

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

From Theory to Practice: A Literature Review of Theoretical Frameworks in Public Sector Sustainability Reporting

Natalia Arias | Miguel Marco-Fondevila  | Ana Yetano 

Accounting and Finance Department, University of Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain

Correspondence: Natalia Arias (nariasll@unizar.es)

Received: 17 February 2025 | **Revised:** 26 May 2025 | **Accepted:** 23 June 2025

Funding: This work was supported by the Spanish State Research Agency under project PID2020-113905GB-I00, MCIN/AEI/[10.13039/501100011033](https://doi.org/10.13039/501100011033) and the Gobierno de Aragón (Spain) under project S56-23R, S33_23R and the LMP159_21.

Keywords: accountability | and governance (ESG) | corporate sustainability reporting (CSR) | environmental | public sector | social | theoretical frameworks

ABSTRACT

This article reviews the evolution of corporate sustainability reporting (CSR) in the public sector, focusing on theoretical frameworks and their application in enhancing transparency and accountability. A systematic literature review of 126 journal articles was conducted to explore the theoretical underpinnings of CSR in the public sector, emphasizing economic, system-oriented, and multi-theoretical frameworks. The study identifies a shift from single-theory approaches to multi-theoretical models, reflecting the complexity of public sector sustainability reporting. Key trends include increased stakeholder engagement and the influence of international sustainability standards. This review provides a comprehensive analysis of CSR in the public sector, highlighting the theoretical evolution and suggesting future research directions to improve implementation and impact. The study is limited to published articles and may not capture all emerging practices. Further research could explore sector-specific reporting guidelines.

1 | Introduction

Environmental degradation, climate change, and social equity have become central to risk assessment about the pervasive impacts on humans and social-ecological systems (PCC 2022) and investment decisions in both the private and public sectors (Wen et al. 2021). As stated by the European Commission (2011), corporate sustainability reporting (CSR) implies that organizations integrate and communicate social, environmental, ethical, consumer, and human rights concerns into their business strategy and operations. This has led to a marked increase in published academic articles addressing CSR disclosure, reflecting the growing stakeholder interest in corporate accountability and transparency beyond purely financial aspects.

Nowadays, the existence of multiple actors focused on setting sustainability standards, such as Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG), International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB), Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TFCD) or Integrated Reporting (IR), shows the growing interest in consolidating the practice of CSR. We are living in a tsunami of regulatory efforts oriented towards the implementation of sustainability disclosure at the international level (Luque-Vílchez et al. 2023).

In this context, it is of particular interest to analyze published articles on the state of CSR in the public sector (PS). The budgetary constraints and the competitive and globalized operational environment place increasing pressure on

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Journal of Public Affairs* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

PS organizations to enhance their performance. In the PS, the imperative for improved performance is accentuated by the growing demands for transparency and accountability (Bryson et al. 2014), requiring robust theoretical frameworks to understand these dynamics. Moreover, the adoption of sustainability practices in the PS is not merely a response to external pressures but also a strategic approach to creating public value and fostering long-term organizational resilience (Moore 2013).

The theoretical approach to CSR has been studied from diverse perspectives, looking at the normative and/or instrumental focus, the economic and/or system-oriented theories, the drivers leading to the engagement to CSR (transparency, commitment to stakeholders, competitiveness, activity impacts, etc.), the exceptional impact of external events such as the 2008–2011 financial crisis or the COVID pandemic, and the different ethical/motivational approach of organizations, particularly when private and public organizations are compared. As of now, to the best of our knowledge, there is no clarity nor consensus regarding the theoretical framework that describes the Public SectorPS approach to CSR and accountability.

In order to gain insight into the evolution of theoretical approaches, this article provides a comprehensive review of the literature on CSR practices in the PS, from the earliest approaches to those that are more recent and emerging. The Research Question (RQ) of the paper points at identifying and examining the different theories employed to understand the manner in which the comprehension and assessment of social responsibility and CSR in the PS have been shaped over the years. To that end, a review of 126 journal articles pertaining to CSR in the PS has been conducted to explore contemporary developments and practices in the field, as well as to identify the most pertinent trends and research topics.

1.1 | Theoretical Streams on Corporate Sustainability Reporting

Given the continuous evolution since the first environmental report in 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), critical examination of CSR has become imperative, regarding methodological approaches and stakeholder influences (Lodhia et al. 2012; Gray et al. 2009; Guthrie et al. 2010). The theoretical foundation of CSR in the PS has been the subject of debate, presenting unique complexities, as these entities serve as regulators and practitioners (Zhang and Li 2021), leading to the emergence of diverse theoretical frameworks in the literature (Mattei et al. 2021; Ahunov 2023).

1.1.1 | Economic Theories

The field of economic theory includes different approaches: socio-economic, agency, and signalling theory. Although less specific and with a longer historical evolution, socio-economic ideas developed first, starting in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, with contributions from thinkers such as Karl Marx and Max Weber. This framework examines the interplay between economic and social factors in CSR implementation,

though its capacity to capture organizational complexity remains debated (Aguilera et al. 2007; C. M. Deegan 2019).

The concept of agency theory, formalised in the 1970s by Jensen and Meckling (1976) and Fama and Jensen (1983), addresses the relationship between owners and managers, with focus on conflicts of interest that can arise when agents do not act in the best interests of the principals (Fama 2009). CSR reduces information asymmetry between managers and stakeholders, promoting better corporate governance (Cui et al. 2018; Martínez-Ferrero et al. 2016; Cheng et al. 2014). In the PS, this dynamic is complicated by multiple accountability layers (Bovens 2007), where agents are accountable to political principals, to the broader public, and other stakeholders. This can create additional complexity in ensuring that actions are aligned with all parties' interests. Signalling theory postulates that the more informed party disseminates information about itself in a credible manner to the less informed party, thus reducing information asymmetry (Spence 1973).

1.1.2 | System-Oriented Theories

Among the system-oriented theories, institutional (and neo-institutional), legitimacy, and stakeholder theory (SHT) are the most used, considering the volume of literature they have generated. Institutional theory has a long history in social sciences, with contributions dating back to the twentieth century (Scott 2008). Foundations of institutional theory evolved in the 1970s and the 1980s with contributions from authors such as Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983), who introduced neo-institutional theory. These developments have been pivotal in exploring how organisations adopt practices, such as CSR, from institutional pressures (Greenwood et al. 2002).

Neo-institutional theory posits that organisations tend towards homogeneity to achieve legitimacy through three mechanisms of isomorphic change: normative, mimetic, and coercive (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). These institutional pressures can lead to 'window dressing', where organizations adopt practices for symbolic legitimacy rather than operational effectiveness (Fang et al. 2023). PS institutions navigate these pressures without substantial changes to internal processes (Christensen and Lægred 2011). By doing so, organizations project an image of modernity and efficiency to stakeholders, preserving internal practices (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Larrinaga (2007) explains why sustainability reporting becomes similar across organizations and countries, not only due to rational efficiency but also due to institutional pressures.

The complexity of institutional pressures is particularly evident in hybrid organizations, which operate at the intersection of private for-profit, third-sector, or public spheres (Grossi et al. 2017). These organizations face conflicting goals, complexities, and expanded responsibilities as they attempt to meet the demands of multiple constituents (Ahunov 2023). As Ahunov (2023) demonstrates, hybrid organizations incorporate competing institutional logics, which can result in tensions between market and non-market logics in their CSR practices. This is especially relevant in the public sector context, where organizations must

balance social and environmental responsibilities with economic performance demands.

Legitimacy theory suggests that organisations seek conformity to social norms and values to ensure their survival. This theory became popular in accounting and organisational management between the 1980s and the 1990s. Suchman (1995) researched the different types of legitimacy and how organisations could manage it. A distinction is made between pragmatic legitimacy, which rests on an organization's direct stakeholders, and moral legitimacy, which is based on actions, such as CSR, being 'the right thing to do' (Suchman 1995). CSR information could be seen as a means to pursue pragmatic legitimacy (Mahadeo et al. 2011).

The stakeholder theory focuses on how organizations manage their relationships with various stakeholders (Freeman 1984). This theory argues that entities must consider the needs of all their stakeholders to achieve long-term sustainable success (Harrison and Wicks 2013). Scholars have examined interactions between organizations and stakeholders, giving rise to the managerial branch of SHT (Freeman 1984; Donaldson and Preston 1995). This perspective acknowledges how organizations manage conflicting claims through stakeholder views in decision-making processes (Mitchell et al. 1997; Gibson 2000; Alam 2006).

For the managerial SHT, information disclosure is essential for stakeholder support, and organizations focus on the accountability needs of critical stakeholders (Ullmann 1985; Roberts 1992). This approach highlights the strategic nature of stakeholder engagement in CSR, suggesting differential treatment of stakeholders based on their importance to organizational objectives.

PS organizations operate under complex pressures from diverse stakeholders, institutional forces, and legitimacy concerns, making single theoretical frameworks insufficient for explaining their disclosure practices (Royo et al. 2019). Scholars suggest that an integrated theoretical approach, combining all theories, provides a more comprehensive understanding of PS CSR and organizational accountability (Fernando and Lawrence 2014). This integration is particularly valuable as the state and the societal norms shape stakeholder legitimacy and organizational behaviour (Santana 2012), while also illuminating the dynamic relationships between organizations and their social-institutional contexts. Such a combined theoretical framework not only enhances our understanding of CSR practices and stakeholder relationship management (C. M. Deegan 2019) but also reflects the evolving nature of PS CSR, which extends beyond mere accountability to encompass organizational change and the advancement of sustainable development goals (SDGs).

1.2 | Progress on CSR Standardization and Regulation Framework

Prior to the financial crisis, corporate sustainability and social responsibility within the PS did not receive the same level of attention. Organizations operated in an environment where non-financial disclosure requirements were less stringent

and mostly voluntary. Nevertheless, there were early efforts to promote responsible business practices through voluntary initiatives such as the early developments of the GRI, launched at the turn of the century (Luque-Vilchez et al. 2023). These initiatives represented the first steps towards integrating sustainability criteria into corporate management, although their uptake was limited and varied across regions and industries (Kolk 2010).

The 2008 financial crisis highlighted the need for greater transparency and accountability within the corporate sector (C. Deegan 2017). A number of international regulations and standards were introduced to improve the quality and comparability of CSR disclosures (Alvarez-Etxeberria et al. 2023). CSR standardization was not only a response to economic crises, but also to social and environmental movements demanding greater corporate responsibility (Larrinaga et al. 2021). In addition, the fight against climate change has been accelerating the adoption of sustainability standards (Eccles and Klimenko 2019). According to the data of the Media and Climate Change Observatory¹ (MecCCO), the number of news stories covering climate and global warming at the world level was 1720 in 2004, 3169 in 2014, and 11,151 in 2023. Climate received increased attention, setting priorities, and modifying structures at lower levels. However, the regulatory advancements typically lead to a rise in sustainability disclosures, and achieving comprehensive compliance is a challenge for many firms (Fallan and Fallan 2009; Negash and Lemma 2020; Esteban-Arrea and Garcia-Torea 2022).

1.3 | Mutual Influence Between the Public Sector and the CSR

Improving efficiency, accountability, and management is on the agenda of many public institutions as an expression of their concern about the appropriate use of taxes, which is both a matter of managerial rationality and a political issue (Torres et al. 2011). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2005) indicated two reasons for public institutions adopting the formalization of targets and performance measurement: (1) managing efficiency and effectiveness and improving decision making (internal use); and (2) improving transparency and accountability (external use). Since the New Public Management in the nineties, the use of additional measures to the financial one has been a core issue in PS management. This has led to a growing need for comprehensive performance measurement and reporting systems that capture both financial and non-financial information.

PS organizations recognize that financial reporting alone is insufficient to convey their full impact and value to society, requiring deeper studies on the role of social and environmental accounting (Steccolini 2019). The reasons for PS CSR are multifaceted: it enhances transparency and accountability, allowing citizens and stakeholders to better understand how public resources are used; it aids in decision-making processes, providing policymakers with a more holistic organizational view; and it helps in identifying areas for improvement and innovation in public service delivery (Ebrahim et al. 2014).

PS reporting occurs at various levels, ranging from individual agencies to local governments and national governments. At the agency level, organizations may focus on program outcomes and operational efficiency. Local governments often report on community impact and service delivery. At the national level, reporting encompasses broader societal outcomes and progress towards SDGs. Bebbington and Unerman (2018) observed that the SDGs represent the most significant international initiative addressing global sustainable development challenges. It is incumbent upon nations to integrate these objectives into national planning, develop specific targets, allocate resources, establish data collection systems, and submit voluntary national reviews to the UN High-Level Political Forum. The evolution of PS reporting has also led to the use of Integrated Reporting (IR) frameworks and CSR, which provide, in a single document, a picture of performance, risks, and future prospects, emphasizing long-term value creation and sustainable development (Guthrie et al. 2017; Manes-Rossi 2018).

The PS has played a pivotal role in the advancement of CSR through the enactment of specific transparency and sustainability laws, for instance, the European Union's Directives. These regulations reflect a growing expectation that public and private entities take responsibility for their environmental and social impacts. Legislation has significantly promoted CSR adoption in the PS, enhancing transparency and sustainability (Pereira and Santos 2021). The dual role creates a cycle of influence whereby CSR in the PS should become an example for the private sector, while innovations and best practices from the private sector are adopted by public entities. This synergy promotes a transparent and sustainable environment, benefiting society as a whole (Matten and Moon 2008). Hodge and Greve (2017) highlight that public-private partnerships (PPPs) serve as important platforms for knowledge exchange and collaborative corporate social responsibility initiatives. Cross-sector partnerships enhance both social impact and organizational learning in sustainability practices (Liu et al. 2024).

The interaction between the public and private sectors in the development of CSR is essential (Brammer et al. 2012). The implementation of sustainability standards by the PS not only enhances its own transparency but also establishes a framework that can guide companies in their reporting efforts.

2 | Methodology

This paper employs the systematic literature review method (Tranfield et al. 2003) to synthesize the evidence from extant literature on corporate social responsibility in the PS. The objective of the review is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic (Tranfield et al. 2003), with a particular focus on a detailed examination of the theories that have been applied in CSR articles. This may lead to the identification of the most frequently used theories, their impact on CSR, and potential future trends. The systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al. 2009).

2.1 | Information Sources

The databases of Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, the largest bibliometric databases, along with Google Scholar (Harzing and Alakangas 2016; Mauro et al. 2017; Paoloni et al. 2020; Ahunov 2023), have been chosen as the main sources for information. It is widely recognized that these two databases include the most relevant, impactful, and up-to-date peer-reviewed academic publications (Ferrer-Serrano et al. 2022).

2.2 | Search Strategy

The terminology used to refer to CSR tends to vary across articles. The reports that may include information of this

TABLE 1 | Types of sustainability reporting.

CSR type	Definition
Non-financial reporting	Reporting of environmental, social and governance information (Andrades Peña and Jorge 2019, 534) or reporting of "information on the narrative context of a business, intangible assets and intellectual capital, as well as environmental, social and governance issues" (GRI 2016)
Sustainability reporting	"A report published by a business about the economic, environmental and social impacts of its everyday activities" (GRI 2016)
CSR reporting	Reporting of information on CSR, which is "businesses' responsibility to act ethically and consider their impact on the community at large" (Montecalvo et al. 2018)
ESG reporting	Reporting that covers areas of sustainability, ethical behaviour and corporate governance (GRI 2016)
Integrated reporting	"A concise communication about how an organization's strategy, governance, performance and prospects, in the context of its external environment, lead to the creation of value over the short, medium and long term" (IIRC 2013)
SDG reporting	The disclosure of how companies develop actions to tackle SDGs (García-Meca and Martínez-Ferrero 2021)

Source: Ahunov (2023).

TABLE 2 | CSR keywords.

Main CSR keywords	
Social accounting	ESG disclosure
Environmental accounting	Environmental report
Non-financial report	SDG report
Non-financial disclosure	CSR accounting
Sustainability report	ESG accounting
Sustainability disclosure	Corporate social responsibility disclosure
CSR report	Social report
CSR disclosure	Social disclosure
Non-financial accounting	Environmental disclosure
Sustainability accounting	Integrated report
Corporate social responsibility accounting	Integrated thinking
Corporate social responsibility report	SDG disclosure
ESG report	

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

scope are as follows: 'sustainability reports', 'social reports', 'corporate social responsibility reports', 'social and community reports', and 'environmental reports' (Junior et al. 2014; Kolk 2010; Owen et al. 2001). Table 1 presents the most frequently used terminology identified by Ahunov (2023) that can be applied to all the PS.

A Boolean search was conducted using the author keywords, abstract words, and article title. Boolean logic is the simple concept of combining search terms using AND, OR, NOT (Boolean operators) to create a search strategy (Booth et al. 2016). Therefore, the search was carried out by combining each main CSR keyword with 'PS'. See the keywords selected in Tables 2 and 3.

2.3 | Selection Process and Data Extraction

To ensure the objective, we only included full-text articles in the review due to their standardized peer-review process, and to ensure systematic comparability, excluding book chapters or papers published in conference proceedings. The search was limited to articles written in English. To obtain a broad sample, we reviewed articles within a scope of 23 years, from 2000 to 2023. The year 2000 was selected as the starting point because it was the year when the GRI first launched its sustainability reporting guidelines². The data extraction was carried out in April 2024. See inclusion and exclusion criteria in Table 3.

Two quality criteria were applied to the journals in which the articles were published: we only selected articles published in journals indexed in quartiles 1 and 2 of the SCImago Journal Rank 2022³ in the area of 'Business, Management and Accounting'. Finally, duplicated articles were removed.

TABLE 3 | Criteria for inclusion and exclusion of articles.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Full-text articles. – Language: English. – Scope: 2000–2023 – Journals included in SCImago Journal Rank and indexed in quartiles 1 and 2 of the SCImago Journal Rank 2022 – Journals in the area of "Business, Management and Accounting" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Book chapters or papers published in conference proceedings. – Articles published in a language other than English. – Articles in non-indexed journals

Source: Author's own elaboration.

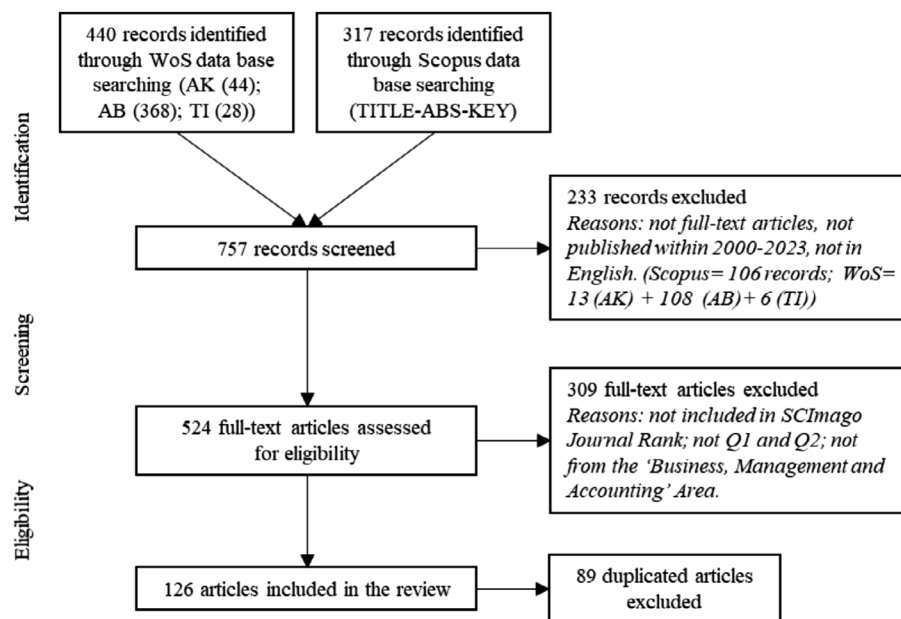


FIGURE 1 | PRISMA flowchart. *Source:* Author's own elaboration.

A total of 89 articles were excluded. Consequently, 126 articles were selected for review (refer to Figure 1).

2.4 | Data Analysis

Following a thorough examination of each article in the final selection of 126. For each article the extracted data encompasses the following: title, author(s), journal, theoretical framework, method of data collection, method of data analysis, main results, conclusions, and limitations. This systematic documentation ensures the consistency of the data collection process and facilitates further analysis.

The analysis process is carried out in two main phases. Firstly, a descriptive analysis of the literature is conducted. This analysis examines the distribution of articles per year from 2000 to 2023, the distribution between different journals, and the frequency of theoretical frameworks and research methods used in the articles. In addition, citation impact is analyzed using both total citations and citations per year (CPY) to account for temporal bias in citation metrics.

Secondly, a content analysis methodology is employed to analyze the selected articles. The content analysis focuses on the following three aspects: (1) the theoretical frameworks employed in each study, (2) the relationships between these frameworks and the research methodologies, and (3) the evolution of theoretical approaches over time.

The content analysis begins with the identification and categorization of the theories used in each article, dividing them into two main categories: economic theories and system-oriented theories (Mattei et al. 2021; Ahunov 2023), and examining the chronological distribution of theoretical frameworks.

Furthermore, the content analysis explores the relationship between the entities studied and the theories applied, as well as

the research methods employed. The objective is to show how different theoretical frameworks are used in different research contexts and types of organizations within the public sector.

Boolean logics used can be found in Supporting Information S1 and Python Code Analysis carried out in Supporting Information S2.

3 | Results

To facilitate the comprehension of the findings of this literature review, the arguments are organised into two sections. The first section focuses on the descriptive analysis of the literature. The second section presents the applied results found, with a content analysis of the 20 most cited articles per year: (1) defines the concept of CSR, (2) identifies the main concerns of the studies, and (3) detects the research gaps suggested for future research.

3.1 | Descriptive Analysis

Figure 2 illustrates the number of publications over time. By analysing the trend line, we observed that there has been a notable increase in the number of publications on CSR in the PS over recent years. During the initial period, from 2000 to 2011, an average of 3 articles per year were published. From 2012 to 2023, the average number of articles published per year rose significantly, reaching 9 articles per year. This increase is evident in 2021, when 15 articles were published, illustrating the growing academic interest. Manes-Rossi et al. (2020) and Ahunov (2023) present findings on the formats of Non-Financial Reporting (NFR) in PS and hybrid organisations.

This assessment has already been analyzed in other articles, which highlight a scarcity of research publications in the period from 2000 to 2008 (Alvarez-Etxeberria et al. 2023). From that year onward, the trend is reversed. Correa-Ruiz and

Moneva-Abadía (2011) indicated the great development of the area from the period of economic recession in 2008.

Figure 3 presents the number of articles published in each source journal; only journals from which more than two articles were obtained are included in the figure (a total of 38 journals were excluded: 25 journals published one article, and 13 journals published two articles). Most of the articles were published in *Public Money and Management* (12), which deals with public service finance, policy, and management. International journals not specialized in public accounting, such as *Meditari Accountancy Research* (9) and *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal* (6), also publish a large number of articles on the subject. This suggests that the PS CSR is of general interest, which can be a consequence of the importance of non-financial issues such as sustainability, social, environmental, and intangible issues in this sector (Manes-Rossi et al. 2020).

Reflecting this growing interest, the temporal distribution of articles included in this review shows a sustained increase in scientific production over the period studied (Figure 4). To analyze this

evolution in more detail, the timeline was segmented into three phases: an initial period (2000–2010), a development period (2011–2017), and a recent period (2018–2023). The number of articles published in each phase increased significantly (13, 26, and 40, respectively), confirming a clear upward trend in research activity.

Through keyword co-occurrence analysis and hierarchical clustering (detailed in Supporting Information S2), we identified three main thematic clusters that have evolved distinctly over time (see Figure 5):

- **Accountability and Performance Reporting** (42% of total publications): Initially dominant (61.5% during 2000–2010), this cluster has maintained its significance and evolved to incorporate more sophisticated performance metrics and reporting frameworks. The cluster's prominence peaked in the recent period (2018–2023), accounting for 87.5% of publications, indicating its consolidation as a core research theme.
- **Stakeholder Engagement and Transparency** (35% of total publications): This cluster shows the most dramatic evolution. From no representation in the initial period (2000–2010), it emerged tentatively during 2011–2017 (3.8%) and

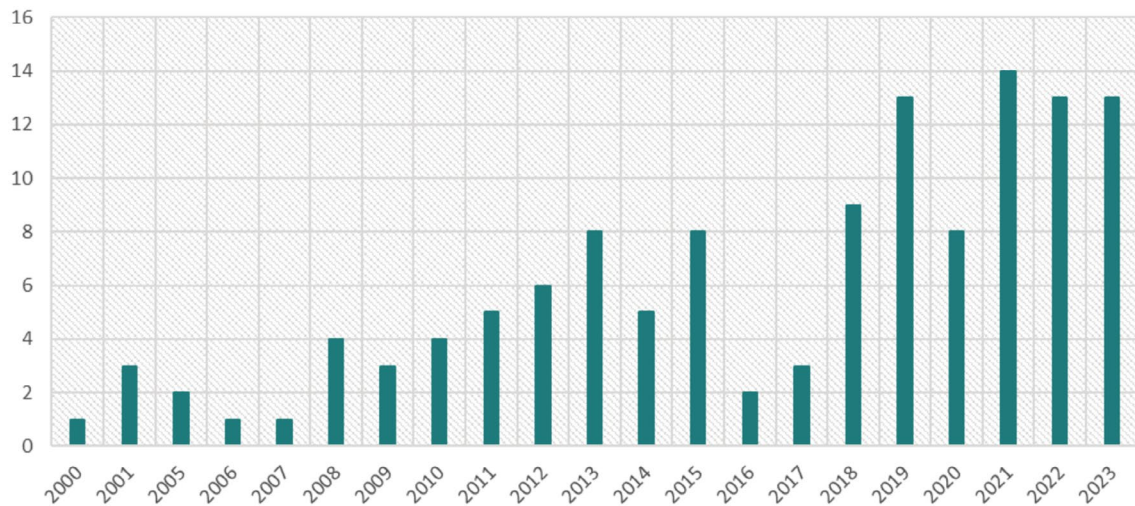


FIGURE 2 | Number of publications (1999–2023).



FIGURE 3 | Paper distribution according to the journal in which there are published.

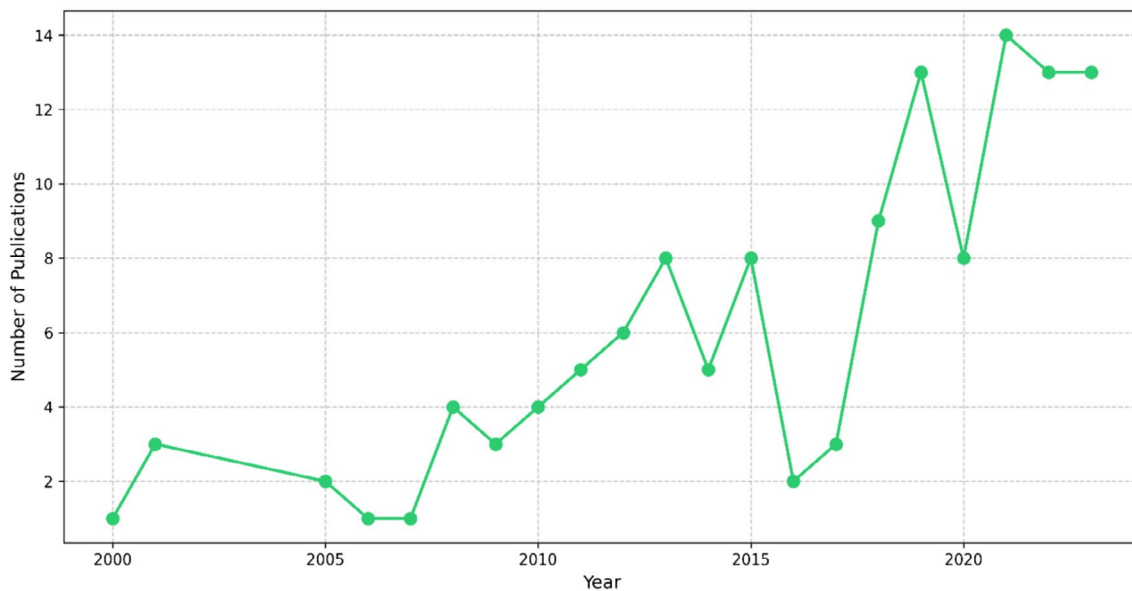


FIGURE 4 | Temporal evolution of research papers.

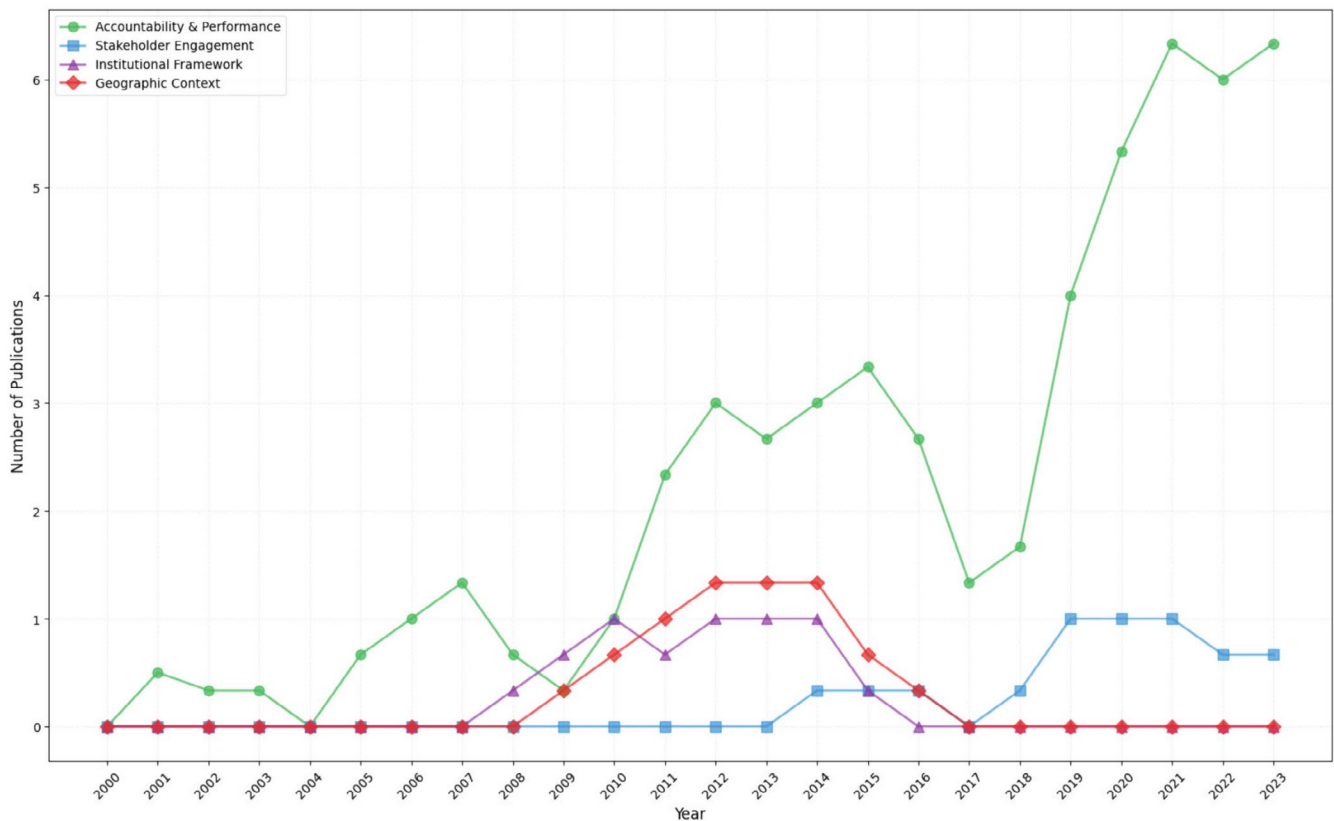


FIGURE 5 | Cluster analysis.

gained substantial momentum in 2018–2023 (12.5%), reflecting growing recognition of stakeholder importance in public sector reporting.

- Integrated Reporting and Sustainability (23% of total publications): This cluster evolved from early institutional framework studies (23.1% in 2000–2010) to more comprehensive approaches integrating multiple reporting dimensions.

Its relative share decreased over time as research focus shifted toward stakeholder engagement and accountability mechanisms.

The temporal evolution (Figure 4) and cluster analysis (Figure 5) reveal not just quantitative growth but significant qualitative transformation in research focus. We observe a clear shift from isolated approaches examining institutional

frameworks or geographical contexts (dominant in 2000–2010) toward integrated perspectives emphasizing accountability, performance measurement, and stakeholder engagement (2018–2023). This evolution suggests a maturing field where initial fragmented approaches are giving way to more holistic frameworks that recognize the interconnected nature of public sector reporting.

Notably, the analysis reveals a convergence trend where these clusters, while distinct, show increasing interconnectedness in recent publications (2018–2023), suggesting an emerging consensus around integrated reporting frameworks that combine accountability mechanisms with stakeholder engagement and sustainability considerations.

A quantitative analysis of the number of citations provides a clear picture of the articles and authors that have had a decisive influence on a specific field of research (Garfield 1977). The impact of each of the 126 articles was measured by the number of WoS and Scopus citations as of 4 April 2024.

After selecting the 20 articles in our sample that have accrued the greatest number of citations up to the date of extraction, a problem of comparability arises, as previously observed by Manes-Rossi et al. (2020), Dumay (2014), and Dumay et al. (2016). Older articles are more well-established and better-known in the literature. Consequently, older articles are more likely to be cited and to appear in lists of highly cited articles.

To address this issue, a ranking based on the average number of citations per year (CPY) is used (Manes-Rossi et al. 2020; Dumay et al. 2016; Bisogno et al. 2018). This approach involves a more balanced comparison of the citations of older articles versus newer ones (Manes-Rossi et al. 2020; Dumay 2014). Table 4 lists the top 20 articles according to CPY. Of the 20 articles, 13 appear in both selections, and, by far, the most cited paper is the article by Brammer and Walker (2011) on an international comparative analysis of sustainable procurement in the PS. There is an emerging research agenda on CSR formats in the PS, as evidenced by the presence of more recent articles that have obtained a relatively high number of citations over a short period of time (Table 4).

3.2 | Content Analysis

The ranking in Table 4 allows us to perform a content analysis of the 20 most-cited articles by year. After selecting the articles included in our sample, we begin by identifying the theories applied in each article (see Table 5). In order to do this, we proceeded to categorize the various theories that had been employed, allocating them to one of two categories: economic or system-oriented theories (Mattei et al. 2021; Ahunov 2023). The theories underlying CSR in the PS are diverse. Recent years have seen a rise in the use of theories from other fields, such as psychological, sociological, pedagogical, and organizational theories. (Jacobs 2012; Hay and Corderly 2018; Corderly and Hay 2022; Mattei et al. 2021).

Our analysis indicates that a multi-theoretical approach ($n=8$, 40%) is the most frequently applied framework, followed by SHT ($n=7$, 35%) and institutional theory ($n=3$, 15%). Several articles

adopt this multi-theoretical approach, as evidenced by the work of Manes-Rossi et al. (2020) and Montecalvo et al. (2018). These studies integrate numerous theoretical perspectives to provide a clearer understanding of PS CSR. This approach reflects the growing recognition that PS reporting complexity requires the use of multiple theories for a proper understanding.

The second most established framework is SHT. The significance of this theory is exemplified in studies such as Kaur and Lodhia (2018), who examined stakeholders' engagement in CSR within Australian local councils, and Farneti et al. (2019) in their study of IR adoption in state-owned enterprises.

Institutional theory examines how organizations adopt practices in response to institutional pressures and social expectations. Brammer and Walker (2011) applied this framework to analyze how different institutional contexts influence sustainable procurement practices across countries. Nicolo et al. (2020) used it to study the evolution of corporate reporting in state-owned enterprises, while Lodhia et al. (2012) examined how institutional forces shape environmental reporting practices in Australian Commonwealth departments. These studies demonstrate how institutional pressures and societal expectations can influence PS reporting and operational practices.

The chronological distribution of theoretical frameworks demonstrates the existence of distinct phases in the development of PS research. The initial period (2007–2010) was distinguished by the predominance of a singular theory, SHT, with an average of one study per year. The middle period (2011–2017) saw a diversification of theoretical frameworks, with the use of institutional and legitimacy theories, although publication volumes remained relatively low. The most recent period (2018–2023) has witnessed a notable increase in research activity, in studies employing multi-theoretical approaches. This period accounts for 50% of all multi-theoretical studies (4 out of 8) and evidences an increased level of methodological sophistication. Notable peaks in research output occurred in 2018 and 2020, with three studies each year. The chronological distribution also reveals that while SHT maintained a consistent presence throughout the entire period ($n=7$), multi-theoretical approaches gained substantial momentum in recent years ($n=8$), suggesting a maturation of the field toward more comprehensive analytical frameworks.

When analysing the relationship between the entities studied and the theories applied (see Table 6), a significant evolution is observed in articles related to the general PS from 2007 to 2021. The earliest studies in this category (2007, 2014) used SHT, while more recent research has shifted towards institutional theory (2021) and approaches not explicitly based on theory (2020). Studies employing multiple theories were conducted in the middle years (2013, 2019), suggesting a period of transition and increased complexity in theoretical frameworks.

For government bodies, there is a notable concentration of studies utilizing multiple theories between 2008 and 2023, with the most recent study conducted in 2023. The only study using institutional theory dates back to 2012. This temporal distribution indicates an increasing trend towards the implementation of more complex and multifaceted theoretical frameworks in the analysis of government organizations over

TABLE 4 | Top 20 most-cited articles by citation per year (CPY).

	Article title	Authors	Publication year	Average of quotes per year
1	Sustainable procurement in the public sector: an international comparative study	Brammer, S; Walker, H	2011	30.5
2	The views of corporate managers on the current state of, and future prospects for, social reporting in Bangladesh: An engagement-based study	Belal, A.R., Owen, D.L.	2007	18.4
3	Non-financial reporting formats in public sector organizations: a structured literature review	Manes-Rossi, F; Nicolò, G; Argento, D	2020	16.0
4	GRI Sustainability Reporting Guidelines for Public and Third Sector Organizations	Dumay, J; Guthrie, J; Farneti, F	2010	15.4
5	Sustainability reporting by Australian public sector organisations: Why they report	Farneti, F., Guthrie, J.	2009	14.1
6	Determinants of corporate social disclosure in Spanish local governments	García-Sánchez, IM; Frías-Aceituno, JV; Rodríguez-Domínguez, L	2013	13.6
7	Measurement of sustainability performance in the public sector	Adams, C.A., Muir, S., Hoque, Z.	2014	13.4
8	Stakeholder engagement in sustainability accounting and reporting: A study of Australian local councils	Kaur, A; Lodhia, S	2018	13.2
9	GRI Sustainability Reporting by Australian Public Sector Organizations	Guthrie, J; Farneti, F	2008	12.3
10	Corporate reporting metamorphosis: empirical findings from state-owned enterprises	Nicolo, G; Zanelato, G; Manes-Rossi, F; Tiron-Tudor, A	2021	12.0
11	Material ESG Outcomes and SDG Externalities: Evaluating the Health Care Sector's Contribution to the SDGs	Consolandi, C., Phadke, H., Hawley, J., Eccles, R.G.	2020	10.8
12	The potential of integrated reporting to enhance sustainability reporting in the public sector	Montecalvo, M; Farneti, F; de Villiers, C	2018	10.7
13	The influence of integrated reporting and stakeholder information needs on the disclosure of social information in a state-owned enterprise	Farneti, F; Casonato, F; Montecalvo, M; de Villiers, C	2019	10.2
14	Intellectual capital between measurement and reporting: a structured literature review	Paoloni, P., Modaffari, G., Ricci, F., Della Corte, G.	2023	10.0
15	The Free State University integrated reporting: a critical consideration	Veltri, S; Silvestri, A	2015	8.8

(Continues)

TABLE 4 | (Continued)

	Article title	Authors	Publication year	Average of quotes per year
16	The accounting, budgeting and fiscal impact of COVID-19 on the United Kingdom	Heald, D; Hodges, R	2020	7.5
17	Sustainability accounting, accountability and reporting in the public sector an overview and suggestions for future research	Kaur, A; Lodhia, SK	2019	7.2
18	Sustainability reporting by local government in Australia: Current and future prospects	Williams, B., Wilmshurst, T., Clift, R.	2011	7.1
19	Driving public sector environmental reporting the disclosure practices of Australian commonwealth departments	Lodhia, S; Jacobs, K; Park, YJ	2012	7.0
20	Thirty years of Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal: A critical study of the journal's most cited articles	Dumay, J; de Villiers, C; Guthrie, J; Hsiao, PC	2018	6.0

Source: Author's own elaboration.

the last decade. Regarding local government, the two identified studies use legitimacy theory (2011) and SHT (2018), indicating the relevance of theories around the legitimacy concept in this setting.

Mixed and other types of organisations (procurement practitioners, non-profit organizations, and state-owned enterprises) show an interesting time-based distribution, with studies using institutional theory in 2011, multiple theories in 2018, and SHT in 2019 and 2010. This distribution suggests experimentation with different theoretical frameworks over time, with no clear tendency toward a particular approach.

Sector-specific institutions (the Healthcare sector and a South African public university) appear in the last part of the period analysed (2015 and 2020), all of which use the SHT. This consistency in theoretical frameworks may indicate an emerging consensus on the importance of stakeholder considerations not only in specific sectors but in the PS in general.

Table 7 describes the research methods used in the analyzed studies. Content analysis is the most frequently used method, appearing in 40% of the studies ($n=8$), followed by multiple methods ($n=4$), literature reviews ($n=3$), interviews ($n=2$), surveys ($n=2$), and case study approach ($n=1$).

Firstly, the use of content analysis is evident in several studies, such as Nicolo et al. (2020) and Lodhia et al. (2012). They found that organizational size and environmental mission did not necessarily correlate with disclosure levels. They studied significant regional variations in sustainability practices, with leadership support and strategic planning identified as key facilitators.

The period up to 2013 shows diverse methodological approaches. A content analysis study of Spanish local governments identified growing interest in CSR while highlighting its early stage of development (García-Sánchez et al. 2013). Their work found a negative relationship between conservative political ideology and the implementation of sustainable practices. Other early studies, such as Rahman Belal and Owen (2007) interview-based research and Guthrie and Farneti (2008) content analysis, employed varied methodological approaches to examine different aspects of PS reporting.

The period from 2013 onwards demonstrates sustained research activity, with a concentration of studies between 2018 and 2020. During this recent period, significant studies employing diverse methodologies stand out. Kaur and Lodhia (2018) conducted a content analysis that revealed the critical role of stakeholder engagement in sustainability accounting and reporting processes within local governments. Montecalvo et al. (2018) and Farneti et al. (2019) employed multiple methods to examine the implementation of IR in the PS, finding IR promoted more effective materiality assessments and enhanced stakeholders' engagement. Consolandi et al. (2018) utilized content analysis to evaluate how SDG and SASB standards can enhance current ESG ratings, while Heald and Hodges (2020) examined the fiscal impact of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom, demonstrating an evolution towards more contemporary and complex issues in PS research.

TABLE 5 | Types of theories (article number).

Theory	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2018	2019	2020	2021	2023	Total
Multiple theories (3, 5, 6, 9, 12, 14, 17, 20)		1	1				1			2	1	1		1	8
Stakeholder theory (2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15)	1			1				1	1	1	1	1			7
Institutional theory (1, 10, 19)					1	1							1		3
Legitimacy theory (18)					1										1
Not explicitly theory-based (16)												1			1
Total	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	3	2	3	1	1	20

Source: Author's own elaboration (N = 20).

Table 8 shows the relationship between methods and theories applied in CSR articles, with content analysis being the most frequently used method, applied in 40% of the studies ($n=8$). This method is prominent in studies employing multiple theories (37.5% of content analysis studies, $n=3$), SHT (25%, $n=2$), and institutional theory (25%, $n=2$). For example, studies such as Nicolo et al. (2020) and Lodhia et al. (2012) use content analysis to explore how institutional pressures shape reporting practices, while Kaur and Lodhia (2018) employ it to examine stakeholder engagement in CSR.

Multiple methods account for 20% of the studies ($n=4$) and are strongly associated with multiple theories (50%, $n=2$). This approach reflects the complexity of research that integrates diverse theories. For instance, Montecalvo et al. (2018) combine content analysis and interviews to examine the adoption of IR, highlighting the interplay of coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism. Similarly, Williams et al. (2011) use multiple methods to explore CSR, identifying gaps in the social and economic dimensions of reporting.

Literature reviews represent 15% of the studies ($n=3$) and are linked to multiple theories (66.7%, $n=2$). These reviews, such as Manes-Rossi et al. (2020), synthesize existing knowledge on CSR formats, identifying gaps in areas like stakeholder engagement and the use of reporting frameworks. The remaining literature review, Dumay et al. (2010), applies SHT to analyze the adoption of GRI guidelines, noting their limited use compared to the private sector.

Interviews and surveys each account for 10% of the studies ($n=2$). Studies using interviews are evenly distributed between multiple theories (50%, $n=1$) and SHT (50%, $n=1$). Farneti and Guthrie (2009) use interviews to explore the drivers of CSR, finding that key individuals often champion the adoption of reporting practices. Similarly, Rahman Belal and Owen (2007) use interviews to examine CSR practices, revealing the limited influence of stakeholders beyond shareholders and the government. Surveys, on the other hand, are linked to SHT (50%, $n=1$) and institutional theory (50%, $n=1$). Brammer and Walker (2011) use surveys to identify enablers and barriers to sustainable procurement practices, emphasizing the role of top management support and legislative frameworks.

The case study approach is the least frequently used method, appearing in only 5% of the studies ($n=1$). This single study (Veltri and Silvestri 2015) applies SHT to critically analyze IR, highlighting significant gaps in adherence to International Financial Reporting Standards guidelines, in stakeholder relationship emphasis, and value creation disclosure.

4 | Discussion

The main objective of the research was to review the evolution of theories applied to PS CSR. The analysis demonstrates a discernible progression from single-theory approaches to more sophisticated multi-theoretical frameworks. The initial studies conducted between 2000 and 2010 predominantly relied on SHT as the primary lens, as shown by the works of Rahman Belal and Owen (2007) and Guthrie and Farneti (2008). However, the

TABLE 6 | Relationship between studied entities and theories (article number).

Entity	Institutional theory (year)	Legitimacy theory (year)	Multiple theories (year)	Not explicitly theory-based (year)	Stakeholder theory (year)	Total
General public sector (2, 6, 7, 10, 16, 17)	1 (2021)		2 (2019, 2013)	1 (2020)	2 (2014, 2007)	6
Governmental bodies (3, 5, 9, 14, 19)	1 (2012)		4 (2020, 2023, 2009, 2008)		—	5
Local government (8, 18)		1 (2011)			1 (2018)	2
Mixed and other organizations (1, 4, 12, 13, 20)	1 (2011)		2 (2018)		2 (2019, 2010)	5
Sector-specific entities (11, 13, 15)					2 (2020, 2015)	2
Total	3	1	8	1	7	20

Source: Author's own elaboration (N = 20).

field has undergone a significant evolution, with 40% of highly cited studies now employing multiple theories (Manes-Rossi et al. 2020; Montecalvo et al. 2018).

This theoretical evolution reflects a recognition that PS CSR is too complex to be explained through a single lens. For example, Farneti et al. (2019) demonstrated how the application of SHT provides a deeper understanding of social information disclosure in state-owned enterprises. Using a combination of content analysis and interviews, they explored how the materiality process prioritizes the most relevant information for stakeholders and how stakeholder engagement shapes the content of social disclosures. Their findings reveal that IR reduces the volume of social disclosures but enhances their alignment with stakeholder needs. In contrast, Nicolo et al. (2020) utilized institutional theory to explain the evolution of corporate reporting in PS organizations, emphasizing the role of institutional pressures such as leadership support and strategic planning. They examined how coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures influence the adoption and development of reporting practices. Their study highlights the importance of external regulations, professional expectations, and the imitation of leading organizations in shaping corporate reporting practices, while identifying barriers such as financial constraints and limited access to information.

The most notable development has been the transformation of reporting formats over time. Early reports predominantly focused on environmental aspects, as documented by Lodhia et al. (2012). This narrow focus gradually expanded into more comprehensive CSR practices (Guthrie and Farneti 2008), eventually leading to the current movement toward IR frameworks that provide a more holistic view of organizational performance (Montecalvo et al. 2018).

The concept of stakeholders' engagement has emerged as a significant trend in the field of CSR, with an increasing number of organizations recognizing the value of incorporating the stakeholder perspectives in their reporting practices. Kaur and Lodhia (2018) emphasize the growing importance of stakeholder

involvement, while Farneti et al. (2019) highlight the increased focus on materiality assessment to ensure that reporting addresses stakeholders' priorities. This evolution has resulted in the implementation of enhanced stakeholder dialogue practices reflecting a shift towards a more collaborative approach to CSR. Independent of the theoretical framework used, stakeholder engagement emerges as a key element of CSR.

The regulatory framework has undergone significant changes. García-Sánchez et al. (2013) trace the shift from voluntary to mandatory reporting requirements in many jurisdictions. This transition has been accompanied by the growing influence of international frameworks, in particular the GRI (Dumay et al. 2010). More recently, there has been an increasing integration of the SDGs into reporting practices, as observed by Consolandi et al. (2018). Adams et al. (2014) highlight the relevance of regulatory frameworks for CSR to become a common practice of public institutions.

Nevertheless, the research also identifies the persistence of significant challenges in CSR. The lack of resources represents a significant barrier to progress, with Brammer and Walker (2011) identifying limitations in both financial and human resources. Williams et al. (2011) highlight the lack of expertise in CSR. Adams et al. (2014) and Manes-Rossi et al. (2020) identify measurement issues in developing appropriate indicators.

Lozano (2015) shows that both internal (leadership) and external (reputation and legislation) factors can be important drivers of sustainability reporting. The implementation of the proposed changes is complicated by the presence of institutional barriers. Vinnari and Laine (2013) document organizational resistance to change, while Kaur and Lodhia (2019) highlight the complexities of managing diverse stakeholder relationships. These challenges highlight the necessity for continued development in both theoretical frameworks and practical implementation strategies.

Future avenues of research are identified. In terms of theoretical development, Manes-Rossi et al. (2020) emphasize the

TABLE 7 | Types of methods applied (article number).

Method	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2018	2019	2020	2021	2023	Total
Content analysis (6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16, 19, 20)		1				1	1			2		2	1		8
Multiple methods (12, 13, 17, 18)					1					1	2				4
Literature review (3, 4, 14)			1									1		1	3
Interviews (2, 5)	1		1												2
Survey (1, 7)					1			1							2
Case study approach (15)									1						1
Total	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	3	2	3	1	1	20

Source: Author's own elaboration (N = 20).

necessity for the creation of PS-specific theoretical frameworks, while Heald and Hodges (2020) advocate for the integration of digital transformation theories. Practical implementation needs include the development of sector-specific reporting guidelines (Montecalvo et al. 2018) and enhanced stakeholder engagement frameworks (Kaur and Lodhia 2018). Finally, attention must be paid to performance measurement, with Adams et al. (2014) advocating for improved impact measurement methodologies and Farneti et al. (2019) highlighting the need for better integration of financial and non-financial metrics.

5 | Conclusions

This systematic review has enabled the examination of the chronological evolution of theoretical approaches to CSR practices, from early approaches to more recent developments. Furthermore, it has facilitated the identification of major trends in both theory and practice while evaluating the conceptual frameworks that have shaped progress in understanding CSR in the PS.

The research findings demonstrate an evolution in PS sustainability literature. Initially descriptive in focus, the literature has evolved to a more analytical approach, examining the impact of concepts and frameworks on financial performance and decision-making. Contemporary research emphasizes the integration of sustainability information into organizational strategy and the development of more sophisticated theoretical frameworks for stakeholder communication. This evolution reflects the growing maturity and complexity of the field.

The analysis shows that system-oriented theories are preferred for PS research. The relevance of stakeholders in this sector justifies the attention that SHT receives. Future studies should compare the informative capacity of managerial versus normative perspectives. CSR in the PS revolves around the concept of public value and stakeholder engagement, even in those studies where SHT is not in the core. The future contribution of theories from other fields, such as psychological, sociological, pedagogical, and organizational theories, could be of important added value.

The study has identified a number of areas that require further attention. These include the development of integrated theoretical frameworks for digital reporting; the development of approaches to measure impact and effectiveness; the integration of SDGs into reporting practices; and the strengthening of theoretical foundations for public-private partnerships in CSR.

The research findings indicate that there are several limitations to be addressed. Firstly, there is a scarcity of theoretical explanations that are specifically tailored to the PS, regarding distinctive accountability relationships and stakeholder dynamics. Secondly, there is a persistent discrepancy between theoretical frameworks and their practical implementation. Thirdly, there is a notable absence of robust theoretical frameworks for measuring impact.

These findings are relevant in various ways, with implications for policymakers, who should revise their policies, programs, and initiatives to fit the PS circumstances and reach higher levels of

TABLE 8 | Relationship between methods and theories applied (article number).

Method	Multiple theories	Stakeholder theory	Institutional theory	Legitimacy theory	Not explicitly theory-based	Total
Content analysis (6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16,19, 20)	3	2	2		1	8
Multiple methods (12, 13, 17, 18)	2	1		1		4
Literature review (3,4, 14)	2	1				3
Interviews (2, 5)	1	1				2
Survey (1, 7)		1	1			2
Case study approach (15)		1				1
Total	8	7	3	1	1	20

Source: Author's own elaboration (N=20)

success in practical implementation. There are also implications for scholars and practitioners, since it has become clear that the PS approach to CSR may not be equivalent in theoretical terms to that of the private sector. It would be convenient to develop a specific theoretical line of study for CSR in the PS, since it could lead to new and interesting findings about its role in society.

The literature review has been subject to some limitations, mostly due to the extensive number of papers directly or indirectly addressing the topic. As explained in the methods section, we managed that limitation by selecting the most relevant and reliable papers in the literature. Another limitation was linked to the different understanding of what the public sector is, particularly in the case of public companies. Indeed, there are significant differences in what being a public company implies depending on the economic system, business culture, or geographical scope. In this regard, we have prioritized the European/Western countries archetype of public entities, given that it represents the most distant one from private sector organizations.

Beyond these limitations, this literature review demonstrates both progress and pending challenges in PS CSR. While substantial advances have been made in developing more sophisticated theoretical frameworks, important areas for future research and development remain. It is imperative that the ongoing evolution of theoretical approaches bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical implementation, while addressing the unique characteristics and needs of PS organizations. An urgent line of research in this regard should tackle the impact that the rapid growth of digital and IT tools, as well as Artificial Intelligence, may have on PS CSR and accountability. New theoretical approaches for CSR practice and reporting could be led shortly by security, ethical management of data, reliability, or independence.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Endnotes

¹ <https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/datasets/vt150k92j>.

² <https://www.globalreporting.org/about-gri/mission-history/>.

³ <https://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php>.

References

- Adams, A., C. Muir, and Z. Hoque. 2014. "Measurement of Sustainability Performance in the Public Sector." *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal* 5, no. 1: 46–67.
- Aguilera, R. V., D. E. Rupp, C. A. Williams, and J. Ganapathi. 2007. "Putting the S Back in Corporate Social Responsibility: A Multilevel Theory of Social Change in Organizations." *Academy of Management Review* 32, no. 3: 836–863.
- Ahunov, H. 2023. "Non-Financial Reporting in Hybrid Organizations – A Systematic Literature Review." *Meditari Accountancy Research* 31, no. 6: 1757–1797. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MEDAR-01-2022-1558>.
- Alam, M. 2006. "Stakeholder Theory." In *Methodological Issues in Accounting Research: Theories, Methods and Issues*, edited by Z. Hoque, 207–222. Spiramus.
- Alvarez-Etxeberria, I., I. Heras-Saizarbitoria, and O. Boiral. 2023. "Academic Research on Sustainability Reporting: A Systematic Review of the Spanish Literature." *Revista de Contabilidad-Spanish Accounting Review* 26, no. 1: 59–78. <https://doi.org/10.6018/rcsar.452071>.
- Andrades Peña, J., and M. L. Jorge. 2019. "Examining the Amount of Mandatory Non-Financial Information Disclosed by Spanish State-Owned Enterprises and Its Potential Influential Variables." *Meditari Accountancy Research* 27, no. 4: 534–555. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MEDAR-05-2018-0343>.
- Bebbington, J., and J. Unerman. 2018. "Achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: An Enabling Role for Accounting Research." *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 31, no. 1: 2–24. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-05-2017-2929>.
- Bisogno, M., J. Dumay, F. Manes Rossi, and P. Tartaglia Polcini. 2018. "Identifying Future Directions for IC Research in Education: A Literature Review." *Journal of Intellectual Capital* 19, no. 1: 10–33. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIC-10-2017-0133>.
- Booth, A., A. Sutton, and D. Papaioannou. 2016. *Systematic Approaches to a Successful Literature Review*. Sage.

- Bovens, M. 2007. "Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework." *European Law Journal* 13, no. 4: 447–468. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0386.2007.00378.x>.
- Brammer, S., and H. Walker. 2011. "Sustainable Procurement in the Public Sector: An International Comparative Study." *International Journal of Operations & Production Management* 31, no. 4: 452–476.
- Brammer, S., G. Jackson, and D. Matten. 2012. "Corporate Social Responsibility and Institutional Theory: New Perspectives on Private Governance." *Socio-Economic Review* 10, no. 1: 3–28.
- Bryson, J. M., B. C. Crosby, and L. Bloomberg. 2014. "Public Value Governance: Moving Beyond Traditional Public Administration and the New Public Management." *Public Administration Review* 74, no. 4: 445–456. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12238>.
- Cheng, B., I. Ioannou, and G. Serafeim. 2014. "Corporate Social Responsibility and Access to Finance." *Strategic Management Journal* 35, no. 1: 1–23.
- Christensen, T., and P. Lægred. 2011. "Complexity and Hybrid Public Administration – Theoretical and Empirical Challenges." *Public Organization Review* 11, no. 4: 407–423. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-010-0141-4>.
- Consolandi, C., H. Phadke, J. P. Hawley, and R. G. Eccles. 2018. "Material ESG Outcomes and SDG Externalities: Evaluating the Health Care Sector's Contribution to the SDGs." <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3277421>.
- Cordery, C. J., and D. C. Hay. 2022. "Public Sector Audit in Uncertain Times." *Financial Accountability & Management* 38, no. 4: 426–446. <https://doi.org/10.1111/faam.12299>.
- Correa-Ruiz, C., and J. M. Moneva-Abadía. 2011. "Special Issue on" social Responsibility Accounting and Reporting in Times of Sustainability Downturn/Crisis." *Revista De Contabilidad* 14, no. Suppl 1: 187–211. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1138-4891\(11\)70032-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1138-4891(11)70032-2).
- Cui, J., H. Jo, and H. Na. 2018. "Does Corporate Social Responsibility Reduce Information Asymmetry?" *Journal of Banking & Finance* 93: 81–95.
- Deegan, C. 2017. "Twenty-Five Years of Social and Environmental Accounting Research Within Critical Perspectives of Accounting: Hits, Misses and Ways Forward." *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 43: 65–87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2016.06.005>.
- Deegan, C. M. 2019. "Legitimacy Theory: Despite Its Enduring Popularity and Contribution, Time Is Right for a Necessary Makeover." *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 32, no. 8: 2307–2329. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-08-2018-3638>.
- DiMaggio, P. J., and W. W. Powell. 1983. "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields." *American Sociological Review* 48: 147–160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>.
- Donaldson, T., and L. E. Preston. 1995. "The Stakeholder Theory of the Corporation: Concepts, Evidence, and Implications." *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 1: 65–91.
- Dumay, J. 2014. "15 Years of the Journal of Intellectual Capital and Counting: A Manifesto for Transformational IC Research." *Journal of Intellectual Capital* 15, no. 1: 2–37. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIC-09-2013-0098>.
- Dumay, J., C. Bernardi, J. Guthrie, and P. Demartini. 2016. "Integrated Reporting: A Structured Literature Review." *Accounting Forum* 40, no. 3: 166–185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.accfor.2016.06.001>.
- Dumay, J., J. Guthrie, and F. Farneti. 2010. "GRI Sustainability Reporting Guidelines For Public And Third Sector Organizations: A Critical Review." *Public Management Review* 12, no. 4: 531–548. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2010.496266>.
- Ebrahim, A., J. Battilana, and J. Mair. 2014. "The Governance of Social Enterprises: Mission Drift and Accountability Challenges in Hybrid Organizations." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 34: 81–100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.RIOB.2014.09.001>.
- Eccles, R. G., and S. Klimenko. 2019. "The Investor Revolution." *Harvard Business Review* 97, no. 3: 106–116.
- Esteban-Arrea, R., and N. Garcia-Torea. 2022. "Strategic Responses to Sustainability Reporting Regulation and Multiple Stakeholder Demands: An Analysis of the Spanish EU Non-Financial Reporting Directive Transposition." *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal* 13, no. 3: 600–625. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SAMPJ-07-2021-0292>.
- European Commission. 2011. "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A renewed EU strategy 2011–14 for Corporate Social Responsibility." <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52011DC0681>.
- Fallan, E., and L. Fallan. 2009. "Voluntarism Versus Regulation: Lessons From Public Disclosure of Environmental Performance Information in Norwegian Companies." *Journal of Accounting and Organizational Change* 5, no. 4: 472–489. <https://doi.org/10.1108/18325910910994685>.
- Fama, E. 2009. "Agency Problems and the Theory of the Firm." In *The Economic Nature of the Firm: A Reader*, edited by R. S. Kroszner and L. Putterman, 270–282. Cambridge University Press.
- Fama, E. F., and M. C. Jensen. 1983. "Separation of Ownership and Control." *Journal of Law and Economics* 26, no. 2: 301–325.
- Fang, H., C. Liu, and L.-A. Zhou. 2023. "Window Dressing in the Public Sector: Evidence From China's Compulsory Education Promotion Program." *Journal of Public Economics* 222: 104878. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2023.104878>.
- Farneti, F., and J. Guthrie. 2009. "Sustainability Reporting by Australian Public Sector Organisations: Why they Report." *Accounting Forum* 33, no. 2: 89–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.accfor.2009.04.002>.
- Farneti, F., F. Casonato, M. Montecalvo, and C. de Villiers. 2019. "The Influence of Integrated Reporting and Stakeholder Information Needs on the Disclosure of Social Information in a State-Owned Enterprise." *Meditari Accountancy Research* 27, no. 4: 556–579. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MEDAR-01-2019-0436>.
- Fernando, S., and S. Lawrence. 2014. "A Theoretical Framework for CSR Practices: Integrating Legitimacy Theory, Stakeholder Theory and Institutional Theory." *Journal of Theoretical Accounting Research* 10, no. 1: 149–178.
- Ferrer-Serrano, M., L. Fuentelsaz, and M. P. Latorre-Martinez. 2022. "Examining Knowledge Transfer and Networks: An Overview of the Last Twenty Years." *Journal of Knowledge Management* 26, no. 8: 2007–2037. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JKM-04-2021-0265>.
- Freeman, R. E. 1984. *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Pitman.
- García-Meca, E., and J. Martínez-Ferrero. 2021. "Are Narcissistic CEOs More Tax Aggressive? The Moderating Role of Internal Audit Committees." *Journal of Business Research* 134: 574–586. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.045>.
- García-Sánchez, I.-M., J.-V. Frías-Aceituno, and L. Rodríguez-Domínguez. 2013. "Determinants of Corporate Social Disclosure in Spanish Local Governments." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 39: 60–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2012.08.037>.
- Garfield, E. 1977. "Introducing Citation Classics: The Human Side of Scientific Reports." *Current Contents* 1, no. 1: 5–7.
- Gibson, K. 2000. "The Moral Basis of Stakeholder Theory." *Journal of Business Ethics* 26: 245–257. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006110106408>.
- Global Reporting Initiative. 2016. "Sustainability Reporting Standards." Accessed June 28, 2025. <https://www.globalreporting.org/standards/>.

- Gray, R., J. Dillard, and C. Spence. 2009. "Social Accounting Research as if the World Matters." *Public Management Review* 11, no. 5: 545–573. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719030902798222>.
- Greenwood, R., R. Suddaby, and C. R. Hinings. 2002. "Theorizing Change: The Role of Professional Associations in the Transformation of Institutionalized Fields." *Academy of Management Journal* 45, no. 1: 58–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3069285>.
- Grossi, G., C. Reichard, A. Thomasson, and J. Vakkuri. 2017. "Theme: Performance Measurement of Hybrid Organizations—Emerging Issues and Future Research Perspectives." *Public Money & Management* 37, no. 6: 379–386.
- Guthrie, J. E., A. Ball, and F. Farneti. 2010. "Advancing Sustainable Management of Public and Not-For-Profit Organizations." *Public Management Review* 12, no. 4: 449–459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2010.496254>.
- Guthrie, J., and F. Farneti. 2008. "GRI Sustainability Reporting by Australian Public Sector Organizations." *Public Money & Management* 28, no. 6: 361–366. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9302.2008.00670.x>.
- Guthrie, J., F. Manes-Rossi, and R. L. Orelli. 2017. "Integrated Reporting and Integrated Thinking in Italian Public Sector Organisations." *Meditari Accountancy Research* 25, no. 4: 553–573. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MEDAR-06-2017-0155>.
- Harrison, J. S., and A. C. Wicks. 2013. "Stakeholder Theory, Value, and Firm Performance." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 23, no. 1: 97–124. <https://doi.org/10.5840/beq20132314>.
- Harzing, A.-W., and S. Alakangas. 2016. "Google Scholar, Scopus and the Web of Science: A Longitudinal and Cross-Disciplinary Comparison." *Scientometrics* 106: 787–804. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-015-1798-9>.
- Hay, D., and C. Cordery. 2018. "The Value of Public Sector Audit: Literature and History." *Journal of Accounting Literature* 40, no. 1: 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acclit.2017.11.001>.
- Heald, D., and R. Hodges. 2020. "The Accounting, Budgeting and Fiscal Impact of COVID-19 on the United Kingdom." *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management* 32, no. 5: 785–795. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPAFM-07-2020-0121>.
- Hodge, G. A., and C. Greve. 2017. "On Public–Private Partnership Performance: A Contemporary Review." *Public Works Management & Policy* 22, no. 1: 55–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1087724X16657830>.
- IIRC. 2013. "The International Framework." www.integratedreporting.org/resource/international-ir-framework/.
- Jacobs, K. 2012. "Making Sense of Social Practice: Theoretical Pluralism in Public Sector Accounting Research." *Financial Accountability & Management* 18, no. 1: 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0408.2011.00534.x>.
- Jensen, M. C., and W. Meckling. 1976. "Theory of the Firm: Managerial Behavior, Agency Costs and Ownership Structure." *Journal of Financial Economics* 3, no. 4: 305–360.
- Junior, R. M., P. J. Best, and J. Cotter. 2014. "Sustainability Reporting and Assurance: A Historical Analysis on a World-Wide Phenomenon." *Journal of Business Ethics* 120: 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1637-y>.
- Kaur, A., and S. Lodhia. 2018. "Stakeholder Engagement in Sustainability Accounting and Reporting: A Study of Australian Local Councils." *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 31, no. 1: 338–368. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-12-2014-1901>.
- Kaur, A., and S. K. Lodhia. 2019. "Key Issues and Challenges in Stakeholder Engagement in Sustainability Reporting: A Study of Australian Local Councils." *Pacific Accounting Review* 31, no. 1: 2–18. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PAAR-11-2017-0092>.
- Kolk, A. 2010. "Trajectories of Sustainability Reporting by MNCs." *Journal of World Business* 45, no. 4: 367–374. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2009.08.001>.
- Larrinaga, C. 2007. "Sustainability Reporting: Insights From Neo-Institutional Theory." In *Sustainability Accounting and Accountability*, edited by J. Unerman, B. O'Dwyer, and J. Bebbington. Routledge.
- Larrinaga, C., C. Larrinaga, and J. Bebbington. 2021. "The Pre-History of Sustainability Reporting: A Constructivist Reading." *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 34, no. 9: 164–181. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-03-2017-2872>.
- Liu, B., J. Li, D. Wang, H. Liu, G. Wu, and J. Yuan. 2024. "Public–Private Partnerships: A Collaborative Framework for Ensuring Project Sustainable Operations." *Engineering Construction and Architectural Management* 31, no. 1: 264–289. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ECAM-12-2021-1124>.
- Lodhia, S., K. Jacobs, and Y. J. Park. 2012. "Driving Public Sector Environmental Reporting." *Public Management Review* 14, no. 5: 631–647. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2011.642565>.
- Lozano, R. 2015. "A Holistic Perspective on Corporate Sustainability Drivers." *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management* 22, no. 1: 32–44. <https://doi.org/10.1002/csr.1325>.
- Luque-Vílchez, M., M. Cordazzo, G. Rimmel, and C. A. Tilt. 2023. "Key Aspects of Sustainability Reporting Quality and the Future of GRI." *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal* 14, no. 4: 637–659. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SAMPJ-03-2023-0127>.
- Mahadeo, J. D., V. Oogarah-Hanuman, and T. Soobaroyen. 2011. "Changes in Social and Environmental Reporting Practices in an Emerging Economy (2004–2007): Exploring the Relevance of Stakeholder and Legitimacy Theories." *Accounting Forum* 35, no. 3: 158–175. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.ACCFOR.2011.06.005>.
- Manes-Rossi, F. 2018. "Is Integrated Reporting a New Challenge for Public Sector Entities?" *African Journal of Business Management* 12, no. 7: 172–187.
- Manes-Rossi, F., G. Nicolò, and D. Argento. 2020. "Non-Financial Reporting Formats in Public Sector Organizations: A Structured Literature Review." *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting and Financial Management* 32, no. 4: 639–669. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPAFM-03-2020-0037>.
- Martínez-Ferrero, J., I. M. García-Sánchez, and B. Cuadrado-Ballesteros. 2016. "Effect of Financial Reporting Quality on Sustainability Information Disclosure." *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management* 23, no. 1: 28–44.
- Mattei, G., G. Grossi, and J. Guthrie. 2021. "Exploring Past, Present and Future Trends in Public Sector Auditing Research: A Literature Review." *Meditari Accountancy Research* 29, no. 7: 94–134. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MEDAR-09-2020-1008>.
- Matten, D., and J. Moon. 2008. "'Implicit' and 'explicit' CSR: A Conceptual Framework for a Comparative Understanding of Corporate Social Responsibility." *Academy of Management Review* 33, no. 2: 404–424.
- Mauro, S. G., L. Cinquini, and G. Grossi. 2017. "Insights Into Performance-Based Budgeting in the Public Sector: A Literature Review and a Research Agenda." *Public Management Review* 19, no. 7: 911–931. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2016.1243810>.
- Meyer, J. W., and B. Rowan. 1977. "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony." *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2: 340–363.
- Mitchell, R. K., B. R. Agle, and D. J. Wood. 1997. "Toward a Theory of Stakeholder Identification and Salience: Defining the Principle of Who and What Really Counts." *Academy of Management Review* 22, no. 4: 853–886.
- Moher, D., A. Liberati, J. Tetzlaff, D. G. Altman, and PRISMA Group. 2009. "Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement." *PLoS Medicine* 6, no. 7: e1000097. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000097>.

- Montecalvo, M., F. Farneti, and C. de Villiers. 2018. "The Potential of Integrated Reporting to Enhance Sustainability Reporting in the Public Sector." *Public Money & Management* 38, no. 5: 365–374. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2018.1477675>.
- Moore, D. R. J. 2013. "Sustainability, Institutionalization and the Duality of Structure: Contradiction and Unintended Consequences in the Political Context of an Australian Water Business." *Management Accounting Research* 24, no. 4: 366–386. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mar.2013.06.006>.
- Negash, M., and T. T. Lemma. 2020. "Institutional Pressures and the Accounting and Reporting of Environmental Liabilities." *Business Strategy and the Environment* 29, no. 5: 1941–1960. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.2480>.
- Nicolo, G., G. Zanellato, F. Manes-Rossi, and A. Tiron-Tudor. 2020. "Corporate Reporting Metamorphosis: Empirical Findings from State-Owned Enterprises." *Public Money & Management* 41, no. 2: 138–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2020.1719633>.
- OECD. 2005. *Modernising Government: The Way Forward*. OECD Publishing.
- Owen, K., R. Mundy, W. Guild, and R. Guild. 2001. "Creating and Sustaining the High Performance Organization." *Managing Service Quality: An International Journal* 11, no. 1: 10–21. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09604520110362443>.
- Paoloni, N., G. Mattei, A. Dello Strologo, and M. Celli. 2020. "The Present and Future of Intellectual Capital in the Healthcare Sector: A Systematic Literature Review." *Journal of Intellectual Capital* 21, no. 3: 357–379. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIC-10-2019-0237>.
- PCC. 2022. "Summary for Policymakers." In *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, 3–33. Cambridge University Press.
- Pereira, T. R., and S. Santos. 2021. "The Impact of Environmental Regulations on Corporate Sustainability Practices: Evidence From the EU." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 294: 126239. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.126239>.
- Rahman Belal, A., and D. L. Owen. 2007. "The Views of Corporate Managers on the Current State of, and Future Prospects for, Social Reporting in Bangladesh: An Engagement-Based Study." *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 20, no. 3: 472–494. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513570710748599>.
- Roberts, R. W. 1992. "Determinants of Corporate Social Responsibility Disclosure: An Application of Stakeholder Theory." *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 17, no. 6: 595–612. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-3682\(92\)90015-K](https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-3682(92)90015-K).
- Royo, S., A. Yetano, and J. García-Lacalle. 2019. "Accountability Styles in State-Owned Enterprises: The Good, the Bad, the Ugly ... And the Pretty." *Revista de Contabilidad* 22, no. 2: 156–170. <https://doi.org/10.6018/rcsar.382231>.
- Santana, A. 2012. "Three Elements of Stakeholder Legitimacy." *Journal of Business Ethics* 105, no. 2: 257–265. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-0966-y>.
- Scott, W. R. 2008. *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas and Interests*. Sage Publications.
- Spence, M. 1973. "Job market signaling." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 87, no. 3: 355–374. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1882010>.
- Steccolini, I. 2019. "Accounting and the Post-New Public Management: Re-Considering Publicness in Accounting Research." *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 32, no. 1: 255–279. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-03-2018-3423>.
- Suchman, M. C. 1995. "Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches." *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3: 571–610. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258788>.
- Torres, L., V. Pina, and A. Yetano. 2011. "Performance Measurement in Spanish Local Governments: A Cross-Case Comparison Study." *Public Administration* 89, no. 3: 1081–1109.
- Tranfield, D., D. Denyer, and P. Smart. 2003. "Towards a Methodology for Developing Evidence-Informed Management Knowledge by Means of Systematic Review." *British Journal of Management* 14, no. 3: 207–222.
- Ullmann, A. A. 1985. "Data in Search of a Theory: A Critical Examination of the Relationships Among Social Performance, Social Disclosure, and Economic Performance of U.S. Firms." *Academy of Management Review* 10, no. 3: 540–557.
- Veltri, S., and A. Silvestri. 2015. "The Free State University Integrated Reporting: A Critical Consideration." *Journal of Intellectual Capital* 16, no. 2: 443–462. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIC-06-2014-0077>.
- Vinnari, E., and M. Laine. 2013. "Just a Passing Fad?: The Diffusion and Decline of Environmental Reporting in the Finnish Water Sector." *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 26: 1107–1134.
- Wen, J., U. Farooq, M. I. Tabash, G. A. El Refae, J. Ahmed, and B. H. Subhani. 2021. "Government Green Environmental Concerns and Corporate Real Investment Decisions: Does Financial Sector Development Matter?" *Energy Policy* 158: 112585.
- Williams, B., T. Wilmshurst, and R. Clift. 2011. "Sustainability Reporting by Local Government in Australia: Current and Future Prospects." *Accounting Forum* 35, no. 3: 176–186. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.accfor.2011.06.004>.
- World Commission on Environment and Development. 1987. *Our Common Future*. Oxford University Press.
- Zhang, X., and Z. Li. 2021. "The Role of Public Sector Organizations in Advancing Corporate Social Responsibility: Evidence From China." *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal* 12, no. 4: 626–648.

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.