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Board Independence and Corporate Social Responsibility: A Literature Review With a Focus on Country Effects

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between board independence and corporate social responsibility (CSR) outcomes. Based on legitimacy theory, we conducted a structured literature review of 167 archival studies to analyze the influence of board independence on CSR performance and reporting. In light of the heterogeneous link between these variables, we included country effects as contextual factors and separated country-specific studies in their Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) membership and board structure. This is the first structured review that synthesizes board independence evidence specifically through the lens of country effects, indicating that most of the included studies found a positive impact of board independence on CSR outcomes. However, while cross-country studies stressed inconclusive results, the positive connection between board independence and CSR was restricted to regimes with a one-tier system. Moreover, while a positive link between board independence and CSR reporting ("talk") was not dependent on OECD status, board independence tended to increase CSR performance ("walk") only in OECD countries.

JEL Classification: M41, M48, Q56

1 | Introduction

Public interest entities' (PIEs) boards of directors make a significant impact on corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting and performance (Abdalla et al. 2024). Among other factors, recognition of a specific quorum of independent members of boards of directors represents one of the most prominent attributes of board effectiveness (Abreu et al. 2023). Board independence is the key precondition for ensuring active monitoring of CSR activities in line with stakeholder demands, as CSR reporting and performance are linked with increased managerial discretion and complexity (Goud 2022; Agnese et al. 2026). Empirical research on the impact of board independence on CSR outcomes has elicited mixed findings (positive, negative, or insignificant links) (e.g., Ortas et al. 2017), which may be explained by diverse measures of board independence, CSR outcomes, and different regimes.

While board independence often has been used synonymously with nonexecutive directors and outside directors in extant research (Abdalla et al. 2024), this strategy is problematic. Nonexecutive or outside directors refer to the formal position of board members in the corporate governance system. It indicates separation from executive directors, emphasizing monitoring duties either in one-tier or two-tier systems (supervisory board). However, formal classification of nonexecutive or outside directors does not guarantee actual independence from executive directors. Consequently, our definition of board independence should be more restrictive. We followed Al Fadli et al.'s (2020) definition, which states that an independent board member is a nonexecutive or outside director who does not have any financial relationship with the company and does not receive any other benefits from the company. Independent nonexecutive or outside board members should have no substantive relationship with the firm as employees or in any other capacity beyond their role on boards (Abreu et al. 2023).

Extant meta-analyses have analyzed various corporate governance attributes' impact on CSR (Boulourian et al. 2021; Dwekat et al. 2022; Endrikat et al. 2021; Hussain et al. 2025; Lagasio and Cucari 2019; Majumder et al. 2017; Zubeltzu-Jaka et al. 2024; Wang et al. 2024), environmental reporting (Aluchna et al. 2023; Pisano et al. 2022), and carbon reporting (Singhania and Bhan 2026). While other meta-analyses have concentrated on the influence of board independence on bank risk-taking (Addo et al. 2025), voluntary disclosure (García-Meca and Sánchez-Ballesta 2010), corporate misconduct (Neville et al. 2019), firm internationalization (Spadafora et al. 2022), and organizational performance (Zubeltzu-Jaka et al. 2019), CSR outcomes were rather neglected. We found only one meta-analysis on board independence and CSR performance (Ortas et al. 2017), which found a positive relationship and a moderator effect in civil law countries. While we also found an increasing number of literature reviews on the relationship between corporate governance and CSR (e.g., Ludwig and Sassen 2022; Naciti et al. 2022; Pahuja et al. 2025), board independence was included only as a niche topic with low attraction. Compared with extant research, we did not find any literature reviews on board independence and CSR outcomes. Due to the heterogeneity of board independence and CSR measures in extant studies, this is the first structured literature review that summarizes extant research on the relationship between board independence and CSR outcomes specifically through the lens of country effects. Our aim was not to conduct a meta-analysis, but rather to present a structured literature review with an emphasis on country effects. Due to inconclusive results from cross-country studies and heterogeneous directions based on legitimacy theory, country-related studies, which were predominant in our sample, were grouped by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) membership. Moreover, we differentiated between various board systems (one-tier, two-tier, and voting right systems). CSR outcomes were differentiated based on CSR performance and reporting in line with prior studies (e.g., Velte 2023), whereas we also differentiated studies based on whether researchers relied on external CSR databases or conducted content analyses to measure CSR reporting levels. We assumed significant country-related effects on the link between board independence and CSR. OECD countries and regimes with a mandatory one-tier system should lead to a positive contribution from independent board members on CSR outcomes in contrast to other settings. Addressing these context factors is relevant to our research topic, and this mainly contributes to the literature. Thus, we posited these research questions:

1. *Does board independence impact CSR performance and reporting?*
2. *Is the assumed relationship between board independence and CSR outcomes dependent on OECD membership and board structure in country-specific studies?*

To increase our review's comparability, we restricted our literature review to empirical-quantitative studies on the board level and CSR outcomes. Moreover, studies on formal operationalizations of board independence as solely nonexecutive or outside directors were excluded, as independence concerns are also possible in this category. Our literature review indicates that most extant studies have concentrated on the ratio of board independence and CSR reporting, and on country-specific studies in regimes with a one-tier-system. In line with legitimacy theory and substantive use of CSR, we found a positive impact from board independence on CSR performance and reporting in OECD regimes and in countries with a one-tier system. However, board independence only tended to increase CSR reporting levels in non-OECD countries, whereas CSR performance's impact was inconclusive. We identified major research gaps and provide recommendations for future research. Future studies should connect, among other aspects, board independence with other director attributes (e.g., sustainability expertise) and compare it with more general proxies (nonexecutive and outside directors), while relying on various subpillars of CSR outcomes (e.g., social dimensions) and CSR decoupling.

Our study is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces legitimacy theory as our theoretical foundation for the literature review. Section 3 includes the research framework and design. Section 4 presents the review's results, whereby we start with some descriptive analyses of the included studies and differentiate between cross-country and country-specific studies. The results from country-specific studies are separated further into OECD membership and board structure. Key research recommendations are included in Section 5 based on extended board independence and CSR measures. Section 6 summarizes the study.

2 | Theoretical Framework

The relationship between board independence and CSR outcomes can be explained through various theories, such as agency theory, stakeholder theory, and resource-dependence theory (Haji 2013; Hafsi and Turgut 2013). Extant studies also have applied legitimacy theory to explain why PIEs engage in board independence and how CSR efforts relate to legitimacy (e.g., Haniffa and Cooke 2005). We referred to legitimacy theory (Gray et al. 1996; Deegan et al. 2002; Islam and Deegan 2008) in line with prior studies (e.g., Al Fadli et al. 2020) because we wanted to differentiate between the potential symbolic and substantive use of CSR in our literature review. CSR outcomes were structured into CSR reporting ("talk") and CSR performance ("walk") to analyze whether board independence may elicit symbolic CSR efforts (reporting) or substantive CSR actions (performance).

Legitimacy theory's premise is that business operations should align with the laws and customs of the society in which it operates (Deegan et al. 2002). In this way, the firm should justify its actions and inform the public about its strategies and processes. One strategy for corporations to gain legitimacy is preparation of CSR reports and related CSR performance figures (Al Fadli et al. 2020). The link between legitimacy and CSR outcomes becomes more significant if stakeholders expect increased CSR efforts, such as climate transformation plans. In this case, businesses use CSR reporting and performance as an instrument to justify their operations (Islam and Deegan 2008). To bridge a perceived legitimacy gap between its actions and how the public views its CSR activities, an effective board of directors should promote these stakeholder demands (Al Fadli et al. 2020).

Recognition of an adequate number or a specific ratio of independent board members can be classified as one of the most important

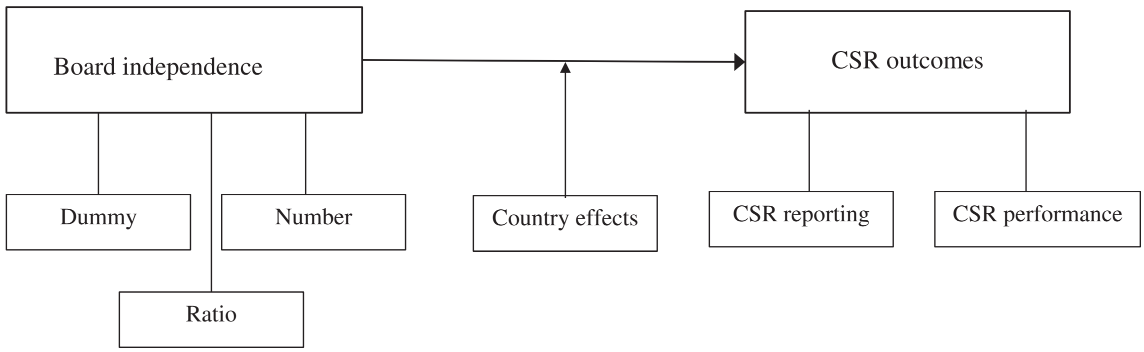

FIGURE 1 | Research framework.

corporate governance mechanisms (Haniffa and Cooke 2005). Boards with independent directors are linked with an effective monitoring instrument within the firm and should increase the sensibility of senior managers regarding CSR efforts (Goud 2022). A higher recognition of independent directors on the board should pressure management to disclose more high-quality CSR information and promote CSR performance (Gold and Taib 2023). This positive relationship between board independence and CSR outcomes as part of legitimacy theory is dependent on the substantive use of CSR and senior managers' intrinsic and/or extrinsic motivations (Islam and Deegan 2008). However, a nonsignificant or even negative contribution by board independence on CSR outcomes may be possible if symbolic use of CSR for self-impression management is evident within the firm (Deegan et al. 2002). As CSR reporting lacks comparability and objectivity in many items, stakeholders often cannot evaluate the quality of CSR information and related performance measures properly (Deegan et al. 2002). Opportunistic management may use CSR reports for greenwashing and information overload, in contrast to stakeholder demands. Questionable CSR reports may be linked with increased legitimacy, if stakeholders trust these measures. Consequently, we assume that it is highly probable that CSR reporting ("talk") is used as a symbol for stakeholder attraction and self-impression management, whereas CSR performance ("walk") is linked with real CSR progress and a higher probability of substantive CSR management. Based on legitimacy theory, the impact of board independence on CSR reporting and performance is heterogeneous, leading to potential positive, negative and insignificant directions. Our literature review aims to analyze these complex relationships.

The next section introduces our research framework and design and provides a descriptive analysis of included studies. When then present principal results on the impact of board independence on CSR, while distinguishing between cross-country and country-specific studies.

3 | Research Framework and Design

3.1 | Research Framework

Figure 1 presents our study's research framework. This literature review aimed to summarize empirical-quantitative studies on the relationship between board independence and CSR outcomes, with an emphasis on country effects. CSR outcomes as dependent variables are separated in CSR performance and reporting. As already mentioned, we assumed that CSR reporting ("talk") is related more to symbolic use of CSR, whereas CSR performance ("walk") indicates substantive CSR management and real progress in corporate sustainability transformation. CSR measures are differentiated further between total proxies and related environmental and social subpillars to recognize CSR topics' complexity. CSR performance relates to quantitative measures of CSR efforts, which are recognized mostly in external databases, such as the LSEG (formerly known as Refinitiv) and the former Kinder, Lydenberg, Domini & Co. (KLD) databases. CSR reports represent an external CSR communication instrument, such as publication of a stand-alone sustainability report (Cai et al. 2023). While some researchers have relied on content analyses of CSR reports and scoring methods (e.g., Caputo et al. 2021), others have recognized specific databases, for example, the Bloomberg database.

Board independence as our independent variable can be measured as the existence, number, or ratio of independent directors on the board of directors. With few exceptions, a minimum number or ratio of independent board members usually is legally required for PIEs (Chen et al. 2025). Moreover, national corporate governance codes often recommend a threshold of at least 50%. In light of the heterogeneous results and as a major contribution to extant research, we concentrated on country effects in our analysis. After distinguishing between cross-country and country-specific studies, we grouped country-related studies in our sample applying to either OECD regimes or non-OECD countries. Moreover, due to diverse board structures from a global perspective, country-specific studies were divided into regimes with a mandatory one-tier system, two-tier system, or a voting right between both systems. We expected a positive impact from board independence on CSR reporting and performance in OECD countries and one-tier systems, and insignificant or even negative links in other regimes. OECD countries are members of the OECD, a forum of mostly developed, democratic nations with market economies that collaborate on economic and social policy, share data, identify best practices, and set international standards to promote sustainable growth and global well-being. These 38 countries cooperate on issues such as taxation, climate change, education, and development. Compared with other countries, OECD countries refer to higher levels of socioeconomic and enforcement conditions, which should promote proper monitoring activities by independent board

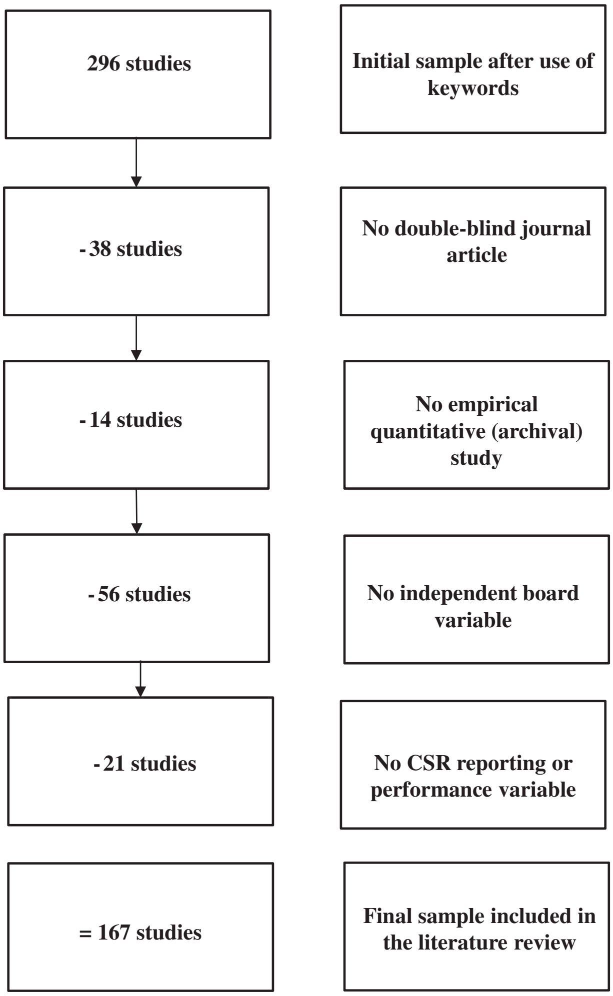

FIGURE 2 | Sample selection process.

members regarding CSR. Moreover, as one-tier systems are linked with conflicts of interest between senior managers and nonexecutive directors due to a lack of formal functional separation, independent board members may be more effective at monitoring than those in two-tier systems, whereby formal independence already is guaranteed (Pham and Tran 2019).

3.2 | Research Design

Our research design and related processes were based on guidelines from Massaro et al.'s (2016) 10 steps. In light of the heterogeneous use of board independence and CSR variables and our aim to account for economic links between related proxies, we decided to prepare a structured literature review (Massaro et al. 2016). The literature review protocol (Step 1) chose two international databases for the keyword search: EBSCO Business Source Complete and Web of Science. We used the keywords "CSR," "Corporate Social Responsibility," "CSR performance," "CSR reporting," "CSR disclosure," "environmental performance," "social performance," "environmental reporting," "social reporting," and related terms in combination with "board independence" and "independent directors" into the search fields, focusing on studies' titles, abstracts, and keywords. Appendix A includes Boolean search strings. Our search was limited to the 2000–2025 time period (date of last search: 01.10.2025). Step 2 was linked with aforementioned research questions. Step 3 focused on the type of studies that we included in the literature review. We started with an initial sample of 296 studies after use of keywords. This literature review only recognized articles published in peer-reviewed (double blind) journals in the English language based on international journal rankings (e.g., Journal Citation Reports, SCImago Journal Rank, TI Journal List, Journal Quality List, ABDC Journal Quality List, and Financial Times Research Rank). This led to a reduction of 38 studies. Moreover, we only included archival (empirical-quantitative) studies due to comparability reasons because we aimed to focus on the economic effect of board independence on CSR. Consequently, 14 more studies were excluded. Moreover, as already noted, we used a restrictive definition of board independence. As formal characteristics of nonexecutive or outside directors generally do not indicate their independence, we excluded 56 more papers on nonexecutive and outside directors and only recognized studies with an explicit reference to independent board directors, unlike the reduction in nonexecutives or outsiders. Finally, 21 more studies with no inclusion of a CSR performance or reporting variable were excluded, rendering a final sample of 167 studies.

Figure 2 summarizes the sample selection process.

Analyses of the studies' impact (Step 4) based on Google Scholar found that every study had been cited at least once. Moreover, Step 5 led to deduction of the research framework and aforementioned major research questions. Statistical software was not used because we did not work with big data sets (Step 6). Referring to the literature review's validity (Step 7), we read each paper and coded it in line with the selected (sub-)categories and research framework (Step 8). Backward and forward citation tracking was not used. Instead, we used a vote-counting methodology (Light and Smith 1971) and included significant findings and their indicators. Significant positive results were marked with a (+), negative coefficients with a (−), and insignificant results with a (+/−). If studies included multiple specifications of board independence or CSR outcomes, we referred to the main variables (one board independence proxy and one CSR measure) in the respective basic regressions. This also related to overlapping samples across studies to avoid implicit "double counting." Step 9 focused on the dataset analysis. We coded the metadata (authors, journals, research methods, etc.) to address the research questions. The findings were tabulated and used to develop major restrictions on extant studies and research recommendations (Step 10), which we present in Chapter 5.

4 | Literature Review Results

4.1 | Descriptive Analyses

Table 1 provides an overview of the studies per publication year (Panel A), region (Panel B), journal (Panel C), board variables (Panel D), CSR variables (Panel E), endogeneity checks (Panel F), and significant results (Panel G). Panel A highlights a significant increase in studies over the past two years, while the first study was published in 2009. Increased stakeholder and regulatory pressure on CSR outcomes may explain the increased research activity since the global financial crisis of 2008–2009. Most of the included studies conducted country-specific studies (110 studies), while cross-country studies were of lower relevance (57 studies) (Panel B). Regarding OECD membership, our sample included 58 studies from OECD member states (Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, United States, Korea, Turkey, France, Italy, and Spain) and 52 studies from non-OECD countries (Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Kazakstan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Vietnam, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa), based on OECD publications.[1] Regarding board structure, we referred to the OECD (2025) and Accountancy Europe (2022) and structure countries into mandatory two-tier systems (China, Indonesia, Iran, and South Africa), mandatory one-tier systems (Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, India, Jordan, Kenya, Korea, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Saudi-Arabia, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States), and regimes with a voting right between one-tier and two-tier system (France, Italy, Kazakstan, and Vietnam). Hybrid systems with a mixture of one- and two-tier systems were classified as two-tier systems in our context. Most studies have recognized countries with a mandatory one-tier system (78 studies), compared with two-tier systems (14 studies) and regimes with a voting right (17 studies). As already noted, in line with legitimacy theory, we assumed a positive impact from board independence on CSR reporting and performance in OECD member states and countries with a mandatory one-tier system.

Panel C revealed that most included studies have been published in management and sustainability journals (117 studies), compared with finance and accounting journals (50 studies). The most prominent journals are *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management* (15 studies) and *Journal of Business Ethics* (nine studies). As Panel D indicates, most researchers recognized the ratio of board independence (126 studies), whereas more detailed proxies such as education, board meeting frequency, or networks were not included, with a few exceptions. Panel E indicates that most studies analyzed the impact of board independence on CSR reporting (109 studies) compared with CSR performance (58 studies). Most studies conducted content analyses of CSR reports and created a disclosure score (101 studies), whereas 28 studies used external CSR databases (e.g., Bloomberg or CDP). Analyses of the relationship between board independence and CSR outcomes faced endogeneity concerns. Advanced regression models such as propensity score matching (PSM), two-stage least squares (2SLS)/instrumental variable (IV), and difference-in-difference approaches are needed; however, most studies did not check for endogeneity concerns (102 studies). This is linked with restricted validity in research results. Finally, Panel G highlights the heterogeneity in the research results, as a positive (103 studies), negative (32 studies), or insignificant link between board independence and CSR outcomes was found. This explains our strategy to focus on country effects in our literature review.

4.2 | Cross-Country Studies

As already noted, cross-country studies have been conducted to a lesser extent (57 studies) than country-specific analyses (110 studies). CSR reporting (30 studies) and CSR performance (27 studies) measures were included approximately to the same extent for cross-country studies. Research results were inconclusive, as positive (13 studies), negative (eight studies), and insignificant (six studies) links between board independence and CSR performance were stated. Similar inconclusive results referred to the impact of board independence on CSR reporting (positive link: 17 studies; negative link: five studies; insignificant results: eight studies).

4.2.1 | CSR Performance ("Walk")

Positive results were related to *CSR performance* (e.g., Arayssi et al. 2020), environmental performance (e.g., Fraccalvieri et al. 2025), and social performance (e.g., Agnese et al. 2026). Negative relationships were found for environmental performance (e.g., Latella et al. 2025). Moreover, insignificant results were reported, based on CSR performance (e.g., Disli et al. 2022) and environmental performance (e.g., Abreu et al. 2023). Kamarudin et al. (2025) found a positive nonlinear relationship between board independence and CSR performance, whereas Sepulveda-Nunez et al. (2025) found a negative nonlinear link.

4.2.2 | CSR Reporting ("Talk")

Heterogeneous results also exist regarding board independence and *CSR reporting*, as researchers found positive (17 studies), negative (five studies), and insignificant (eight studies) results. On the one hand, board independence tends to increase CSR reporting (e.g., Anifowose 2025) and environmental disclosure (e.g., Amran, Periasamy, and Zulkafli 2014). On the other hand, a negative relationship between board independence and CSR reporting (e.g., Adel et al. 2019) and environmental reporting (Taglialatela et al. 2024) was found. Moreover, some studies did not stress a significant link between board independence, CSR reporting (e.g., Amran, Lee, and Devi 2014), and environmental reporting (Prado-Lorenzo and Garcia-Sanchez 2010).

These heterogeneous results are in line with legitimacy theory, as management incentives for symbolic and substantive use of CSR are present in business practice. Moreover, cross-country studies may include significant country-related differences, with a major impact on corporate governance and CSR efforts, leading to positive, negative, or insignificant research results.

4.3 | The Relationship Between Board Independence and CSR Based on OECD Membership

Next, we focus on country-specific studies, based on OECD membership and board structure. Regarding *CSR performance*, we identified 26 studies in OECD member countries and seven studies in non-OECD regimes. Analyses of the impact of board independence on *CSR reporting* were conducted predominantly in non-OECD countries (49 studies), particularly, in Asia, compared with studies in OECD countries (30 studies). Tendencies

TABLE 1 | Count of cited published papers.

Panel A: publication year

Total: 167

- 2009: 2
- 2010: 1
- 2011: 3
- 2012: 3
- 2013: 5
- 2014: 4
- 2015: 8
- 2016: 7
- 2017: 6
- 2018: 14
- 2019: 16
- 2020: 15
- 2021: 14
- 2022: 14
- 2023: 15
- 2024: 20
- 2025: 20

Panel B: region

Total: 167

- Cross-country: 57
- Country-specific studies: 110
  - OECD countries: 58 (Australia: 7; Canada: 3; UK: 8; USA: 20; Korea: 2; Turkey: 1; France: 7; Italy: 5; Spain: 5)
  - Non-OECD countries: 52 (Bangladesh: 4; China: 11; India: 10; Indonesia: 1; Iran: 1; Jordan: 5; Kazakstan: 2; Malaysia: 5; Pakistan: 1; Palestine: 1; Saudia Arabia: 2; Taiwan: 1; Vietnam: 3; Kenya: 2; Nigeria: 2; South Africa: 1)
- One-tier system: 78 (Australia: 7; Bangladesh: 4; Canada: 3; India: 10; Jordan: 5; Kenya: 2; Korea: 2; Malaysia: 5; Nigeria: 2; Pakistan: 1; Palestine: 1; Saudi-Arabia: 2; Spain: 5; Taiwan: 1; Turkey: 1; UK: 8; USA: 19)
- Two-tier system: 14 (China: 11; Indonesia: 1; Iran: 1; South Africa: 1)
- Voting right: 17 (France: 7; Italy: 5; Kazakstan: 2; Vietnam: 3)

Panel C: journal

Total: 167

- Finance and Accounting Journals (50)
  - *Accounting & Finance*: 1
  - *Accounting and Business Research*: 2
  - *Accounting Research Journal*: 4
  - *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*: 1
  - *Applied Economics*: 2
  - *British Accounting Review*: 2
  - *Emerging Markets Finance and Trade*: 1
  - *European Journal of Finance*: 1
  - *Finance Research Letters*: 1
  - *International Journal of Accounting & Information Management*: 3
  - *International Journal of Finance & Economics*: 1
  - *International Journal of Managerial Finance*: 2
  - *International Review of Economics and Finance*: 1
  - *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change*: 1
  - *Journal of Accounting and Public Policy*: 1
  - *Journal of Accounting in Emerging Economies*: 1
  - *Journal of Accounting Literature*: 2
  - *Journal of Applied Accounting Research*: 1
  - *Journal of Business Finance and Accounting*: 1
  - *Journal of Financial Reporting and Accounting*: 6
  - *Journal of International Accounting Research*: 1
  - *Journal of International Financial Markets, Institutions & Money*: 1
  - *Journal of Sustainable Finance & Investment*: 1
  - *Managerial Auditing Journal*: 1
  - *Meditari Accountancy Research*: 2
  - *Pacific Accounting Review*: 1
  - *Pacific-Basin Finance Journal*: 1
  - *Research in International Business and Finance*: 2
  - *Studies in Economics and Finance*: 1
  - *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal*: 4

(Continues)

Panel C: journal	
	• Management and sustainability journals (117) ◦ *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management*: 2 ◦ *British Journal of Management*: 1 ◦ *Business and Society Review*: 1 ◦ *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility*: 1 ◦ *Business Strategy & Development*: 1 ◦ *Business Strategy and Development*: 3 ◦ *Business Strategy and the Environment*: 9 ◦ *Corporate Governance*: 19 ◦ *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*: 15 ◦ *Critical Perspectives on International Business*: 1 ◦ *Ecological Economics*: 1 ◦ *European Journal of Management and Business Economics*: 1 ◦ *Global Business Review*: 2 ◦ *International Journal of Climate Change Strategies and Management*: 1 ◦ *International Journal of Disclosure and Governance*: 7 ◦ *International Journal of Law and Management*: 2 ◦ *International Journal of Production Economics*: 1 ◦ *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*: 1 ◦ *Journal of Asia Business Studies*: 1 ◦ *Journal of Business Ethics*: 9 ◦ *Journal of Business Research*: 2 ◦ *Journal of Cleaner Production*: 5 ◦ *Journal of Environmental Management*: 1 ◦ *Journal of Global Responsibility*: 4 ◦ *Journal of Intellectual Capital*: 1 ◦ *Journal of Management*: 1 ◦ *Journal of Management and Governance*: 5 ◦ *Management Decision*: 1 ◦ *Management Research Review*: 1 ◦ *Multinational Business Review*: 1 ◦ *Organization & Environment*: 1 ◦ *Resources Policy*: 1 ◦ *Review of Managerial Science*: 2 ◦ *Social Responsibility Journal*: 8 ◦ *Society and Business Review*: 2 ◦ *Sustainable Development*: 2
Panel D: board independence variables	
Total: 167	• Dummy: 8 (at least 50; at least one; greater than legally required; greater than mean independence; public dissent; lead director) • Number: 6 • Ratio: 126 • Ratio of independent nonexecutive/outside directors: 20 • Ratio of independent directors appointed by minority shareholders: 1 • Ratio of independent directors attending shareholders meeting: 1 • Ratio of independent director networks: 1 • Ratio of independent co-opted directors: 1 • Board meeting frequency: 1 • Reputational incentives: 1 • Education: 1
Panel E: CSR variables	
Total: 167	• CSR reporting: 109 (external CSR databases: 28; content analyses: 101) • CSR performance: 58
Panel F: endogeneity checks (e.g., propensity score matching (PSM), difference-in-difference-approach, generalized method of moments (GMM))	
Total: 167	• Yes: 65 • No: 102

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Panel G: significant results	
Total: 167	• Positive: 103 • Negative: 32 • Insignificant: 42

indicate that the positive impact of board independence on *CSR reporting* is not dependent on OECD membership. However, the positive relationship between board independence and *CSR performance* tends to be restricted to countries with OECD membership.

4.3.1 | CSR Performance ("Walk")

While relying on *OECD member countries*, most included studies (19) reported a positive impact from board independence on *CSR performance* (e.g., Al-Sarraf et al. 2025; Beji et al. 2021) and environmental performance (e.g., Post et al. 2015) levels. Only six studies found an insignificant relationship between board independence and CSR performance (e.g., Hafsi and Turgut 2013; Crifo et al. 2019), and one study found a negative relationship (Arora and Dharwadkar 2011).

In contrast, research on *non-OECD regimes* is limited (seven studies) and yielded mixed results, as a positive impact from board independence on CSR performance (e.g., Liu et al. 2025) (four studies) and insignificant results (three studies) were found (e.g., Goud 2022).

4.3.2 | CSR Reporting ("Talk")

There are some indications that board independence increases *CSR reporting* (e.g., Albitar et al. 2023; Lepore et al. 2023), environmental reporting (e.g., Elsayih et al. 2018), and social reporting (e.g., Benjamin et al. 2020) levels in *OECD member states* (23 studies), as insignificant results (e.g., Fisher et al. 2020; Caputo et al. 2021) (eight studies) and negative directions (Ghitti et al. 2024; Baalouch et al. 2019) (three studies) were rare.

Moreover, regarding *non-OECD countries*, board dependence also tends to increase CSR reporting (e.g., Khan et al. 2013) and environmental reporting (e.g., Gerged 2021) levels (26 studies), while fewer negative (e.g., Cai et al. 2023) (six studies) and insignificant (e.g., Zhou 2019) (12 studies) results were found.

Tendencies toward a positive impact from board independence on CSR reporting and performance in OECD member countries align with legitimacy theory, indicating a higher probability of substantive management use of CSR ("talk" and "walk") in these regimes. Positive associations between board independence and CSR performance were not reported mainly in non-OECD countries. Weaker economic and enforcement conditions in non-OECD nations may lead to lower management incentives to include substantive CSR management processes, leading to increased CSR performance. In these regimes, board independence tends to be related solely to symbolic CSR efforts (CSR reporting) to attain legitimacy.

4.4 | The Relationship Between Board Independence and CSR Based on Board Structure

As already noted, we also separated country-specific studies' board structure in regimes with a mandatory one-tier system, mandatory two-tier system and a voting right between the two board systems. We registered dominant results on the link between board independence and CSR performance and reporting in countries with a *one-tier system* (26 studies and 55 studies, respectively), whereas research in two-tier systems (two studies and 12 studies, respectively) and in countries with a voting right (four studies and 13 studies, respectively) carried little relevance.

4.4.1 | CSR Performance ("Walk")

Our literature review indicates that board independence tended to increase *CSR performance* levels in regimes with a *one-tier system* (e.g., Al-Sarraf et al. 2025), as inverse (Arora and Dharwadkar 2011) and insignificant (e.g., Karim et al. 2020) results were rare. We found little on the relationship between board independence and CSR performance in countries with a two-tier system (e.g., Liu et al. 2025). This is also related to country-specific studies with a voting right between one-tier and two-tier systems (e.g., Beji et al. 2021).

4.4.2 | CSR Reporting ("Talk")

Furthermore, board independence and *CSR reporting* tended to be related positively in countries with a *one-tier system* (e.g., Abdalla et al. 2024). Insignificant results (e.g., Bedi and Singh 2024) and negative relationships (e.g., Ghitti et al. 2024) were found to a lesser extent. Aligning with our remarks on CSR performance, few extant studies have examined the impact of board independence on CSR reporting in other regimes, leading to inconclusive results. Few studies found a positive relationship in one-tier systems (e.g., Abbas et al. 2023), while insignificant (e.g., Zhou 2019) and negative (Cai et al. 2023) results also were stated. Similar heterogeneous results were related to countries with a voting right between one-tier and two-tier systems, leading to either positive (e.g., Cucari et al. 2018), negative (e.g., Baalouch et al. 2019), or insignificant (e.g., Caputo et al. 2021) results.

These tendencies toward a positive impact from board independence on CSR reporting and performance in countries with a one-tier system are in line with legitimacy theory, as conflicts of interest within nonexecutive directors are more pronounced in one-tier systems than in two-tier systems. Thus, monitoring by independent board members tends to be more effective in one-tier systems. Active board monitoring relates to increased CSR reporting and performance levels, thereby lowering the probability of symbolic use of CSR.

4.5 | Summary of Major Results

4.5.1 | Cross-Country Studies

Regarding *cross-country studies*, in line with our basic assumptions and legitimacy theory, we found *inconclusive* results on the impact of board independence on CSR reporting and performance. As country effects may explain research results' heterogeneity, we focused on country-specific studies in our review.

4.5.2 | OECD Membership

In line with legitimacy theory (Deegan et al. 2002) and based on *country-specific studies*, we found some tendencies that board independence is related *positively* to CSR *reporting and performance*, as substantive CSR efforts are concentrated in *OECD member states*. These results may be explained by increased financial, CSR, and enforcement conditions in OECD countries, leading to increased monitoring activities by boards of directors, substantive CSR management, and increased legitimacy. While we also found some indications that board independence and CSR *reporting* are related positively in *non-OECD countries*, studies in these regimes did not find mainly a positive impact on *CSR performance*. There may be restrictions in non-OECD regimes on transferring symbolic CSR reports into substantive increases in CSR performance. Symbolic use of CSR to gain short-term legitimacy may relate to a mismatch between CSR reporting and performance in the form of corporate greenwashing and decoupling processes.

As a robustness test, we compared whether the positive impact of board independence on CSR reporting is dependent on measurement of CSR reporting (external databases vs. content analyses and individual quality scores). Empirical research on OECD member states reported rather balanced positive results for CSR reporting measures, based on external databases (11 studies) and content analyses (12 studies). With one exception, negative and insignificant results were linked to self-created CSR reporting scores. Referring to non-OECD countries, most studies conducted content analyses of CSR reports and created individual scores. In contrast, five studies found a positive impact of board independence on CSR reporting based on external databases.

4.5.3 | Board Structure

Moreover, the literature review indicated a positive contribution by board independence on *CSR reporting and performance* in *one-tier systems*, corresponding with our basis assumptions and legitimacy theory (Deegan et al. 2002). As a robustness test, we also found dominant recognition of self-created measures of CSR reporting (25 studies), whereas a positive impact of board independence on CSR reporting based on external databases was of lower importance (11 studies). Research results on mandatory two-tier systems and regimes with a voting right between one-tier and two-tier systems were inconclusive due to a low number of studies. Compared with two-tier systems, nonexecutive directors in one-tier systems relate to an extended risk of conflicts of interest, leading to impaired board independence. Among other aspects, CEO duality as the personal identity between the CEO and board chair leads to a massive impact from the CEO on board dynamics and CSR strategies. The influence of nonexecutive directors on CSR is reduced in these constellations. In contrast, two-tier systems lead to a decreased risk of impaired board independence in light of the functional separation between leadership and monitoring functions of the board. Thus, careful recognition of independent board members can be classified as a substitute in one-tier systems and may be more effective than two-tier systems, in which a basic level of board independence is guaranteed by the board structure itself. Board independence in one-tier systems tends to pressure senior managers to include substantive CSR efforts, leading to legitimacy and increased CSR reporting and performance levels.

The controversial results on the relationship between board independence and CSR outcomes in other constellations may be explained by conflicting effects from symbolic use of CSR (reporting) and substantive use of CSR (performance) in line with legitimacy theory (Al Fadli et al. 2020).

Figure 3 summarizes the literature review's principal results.

The literature review indicated major research gaps that will be explained in the next section.

5 | Research Recommendations

5.1 | Extended Board Independence Measures

Our literature review indicated a dominant inclusion of the ratio of board independence without any further differentiation. Many studies did not explain in detail how they measured

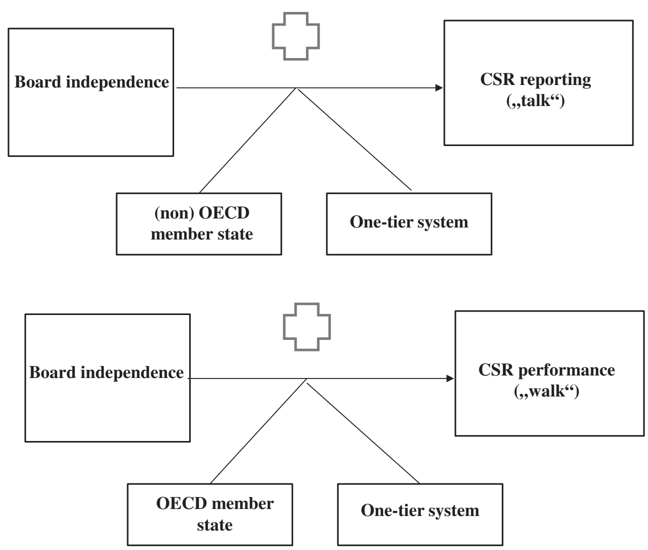

FIGURE 3 | Major results of the literature review.

board independence levels and how their measure relates to nonexecutive or outside directors. As already mentioned, formal separation between nonexecutive (outside) directors and executive (inside) directors does not lead to proper separation of board independence. Board independence, as a subpart of nonexecutive (outside) directors, should be recognized explicitly and it should be best practice in future research designs to rely on the ratio of nonexecutive (outside) directors with no personal or professional relationships to the firm (independence in fact) (e.g., Abdalla et al. 2024; Abu Qa'dan and Suwaidan 2019; Albitar et al. 2023). Moreover, we strongly recommend measuring individual contributions by independent and nonexecutive (outside) directors to CSR to analyze potential differences in their impact (e.g., Agnese et al. 2026) in countries with different board systems.

Research Question 1. *What is the separate and combined impact of independent and nonexecutive (outside) directors on CSR outcomes in different board structures?*

As a certain threshold of board independence is regulated in most regimes and national corporate governance codes regularly recommend recognition of at least 50% of independent directors, these regulatory developments also should be explicitly recognized in future studies. We only identified a few studies (Abang'a and Taurangana 2024; Lee 2025; Lin et al. 2015; Nguyen et al. 2025) with this research strategy. Regulatory effects of board independence quotas should be analyzed in future studies, based on a difference-in-difference approach.

Research Question 2. *Does a critical mass of board independence, based on soft and hard law, influence CSR outcomes in (non) OECD countries and different board structures?*

Furthermore, we found a limited inclusion of heterogeneity analyses in board independence and discovered little about specific characteristics of independent directors and their impact on CSR. A few studies recognized the relationship between independent director networks (Chen et al. 2025), independent coopted directors (El Saleh and Jurdi 2024), independent directors' meeting frequency (Fahad and Rahman 2020), and reputational incentives (Khoo et al. 2022) on CSR. There should be future inclusion of observable attributes, such as director age and nationality, and underlying attributes, such as these independent board members' levels of education and expertise (Fernandez-Gago et al. 2018). As foreign directors are assumed to be more independent than their domestic colleagues (Agyemang et al. 2025), a complementary relationship between board independence and nationality should be tested.

Moreover, boards of directors need an appropriate level of sustainability-related expertise and education to impact CSR outcomes positively (Al-Sarraf et al. 2025). Thus, future studies should measure independent directors' degree of sustainability skills and education. These skills should lead to increased monitoring quality of CSR issues and decreased probability of self-impression management. Furthermore, these heterogeneity analyses of board independence should recognize countries with different board structures, which mainly affect independent directors' monitoring practices.

Research Question 3. *Does board independence heterogeneity, such as independent director networks, influence CSR outcomes in one-tier and two-tier systems?*

5.2 | Extended CSR Variables

Most studies in our literature review have recognized total CSR outcomes, particularly CSR reporting. Sub-pillars of CSR, such as environmental performance, have been included to a lesser degree (e.g., Latella et al. 2025). With few exceptions (e.g., Shu and Chiang 2020; Lin et al. 2015), the social pillar of CSR was neglected in this research topic. The unbalanced recognition of environmental issues (e.g., climate reporting) compared with social efforts (e.g., human rights reporting) may be explained by major differences regarding quantification, learning effects, and regulations. Social topics tended to be linked with a lower degree of quantification, impaired comparability, and validity. As many countries have implemented mandatory codetermination within board of directors, analyses of the impact of board independence on employee performance and reporting are justified (Shu and Chiang 2020). In light of increased regulatory and stakeholder pressure on sustainable supply chains, we identified only three studies in the literature review on the relationship between board independence and supply chain reporting (Benjamin et al. 2020; Cai et al. 2023; Sebastinelli and Tamimi 2020). Supply chain reporting refers to extended resources and management processes that lead to increased monitoring by the board of directors. As research results are assumed to be mainly different in OECD and non-OECD countries, there should be more emphasis placed on these country effects.

Research Question 4. *Does board independence increase the social pillar of CSR reporting and performance (such as employee satisfaction, supplier relationships) in (non) OECD member states?*

Another research recommendation is linked with CSR decoupling as the difference between external CSR actions (reporting) and internal CSR efforts (performance) (Sauerwald and Sun 2019; Walker and Wan 2012). CSR decoupling can be differentiated further between greenwashing (positive difference) and brownwashing (negative difference). In line with legitimacy theory, CSR decoupling relates to symbolic use of CSR for self-impression management. As CSR decoupling contrasts with stakeholder demands, it is questionable whether stricter monitoring by independent directors decreases the CSR decoupling level. Few studies in this literature review have analyzed the impact of board independence on greenwashing (Ghitti et al. 2024; Ma et al. 2025) and environmental decoupling (Pisano et al. 2025; Taglialatela et al. 2024) with inconclusive results. Therefore, future studies should analyze the impact of board independence on different levels of CSR decoupling and include country effects.

Research Question 5. *Does board independence influence the level of CSR decoupling (total, greenwashing, brownwashing, environmental, and social decoupling) in (non)-OECD countries?*

6 | Conclusions

6.1 | Summary

Since the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, we found an increased level of stakeholder and regulatory pressure on PIEs' boards of directors to promote CSR initiatives, leading to increased levels of CSR reporting and performance (Al Fadli et al. 2020; Agnese et al. 2026). Board independence represents one of the most prominent board attributes in this research topic (Agyemang et al. 2025). While extant literature reviews (e.g., Ludwig and Sassen 2022; Naciti et al. 2022; Pahuja et al. 2025) and meta-analyses (e.g., Boulourian et al. 2021; Dwekat et al. 2022) have analyzed various corporate governance variables' impact on CSR outcomes, a focus on the relationship between board independence and CSR was not examined, except for Ortas et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis. In light of the heterogeneous measurement of board independence, CSR, and inconclusive results, our aim was to conduct a structured literature review of 167 archival studies that synthesizes board independence evidence specifically through the lens of country effects. In contrast to a meta-analysis, we concentrate on the variety of different contexts, proxies, and underlying moderator variables. Based on legitimacy theory (Deegan et al. 2002), either a positive or negative impact from independent board members on CSR reporting and performance can be realistic. The significant direction is dependent on senior managers' potential symbolic or substantive use of CSR. While CSR reporting ("talk") may be linked to symbolic use of CSR, CSR performance ("walk") indicates real progress in substantive CSR management. Our aim was to analyze whether certain country effects, based on OECD membership and board structures, make a significant impact on symbolic vs. substantive use of CSR. Based on legitimacy theory, we assumed that the positive link between board independence, CSR performance, and CSR reporting is focused on OECD member countries and regimes with a mandatory one-tier system.

Our literature review indicated an emphasis on country-specific studies with a one-tier-system (e.g., Al-Sarraf et al. 2025) and dominant analyses of the ratio of board independence (e.g., Pham and Tran 2019) and CSR reporting (e.g., Abu Qa'dan and Suwaidan 2019). In line with legitimacy theory, we found a tendency toward a positive relationship between board independence, CSR reporting, and CSR performance in regimes with a mandatory one-tier system. Board independence tends to be more effective within corporations with a mandatory one-tier system, as these systems are related to potential conflicts of interest. Moreover, while OECD status did not make any impact on the positive link between board independence and CSR reporting ("talk"), board independence tends to increase CSR performance ("walk") only in OECD countries. These results correspond to legitimacy theory because firms in non-OECD countries may refer to symbolic use of CSR reporting and do not realize substantive CSR management and significant improvements in CSR performance due to lower stakeholder and regulatory pressure.

Our results open future discussions of specific country effects on the link between board independence and CSR. We identified major research gaps and presented useful recommendations for future research. First, researchers should extend their descriptions of measurements of board independence compared with nonexecutive and outside directors. Moreover, board independence should relate to other director characteristics, such as sustainability-related expertise and education. By relying on CSR measures, the included studies mainly recognized total CSR proxies, while a few studies also recognized environmental reporting and performance. In light of increased stakeholder and regulatory pressure, future researchers also should rely on the social pillars of CSR, such as employee and supply chain aspects. The impact of board independence on CSR decoupling as severe self-impression management also should be reflected to a greater extent.

6.2 | Our Study's Limitations

We stress some *limitations* in our paper, as the vote-counting method (Light and Smith 1971) only recognizes the number of significances and neglects sample or effect sizes. Moreover, increased heterogeneity in the sample sizes within included studies can be found. Cross-country studies with a higher level of observations tend to be related to an increased external validity compared with country-related designs and a lower volume of firm observations. Meta-analyses may decrease these limitations, based on statistical outcomes dependent on included studies' sample sizes. As we already identified one meta-analysis on board independence and CSR performance (Ortas et al. 2017), we aimed to structure the various board independence and CSR measures and focus on country effects through a structured literature review. Finally, we restricted the research on board independence and excluded independence on committees and individual characteristics (e.g., CEO duality).

6.3 | Practical Implications

Our study poses major *practical implications*. While inclusion of a specific quorum of independent directors on boards of directors usually is requested under national standards, boards of directors should be sensitive to include a threshold of at least 50% independent board members, in line with national corporate governance codes (Nguyen et al. 2025). In light of the restricted quality of corporate governance reporting, senior managers should feel more responsible for including detailed information on the degree of conflicts of interest among nonexecutive (outside) directors, which may lead to impaired independence among their members. Moreover, each board member's CV should be released to the public, and sustainability-related expertise and education should be considered carefully. Stakeholder demands on proper monitoring quality among senior managers, which should lead to increased CSR reporting and performance, depend on adequate levels of sustainability experts on boards.

6.4 | Regulatory Implications

The study's *regulatory implications* refer to the need for future harmonization of board independence regulations for diverse board systems and development levels. A broad range of different thresholds for mandatory inclusion of independent board members from PIEs can be inferred from a global perspective. This limits comparability and decision usefulness of corporate governance analyses by shareholders and other stakeholder groups. While the combined recognition of independence, financial expertise, and industry skills already has been addressed in some regulatory contexts, such as the European Union and the United States, there should be a better regulatory link between board independence and sustainability-related expertise. The current regulatory separation between stand-alone corporate governance statements and sustainability reports also should be changed to an integrated ESG disclosure framework. Consequently, stakeholders would be better informed on complementary vs. substitutive roles of board independence and independent directors' sustainability skills.

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Endnotes

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** csr70567-sup-0001-Appendix.docx.

Appendix A

Boolean Search Strings

board independence AND ESG performance (20/09/2025)

board independence AND ESG reporting (20/09/2025)

board independence AND ESG disclosure (20/09/2025)

board independence AND ESG (20/09/2025)

board independence AND CSR (20/09/2025)

board independence AND CSR performance (20/09/2025)

board independence AND CSR reporting (20/09/2025)

board independence AND CSR disclosure (20/09/2025)

board independence AND sustainability (20/09/2025)

board independence AND sustainability performance (20/09/2025)

board independence AND sustainability reporting (20/09/2025)

board independence AND corporate social responsibility (20/09/2025)

board independence AND environmental performance (20/09/2025)

board independence AND environmental reporting (20/09/2005)

board independence AND environmental disclosure (20/09/2005)

board independence AND social performance (20/09/2005)

board independence AND social reporting (20/09/2005)

board independence AND social disclosure (20/09/2005)
independent directors AND ESG performance (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND ESG reporting (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND ESG disclosure (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND ESG (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND CSR (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND CSR performance (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND CSR reporting (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND CSR disclosure (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND sustainability (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND sustainability performance (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND sustainability reporting (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND corporate social responsibility (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND environmental performance (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND environmental reporting (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND environmental disclosure (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND social performance (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND social reporting (01/10/2025)
independent directors AND social disclosure (01/10/2025)