village governance (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Howlett, 2019).

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study concludes that implementing the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) in the recruitment of village officials is an effective policy instrument for strengthening the merit system and enhancing public trust in village government. Quantitative findings indicate that selection transparency, selection objectivity, and procedural justice are positively and significantly associated with public trust, with procedural justice emerging as the most dominant factor. This underscores that public perceptions of fairness in the recruitment process are central to the legitimacy of selection outcomes.

Qualitative findings reinforce these results by demonstrating that social acceptance of appointed village officials is shaped not merely by selection outcomes but by the extent to which recruitment processes are perceived as fair, open, and free from local elite intervention. The implementation of CAT has been shown to narrow opportunities for patronage and non-meritocratic practices, although it initially generated temporary social resistance. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings through triangulation confirms that CAT functions not only as a technical recruitment tool but also as an institutional mechanism that transforms village social relations from patronage-based patterns toward merit-based governance. In the context of villages in Kendal Regency, CAT implementation contributes to increased bureaucratic professionalism, strengthened legitimacy of appointed village officials, and enhanced post-selection social stability. Accordingly, recruitment reform through CAT should be understood as a policy process that is both administrative and social in nature.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the implementation of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) in village official recruitment should be supported by strengthened institutional arrangements and regulatory frameworks that provide legal certainty and ensure consistent implementation across regions. Local governments should ensure that regulations governing CAT implementation are clear, standardised, and easily understood by all stakeholders in order to prevent delegitimising selection outcomes and reinforce public trust.

Furthermore, improving digital literacy and capacity among prospective village officials and community members is a critical prerequisite for ensuring substantive fairness, particularly in villages with limited access to technology. This is essential to prevent CAT implementation from generating new forms of inequality in the recruitment process. Strengthening transparency and public communication should also be pursued proactively and continuously through the open dissemination of information regarding selection mechanisms, stages, and results, thereby fostering stronger perceptions of procedural justice. In addition, independent oversight mechanisms and periodic evaluations are necessary to safeguard the integrity of the CAT system and to detect potential irregularities and social resistance at an early stage. Finally, future research is recommended to examine the long-term impacts of CAT implementation on the performance of village officials and the quality of public services, and to conduct cross-regional comparative studies to enhance the generalizability of findings and support the development of sustainable village bureaucratic reform policies.

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Regulations

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