

DIGITIZATION, FAST AND SLOW

Comparing the creation of digital public services
in Denmark, France and Germany

Corinna Funke

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to
obtaining the degree of Doctor of Political and Social
Sciences of the European University Institute

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Abstract

This thesis deals with the digitization of public services. It seeks to explain why some countries appear to digitize their public service offer at greater speed and with more ease than others, despite similar backgrounds in terms of wealth, IT infrastructure and administrative capacity. For this, the cases of Denmark, France and Germany are compared with respect to their implementation of encompassing, national systems for the provision of citizen-friendly public services online. The time frame under observation roughly covers the years 2000 until the late 2010s. Expert interviews and governmental documents form the basis for the analysis. The dominant administrative culture as well as the politico-administrative structure that governs responsibility for administrative service provision emerged as the principal forces to explain the speed and success of states' digitization efforts. A bureaucratic cultural legacy slows down the drive to digitize public services. A decentralized and incoherently organized administrative structure renders digitization more difficult, time-intensive and costly and leads to a disjointed service offer.

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01 | INTRODUCTION

As more of our societies' activities shift into the digital sphere, the more apparent it is that state administrations must follow suit. At the same time, the criteria by which a state may be considered capable of good governance are shifting. We all witnessed this, at times painfully, in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. With mandatory social distancing in place, many formerly analogue work routines shifted to online spaces. In particular, government services such as cash payouts to struggling firms, school education and contact tracing of infected individuals had to be digitized at lightning speed. Among other researchers comparing the efforts of states around the world to curb the pandemic by building and releasing contact-tracing apps, Cingolani (2022) observed that some governments fared far better than others (and some, far worse). She found that this performance was barely linked to prior levels of state capacity. Indeed, Cingolani's findings replicated the central findings of this thesis: first, that the conditions of good governance are shifting and with them, the countries that we can consider to be well-governed; and second, that public administration had to undergo in the past 20 years, a cultural and behavioural shift.

The interest of this thesis lies with the question of how states and their administrations have so far adapted to the digital era that is already underway. It focuses on the time window between roughly the years 2000 and 2020. Much of what constitutes modern bureaucracy was formed to fit the industrial age; prior to that, state administrations were small entities with a narrow focus on taxation, diplomacy and warfare. As the inventions of the industrial age changed the functioning of societies, public administrations evolved to satisfy these new demands by adopting the reliable mass administration of civil registries, business regulations and social welfare programs as their core. Citizens became workers, school children, pensioners and so forth. As such, the object of administrative procedures shifted to ensure the smooth functioning of a modern society. This paradigm is far from gone, but cracks are appearing. Some elements which steer bureaucratic operations appear to have become increasingly at odds with present circumstances, as many of us noticed in 2020 and 2021. How are states adapting to the digital era and why is it that some are undergoing those changes faster and more effectively than others?

The topic of this thesis is, thus, the digitization of public administration. More precisely, it traces differences between the implementation of digital public service reforms and seeks to unearth why some countries have achieved more success than others. The digitization of public services for citizens and businesses plays a key role in the new character of public administration, and public services is where change has been the most acute. This is not to say that open data, e-democracy and cybersecurity are not also domains of public sector digitization, but they will not be at the centre of

this study. In reference to the European Commission's Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), digital public services shall be defined as administrative services for citizens and businesses that can be, partly or entirely, conducted online. They include citizen obligations (e.g. tax declarations, notification of moving), rights (e.g. social benefits), official documents (e.g. ID cards, birth certificates), public education services (e.g. public libraries, information on enrolment in schools or universities) and public health services (e.g. public hospitals).

HOW I CAME TO THE TOPIC

This project has a backstory. In the fall of 2017, I was commissioned by a collective of municipal German job centres to conduct a study on the state of digitization in the administration of unemployment benefits in Germany and a selection of other European countries. I swiftly packed my suitcase and conducted case studies of local administrative services in a number of neighbouring countries. Interest in the research project had been sparked by Germany's *Onlinezugangverbesserungsgesetz* or "law on improving online access" (hereafter the Online Access Law or OZG), which had been passed by the *Bundestag* that summer. The law mandated the digitization of all administrative services by the end of 2022 as well as the creation of an internet portal system through which to access them. It caused a frenzy among Germany's public officials, who had comfortably lived and worked in a state of overwhelmingly analogue service provision up until then. Suddenly, they were to offer access to all of their public services online – and in only five years' time.

My study revealed that nearly all the countries sharing a border with Germany – Poland, the Netherlands, Austria and Denmark – had a head start of up to 20 years in many areas of public digitization. For instance, Denmark, leader of the digital avant-garde, digitized its public filing system as early as 2001; Germany was planning to do so by 2022. And the prospect of implementing the OZG more swiftly seemed unlikely. Despite its sizeable state budget, highly-trained and capable administrative bodies and digitally active society, Germany was missing all of the critical technological institutional infrastructure needed for the successful implementation of its Online Access Law. At the time, less than 15 percent of German citizens possessed an electronic identity card. The *DE-Postfach*, a state-funded secure online mailbox, suffered from an even smaller take-up and the and the Länder governments of the 16 German federated states could not agree on a national public service platform on which to offer their services.¹ Between two rival ministries, the chancellery and the ministry of the

¹ The German eID is integrated with the regular ID card but has to be expressly activated by its owner. In order to actually use it for online identification purposes, an additional card-reading device was needed at the time, which only 5 percent of Germans possessed as of 2017. https://initiated21.de/app/uploads/2017/10/egovernmentmonitor2017_20171129.pdf, accessed 27 May 2021

interior, a digital state secretary without a budget, an intergovernmental national IT Planning Council with no staff, 16 Länder governments and 400+ local governments, the institutional responsibility for implementing the necessary digital reform was unclear. And it quickly became clear that the multitude of file standards, software applications and local data registries already in place would require forceful standardization in order to implement the OZG – a gargantuan task.

How was it that the German administration had been dragging its heels – even avoiding – digital public sector reform for so long? A comparable project in Denmark, the national public services platform <https://www.borger.dk>, had already been launched in 2004. It combined an online citizen ID with a secure web mailbox for official documents and by 2017 had a take-up of over 90 percent (European Commission, 2015). How had Denmark managed to gain such a lead compared to its neighbour, Germany?

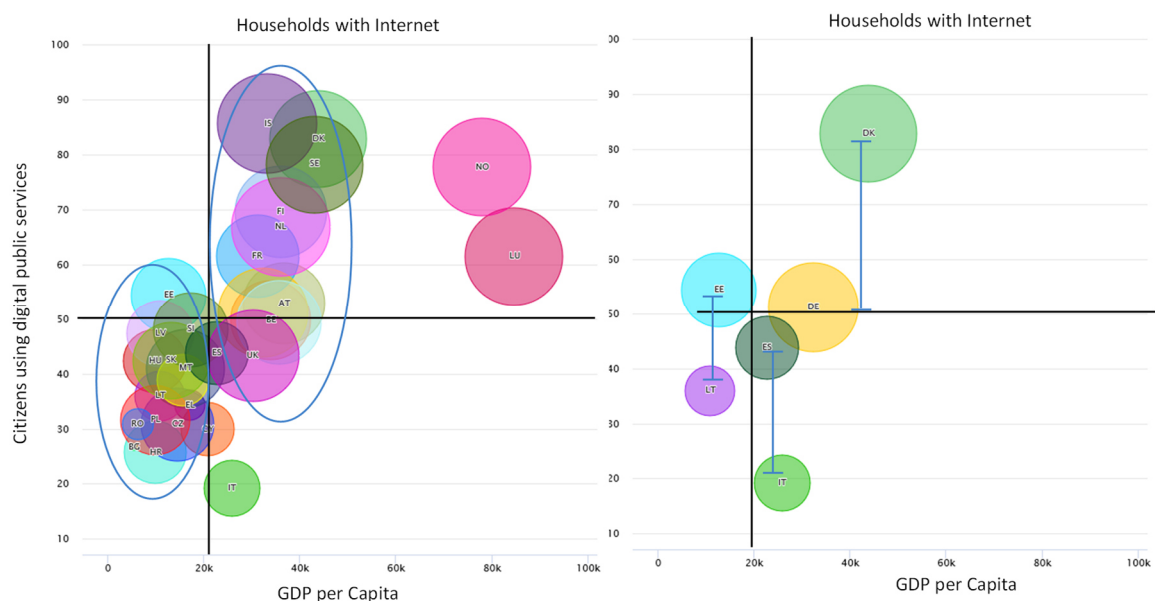
A PUZZLING CASE OF OVER- AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT

It might have been that Germany was only an odd case, but a comparison of all EU member countries pointed to a larger puzzle which revealed staggering differences in the extent of digital service provision without any obvious causal explanation to account for them. Equally well-funded and digitally-advanced countries scored very differently with respect to the digitization of their public service administration. Figure 1 plots the level of digital public service provision for each of the EU27, measured as the share of citizens who made use of some type of eGovernment service in the past 12 months. This includes, for example, registering a car or applying for social benefits. Measuring citizens' behaviour captures not only the existence of online service but also their actual use. This is relevant because good implementation can be evaluated very effectively this way: half-hearted or ill-functioning online service solutions that only nominally “tick the box” of public service digitization are filtered out and do not bias the results.² The differentials in eGovernment service use are enormous. While in some countries nearly 90 percent of citizens have used at least one online service in the past year, in others this applies to only 25 percent of citizens. Generally speaking, fully functioning, digitized online services are more likely to be the privilege of particularly affluent countries which can more easily afford to invest in their public sector. Furthermore, these countries' economies are more likely to feature competitive businesses investing in digital technology and pressuring their home countries'

² The difference between digitization efforts and the results that are actually achieved is a key point of this thesis. Other eGovernment indicators, which measure eGovernment progress at the policy output level as opposed to the outcome level, tend to paint a much more optimistic and equalized picture of eGovernment in Europe. Consider for example the results of the yearly eGovernment benchmark studies by Capgemini: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/485079>, accessed 17 January 2022.

public services to match these developments. And indeed, by using GDP per capita as a measure of the financial resources of the state and a competitive economy, two country clusters emerge. One cluster is made up of the wealthier European nations, the other of the poorer. These two clusters demonstrate that wealthy nations on average provide better digital state services, which is not surprising since investment into digital infrastructure is costly, at least in the initial stages.

FIGURE 1 | SHARE OF CITIZENS WHO USED DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICES IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS, 2018



And yet, these two factors alone cannot explain the staggering performance differentials *within* each cluster. Comparing country pairs with similar levels of affluence and access to the internet reveals that there must be more at play. Countries as similar as Estonia – a digital champion of modest means – and Lithuania are over 25 percentage points apart. Similarly, only 24 percent of Italians had made use of an eGovernment service in 2018, while 57 percent of Spaniards had done so. Comparing Germany with its smaller neighbour Denmark, the difference is even more extreme: 92 percent of Danish citizens had applied for a public service over the internet whereas only 56 percent of their German counterparts had done so within one year.³ This is in spite of the fact that, economically and culturally, these three country couples are about as close as two nations can be. At the same time, these countries have been highly comparable in terms of bureaucratic effectiveness – at least up to now. Germany in particular has been known for its efficiently run, rational and modern public administration for a long time. But apparently, its bureaucratic capability has not translated from the 20th century into the digital era. So, the puzzle at the core of this thesis can be summarized as follows: [Why are countries with similar potential performing so differently in the digitization of their public services?](#)

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature relevant to this research project falls broadly into one of the four following categories: firstly, there is an established literature of policy changes in general and, secondly, of administrative policy in particular. Digging deeper, it would be possible to approach the puzzle from the perspective of policy implementation rather than policy change. Lastly, there exists a specialized literature on the topic of eGovernment, which features overwhelmingly descriptive work about eGovernment reform projects and single-country case studies. These works offer a pool of best practice cases with detailed descriptive knowledge and recommendations for practitioners, but are light on comparative theory (see for example Igari 2014 or Scupola 2018).

When trying to account for divergent performance on any kind of policy measure, it is not unreasonable to turn first to the many established schools of thought in the literature on policy change. After all, administrative policy change constitutes but one particular type of policy change. However, these theories should be applied to digital public service reform with caution. Currently, the two most prominent strands of policy change research – into the link between policy output and public opinion on the one hand and party politics on the other – play little to no role in digital public service reform.

³ European Commission. (2019). Digital Scoreboard, indicator “Individuals interacting online with public authorities, last 12 months”, 2018.

The reason for this is that despite the hype around digitization, digital public service reform is not a salient political issue, as Paul Marx demonstrated in a study of EU citizens (Marx, 2019). Since it is not relevant to voters, parties avoid the topic meaning it does not feature in electoral campaigns and nor is it systematically found across party cleavages. Lacking voter salience, political policymaking on the topic of digital public service reform is sluggish (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Wolfe, 2012) and delegated to the sphere of administrative policymaking instead.⁴ In the absence of parliamentary involvement, administrative policymaking features different actors and its own institutional setting and legacies. For this reason, the literature on administrative reform has its own separate theories and, often, its own refined versions of common policy change theory (see for instance Heady 2001; Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017a).

Overall, the research discourse about administrative reform is divided into two opposing sub-fields. While some find convergence (Dunleavy, 2006; Mazur & Kopycinski, 2018; Osborne, 2010) when tracing the administrative reform trends of OECD countries, others see first and foremost divergence (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2014; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017a). For those who study patterns of convergence, public administration has run through at least three paradigmatic eras and is now on the verge of reorientation towards the next big international reform trend to span all developed states in a similar fashion (see for example Torfing et al. 2020). The story here goes that the post-war era of rational planning was supplanted by a new paradigm dubbed New Public Management (NPM), which aimed to cut public expenses and deliver customer-friendly public services in a lean and efficient manner (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2009). According to convergence theorists, we have now entered a post-NPM phase and can observe a change in the objective of national reform activities. To some, “Digital-era Government” (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, et al., 2006; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013) has taken over as THE international trend to shape administrative policy worldwide.⁵ While it is certainly true that organizations like the OECD and the European Commission (EC) are pushing for digital public service reforms, not all countries have heeded the call (Capgemini et al., 2010; United Nations, 2020). In some countries, like Estonia, Denmark and Austria, digitizing public administration has been made a top priority, followed for its own sake, which could credibly be presented as the new paradigm leading most reform activity. In other countries, like Germany and

⁴ This is not to say that digital public service reform always bypasses parliaments. In many instances (and in legalistic administrative systems more so than in the Anglo-Saxon countries, which are based on common law and ministerial discretion), some statutory “kick-off” for reform activities is needed, for example when reforms require administrative responsibilities to be transferred from local government to a central agency.

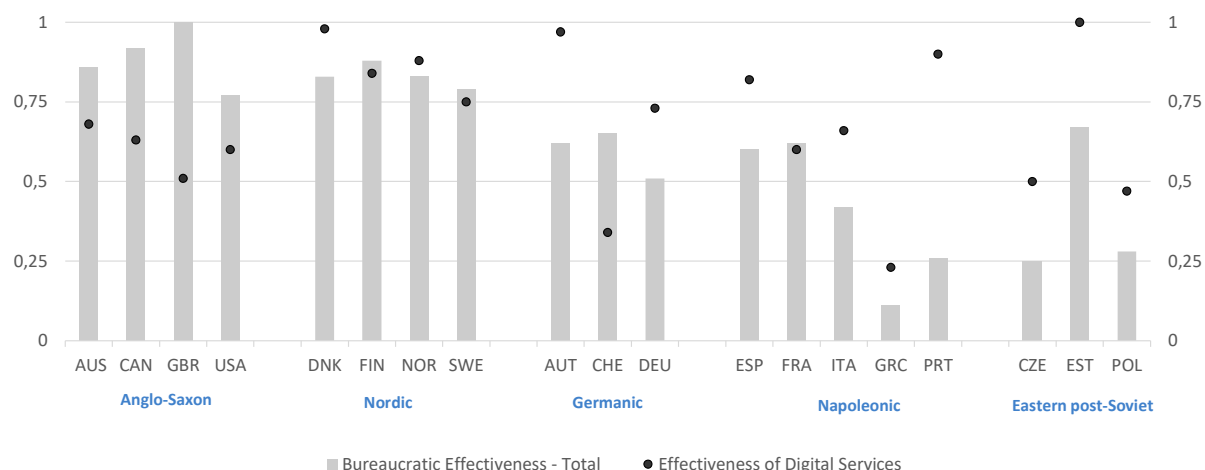
⁵ This claim does not go uncontested. Others consider “Governance” as the dominant contemporary reform trend (Osborne, 2010; Torfing et al., 2020)

Italy, change is made only to the degree that is legally required through EU law; digital public services appear to be nowhere near such a new reform paradigm. In these countries, “Neo-Weberian” reform efforts are suggested by some researchers as the more appropriate way of summing up the move away from NPM (Mazur & Kopycinski, 2018; Ongaro, 2009). And yet, in the past ten years virtually all European countries have made at least some effort to introduce digital public services, most even at increasing speed.⁶ So, overall, convergence on “digital era government”, as pushed by international organisations and viewed as the new reform paradigm in public administration, can explain why countries are generally moving in this direction. But the theoretical concept cannot explain why some, otherwise similar, countries are picking up on the trend faster than others.

For this reason, it seems that theories which instead highlight divergence in public sector reform are of greater relevance to the research question at hand. Why is eGovernment reform at the forefront in some countries and much less so in others? Influential scholars of public administration such as Guy Peters, Sabine Kuhlmann and Christopher Pollitt have concluded that already, during the NPM era, but even more clearly since its demise, countries or country groups have followed distinct “reform trajectories”. These country clusters share many similarities across their public administrations. They argue that the countries in each cluster follow the logic of an underlying ideal or “model type” pertaining to how to organize public administration. Depending on the fit of that inner logic, some models will be more welcoming of digital service reform than others. An Anglo-Saxon model has low expenses, takes a pragmatic approach to organizing bureaucracy, features market solutions and consumer choice while limiting government (Ongaro & Van Thiel, 2018). A Napoleonic or French model has a legalistic, centralized top-down administration (Bartoli, 2011; Ongaro, 2009); a Nordic model has high expenditure and a preference for universal, public solutions that accepts interventionist measures by the state (Veggeleland, 2007). A Continental-federal model is characterized by stark legalism, federalist structures and strong local governments; a Central and Eastern European model features newly-designed administrative regimes in the Baltics and the cultural legacy of the Soviet era in most other parts. Lastly is a south-east European model with a stronger Soviet legacy, weak local government and a higher incidence of corruption (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017a).

⁶ European Commission, Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) – Digital Public Service 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_5481, accessed 26 January 2022

FIGURE 2 | INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE EFFECTIVENESS (InCiSE) INDEX, 2019



Score: 0-1; 1 = Maximum. Source: International Civil Service Effectiveness (InCiSE) Index project, a collaboration between the Blavatnik School of Government and the Institute for Government, 2019. Belgium and the Netherlands are omitted, because their membership to any of the aforementioned administrative traditions is not as clear cut.

Figure 2 depicts two measures from the International Civil Service Effectiveness (InCiSE) Index. The index measures the capabilities of public administration and operationalizes digital services somewhat differently and less reliably than the DESI index.⁷ Still, it is useful for comparing the general administrative capacities of country groups and the more specific area of digital capacity. Generally speaking, the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries rank highly in terms of overall bureaucratic effectiveness. It is reasonable to assume that general bureaucratic capabilities would go hand in hand with effective digital services. And indeed, for the Nordic countries this is true. The Anglo-Saxon countries do not quite match their overall effectiveness, but at least attain consistently decent results on digital effectiveness. A notable exception is the United Kingdom, which notably underperforms on the measure of digital services. For the other country models, the picture is far more mixed and does not lend itself to much generalization between administrative regimes and digital service performance. But nor does digital service attainment appear to be a mere correlate of a country's overall bureaucratic effectiveness. So, there seems to be at least some relationship in the Nordic countries, and possibly the Anglo-Saxon countries, between effective bureaucracy in general and effective digital public services. But what the underlying connection precisely is which would explain why countries that belong to either of these two regime models perform above average remains dubious. Equally

⁷ The InCiSE Index for Digital Service Effectiveness is defined as "user-centricity and crossborder mobility of digitally-provided public services and the availability of 'key enablers'". It reuses data from the annual European eGovernment Benchmark Study and the UN's biennial E-Government Survey. For the European data, the index largely captures the digital services for only a small number of pre-defined services, making it more prone to biased results, not least because of conscious efforts of countries to selectively improve those target measures.

confusing is that all other regime models have at least one positive outlier: Portugal, Austria and Estonia are outperforming their respective regime groups. Administrative regime models thus deliver only a limited and highly unclear theoretical explanation for good performance in digital public services.

If administrative regime models cannot causally explain the divergence in eGovernment performance, it is advisable to abandon those models for a moment and instead study individual countries and their eGovernment reform trajectories. What common factor unites the high performers? From the descriptive literature on successful eGovernment reforms, we can gather a broad range of causal factors that may contribute to the implementation of effective digital public services. The most relevant ones can be grouped according to the following six categories: infrastructural preconditions, actors, culture, institutional legacy, political institutions and good organisation. Broadly speaking, these theories mirror the different “houses” found in the policy change literature. We shall assess them and their explanatory power for successful eGovernment reform one by one.

The line of argument that proposed infrastructural preconditions as the reason for why some countries are ahead of others in adopting a digital reform agenda follows a functionalistic logic. Functional explanations for policy change assume that structural contexts find their way into policymaking, regardless of institutions or political actors. They assume that the power of circumstance will channel itself into the politico-administrative system and create an impetus for change (Little, 1991). Indeed, it is obvious that infrastructural preconditions like internet access and the overall pervasiveness of the internet in the economy and society of a country are necessary prerequisites for the implementation of digital state services (Contini & Lanzara, 2008; Homburg, 2018). The logic behind this argument is that modernization within a society and its economy will sooner or later cause the state to catch up. It is furthermore likely that the necessary, costly investment into building and maintaining digital public infrastructure constitutes a prohibitive hurdle for poorer countries. Upon first sight, both hypotheses seem obvious and, indeed, a look back at Figure 1 reveals that this is at least partly true. The highest-ranking countries in digital public service implementation are among the richest in Europe and have highly digitized societies (Denmark, Sweden and Norway). The poorest European countries (Romania, Bulgaria), which are much less digitally advanced, rank at the bottom. But between the extremes the picture is far too mixed for a simple functional answer. Estonia outranks the UK and Italy is behind countries as disadvantaged as Slovakia and Portugal. It is hence clear that while infrastructural preconditions like money or internet diffusion may necessarily be required for the implementation of digital public services, there is no simple functional mechanism at work which

explains the detailed empirical picture of eGovernment reform in Europe.

Some administrative scholars argue that reforms need champions whose advocacy for them is based on strong ideational motivations (Homburg, 2018). In the realm of digital public service reform, it is already well-established that the critical actors are often high-ranking bureaucrats who put the issue on the agenda on their own initiative (Alcaide Muñoz, Rodríguez Bolívar 2018). Observation of the pivotal role played by chief policymakers, particularly ministerial mandarins, has been long-standing, ever since Hugh Hecló's analysis of actor networks in the policymaking process (Hecló & Wildavsky, 1974). The case of Estonia markedly shows how a single Baltic country pursued a very different policy trajectory to its otherwise highly similar neighbours because of influential, idea-driven actors who decided in the early 1990s to make the country a model of digital government (Ernsdorff & Berbec, 2007). However, the clustering of excellent eGovernment performance among all Nordic and nearly all Anglo-Saxon countries indicates that there is something more systematic at play that favours or pushes for digitizing reforms. It is possible that Estonia is an outlier precisely because of the influence of a strong actor or actors, but a purely agent-centric explanation clearly does not capture well enough the empirical picture of high and low performers in digital state services. Still, the eGovernment reform literature stresses that enthusiasts are imperative in propelling eGovernment reform, at least in the early stages (Bekkers & Homburg, 2007; Chung, 2020; Homburg, 2018).

Given the proliferation of digital public service innovation in both the Anglo-Saxon as well as the Nordic world, it is worth asking what could possibly unite the two to encourage actors to pursue digital public service reforms. Is it purely chance or is there some common cultural factor that exerts an influence on the potential drivers for eGovernment reform? The role of culture is one of the rare explanatory variables which has been systematically assessed in comparative research for its role in digital public sector reform (Fang Zhao et al., 2014; Khalil, 2011; Kovačić, 2005; Zhao, 2011). There is universal agreement that national cultures can be either particularly welcoming or inhospitable towards digitization in general and public sector digitization in particular. What elements of a nation's culture precisely determine its openness towards all things digital is, however, open for debate. Generally, these studies look for systematic links between certain wide-spread cultural norms and values on the one hand and eGovernment diffusion on the other. Zhao et al, for example, evaluate the impact of certain traits: performance orientation, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, in-group collectivism and future orientation. They find the last two to be significantly linked with both eGovernment development – a policy output measure – as well as with eParticipation – an outcome measure at the citizen level. Power distance also appears to have an effect, albeit not significantly so (Fang Zhao et al., 2014, pp. 1011–1013). Their results confirm earlier studies by Khalil (2011) and

Arslan (2009) who also find collectivist thought and large power distances to be (negatively) correlated with eGovernment diffusion. Methodologically, these studies are large- or medium-n studies that assess correlations between international measures of eGovernment, typically the UN eGovernment Survey, and catalogues of national value measures. For the latter, most rely either on Hofstede's classification of national cultures (Hofstede, 1984, 2003) or on the more recent GLOBE model by House et al. (2004). If we are to accept that intangible things like "national cultures" can be reliably measured and expressed as numeric indexes,⁸ then we can conclude, with some certainty, that there is indeed a connection between culture and eGovernment progress. What these studies lack, however, is a convincing causal narrative of how the normative environment of a country at large translates into the actions of governments (and their citizens).

For this, we turn to implementation studies that can possibly provide this missing link. The field of implementation research literature closely evaluates the conditions under which policy implementation projects succeed – or fail. Regarding the role of culture, Rothstein (1998) has shown that it is not so much the broad context of a national culture, but rather the narrower *organisational* culture of administrative agencies that makes the difference. In a comparative study in Sweden, he showed how the different organisational cultures of two agencies – cadre versus bureaucratic – affected implementation outcomes. In a similar vein, Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017a) have observed that administrative cultures can impact the outcomes of reform agendas. Where administrative personnel are open to change and willing to provide good public services to citizens, eGovernment projects are more likely to see the light of day. They go on to remark that the interaction between public officials and their citizens can also play a role in reform implementation, particularly in the arena of digital public services. Their proposition is that the high level of trust that citizens in Denmark, Sweden and Iceland experience with respect to their states may encourage policymakers to actively approach digital change (see also Svendsen, Svendsen, and Graeff 2012; Danish Foreign Ministry 2019). This compares with more "anxious" national citizens like the French and Germans who are far more hesitant when it comes to change in general and political reforms in particular (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017a). There, privacy and data protection are sensitive topics – much less than in Nordic countries. The digital excellence of Anglo-Saxon (and also Dutch) bureaucrats could possibly be to do with the generalist training they receive, which is said to encourage a more pragmatic customer-oriented view of public administration, rather than a legalistic and bureaucratic one (Ongaro et al., 2018). The Anglo-

⁸ See for example McSweeney (2002) for a critique of the arguably reductive logic behind Hofstede's quantitative operationalization of cultural traits. His criticism can similarly be applied to the GLOBE model.

Saxons are, moreover, particularly open towards private management consultants who will often push for hyped reform agendas (Pollitt, 2011). All of these factors could benefit the production of an administrative culture that tends towards digitizing public services.

But as with the actor-centric explanation, culture as the main cause for good eGovernment performance falls woefully short of explaining why such supposedly unlikely candidates as Austria, Spain and Portugal excel at digital reform while culturally similar countries are much further behind. Compare, for example, Austria with Germany, or Spain and Portugal with Italy. Those laggards hint at an entirely different story. Maybe the important question to ask is not what causes reform, but what prevents it. For this, implementation studies will typically point to an entirely different factor for successful reform implementation: the importance of effective organisation. In their seminal piece on how “great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland” Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) describe in painstaking detail how an overcomplicated governance structure that involves too many actors can be noxious for an implementation project, even when everyone involved is committed to its success. From institutional theory we know that a higher number of (open) veto points is detrimental to policy change (Immergut, 1990; Tsebelis, 2000); the same is likely to apply to policy implementation. From Fritz Scharpf we know that federalism, decentralization and the resulting complexity for policymaking can put a stopper on swift and large-scale change (Scharpf et al., 1977). According to Arend Lijphart, one strength of decentralized consensus democracies is in creating broad coalitions for political changes (Lijphart, 2012), but for eGovernment implementation it appears that consensual, federal and decentralized systems render decision-making more demanding. The reason is that federal or unitary-but-decentralized administrative systems do not have a natural locus from which to steer eGovernment reform (Egeberg, 1999; Hölterhoff et al., 2017). State digitization, however, requires a large degree of standardization and central, monopolistic infrastructures. Organizing it across multiple horizontal actors without one clear broker is difficult (Sjöblom & Jensen, 2019). The usual routine of delegating reform responsibilities down to the meso- or local level – the *modus vivendi* of any decentralized system – can create multitudes of incompatible IT solutions or, when local actors lack resources, even none at all (Mergel, 2021). Legacy investments can also create technological path dependencies that become increasingly hard to unravel over time (David, 1994; Pierson, 2000). This is why centrifugal political institutions often come with decentralized digital “policy legacies” (North 1990) that prove difficult to render interoperable (Yannis, 2010).⁹ By contrast, unitary

⁹ Interoperability refers to “the ability of two or more [IT] systems or components to exchange information and to use the information that has been exchanged” (Diallo et al., 2011, p. 84).

countries like Denmark, France and Estonia profited immensely in their reform activities from having central data registries, interoperable software and file standards (Weerakkody & Reddick, 2013). Facilitating ICT institutions (so-called “key enablers”, like a secure digital citizen identity or a national government service platform) are, in the eyes of the EC, the main reason why some countries developed digital public services much faster and more successfully than those which initially lacked these basic institutions.¹⁰

It seems clear that federalism and decentralization can become institutional obstacles for digital public service reform because they go against the centralist logic offered by digital services. However, all Nordic countries are highly decentralized, and while Austria is a federal country like Germany, it fares much better. Evidently, there are ways around seemingly prohibitive political institutions and institutional legacies. According to many authors of the eGovernment reform literature, the key lies in the clever organisation of digital reform projects (Clarke, 2017; Dawes & Pardo, 2002; Gil-Garcia, 2012; Meyerhoff Nielsen, 2019). Temporary project units or special organisations at the national level that run across departmental silos and vertical state structures can produce an effect similar to a centralized, majoritarian administrative system. The establishment of an effective, competent, strongly mandated and financially as well as politically powerful single broker has often been described as the base of a digital success story. Its role is to take in and harmonize the input of all administrative actors, and it should be able to implement binding decisions (Cepiku et al., 2013; Hölterhoff et al., 2017). But how much can be learned from such best-practice cases? Returning to the heroic policy enthusiasts mentioned above, the question arises as to whether such lessons can be applied to any other country. Are they guidelines that can be implemented at will or do those best practice cases merely constitute observations of which organisational backgrounds are beneficial – but without great hope of copying them in a swift manner to other contexts? In other words, whether good reform organisation can “heal” the institutional, structural and cultural ills in all circumstances cannot simply be learned from successful case studies, because they typically do not report when this fix did not work. Such is the case when selecting by dependent variable alone and restricting the choice to positive outcomes. This is why in order to discern what is really required for a successful transition to digital era governance, a more rigorously comparative approach is required.

A THEORY TO MAKE SENSE OF THE EMPIRICS

¹⁰ This information stems from an interview that was conducted with a representative from the European Commission’s Directorate General in charge of public sector digitization in the explorative phase of this thesis.

In order to come up with a convincing account of what makes or breaks eGovernment reform, three things are needed. First, a closer look not only at the frontrunners, but also the laggards. This requires, secondly, awareness of the fact that positive reform outcomes are continuously evolving because policy change is happening ubiquitously. By 2020 most, if not all, affluent states had committed themselves to modernizing their administrations and rolled out at least some digital services for citizens and businesses. And third, we need robust measurement that leaves little wiggle room for reform indicators massaged by shallow IT implementation projects which achieve little impact in reality.¹¹ Luckily, the European Commission conducts a regular household survey on ICT use that captures the implementation of digital public services at their most realistic.¹²

TABLE 1 | DIGITAL TRANSMISSION OF FILLED ADMINISTRATIVE FORMS 2010, 2019

Rank	Country	Digital administrative forms (2010)	Country	Digital administrative forms (2019)
1	Denmark	59 %	Iceland	80 %
2	Iceland	58 %	Sweden	77 %
3	Norway	49 %	Estonia	74 %
4	Netherlands	43 %	Denmark	74 %
5	France	40 %	Finland	72 %
6	Finland	39 %	Norway	68 %
7	Estonia	38 %	France	64 %
8	Sweden	37 %	Netherlands	58 %
9	Ireland	27 %	Latvia	56 %
10	Luxembourg	23 %	Ireland	55 %
11	United Kingdom	23 %	United Kingdom	51 %
12	Germany	23 %	Austria	47 %
13	Belgium	22 %	Spain	47 %

¹¹ According to an explorative interview that was conducted with the European Commission's Directorate General in charge of public sector digitization, countries have adapted to the performance measures of the yearly eGovernment Benchmark Study by producing digital service specifically for its narrow range of eight life events. As a result, some countries' results on the eGovernment Benchmark indicators have a positive bias compared to indicators that capture eGovernment use on a broader scale.

¹² Eurostat, EU survey on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in households and by individuals (ISOC_I), 2002-2021, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/isoc_i_esms.htm#:~:text=The%20EU%20survey%20on%20the,in%20households%20and%20by%20individuals, accessed 24 December 2021.

14	Austria	20 %	Lithuania	43 %
15	Slovakia	20 %	Belgium	40 %
16	Portugal	19 %	Hungary	39 %
17	Lithuania	17 %	Luxembourg	36 %
18	Hungary	17 %	Poland	31 %
19	Spain	16 %	Portugal	30 %
20	Malta	15 %	Greece	28 %
21	Latvia	14 %	Malta	28 %
22	Slovenia	12 %	Czechia	25 %
23	Poland	10 %	Slovenia	21 %
24	Greece	7 %	Germany	21 %
25	Croatia	7 %	Croatia	19 %
26	Italy	7 %	Slovakia	18 %
27	Czechia	6 %	Italy	14 %

Source: Eurostat, Indicator "Internet use: submitting completed forms (last 12 months)", 2020.

Its most demanding indicator measures the share of adult citizens who were able to use the internet to transmit completed forms to an administrative authority in the past 12 months, for example when filing their taxes or applying for a permit. This captures not only the existence of an online service, but also validates its usability and recognition among citizens. Table 1 displays the data for the year 2010 and the year 2019. Two things jump to the eye: On the whole, European member states have made good progress. But Germany has not, falling back not only on the ranking scale but also in absolute terms. While in 2010 23 per cent of citizens had submitted administrative forms online (ranking position 12), in 2019 this was true only for 21 per cent (ranking position 24). Whether this curious drop is due to measuring error or an actual deterioration is hard to say, but it showcases the lack of progress in Germany, particularly when compared to its European neighbours.

What kind of theoretical argument can be drawn from these observations? A cursory dive into Germany's trouble with digital service reform assigns the blame to an unfortunate politico-administrative setting: Germany's problem is, so it goes, that it is a large, federal country with a high degree of local autonomy in the provision of administrative services (Mergel 2021). The theory behind this argument is that too many cooks spoil the broth. Given that digital public service reform is a cross-

cutting policy project, it involves all those administrative actors that are in charge of (analogue) service execution. In a big, federal, decentralized country this brings a prohibitive number of actors to the policy implementation table. To make matters worse, a large number of actors poses a particularly dire problem for the implementation of a digital reform agenda since digital solutions thrive on standards and central platforms – something that requires agreement among all of those who are involved. The idea that country size, federal administrative structures and strong local self-government are the bane of Germany's digital public service reform efforts is, conversely, strengthened when considering the high achievers in the digital public service ranking. Among the top six, we find exclusively small, unitary countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Sweden and Estonia all fit this mould.

And yet, the pervasive success of Nordic countries points to yet another causal story – one that has nothing to do with administrative structures. Indeed, case reports about digital public sector high-achievers like Denmark tend to highlight a particularly Nordic administrative culture which is said by some to form the foundation of their ambitious and successful digital reform activities (e.g. Scupola 2018; for comparative studies see: Khalil 2011; Kumar et al. 2020). This literature suggests that Nordic administrative culture is more open to change in general and the internet in particular (Bolgherini, 2007; Rose et al., 2015; Rose & Persson, 2012). Like the Anglo-Saxon administrative tradition, the Nordic administrative tradition has been more heavily informed by the NPM reform discourse of the 1980s and 1990s than its Continental counterparts (Verhoest, 2016). In members of the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic administrative regime group, NPM-style reforms have instilled a relatively young legacy of prioritizing efficiency with a focus on output and service orientation that takes inspiration from the private sector (H. F. Hansen, 2011). Efficiency in the context of the state as opposed to a private business is meant to mean increasing government sector productivity at stable or even lower costs for the taxpayer (Dunleavy & Carrera, 2013). The theory which connects this administrative tradition with good digital public service outcomes asserts that the specific cultural norms of the Nordic (and Anglo-Saxon) administrative traditions fit particularly well with the ideals of a user-friendly digitized public administration.¹³ And indeed, at a global level, it is countries that follow in the footsteps of the Anglo-Saxon administrative tradition (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) that are found at the top of eGovernment rankings (United Nations 2020). The flip side is that the more traditionally bureaucratic norms that govern the inner logic of the Napoleonic, Germanic and Central European administrative traditions – namely, legalism and procedural correctness, written files, hierarchical order and a

¹³ For a similar argument, albeit applied to NPM, see for example Christensen and Lægreid (2001) or Bouckaert (2007). They argue that there is a specific cultural fit between the values of NPM and the prevalent norms and values of certain politico-administrative regimes.

separation between the private and the public sphere – are not a good fit for a digital overhaul of public administration.

In brief, the guiding theory of this thesis is a twofold argument:

- 1) **Federal and decentralized politico-administrative structures** put a stopper on digital public service implementation because they increase the number of administrative actors that are required to be involved, which in turn makes it harder to agree on common IT standards. Unitary and centralized structures on the other hand ought to facilitate the implementation of digital public services.

Hypothesis 1a: Federal and decentralized countries take longer to implement digital public service reforms and thus exhibit lower use of digital public services to this day.

Hypothesis 1b: Unitary and centralized countries are faster and more successful in their digital public service implementation and have thus attained higher rates of digital public service use.

- 2) An **administrative culture** which is underpinned by digital-friendly norms like service-orientation, efficiency and a pragmatic focus on outcomes favours the fostering of digital reform projects by public administrations. Formulated in the negative sense, a classically bureaucratic administrative culture appears to stand in the way of implementing user-friendly digital public services.

Hypothesis 2a: Countries with a traditionally service-oriented administrative culture have attained a higher output of digital public services.

Hypothesis 2b: Countries with a traditionally bureaucratic administrative culture have a lower output of digital public services.

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODS AND CASE SELECTION

As so often in political science research, the number of potentially influential variables is vast, while cases are limited. For this reason, the research design has been modelled accordingly as a qualitative comparison of three case studies. These three cases allow for coupled comparisons to accommodate the two rival theories about what drives digital public service reform: an administration's structures or culture. We follow the implementation process of three similar public digitization projects in Germany, Denmark and France to try to single out the most influential factor(s) that determine how quickly and successfully modern administrations transition to digital era governance.

This transition has to be measured somehow, but adequately capturing reform output is no triviality (Vedung, 2017, pp. 121-pp). In fact, much public policy research suffers from a lack of data about reform implementations (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017a, p. 36). Luckily, high-quality comparable data about a range of eGovernment policy indicators is available at the outcome level for 193 country cases through the UN eGovernment survey and by Eurostat for the EU27. Several domains are covered by eGovernment policy, such as open data, eDemocracy, state IT infrastructure and cybersecurity (Ramaprasad et al., 2015). Here, digital public services will be the main focus, because they can be most accurately measured at the outcome level of the citizen. Furthermore, limiting research to the realm of the European Union (EU) comes with considerable advantages. First, its data on citizens' take-up of eGovernment is highly reliable as it stems from the same annual survey that measures policy outcomes at the household level. This is in contrast to the UN eGovernment survey which has to rely on expert testimonies (United Nations, 2020). Second, by virtue of limiting the analysis to the legal context of the EU, variations in data protection legislation are taken out of the equation. More importantly, the EU provides a common starting point for reform efforts with the Malmö Declaration of 2009 and the subsequent eGovernment action plan 2011-15.¹⁴ Assuming a common environment for policy diffusion, we can interpret the time since then as a fair competition of policy implementation between European nations, spurred on by EU legislation and assessed by an annual performance ranking. The drawback is that the maximum case number is limited to 27, thereby squashing any hopes for conducting a large-n analysis to single out the most relevant causal factor for successful eGovernment. However, this outcome-level data is important for assessing the dependent variable. It offers an excellent base for assessing and ranking eGovernment achievement across countries and it guides the selection of cases for qualitative research.

However, qualitative research can run into similar problems given that the research literature lists quite a few plausible explanations for the different outcomes in digital public services. This means that a case-based approach is likely to run into the so-called "small-n-problem", defined as the conundrum of gaining reliable theoretical insights when observations are few but explanatory factors abundant (Collier 2004). In case-based research, a solution to this problem is often to minimize variation. This happens by means of selecting cases that mute alternative explanation through a most-similar or a most-different design (Mill 1843/1872). But this procedure assumes prior certainty about

¹⁴ European Commission. 2009. "eGovernment Declaration." Malmö. <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/policies/egovernment>, accessed 23 December 2021.

European Commission. 2010. "The European eGovernment Action Plan 2011-2015." Brussels, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0743:FIN:EN:PDF>, accessed 23 December 2021.

which explanation, among several contenders, is the right one to test. In this project, the literature is highly divided on the most relevant explanation for differences between eGovernment progress in European countries (heroic actors, the general baseline of administrative capacity, political institutions, culture or good organisation). At worst, a case-based approach with purposeful case sampling will lead to biased results that only reproduce prior assumptions (Geddes 1990).

In order to circumvent this risk, the research design of this thesis borrowed from Lieberman's iterative approach to comparative case research that stresses the importance of exploration prior to committing to any particular theory (Lieberman 2005). The research behind this thesis broadly followed this approach. Quantitative data from Eurostat and the UN eGovernment survey were used to weigh different measures of performance indicator against one another. Based on a robust performance ranking (see Table 1), explorative interviews with country experts from Germany and Denmark and an eGovernment expert at the EU level followed.¹⁵ Germany and Denmark were selected as best- and worst-case scenarios with similar levels of bureaucratic capacity, affluence, internet diffusion and business digitization. Austria was added as a second most-similar case to contrast with Germany as the two countries share many cultural and political similarities, yet Austria fares better with respect to eGovernment reform. This was done in order to gather insight into factors for success as well as failure, since these need not necessarily be the same (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 39). An explorative, cursory dive into each country case served to eliminate several prior hypotheses such as country size, legal background or the importance of private-sector digitization.

Two distinct hypotheses emerged from the exploration. The Danish pre-study pointed to the predominance of a service-oriented administrative culture for successful eGovernment reform. The German pre-study on the other hand stressed the overbearing influence of its federal state structure. The Austrian pre-study was inconclusive. As it turns out, the Austrian federal structure is much weaker than Germany's – particularly in the area of citizens' services and IT infrastructure it resembles unitary Denmark more closely than federal Germany. Furthermore, a different administrative tradition was repeatedly stressed, which contrasted the strict, bureaucratic Prussian heritage of Germany with a

¹⁵EU level: 45 minute telephone interview with Miguel Alvarez-Rodriguez, employee at EU Directorate General for Informatics, Unit D.2 "Interoperability", charged with monitoring country activities to implement interoperable standards for digital public services, 20 March 2019.

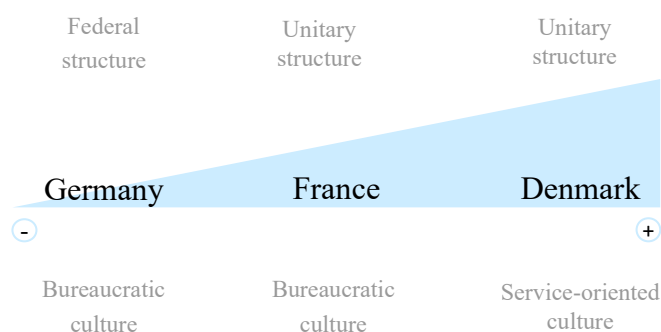
Germany: 45 minute video interview with Jörn Riedel, Chief Information Officer for Hamburg state administration, charged with implementing eGovernment reforms, 05 June 2018

Austria: 60 minute video interview with Robert Krimmer, Professor of eGovernment at the University of Tallinn, 16 October 2019

Denmark: 60 minute interview with Lone Skak-Norskov, Danish counsellor of embassy and formerly at Danish Ministry of Finance, responsible for eGovernment project of Danish online portal for digital public services, 05 June 2018.

more relaxed administrative culture in Austria. In striking out neither of the two rival hypotheses, the Austrian pre-study instead supported both equally.

FIGURE 3 | CASE SELECTION



As a solution, in order to evaluate the role of state structures next to the role of administrative culture, Austria was replaced by a different, third case study. France shares a starkly bureaucratic culture with Germany but its unitary state structure resembles Denmark. As such, France served a double purpose, forming two comparative couplets, one with Germany and one with Denmark. By contrasting France with Germany, administrative culture could be “held still” for the role of state structures to emerge more clearly. But given that the cases were being observed in a qualitative manner, it was also possible to compare whether bureaucratic culture is unfolding in the same way in both countries. The same holds true for France and Denmark, albeit the other way round. In this matched couplet, it was possible to study the effect of different administrative cultures under the circumstance of similar state structures. This research design borrows heavily from Skocpol (2015) and Thelen (2004), who used matched couples to vary the causal factor of their interest. In this way the research design approximates a treatment effect by means of varying one potential causal variable between two otherwise highly similar cases.

For each case, a key eGovernment reform project was selected, along which the case was then conducted. In all three cases the specific reform project was the same, namely the digitization of administrative services and their provision through a user-friendly internet portal or system of portals. These multi-faceted reform processes included many steps and side-projects, like e.g. the dissemination of digital identity solutions, crafting online service standards and so forth. But in all three countries these reform processes could be, at least partially, summed up by the erection a nationally recognized online service portal. For Denmark this was *borger.dk*, for France *service-public.fr* and in Germany the network of a federal and 16 state portals (“*Portalverbund*”). Although administrative

internet portals have eventually been recognized as less than ideal¹⁶ “vessels” for digital public services, their widely-recognized names served as a useful *pars pro toto* during the interviews that were conducted in this research project. This helped to ensure that this comparative study truly did compare a similar thing across three different countries.

These three country cases were studied chronologically, within their wider historical context and as “thickly” as possible (Geertz, 1973). This was for two reasons. First, by narrowing down country cases to reform implementation, they were rendered as similar as possible, which allowed for the assumption that the same causes had the same effects. Second, it is only in the specifics of a reform project that causal process observations (Brady & Collier, 2004) can be made “researchable”. In attempting any statement about causality it’s necessary to hear or see the “smoking guns” of cause and effect.¹⁷ Only by following one contested, critical reform project from beginning to end, and by linking the causal process observations into a meaningful sequence can congruence be established (Beach & Pedersen, 2016).

The primary data through which the three case studies were used to assess the role of administrative culture and state structures comprise 53 semi-structured expert interviews. These were supplemented with a small-scale expert survey as well as governmental publications and parliamentary documents. The interview partners were selected for their personal participation in the implementation of their country’s respective digital public service portals. Interviewees’ affiliations included public administration, interest groups, politics, consulting and IT service providers. About half of the interviewees were purposefully selected to represent the key organisations which were involved in each country’s respective implementation project. The others were snowballed with the aim of covering all state levels and possible perspectives (state, interest group, private contractors). In a semi-structured setting, these practical experts from the “battlefield of eGovernment implementation” were asked to assess how well their country was doing in implementing digital public services and why this was so. They were asked to speak in detail about factors they perceived as helpful or obstructive

¹⁶ This is because, as pointed out by Patrick Dunleavy, the big commercial search engines like Google are simply more effective at finding the desired public service that a citizen might look for. The internal search mechanisms or ordering systems of Digital One-stop-shops, run by the state, simply cannot compete with them from a user’s perspective. Yet, for nearly two decades they set the model for how digital public services ought to be provided online.

¹⁷ The primary purpose of the case studies was to confirm (or reject) the theoretical model. On top of that, the case studies should also deliver a causal link between cause and outcome. This is because proving the correlation of cause and outcome is not yet enough to prove causality, as Beach and Pedersen (2016) point out in their work on qualitative case-based research. In their definition of qualitative research, this thesis design opts for the congruence approach of showing causality. Congruence implies that both the existence of the cause and of the outcome must be proven within the case(s) and preferably proof can be given for the first causing the latter. This shows why selecting reform projects as cases of eGovernment policy change for each country case is vital.

in their day-to-day experience and to weigh their importance with regard to the success of the implementation process. Their answers were coded and triangulated with a survey that each interview respondent was asked to answer additionally. Robust answers were those which showed up both in the survey as well as in the open section. Detailed information about the sampling process and the methods for conducting, documenting and interpreting the interview results can be found in Chapter 7. It furthermore provides the entirety of the interview data in an aggregate format for each country.

KEY FINDINGS BY COUNTRY

KEY EMPIRICAL FINDINGS FROM DENMARK

Denmark was driven towards digital public service reform earlier than other countries out of a motivation to preserve the financial stability of its generous welfare system and broad, high-quality public service offer. Since the ideas of NPM had taken a strong hold, a large state was not considered to be at odds with an efficient, cost-savvy public administration. Instead, administrative automation was considered an opportunity to keep the generous public service offer financially sustainable. In the 2000s, Denmark erected a coherent national IT environment for the online provision of public services. The technological cornerstones were a common eID solution, *NemID* (which translates as “easy Identification”) and a national web platform, *borger.dk*, which served as a one-stop-shop for all digital public services and as a connector to local or agency-specific websites. Later on, a data sharing mechanism was added that helped to further simplify and improve the quality of Denmark’s online service offer by reducing the need for users to input data. The website *borger.dk* was supplemented with a secure email post box for the transmission of official documents, the use of which was mandated in 2014 in order to save money on paper-based processes. The coherent technological landscape behind *borger.dk* benefited enormously from central IT legacies, notably a unified data registry system complete with national citizen identification numbers (“CPR Number”) and a consolidated landscape of public IT providers, which in turn were the result of decades of coherent management of state IT. Today’s digital public service offer in Denmark attains very high user rates and is cherished by Danish citizens because of its simple and pleasant design. The secret behind the excellent output was the coming together of a citizen-centric administrative culture with beneficial administrative structures which allowed for the coherent and citizen-focused implementation of digital public services. Implementation was headed by a powerful intra-state committee for IT which dictated national solutions. It was supported by a national Digitization Agency which united relevant IT and project management skills so as to lessen dependence on private contractors. Both actors enjoyed high legitimacy during roll-out thanks to the inclusion of all state tiers in the decision-making process and a

broad consensus on improving citizen services and achieving efficiency gains.

KEY EMPIRICAL FINDINGS FROM FRANCE

Politicians and centralisation kick-started digital public service reform in France, but a hierarchical administrative culture coupled with deep divisions within the administrative structure cost the country its head start. France started its public digitization efforts early thanks to the political initiatives of president Mitterrand, but lost momentum in the implementation phase. A legalistic, top-down, administrative culture stunted interest in really providing citizen-oriented public services as well as hindering pragmatic collaboration across administrative domains that were needed to build a user-friendly, coherent digital service offer. Instead, a seemingly centralized – but in reality, horizontally divided – executive balkanized responsibility for public digitization and, consequently, the reform output. The result was several botched, aborted or failed public IT projects which brought public digitization efforts to a near halt between 2008 and 2013. A turn-around was only achieved thanks to outside intervention. A group of private sector mavericks were brought in by the incumbent prime minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, in order to “hack” the civil service after yet another catastrophic IT failure (this time, a botched open data portal). By implementing innovative institutional solutions, these individuals precipitated a paradigmatic cultural change. These solutions comprised so-called “state start-ups” and an informal network dubbed “beta.gouv” to support a “coalition of the willing” across the administrative landscape. These two solutions bridged the divides between horizontally-fragmented administrative structures and propelled broader cultural change from bureaucratic to service-oriented. Still, vertical divisions in the state structure remain intact. For this reason, IT development still happens mostly in horizontal silos – thereby deepening the divisions between frontrunners and laggards. In short, French administrative culture is very slowly adapting to digital era governance, but its structures and embedded routines are more resistant to change.

KEY EMPIRICAL FINDINGS FROM GERMANY

Germany came late to the game of digital public service reform. Motivated by EU law-making and “ranking shame” rather than efficiency gains, it now has trouble catching up with the rest of the developed world. While other countries “took off”, Germany made virtually no progress with digital public service reform in the last ten years. This stagnation is entirely a problem of implementation, not of policymaking. Neither the German electorate, nor politicians have been an obstacle – everybody agreed that public services ought to be digitized sooner rather than later. Still, it took until 2017 for digital public service implementation to gain sufficient momentum, thanks to the passing of the federal Online Access Law. But ever since, Germany has found it particularly hard to implement a usable and coherent digital public service offer for its citizens and businesses – despite the best of intent. The

primary sources of concern are the twin legacies of disjointed, federal decision-making and long-standing federal IT, which take the form of disjointed IT solutions, a lack of standards and a large number of independent IT actors. These disjointed administrative structures shape technological choices. The decentralised system is not coordinated in the same coherent manner as Denmark, so each state level produces their own solution, which prevents the setting of national standards. That is because the project governance for the implementation of the Online Access Law copies typical decision structures, which are marked by ambivalence and tend to obstruct digitization purposes. Yes, there are intra-state committees for IT development, but all too often those committees lack the willpower to forego regional vanities and commit to a single, common solution. With a less bureaucratic culture, the federal administrative structures would not have been such a problem: existing intra-state institutions could easily have been used for the same decisions as those made by the Danish. But a mixture of paper-fixation, data-protection-angst and an asymmetrical conception of the state-citizen relationship has stood in the way of user-friendly decisions. Since the administrative structures in Germany are made of institutional steel, change is most likely to come from changing attitudes. As of now, the recognition that bureaucratic attitudes stand in the way of contemporary administration is blossoming among those who have made the first steps towards digital-era administration in Germany. But there is a long way to go. It is possible that the vertically fragmented technological choices of today will persist into the future and shape the institutional layout of German public administration in the digital age.

THE RESULTS IN A NUTSHELL

This study set out to assess the double hypothesis that 1) the administrative structure's degree of fragmentation and 2) the presence or absence of bureaucratic norms within the administrative culture of a country affect its success with digital public service implementation. The cases overall confirmed the hypotheses and helped to further refine the argument.

1) Administrative structure: Administrative structures turned out to have had a considerable influence on both the speed and success of digital public service reform implementation but also on the shape of the technological choices. Administrative structures revealed themselves to be distinct from political decision-making structures, as political action was in no case an obstacle to digital public service reform. For that reason, it made no difference per se whether a state was organized in a unitary or federal manner, because *political* veto played no role. Digital reform success (or failure) manifested during implementation, not during policymaking. For that reason, it was only the *administrative* structures which counted. These can be defined as the organizing principle that governs how the

implementation of political decisions and, notably, the provision of public services, is organized.¹⁸ These administrative structures are shaped by three elements: The distribution of the right to define how public services are to be implemented on the vertical axis of the state hierarchy, the degree of institutionalized horizontal coordination between its administrative units on the same hierarchical level and the management of existing divides.

The interplay of administrative structures and their management can result in coherent or disjointed administrative action. Disjointed administrative action can take the form of horizontal or vertical fragmentation, depending on the layout of the administrative structures. France, centralized and unitary, displayed disjointed administrative action with a lot of horizontal fragmentation, though recent decentralization efforts had also caused some vertical fragmentation for local government. In federal and decentralized Germany, coordination achieved coherent results at the horizontal level, but vertical fragmentation was very pronounced due to its strong institutional protection, leading to disjointed action along the vertical axis. Denmark, unitary but decentralized, was a symbiotic middle ground between the other two cases, uniting the best of both worlds and resulting in a very coherent implementation process for digital public services across the whole country.

2) Administrative culture: Besides administrative structures, administrative culture turned out to be the other hugely influential factor. In fact, this thesis presents the argument that certain administrative cultures are systematically linked with digital public service progress. That is because when an administrative culture reflects many of the norms of the digital-era ideal, it makes its public administration more accepting of digital changes because they “click” with its underlying norms. These norms are not randomly distributed, but instead can be organized into two sets. One set of norms forms a “bureaucratic” administrative culture, the other constitutes a contemporary “digital-era” culture. France and Germany turned out to both be still very much steeped in bureaucratic culture, despite some tentative changes in recent years (particularly in France). Danish administrative culture, on the other hand, was much more similar to the ideal of digital-era administrative culture. The reason for this is the cultural legacy of the Nordic administrative tradition. Administrative traditions with a pragmatic service orientation and which happened to be influenced by NPM (like the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic regimes) appeared to be better attuned to the implementation challenges of a digital-era administration because they value efficiency and citizen satisfaction. These traditions quickly and easily evolved into a digital-era administrative culture. A public administration whose tradition is better

¹⁸ Which state level (or actor) is usually regulated through the administrative code but sometimes, particularly in the German case, further regulated through the constitution.

described as bureaucratic however, will offer little intrinsic motivation to digitization and possibly even reject its impositions.

In summary, administrative structures and their management (administrative action) as well as the type of administrative culture are what decides over a country's speed and success in the digitization of its public services. Coherent administrative action (Denmark) is associated with good digital public service results, whereas disjointed administrative action (France, Germany) is associated with weaker results. Disjointed action can produce horizontally or vertically disjointed online presentation of public services, depending on whether a country's administrative structures are vertically (Germany) or horizontally fragmented (France). Still, regardless of how convenient or inconvenient the pre-existing administrative structures and cultures are for accommodating the digital rehaul of administrative services, their modernization is inevitable for a number of reasons: financial need, adaptive pressure from society and the economy, policy diffusion through supranational actors, and policy learning from advanced countries. In the long run, most if not all developed countries will digitize and partly automate the provision of their state services, both internally but also externally, vis-à-vis businesses and citizens. But the speed at which they achieve this, as well as the shape and quality of those digital administrative offers will differ considerably. Some will do much better than others. But undoing or amending at a later point in time the digital institutions that are being seeded at the moment will become increasingly hard. The digital futures of our public administrations are already taking shape today. Germany was an exemplary case in which the vast majority of administrative officials and technical staff in charge of digital public services reflected critically on the negative effects the existing German administrative structures were having on implementation output, even while they were incapable of changing the path of implementation. Administrative structures are very hard, if not entirely impossible, to overcome as they are heavily protected by strong institutions – constitutional regulation in the case of Germany. For this reason, digital-era governance has to be accommodated through a change in administrative cultures because it is – relatively speaking – the more pliable institution. Path dependencies were shown to also exist in the form cultural legacies. But they are less strictly shielded from change than structural path dependencies.

02 | ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS AND THEIR ROLE IN DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICE IMPLEMENTATION

This chapter lays out the fundamentals of the key explanatory force behind the varying levels of speed and success in the implementation of digital public services. It states why administrative systems are so important and goes on to present the commonly used characteristics of which they are made up. Their value for explaining digital public service reform success is critically assessed before the chapter concludes by proposing a new and slightly different framework that is better able to explain the empirical picture. At last, the three cases Germany, France and Denmark are fitted into the framework based on the results of the case studies

WHY CONSIDER ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS?

The digitization of states' public services is an administrative reform agenda par excellence. It is a reform agenda both for administration, but also largely thought up and enacted by public administration itself. Political decisions made in parliaments or by governments have here and there nudged public officials to get things started. But by and large, politics has affected the heterogenous landscape of public service digitization across countries with an otherwise modern and effective public administration to only a small degree.¹⁹ As such, any inquiry into the how and why of varied reform outcomes must primarily look towards administrative policymaking and implementation.²⁰ Both of these take place within the boundaries of the administrative system as opposed to the political system. And while these systems certainly overlap at times, a clear distinction can be made.

For the purposes of this study, the "administrative system" covers the entirety of a state's public administration: its ministerial bureaucracy, its intermediate and street-level bureaucracy as well as the cultural traditions and institutional structures in which they operate. An administrative system's principle of action is mostly devoid of partisan preferences and its governing institutions are distinct from political institutions. Again, some overlap exists in the political institution of, say, a federal political system, which naturally entails an administrative system whose administrative units are built alongside the same federal structures. But for the most part, the governing institutions of

¹⁹ The UN eGovernment Survey and the EU's DESI Index subcomponent Digital Public Services offers a good empirical overview of the state of public sector digitization.

²⁰ Administrative policymaking, as opposed to political policymaking, describes the decision-making processes that take place largely within administration and that do not show up on the political agendas of parliaments and governments. Its key actors are ministerial mandarins as opposed to elected officials. Implementation studies assess the role of street-level bureaucrats for the success of policies during their roll-out (Hecló & Wildavsky, 1974; Meyers et al., 2007; Rothstein, 1998).

administrative systems are only loosely linked (if at all) with those of the administrative system. The description and classification of administrative systems is one of the core strands in comparative administrative science, much like the study of political systems in comparative political science. Mapping their evolution attracts senior researchers in the field. Discussion of their characteristics and noticeable changes makes up a large segment of the research discourse in public administration (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2014; Peters, 2021; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 1999, 2004b, 2011, 2017a; Wollmann & Kuhlmann, 2019).

Just like political systems, these administrative systems serve as a vehicle to understand country differences in administrative practices or reform trajectories. There are three ways in which these systems are employed in comparative administrative studies. (1) Descriptively, as a means to map the empirical landscape of reality, and analytically, as a means to understand the causes of change or persistence. As an analytical variable, administrative systems have been studied as (2) a dependent variable and (3) as an explanatory factor. Studies which place administrative systems on the dependent side tend to be interested in the ways that administrative systems are shaped across time by different reform paradigms or other causal variables (Dunleavy, Margetts, Tinkler, et al., 2006; Pollitt, 2007; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2009). A common inquiry, for example, would look into the effects that a reform agenda like the NPM has had on a single or multiple regimes (Christensen & Lægreid, 2001). This line of research is particularly interested in the question of whether reforms have a converging effect or whether regimes remain bound by the particularities of their institutional setting. Studies which use administrative systems as an independent variable on the other hand, are curious as to whether certain administrative systems carry advantages or disadvantages for certain policy outcomes. The motivation behind such research is to understand where differences arise from but also to learn from optimal systems so that administrative practices that were found to be “helpful” can be spread beyond national borders.

This thesis leans more heavily on the side of using administrative systems as an explanatory force in order to understand why some countries attain vastly better results in the digitization of their public sectors than others, despite similar potential. For that purpose, this chapter will draw on the pre-existing descriptive work on administrative systems and present a slightly modified framework. For this, we shall look at the different ways of describing and classifying administrative systems, because there are competing but equally valid ways of doing this, depending on each respective researcher’s main focus of study. There are many classifications that are built on civil service schemes or on variants of local government. The focus of this particular study will be on those dimensions of administrative regimes that are likely to matter for the digitization of public sectors. The proposed

administrative regime will then be applied in the subsequent chapters as an explanatory framework through which to understand the different outcomes with respect to public sector digitization in the German, Danish and French case studies. The hypothesis behind this approach is that the differences in the cases' administrative systems explain the country differentials in digital public service outcomes.

However, it is important to remain conscious of the dual relationship between administrative systems and administrative reform, where either can serve as both a dependent and independent variable. Indeed, a key finding of the empirical chapters in this thesis was that ongoing reform activities to digitize public sector services create a positive feedback loop. Over the course of time, a growing number of digitization reform projects will affect the administrative system in which they are taking place, making them more "digital-friendly" than they were prior to such activities. Moving targets are not unheard of in social research and are instead rather common. But for causal analysis it is vital to establish the direction of influence between variables. If it is impossible to say whether A has been caused by B or whether it was not rather B moulding A, no convincing causal claim can be made. Luckily for this study, we can safely state that administrative systems predate the emergence of smartphones, high-speed internet and Big Data. For that reason, it is fair to assume the independence of administrative regimes as an explanatory framework – at least for a while. And yet, the case studies already showed early signs of digital public service reform causing changes within the analysed countries. Given that mapping the changes to existing administrative systems is crucial to empirically grounded research in public administration and policy studies, this thesis will also try and sketch how current systems are evolving – and will continue to evolve under the influence of digitization. Chapter 6 will elaborate on where we can start to see the converging effects of continuous digitization efforts across formerly very distinct administrative regimes, notably on the administrative culture which is being particularly affected by public sector digitization.

AN OVERVIEW OF ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS

The following section summarizes the current state of scholarly literature on administrative systems, focusing on those aspects that are likely to influence the implementation of public sector digitization reforms. It begins with an overview of administrative systems and their most prominent classifications. This is followed by a deeper dive into the cultural as well as the structural institutional features from which those classifications are built. Much of the literature in public administration research is set on grouping countries' administrative systems into regimes (or "models") based on varying characteristics. Classifications commonly differentiate between a Napoleonic regime, a federal Germanic-Continental (or Weberian) regime, a Nordic regime, and an Anglo-Saxon regime. Beyond those, different authors have suggested additional variations or subcategories, like a Southern-

European or South-East-European type (Kickert, 2011; Sotiropoulos, 2004), and a post-Soviet or Eastern-European type (Painter & Peters, 2010, p. 27; Wollmann, 1997; Wollmann & Lankina, 2003). In other parts of the world, an Islamic, a Latin-American and a Confucian administrative regime model have been identified (Minh Chau, 1996; Nef, 2007; Samier, 2017). In an overview of various authors' categorization systems, Kuhlmann and Wollmann (2019, pp. 17–18) alone count seven different approaches to modelling administrative regimes.

The different classifications are put together based on a range of legacy-producing institutions, which differ from scholar to scholar (compare for example Painter and Peters 2010 with Ongaro and Van Thiel 2018). Recurring institutional features, in the strict sense of the term, that reappear in most classifications, are the state's structures, the legal tradition and the existence of a separate sphere of administrative courts and law (König et al., 2014; Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019; Painter & Peters, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017a), the employment statutes for civil servants (Demmke & Moilanen, 2010) and the system for training and hiring public employees (Reichard & Schröter, 2021). These institutional features can be used to form single-dimensional systematizations, for example to sort countries solely based on their legal tradition into either "Continental European rule-of-law" or "Anglo-Saxon public interest" categories (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019, p. 13). Following this line, there are various classifications for subdimensions of administrative systems, like civil service regimes (Bekke et al., 1996) or local government regimes (Wayenberg & Kuhlmann, 2018). But those subdimensions can also be employed to form multi-dimensional administrative regime models (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019; Ongaro & Van Thiel, 2018; Painter & Peters, 2010). Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) go beyond the political-institutional structures and also include the style of government, the relations between ministers and their mandarins, the use of external policy advisors and the public service culture in their model. This is to demonstrate that there are many possible institutions on which to base a typology of public administrative regimes and, by consequence, a potentially infinite number of typologies for administrative systems. Table 2 provides an overview of some of the most widely recognized categorization schemes. It is an exemplary overview and by no means encompassing.

TABLE 2 | TYPOLOGIES OF ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS

Authors	Model dimensions	Country Groups	Interest of Comparison
Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019 (2014)	Culture (legal family and administrative culture)	Continental European Napoleonic	Public administration systems
	Institutions (Macro-structure of Public Administration)	Continental European Federal	

	Historical dimension (Administrative tradition)	Nordic Anglo-Saxon Central Eastern and South Eastern	
Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017 (2011, 2004, 1999)	State structure style of government, minister- mandarin relations, the use of external policy advisors and the public service culture	Continental-European- Napoleonic Continental-European- Federal Nordic Anglo-Saxon Central/Eastern European South-Eastern European	Public administration systems
Ongaro and van Thiel 2018	Political system, legal tradition, geography	Napoleonic Southern Europe Germanic Nordic Anglophone Central and Eastern European	Public administration systems
Peters 2021 (2018), Painter and Peters 2010	Nature of the state, legal or managerial steering, relationship between politics and public administration, service orientation of public servants, career patterns of public servants, role of social actors in influencing the bureaucracy, accountability	Napoleonic Germanic Scandinavian Anglo-American Soviet (also Latin American, Post- colonial South Asian & African, East Asian, Islamic)	Public administration traditions
Demmke and Moilanen (2010)	Regulation of public service personnel (legal status, career tracks, salary and tenure system)	South-Eastern and Mediterranean Continental Scandinavian Anglo-Saxon, Eastern European	Civil service systems

Adapted from Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019 (2014) and Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017, with own additions.

THE CULTURAL-INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION

Above, we outlined the hard, institutional features that make up administrative systems and which are regularly used for comparative analysis. But most of the categorizations in Table 2 also include a softer type of institution in the form of administrative culture. Administrative culture can be defined as the set of norms that governs interaction within public administrations and between public

administrations and citizens.²¹ It is to be applied, at least in the context of this thesis, to a country's public administration as a whole, treating it effectively like a large-scale organisation whose units are held together by a common spirit.²² This definition of administrative culture leans on Bouckaert and Pollitt (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017a, p. 48), although their operationalisation actually does not cover a wide set of norms but has been narrowed down to one key norm only – the question of whom public administration should serve: the public interest, corporate interests or the *Rechtsstaat*. Now, it is a theoretical debate in the field of institutional analysis as to what degree an ephemeral thing like culture can be considered an institution (Hay, 2008), and even if it can, how it could be measured (Peters, 2000). But at least with respect to organisational cultures, (Clegg & Hardy, 1999; Martin & Siehl, 1983; Schein, 1985, 1990, 2010) or national cultures (Hofstede 1984; 2003) good results have been attained in making such intangible things as norms, values and ideas measurable and thereby usable for comparative analysis (Peters 2000, 12). In the field of public administration, the COCOPS Executive Survey by Hammerschmid et al (2013) has made a valuable contribution to the mapping of civil servants' attitudes.

These and other authors have also demonstrated that the organisational culture of public administrations can have measurable outcomes on reform results (Hammerschmid et al., 2016; Howlett, 2003; Rothstein, 1998; Weaver & Rockman, 1993, 2010). Margetts (2012, p. 454) already observed ten years ago an association between adherence to NPM values in public administration and practices surrounding ICT contracting. A related observation is that national cultures on the whole appear to be related with progress in the field of eGovernment (Fang Zhao et al., 2014; Kovačić, 2005; Zhao, 2011). This all points to a causal relationship between the particular cultures of public administration systems and their adoption of ICT. Such a relationship would not come as a surprise as cross-sectoral evaluations of administrative reform processes have shown repeatedly that administrative cultures have a mediating effect on reform implementation (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004b, pp. 34–35)

²¹ This is not to be confused with “administrative style”, a term that instead refers more narrowly to the management practices that a single administrative agency adopts in its work (Bayerlein et al., 2020).

²² It should be noted that administrative cultures differ not just between countries but also within them. Different administrative bodies can have noticeably different organisational cultures, which may stem from varying educational backgrounds, professional roles or particular historical legacies (O.-P. Dwivedi, 2005, p. 23). Rothstein (1998), for instance, demonstrated in a vivid manner how two Swedish governmental agencies achieved vastly different results in the implementation of two policy projects because of their respective organisational cultures.

TABLE 3 | TYPOLOGIES OF ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURES

Authors	Model dimensions	Country Groups	Interest of Comparison
Pierre 1995 & Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017 (2011, 2004, 1999)	Relationship between administration and society, legal tradition	Public interest <i>Rechtsstaat</i> Corporatist/Pluralistic	Public administration cultures
König 2014	Dominant modus of administrative action	Legalism (Continental Europe) Managerialism (Anglo-American world)	Public administration cultures
Heady 1996, 2010	Relationship between administration and politics, legal system (Napoleonic versus Common Law)	Classic (bureaucratic) Administration Civic Culture-Administration	Public administration cultures
Arellano-Gault and del Castillo-Vega 2004	Handling of power in public administration	Anglo-Saxon Latin Scandinavian	Public administration cultures
Jann 2002 (1983)	Interaction with citizens, administrative action when solving problems	Cooperative contact culture (Scandinavian) Flexible negotiation culture (Anglo-Saxon) Formalized regulatory culture (Continental Europe)	Public administration cultures

By now, administrative cultures have been widely discussed, typified and used for analytical purposes in comparative research. Several stand-alone classifications of administrative culture, as a particular subcategory of organisational or national cultures, have been put forward (see Table 3). Klaus König (2014) proposes a simple twofold typology that is widely recognized – plenty of similar renditions can be found in comparative public policy and administrative science. He differentiates between a legalistic administrative culture in much of continental Europe and a managerial one, which takes the United States as an archetype. In this, König redevelops an older, dualistic typology by Ferrel Heady, which distinguished a “Civic Culture-Administration” in the Anglo-Saxon world from a bureaucratic “Classic Administration” in Western Europe (Heady, 1979, 1984, 2001). Heady explained that these two types of administrative culture originated from the different roles that administrations have had to play, dependent on their respective political environments. In continental Europe, modern public administration emerged under aristocratic or even absolutist rule and had to act as a stabilizing force throughout phases of political upheaval and unrest on the road to democratization. In the Anglo-Saxon

world on the other hand, modern administration was predated by democratic rule, so that its role had been – a priori – to serve a stable democratic polity. König ultimately follows this historical argument by refining it slightly: continental European administration is legalistic because its founding logic had been to hedge monarchist rule with a legalistic *Rechtsstaat*. Without this caveat, Anglo-Saxon administration had been able to conceive of itself as a democratically legitimate public service unit from the very beginning, and as a consequence has continued to focus more on implementing governmental decisions than on safeguarding formal rules. A very similar account is offered by Jon Pierre, who also bases his description of administrative cultures on the weight of the legal system on public administration (Pierre, 1995). But he goes somewhat further in his interpretation of what this means for the administrative culture at large. Being interested in the ways that a legalistic culture acted as an impediment to the NPM reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, he found that administrations which are based on the norms of the *Rechtsstaat*, like France and Germany, appeared unenthusiastic about reforms to tackle efficiency and customer-friendliness. In opposition to this, he described the Anglo-Saxon administrative culture as one that cared about the nation's public interest. To serve the public interest in the best way possible was considered the guiding norm. Less in awe of itself, Anglo-Saxon public administration sees its role as acting as a fair referee and a trustworthy manager who will implement policies for the common good.

By way of contrast, Arellano-Gault and del Castillo-Vega (2004) focus on the way that administrations are supposed to wield power in relation to political actors. This is a slightly different angle to that taken by König and Heady, but they too consider the interdependent roles of administration and politics to be vital to a public administration's inner culture, and hence arrive at similar conclusions. The main difference is that Arellano-Gault and del Castillo-Vega see not two, but three ideal-type models of administrative culture: Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Scandinavian. They propose that the culture of an administration can be understood through the implicit norms and beliefs that surround the use of power in the political system in general and through its bureaucracy in particular. In this, they borrow from Hofstede's concept of "power-distance" which states that different national cultures vary with respect to the power differentials they find tolerable, either between individuals but also between people and the state (Hofstede, 1984, 2003). In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, public administration is not supposed to hold power and use it for its own purposes. In this way, it is understood as juxtaposed to politics, which is the only legitimate locus of power. Instead, public administration is meant to be a neutral servant to a sovereign and democratically legitimized government. Its qualities are thus limited to the smooth, professional and efficient implementation of parliamentary and governmental decisions. It is through this idea of the relation between a democratic sovereign and a public administration subjugated to it that the Anglo-Saxons conceive of their

administrations as mere public managing units. By contrast, public administration in the Latin world²³ is expressly mandated by society to wield power – against elected officials if needs be. As such, it is not only allowed, but expected to employ power for the benefit of society. Although Arellano-Gault and del Castillo-Vega base their Latin type on their observations of Latin America, we see this kind of thinking about administration exemplified par excellence in France’s public administration, and to a lesser degree in Germany’s. This dualism of a limited Anglo-Saxon and a stronger Continental self-conception mirrors Pierre, König and Heady, but Arellano-Gault and del Castillo-Vega go further in identifying a third ideal type in Scandinavia. They write that “the Scandinavian model of public administration emphasizes a strong belief and confidence in the capacities of collectives to administer themselves. Power exists and it is a necessary feature of social relationships, but it is expected that individuals and groups endorse the general value of the collective, a value that endorses the general well-being” (Arellano-Gault & del Castillo-Vega, 2004, p. 522). Public officials in Scandinavia thus benefit from a culture that accords considerable power to public administration, provided they employ it for the greater good of society. Thanks to this, Scandinavian public administration acts according to a self-image that grants much leeway, but is similarly demanding of citizen-friendly and effective results. In a way, it combines the best of both worlds: the self-assurance and assertiveness of the Latin “strong-state” bureaucracy and the sense of obligation to the citizens of the Anglo-Saxon administrative culture. With respect to digital public services, one ought to expect Scandinavian administration to push itself towards offering its citizens modern, top-notch digital services and to take an active role in the development and ownership of the necessary ICT.²⁴

Werner Jann has similarly offered a typology of three different administrative cultures. His focuses on the interaction between public administration and its citizens and the way public officials address problems (Jann, 1983, 2002). He found a “cooperative contact culture” in Sweden and the rest of the Nordic countries, a “flexible negotiation culture” in the United Kingdom and the Anglo-Saxon world at large, and a “formalized regulatory culture” in Germany, which is representative of much of the European continent. Administrative action, according to Jann, can be explained by an underlying administrative culture that has deep historical roots and is borne out by the formal and informal

²³ Arellano-Gault and del Castillo-Vegas remain vague about which countries in the real world belong to their idealized “Latin” type. Being based in Southern America themselves, it appears they have based this type on the Latin American world, but to some degree their observations can also be applied to the Napoleonic administrative tradition of France and Southern Europe.

²⁴ Margetts (2012, p. 454) found that many European countries, in contrast to Anglo-Saxon countries, opt for short and limited out-contracting of ICT services. This reflects the traditionally strong self-confidence of Nordic states, whose citizens trust it to be on par with private companies and offer competitive quality and innovation. Consider, for example, the active role the Danish government has taken in the construction of a universally usable digital identity, which is employed both by public administration as well as banks and other private entities.

institutions of the politico-administrative system at large. Administrative action in the Nordic country family is, for instance, formed by its highly cooperative and consensus-oriented democratic system and a national culture with lots of interpersonal trust and an aversion towards hierarchies. This is reflected in public officials' cooperative and citizen-oriented behaviour. By contrast, administrative action in Continental Europe is informed by a culture built on formalized rules and regulations and a legalistic spirit. The perk of Jann's concept of administrative culture is that it is less abstract than those previously presented. This is thanks to his concept being based not on the deep historical roots of an administration, but on its observable actions today. Still, he arrives at the same country clusters: the Anglo-Saxon world, the Nordics and Continental (Western) Europe. Linking his empirically driven typology with the more historical accounts of other administrative scholars, we can draw a link between past institutional formations and contemporary behaviour. But he also shows there has been some movement: a dualist view of Continental Europe on the one hand and the Anglo-American world on the other no longer adequately reflects reality.

This is because the Nordic countries, together with the Netherlands, have embarked towards a new cultural horizon. They may have historically shared cultural roots with Continental Europe, but today they are much less bureaucratic and legalistic and have instead come to resemble the pragmatic Anglo-Saxon countries but without entirely letting go of their *Rechtsstaat* tradition. Public administration there has neither fallen prey to cutbacks nor neoliberal fantasies of a limited state, as has happened in the United States and the United Kingdom. Instead, they have copied the Anglo-Saxon focus on goals, output and efficiency. The reason behind this change is that the Nordics and the Netherlands adopted NPM-reforms more eagerly than their continental neighbours (Verhoest, 2016). According to Bouckaert (2007) this greater affinity was due to the fact that the ideas of NPM aligned better with their administrative tradition. Given that efficiency and customer-friendliness are also two key motivations for embarking on digitization reforms, it could easily be hypothesized that the affinity extends itself into an administrative culture that would be eager to adopt digital technologies for the sake of the public interest. Being less shackled by the stark legalism of most of continental Europe, the Nordic and Dutch administrations would also find it easier to adapt their routines and skills in a pragmatic fashion and copy strategies from digitally savvy private organisations. At the same time, the Nordic and Dutch idea of the state's role has not been as corroded by neoliberalism as in many Anglo-Saxon countries. Instead, a strong and trusted role of the state allows public administration to go ahead and ensure the privacy and security of its citizens on the internet instead of outsourcing these

responsibilities to big tech companies.²⁵

The takeaway from this is that in Continental Europe, the old ways of thinking still persist. Bureaucratic administration still reigns and poses a normative obstacle to digitization. The Nordic countries and the Netherlands on the one hand and the Anglo-Saxon world on the other have for a long time been walking on culturally different paths. Coming from different places they have now reached a common normative ground with respect to digital public sector reform. Both of these groups of nations have been quicker at adapting their administrative culture to the needs of the 21st century.

THE STRUCTURAL-INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION

Besides organisational cultures, political-institutional structures are a second recurring theme in the categorization of administrative systems. Again, the precise structural elements that are relevant for the sake of comparison depend on the topic of interest. For administrative reform projects, into which digital public service reforms neatly fall, Kuhlmann and Wollmann suggest considering “the multilevel-macro-structure of public administration” (2019, p. 11). This thesis will broadly follow that definition and consider both the [vertical](#) and [horizontal structuring](#) of the administrative state as well as the [interplay of the administrative units](#) within its multilevel structure.

The [vertical structure](#) of the state is widely regarded to be a key explanans for the success and effects of administrative reform activities (Ebel & Yilmaz, 2002; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Under the “vertical structure”, several different but interrelated factors are subsumed, namely whether a state is organized in a unitary or federal fashion and whether a country’s politico-administrative system is to be regarded as centralized or rather as decentralised. Now, federalism and unitarism are first and foremost categories of *political* power-sharing within a country and refer to the administrative system only as an afterthought. This is reflected in definitions that focus on political decision-making. A unitary political system is, for instance, commonly described in opposition to a federation as having “no constitutionally entrenched division of state power” (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017a, p. 50). This does not mean that no such sharing takes place. Most, if not all unitary democracies hold elections at one or

²⁵ Consider the unfortunate but typical role played by the German government during the Covid-19 pandemic in the case of the inception of a contact-tracing app. While the government was still debating whether and how such an application was desirable and feasible, several prominent German artists were already promoting a privately launched alternative (*LUCA-app*). Its technical design was considered subpar and enabled privacy breaches but it filled a void and hence quickly became a widely used tool by restaurants, cinemas and art venues. The official government-mandated *Corona-Warn-App* eventually copied the idea and adopted a similar but safer technical mechanism.

more subnational tiers of government and in many cases have delegated substantial policymaking powers to them. The caveat of unitarism, however, is that any sharing of power happens in a voluntary manner. It can, at least in theory, be revoked any time. The Thatcher government, for example, infamously dissolved the Greater London Council for administrative reasons, but also because it was annoyed with the political opposition it received there (Stoker 1988, 142-144). A coup d'état was not necessary for the dissolution because it was – while arguably a divisive decision – also a perfectly legal one. For a far-reaching administrative reform agenda like the digitization of the entirety of a state's public services, a unitary state structure hence holds some advantage. Reorganizing administrative structures in order to make them more digital-friendly or taking decisions to digitize key administrative procedures could be more easily orchestrated centrally. It is thus reasonable to assume that digitization reforms in unitary countries would turn out in a uniform manner while federal countries would find the responsibility over reform, and consequently its results, to be more dispersed. On the other hand, federal states are said to offer more room for experimenting with reform ideas and have a lower bar for the quick implementation of small, digital solutions (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017a, p. 50). In either case, the vertical distribution of power along states' governmental tiers is likely to affect the ease, speed and uniformity of digital public service reform.

So far, we have considered different modes of vertically structuring the state while stressing the political side. This section is, however, more interested in the vertical structuring of administration. Conveniently, public administrations are more or less built alongside the political tiers of governments and parliaments. A federal polity has a federally structured public administration; a unitary polity, a unitary one. The size, power and purpose of administration hence loosely follow the powers with which the respective political units – federal, state and local – are equipped. Still, it would be a misleading simplification to equate one with the other. Policymaking, the craft of parliaments, implementation and the duty of administration are not necessarily jointly given. Both unitary and federal countries have been known to delegate the implementation of federal laws to local or regional administrations, respectively. The degree of administrative decentralization and deconcentration thus merits closer inspection.

Decentralization is defined as the distribution of state tasks to lower state tiers, whereas deconcentration refers only to the territorial distribution of administrative units of the same organisation. For example, social administration in France is a centralized policy domain, but the administrative body in charge, the CAF (*Caisse d'allocations familiales*), runs a large number of localized branch offices in the provinces. These receive orders from Paris and are far less autonomous than truly decentralized, independent local administration, but they still have some leeway with

respect to how they run their affairs. In Germany, the national level holds tremendous powers in the realm policymaking but rarely executes its own laws. This goes so far that the German federation has been classified as a so-called “executive federalism” (Ismayr, 2009, p. 555; Rudzio, 2019, p. 35). So, while for a federal country the Bundestag is relatively powerful compared to the *Landtage*, its national public administration is a dwarf, as shown by Table 4.

TABLE 4 | SHARE OF PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT BY STATE TIER, 2017-2018

Country	Central	Sub-central
Germany	10.7	81.0
Sweden	18.0	81.9
Denmark	23.7	76.0
France	39.3	37.4
United Kingdom	61.4	38.6
Portugal	75.5	22.9

Source: International Labour Organisation (ILO), ILOSTAT (database), public employment by sectors and sub-sectors of national accounts, data from 2017/2018. Data is given in percentage; remaining shares to 100 percent are “social security”.

Public employment at the national level makes up only 10.7 percent of all public employment. And yet, a unitary country like Denmark also employs most of its manpower at the subnational level. This is because the implementation of Danish national laws takes place at the regional or local level similarly often. But even a country like France that is often stereotyped as the archetypal unitary state, modelled on a Parisian absolutism, employs less than half of its public personnel at the national level (39.3 percent).²⁶ This is in contrast to other unitary countries like Portugal, which attains 75 percent. So, while there is certainly a direct connection between the macro-structure of the political system and the accompanying administrative structures, the relationship is not quite as straightforward. Overall, these employment numbers indicate that the power of legislation and the prerogative of implementation, which often bears considerable leeway for interpretation, need to be considered separately.

²⁶ Source: ILO. 2021. ILOSTAT, “Employment by sex and institutional sector (thousands). Public employment by sectors and sub-sectors of national accounts.”, accessed 20 November 2021. To this must be added that a large proportion of public officials in France work for the social security funds, which manage themselves, but tend to operate as centralized yet deconcentrated organisations.

And yet, in a strict sense, decentralization refers to the delegation not just of implementation duties, but also of decision-making powers. In this regard, a federal country will on average be more decentralized than a unitary country. But while these characteristics may appear logically connected to one another, they are not always strictly correlated in reality. For a precise description of how administrative responsibilities are allocated along vertical state tiers, the matter of true functional decentralization hence has to be observed in a detailed manner. This is in contrast to the mere delegation of implementation duties from the upper levels of the state, or the territorial deconcentration of central authorities. The key difference here is between tasks that are implemented at the subnational level on behalf of the central state and those tasks that local administrations handle in their own right. The distinction is important because it entails important consequences for the steering of administrative services. While local government and its administration is free in the way they run the administrative procedures in their own policy domains, delegated tasks are usually subjected to critical oversight. To clarify the difference, German administrative law distinguishes between *Rechtsaufsicht*, which only concerns itself with the question of whether delegated units lawfully adhere to the policy they are supposed to implement, and *Fachaufsicht*, which also considers *how* they implement a policy and with what results. Moreover, *Fachaufsicht* can require that the delegating state tier specifies detailed procedural guidelines. Whether – and if so, how exactly – a particular public service is to be offered online would fall neatly into this domain. The degree of decentralization in terms of full, functional autonomy should thus be considered as an important element in an explanation of digital public service reform success across different administrative systems.

A federal state posits by virtue of its very nature that policymaking and implementation should be done at the subnational level whenever suitable. But we do not find the opposite statement to be true. Unitary countries have decentralized their administrative structures to vastly different degrees (Lijphart, 2012). There was a veritable boom of decentralization policies in the 1980s and 1990s during which many countries with unitary structures followed a trend to decentralize (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019, pp. 144–185). Notably, the United Kingdom embarked on its pathway towards devolution (Wollmann & Kuhlmann, 2019, pp. 151–152), and the Nordic countries strengthened their local levels to provide public services in a more locally embedded fashion. So, in a similar way to its noticeable shift in administrative culture, the Nordic administrative regime has proven to be particularly receptive to the NPM-inspired reform agenda of decentralization (Alonso et al., 2013, p. 5; H. F. Hansen, 2011). In Denmark, as in the other Nordic countries, the already fairly decentralized administrative structures were further enhanced and equipped with even greater responsibilities (H. F. Hansen, 2011; Vrangbæk, 2010). But even France, which until the 1980s was a highly centralized country due to its

legacy of Napoleonic administration, has relaxed the Parisian grip on the country and delegated some functions to the regional or local level. In this, France expressly went further than merely deconcentrating national agencies through local branch offices. But still, the French scope of decentralization pales in comparison with the level of administrative and political decentralization in Denmark or Germany. Germany has also rearranged some of its functions across the state tiers, but given a highly decentralized starting point, there has been little left to pass on to the local level. If there has been any political discussion of decentralization in the past 20 years, it is more often than not drowned out by cries for less decentralization and a neater separation of national and subnational prerogatives (Heinz, 2011; Kropp, 2010).

For the purpose of classifying administrative structures into coherent types, the loose connection between political and administrative macro-structures on the one hand and the complex nuances of decentralization on the other poses a difficulty. Still, some attempts to summarize administrative structures have been made in order to include them as a dimension into typologies of administrative systems. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017a, p. 49) for example differentiate between countries based on two (and a half) structural descriptors: the state's overall structure ("federal" versus "unitary", the latter with the subtypes "unitary-centralized" and "unitary-decentralized") and its internal degree of coordination ("coordinated" versus "fragmented") (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017a, 49). Coordination and fragmentation are practices rather than structures per se and shall be discussed further down in this section. Wollmann and Kuhlmann adopt the very same categories of macro-structures and decentralization, but disregard coordination and add the "strength of local government" to their mix instead. This reflects a number of scholars who have made the study of comparative local government into a subfield of comparative public administration and who provide a number of structural descriptors for the local level (Wayenberg & Kuhlmann, 2018; Wollmann & Kuhlmann, 2019, pp. 25–34). Similar to systems of administrative cultures, these systems of local government can be described and analysed by themselves or in conjunction with other elements of an administrative system.

One key aspect of local government systematizations is the strength and autonomy of the local level vis-à-vis the upper state levels. The strength of local-level administration noticeably shapes a country's administrative structure and consequently the entire administrative system because the local level is charged with a considerable number of tasks, even in countries where it is considered to be relatively weak. But it is all the more true now that many countries have increased the autonomy and scope of their local levels (Ladner et al., 2016). In many countries, municipalities and counties are charged with the majority of public services these days (see again Table 4). In Germany, for instance,

over 70 percent of all administrative services are provided at the local level.²⁷ The relevant point that scholars of local government make is that for decentralization to work, administration at the local level must have sufficient administrative capacities in order to fulfil the expectations which are directed at them. Otherwise, decentralizing reforms run the risk of becoming moot projects, where subsidiarity is only declared and not lived. In those cases, laws or even constitutional amendments may prescribe a more decentralized, subsidiary distribution of policymaking powers or administrative tasks, but the local level will find itself incapable of living up to them, which can either lead to a regulatory gap or higher state-tiers stepping up to fill in the missing pieces.

For digital public service reforms, this is a very real danger. As stated above, the digitization of public services particularly concerns local administration as they are the main provider of such services. The onus to digitize them will consequently fall within their scope of action, unless other state actors are willing to step in for them. Administrative capacities at the local level will hence determine the fortunes of such reform endeavours. This is true first and foremost in those countries where regulatory responsibilities have been fully shifted downwards. If, on the other hand, local government has a more residual role vis-à-vis the central state, the latter will have to take primary responsibility for the digitization of public services. In other words, digitization projects will have to be realized where the implementation duties of public service are currently found. The more decentralized the public service provision, the greater the role of local government will be for their digitization. This warrants a closer look at what constitutes strong and capable local government.

The strength of local government or administration is made up of least three dimensions: their functional scope, their financial resources and autonomy, and their territorial size (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019).²⁸ The functional scope captures the policy domains and tasks that are carried out at the local level and have already been discussed here. To recap, the local level may have more or fewer policy domains relegated to them, they might even benefit from a general subsidiarity clause which shifts responsibilities to them, and they may either carry out tasks in their own right or through delegation by upper tiers of government. Generally, a high share of public expenditure at the local level is a good indicator of strong local government. Indeed, in administrative systems that follow the “separationist model” (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019, pp. 26–27) any expenditure at the local level

²⁷ <https://leitfaden.ozg-umsetzung.de/display/OZG/terms/all>, accessed 12 December 2021.

²⁸ Some researchers in the field of comparative local government would also include the political institutions that orchestrate local democracy here. These institutions cover, for example, the ways in which municipal authorities are elected, and how the interplay of local (non-elected) administration and elected councils is organized (Goldsmith & Page, 2010; Heinelt et al., 2018). But since the impact of this dimension on the capacity to implement digital reform projects at the local level is unclear, this section will not discuss these aspects further.

may be rightfully interpreted as a derivative of the local scope of action. That is because these countries, notably the United Kingdom and the Nordic countries, practice a neater separation of state and local tasks. This is in contrast with the integrated model of most of continental Europe, where local administration not only carries out its very own responsibilities but is also charged with the implementation of state tasks. In France, for instance, the mayor has a double role: he or she is the head of local government and simultaneously a representative of *l'État central*. This goes in hand with reduced autonomy as the implementation of other tasks is usually accompanied by steering at oversight. So, large expenditure at the local level may be indicative of a strong and autonomous local government, but it is advisable to remain cautious. This is because the level of central steering can vary immensely, particularly when it comes to delegated tasks. In the French integrationist model, for instance, the decentralization reforms of the past decades have been moderated in their effect by regulatory specifications, issued by national ministries regarding implementation at the local level. Downshifted policymaking powers have barely been used. In the eyes of some observers, an integrationist local government model combined with a legacy of centralization has curbed real autonomous administrative action at lower state tiers (Cole, 2006, p. 35; Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019).

Evidently, public service responsibilities cannot be shouldered if local government lacks the necessary financial resources. This is why the financial prowess and the financial autonomy of the local level is another important element that determines the strength of local government. An assessment of government expenditure by state tier provides an idea of the sums with which local government deals, although it may still be that resources and tasks are unbalanced. In Germany, for instance, the local level has some taxation rights, but does not raise enough funds to cover all of its tasks, which is why local budgets are heavily subsidized with tax incomes from the federal and the Länder level. Besides the general subsidies, German *Kommunen* also receive purpose-bound subsidies for the tasks they carry out on behalf of the federal and Länder governments (Federal Ministry of Finance, 2021). Although the delegating state tier has to fully offset the cost they are relegating to counties and municipalities, the exact sums that are required are often up for debate. While the expenditure for financial handouts to citizens can be accounted for precisely, the necessary costs that local administrations run up in terms of personnel costs to administer these handouts is difficult to assess. As a consequence, budget subsidies of all kinds exist and have to be hashed out regularly. The more a state departs from the connexive principle that the body which governs a given policy should also administer and finance it, the more likely it is to cause financial distress to municipalities. In such cases they are dependent on financial redistribution from the upper levels of government. The degree of financial autonomy at the local level can consequently be expressed through the relationship between

expenditure at the local level and the level of taxation that is being raised there. Systems of local administration hence differ with respect to their financial autonomy and can be ranked accordingly as a way to operationalize the strength of local government. The idea is that high financial autonomy equals strength at the local level which in turn equals “true” decentralization. With respect to digital public service reform, financial prowess at the local level must be considered a necessary condition for its success because high investments are needed to design software and buy hardware while ongoing maintenance will require additional funds in the long run.²⁹

The purchasing power at the local level is affected also by the average unit size of a municipality or county. For a large municipality, the costs of running its own servers will make up a smaller budgetary share than for a small municipality. More than that, the overall administrative capacity of local government has minimum size requirements. In the 1970s, Denmark took this insight so far as to calculate the minimum necessary unit size for the effective provision of a range of public services and upsized their municipal structures accordingly (Andersen, 2008). This is because specialized skills, management and support positions will quickly overstretch the personnel overhead of a small administrative body. Today, Denmark is home to the largest municipalities in all of Europe. Because of this tight relationship between size and administrative capacity, comparative local government scholars have come to differentiate between administrative models which rely on large units at the lowest tiers of government and those which operate in smaller units. Generally speaking, the United Kingdom and the Nordic countries have the biggest communities with the highest average number of citizens per municipality. In southern Europe, by contrast, municipalities more often follow the historic parishes of the past and have far fewer inhabitants. In France, for instance, 86 percent of municipalities comprise fewer than two thousand citizens.³⁰ The situation in central Europe is more mixed. In Germany, for instance, much of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg belong to the Southern Model, with relatively small units, whereas most of Germany’s north and east follow the Northern Model with very large units (Wollmann & Kuhlmann, 2019, pp. 87–99). In order to deal with often prohibitively small municipalities, France has for a long time employed a tactic of local cooperative associations in which several local units come together to finance services requiring larger scales. They run, for example,

²⁹ Some maintenance costs, maybe even all of them, can potentially be offset by efficiency gains if IT projects are tailored so as to fully automatize tasks which have before being carried out by administrative personnel. But while this is not unrealistic – Denmark has managed to reduce some human labour through IT in its public sector – lowered costs should also not be taken for granted and initial, up-front investments have to be made. Moreover, not all IT projects are aimed at reducing overall costs. The city of Graz, for example, opened online channels for its citizens to make complaints or suggestions and experienced an increase in workload compared to the state before this digitization project, because now more citizens felt invited to engage with this particular offer.

³⁰ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). 2016. “Subnational governments around the world. Structure and finance. A first contribution to the Global Observatory on Local Finance. Country Profiles”, https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/global_observatory_of_local_finance-part_iii.pdf, accessed 01 January 2022.

public transportation services or garbage collection. But because of the additional complexities and steering difficulties, France has been working on increasing unit size at the local and meso-level in the past 15 years through a number of reforms. Among them are a reduction in the number of regions and the introduction of so-called *métropoles* (Demazière, 2021).³¹ So, there appears to be a general trend towards creating larger units at the local level across both modes of local government systems – big and small – in order to make them fit for growing functional scopes. It is evident that the need to build and maintain complex IT services at the local level has further exacerbated the push for larger units.

To sum up, the vertical structuring of a state's public administration is likely to play a considerable role in the way a country can reasonably digitize its public services. Vertical fragmentation will make the conception of a uniform public service environment difficult because it brings in many actors and diffuses responsibilities and resources for digital reform projects. This is particularly dire, as digitization thrives on centralized platforms, file standards and standardized software interfaces. Vertical fragmentation can be built into an administrative system by way of a federal political system or by decentralization in unitarian countries. Decentralization that has taken place in a structural setting of weak local government poses an even greater obstacle, because local government will then be nominally in charge of public service digitization but without the means to successfully implement it. But even under strong local government, vertically fragmented administrative structures will find it a challenge to cooperate on common IT solutions if they do not want to run the risk of producing a highly fragmented public IT landscape.

A rift can also arise from the horizontal structuring of a state's public administration. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017a) propose adding the category of coordination/fragmentation into their systematization of administrative structures. By this, they mean the horizontal coordination between policy portfolios at the ministerial level. Such a category is not one of hard structures per se, but of their management. It asks how public officials operate within their country's administrative structures: whether they harmonize their work, notably in the realm of administrative regulation, standards and procedures as well as the implementation of policy. Indeed, Lijphart (2012) points out that some countries tightly coordinate the decision-making of their ministerial cabinets. Generally, he finds consensual democracies to be more attuned to harmonizing their ministerial decisions and policy-plans. Consider, for example, the high degree of coordination within Germany's governments, which

³¹ These metropolitan super-units tightly fuse administrative city districts and surrounding municipalities but without entirely merging them. The motivation is to create large units at the local level without the need for a legal merger, which is often politically unfeasible. The larger unit-size allows for advantages of scales or the delegation of tasks which are otherwise offered by the *département* (Wienen & Mosler-Törnström, 2016).

goes by the term *Ressortabstimmung* (“harmonization across portfolios”). Any policy project which is deemed to touch upon another ministry’s realm of action has to be communicated in advance and the other side will have the right to demand changes. In other countries, certain ministries – most often Ministries of Finance – can take on the role of a powerful *primus inter pares* and steer other portfolios thanks to their elevated role. This dynamic can be observed in Denmark, but also in the UK and New Zealand. In other countries, such as the US and France, the ministerial domains work far more independently (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017a, p. 47). Their horizontal fragmentation is much more likely to result in a more fragmented policymaking landscape – something that will be reflected in any state-wide reforms, such as public service digitization.

Horizontal coordination can also take place at the sub-national level. In Germany, the federalized state structures are horizontally linked by “a cooperative system of the executives” (Lehner 1979, 7). This system is particularly visible in times of crisis. During the Covid-19 pandemic the *Bund-Länder-Konferenz* of Chancellor Merkel and the 16 Länder prime ministers turned into the de facto highest political institution in the Federation, despite this configuration having no basis in the German constitution. But even in quieter times there is a tendency to coordinate political and administrative action within the federation through a multitude of executive committees at all levels – from Länder ministers down to the operational level of ministerial officers and even street-level-bureaucrats. For a cross-national policy project like the digitization of the entire public sector, such horizontal coordination is required if national standards are to be implemented. But administrative scholars have noted that horizontal coordination can often be time-intensive, inefficient and risks producing ill-fitting compromises (Rudzio 2015, 314-315).

With respect to digital public service reform, the degree of fragmentation and the quality of coordination are of utmost importance, because digitization as a reform project concerns a country’s public administration in its entirety. And while the digitization of single services can certainly be done at the portfolio level, centralizing technologies as well as creating recognizable design templates requires encompassing decisions for the public sector as a whole. A well-oiled interplay of state structures, along both the vertical axis and the horizontal divides, will determine whether a state will be able to produce a coherent digital public service landscape.

A CRITICAL SUMMARY OF ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS AS AN EXPLANATORY FORCE

Administrative systems are judged to be highly impactful on wide-scale public sector reform agendas like digitization. These systems can be made of a range of institutional features. Institutions can be “hard” (i.e. state structures or local government models) or “soft” (i.e. the organisational culture that

governs a nation's public administration). Administrative cultures are often linked to historic circumstances and routinely differentiate between a bureaucratic and a public service-oriented type. Administrative structures refer to the vertical distributions of duties and capabilities and the horizontal rifts across policy and ministerial domains or between subnational units. There are categorizations of singular scope, for example civil service systems, systems of local government or systems of public service culture, as well as categorizations which cover multiple dimensions. In the latter type, the multi-dimensional typologies are built on the observation that norms, ideas and beliefs are systematically linked with their underlying, "hard" institutions. For example, the administrative culture is less likely to be bureaucratic if civil servants are not shielded through a protective labour law regime. These multidimensional systems are also called "traditions", referring to the fact that their roots are deeply embedded in history and their character hence unlikely to change. There is a recurring set of such administrative traditions that recognizes, among others, an Anglo-Saxon, a Nordic, a Napoleonic and a federal Germanic type.

But at least two problems arise from these multidimensional typologies of administrative systems or traditions. First, they suggest a stability that is only partially reflected by reality. Interlocked systems of mutually stabilizing institutions do not offer much explanatory room for change. If there really were elective affinities of different administrative institutions with self-reinforcing dynamics, it is not evident how any such system could be budged, at least in the absence of severe external shocks. Indeed, the administrative systems of countries like Germany and France have persisted in the face of great historical and political turmoil over the last two hundred years. The strength of the literature on administrative traditions is that it is good at explaining why reform stimuli that occur at an international level are processed differently by different countries. But the literature implies a continuity in administrative systems that falls increasingly short of accurately describing the transformations of administrative traditions – for example, the turn towards cost-effectiveness in the public administrations of the Nordic countries and the Netherlands. These countries had for a long time cherished a generous welfare state and shared the legalistic tradition with the rest of continental Europe. Today, their administrative cultures are noticeably different from the rest of continental Europe. Or, consider how French administration has been erecting state "start-ups" to shake off the dust from its formal, paper-based, bureaucratic culture in recent years (Foucaud, 2017; Verdier & Pezziardi, 2017). The empirical data of the study at hand points to the pivotal role that single heroic actors can play, particularly for cultural change, and, sometimes even for the hard business of structural reform. In this respect, the framework that this study proposes is more open to change than the widely used multidimensional models.

Second, there is a methodological issue with the multidimensional character of those administrative systems. Kuhlmann and Wollmann, Pollitt and Bouckaert, as well as Peters all mix together institutional characteristics in their administrative systems that are not logically linked with one another. Take, for instance, Pollitt and Bouckaert's integration of both the legal culture and degree of ministerial coordination into their typology. There is no apparent linkage between these two institutional features. While this poses no problem if administrative systems are only meant to be as a descriptive heuristic, it does when administrative systems or traditions as a whole are used as explanatory variables. This is because an explanation that is built on the wholesale variable of an "administrative system" would obfuscate which characteristics are responsible for which effect. For the purposes of explaining divergent outcomes in digital public service reform, belonging, for example, to the "federal Germanic" administrative type would not answer the question of what precisely it is about this type that poses a challenge. To take the most puzzling case, is Germany such a laggard in digital public service reform because of its federal and decentralized administrative structure? Or is it the legalistic *Rechtsstaat* culture that stands in the way of building effective digital services?

A FRAMEWORK TO BETTER EXPLAIN DIGITAL REFORM SUCCESS – OR FAILURE

This study sets out to analyse why some countries, despite decent starting conditions, struggle or even fail in their digital public service reform projects while others succeed with apparent ease. Some countries launched themselves early into the era of digital governance, some later. They have since proceeded at different speeds to produce either more or less compelling results. It is evident that certain things can go right or wrong at the heart of administrative systems when trying to catch up with our digital age. These systems have been laid out in detail, as has consideration of single-purpose and multidimensional types. And out of those, we have singled out the characteristics which ought to be highly impactful for successful digital public service reforms.

Those characteristics can be sorted into one of two dimensions: administrative culture on the one hand and administrative structures on the other. This grouping follows Guy Peters in his most recent work on "administrative traditions", which he defines as follows: "By administrative tradition we mean an historically based set of values, structures, and relationships with other institutions that defines the nature of appropriate public administration within a society" (Peters 2021, 24). But while he lumps these two different sets of institutions – culture and structure – into one typology to look for linkages and elective affinities, this thesis proposes a framework that considers each one separately. This is because it appears very likely that each dimension will have its own, neatly separate, influence on states' digitization efforts. Such separation allows for the analysis of each of those dimensions' impact. For that reason, we shall not consider the multidimensional systems of Napoleonic, Germanic,

Scandinavian and Anglo-American administrative regimes on the whole, but rather break them down into their cultural and structural components.

For the purposes of analysing the effect of administrative culture on digital public service reform we make out two cultural sets. One set of norms forms a “bureaucratic” administrative culture, that is largely built on the traditional bureaucratic, Weberian model. The other constitutes a contemporary “digital-era” culture.

A) **Bureaucratic administrative culture** is modelled on the traditional Weberian ideal of bureaucracy and is carried by the following norms:

- The notion of public administration as a separate world above the private sphere.
- An asymmetrical relationship between public administration and citizens (“citizen as subject”).
- Legalism – the key purpose of public administration is to ensure legality.
- Hierarchical organisation.

B) **Digital-era administrative culture** on the other hand incorporates some of the normative changes that NPM brought to formerly traditional public administration, but goes beyond them. The similarity primarily arises from the state’s self-conception as a service-provider, akin to a company that offers services to customers. But the goal is to upgrade the state, not to make it obsolete and privatize it. The guiding norms of the administrative culture for a digital era are as follows:

- The state and public administration are not distinct from the private sphere.
- The relationship between citizens and public administration is symmetrical (“citizen as equal”).
- Service orientation – the key purpose of public administration is to serve its citizens.
- Collaborative organisation, with steep hierarchies not accepted.

These sets are not to be regarded as reflections of one specific country, but rather as ideal types to which any given country adheres more or less. One country might be strongly bureaucratic in one dimension but very much attuned to the digital era in the other three. Or, an administrative system could find itself halfway between both poles on all characteristics. But a common thread runs through each set: the administrative system’s attitude towards inclusiveness and exclusiveness. A digital-era administrative culture has an inclusive understanding of the public sector and seeks to break up boundaries, for example between the state and the private sector, between higher and lower state tiers, between citizens and public officials or between public sector employees and their executives. By contrast, the bureaucratic administrative culture accepts and values those boundaries. Its

functioning requires the neat separation of those spheres and it reacts with irritation if the boundaries are broken up for the sake of inclusive and citizen-oriented services.

Furthermore, these two ideal cultural sets are not distributed randomly across the empirical landscape. First, they are tied to the underlying institutions of the respective administrative system. A country's affinity to either set is largely determined by historic legacies like the legal tradition or the employment statutes of civil servants. A heavily codified corpus of separate employment statutes for civil servants will, for example, act as a barrier to the normative influence that formerly private sector employees could bring into the state's workforce. Similarly, a specialised administrative judicial system acts as an institutional legacy. In such countries, administrative culture is likely to protect its legalistic character against the pressure for change. The more exclusive and legalistic the institutions of a given country are, we can conclude, the more persistent the bureaucratic culture. This is not to say that change is impossible, but rather that it takes longer and requires more voluntary action for some countries than others. In the long run, outward pressure from digital societies will in all likelihood cause convergence towards the pole of digital-era administrative culture.

FIGURE 4 | COUNTRIES WITH BUREAUCRATIC VERSUS DIGITAL-ERA ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE



Own classification; based on Peters 2021, Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017, Verhoest et al., 2009 as well as Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019 with own additions.

Administrative structure, as opposed to political structure, is defined as the organizing principle that governs how the implementation of political decisions and, notably, the provision of public services is organized. It is shaped by three elements:

- 1) The degree of **vertical fragmentation**, which is defined by the way that the authority over the provision of public services is distributed along the vertical axis of the state hierarchy. In a centralized system like France, for instance, the administrative structures are less vertically fragmented than in a decentralized system like Germany, because many services are implemented through the local offices of national agencies and much localized service provision is, or can be, regulated at the national level.
- 2) The second element that defines a country's administrative structure is its **degree of horizontal**

fragmentation, which shall be defined as the institutionalized horizontal coordination between administrative units on the same hierarchical level. This includes ministries but also operational units and entities of local government.

3) Apart from administrative structures' vertical and horizontal fragmentation, the **management** of those divides plays a considerable role for digital public service implementation as well. In countries with a cooperative administrative style, like Germany and Denmark, solo efforts are frowned upon even when they happen within their rightful jurisdictions. The vertical and horizontal fragmentation, which exists on paper, is thus often reigned in through a collaborative administrative praxis. For example, in decentralized Denmark, vertical fragmentation at the local level is prevented through the co-optation of the KL, an interest group for local governments, into national policy committees. In France, on the other hand, a hierarchical administrative style means that administrative units generally refrain from coordinating their implementation projects horizontally with others. In practice this can have a centrifugal effect on implementation efforts. Consequently, the digital public service landscape in France is horizontally fragmented with great variations in coverage and quality across French public administration.

Of the three dimensions, vertical fragmentation is the easiest to grasp, for example by the share of public employment or expenditure at subnational units of government (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019, p. 24). Federal systems will typically be vertically fragmented while unitary systems tend to be less so, although unitary countries can also be highly decentralized – as is the case in the Nordic countries (Lijphart, 2012, pp. 174–187). Smaller local government units and constitutionally-protected local government can also enhance vertical fragmentation (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019, pp. 25–27). Horizontal fragmentation is more difficult to pin down. Independent hiring and career systems between administrative units can deepen horizontal divides between portfolios (Bekke et al., 1996; Bezes & Jeannot, 2011), while effective horizontal coordination across the different ministerial domains of cabinets can lessen them (Lijphart, 2012, pp. 102–104; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017b, pp. 51–52).

In order to evaluate the interplay of administrative structures, an even closer look is needed. In the case of digital public sector reform, a good indicator for coherent administrative action is the landscape of actors that are charged with the implementation of this reform agenda.³² If

³² For this see the country fact sheets of the European Commission's Joinup project: <https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/collection/nifo-national-interoperability-framework-observatory/digital-public-administration-factsheets>, accessed 19 December 2021.

implementation duties are widely distributed across many committees, agencies and municipalities which are tasked with developing, buying and running their own digital solutions, we experience an example of disjointed administrative action. A single agency or ministry in charge of digitization for the whole of a country's public administration can, by contrast, be considered as an indicator of coherent public action. This classification borrows from the concept of "joined-up" government, an idea that was intensely promoted by the Labour Government in the UK during the 2000s but did not gain much traction beyond the British Isles (Bogdanor, 2005; Kavanagh & Richards, 2001; Pollitt, 2003). Quite possibly, the benefits of effective joined-up government were not as evident at the time. While the coordination of policy-making may be generally advantageous, far greater benefits can be reaped in the era of digital governance. The creation of state-wide platforms and IT applications for national use requires a degree of coordination that has simply not been necessary in the time of paper-based administration, which was run by humans and could rely on discretion and local flexibility. For this reason, the management of the given administrative structures has become so much more relevant today.

In focusing on the effective management of administrative structures, this framework differs from prior approaches to conceptualizing politico-administrative systems. To name the most relevant, Lijphart focuses on the consensual character of governance, which he considers as superior. In contrast to this, the approach finds that there can be both disjointed public action in consensual systems (Germany) and quite effective public action in majoritarian systems (UK). Kuhlmann and Wollmann as well as Pollitt and Bouckaert conceive of vertical fragmentation as the formal distribution of tasks across the vertical axis but pay little attention to how well state actors coordinate their behaviour. Although Pollitt and Bouckaert also mention "horizontal coordination" as a defining criterion for a state's administrative capacity, they have a more limited idea of what coordination entails. To them, it is primarily about the cohesion of ministerial cabinets, while the approach of this thesis goes beyond this to ask, instead, whether a state is able to align all of its public administration for the purposes of a policy goal – in our case, the effective digitization of its public services.

TABLE 5 | COUNTRIES ON THE SCALE FROM COHERENT TO DISJOINTED ADMINISTRATION

	Coherent administration		Disjointed administration
High fragmentation	Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Netherlands Strong vertical fragmentation, but very good coordination	Austria, Switzerland Very strong vertical fragmentation, but good coordination	Germany, Belgium Very strong vertical fragmentation, little coordination
Low fragmentation	Estonia, Portugal High degree of vertical integration and very good coordination	UK, Spain Vertically slightly fragmented, but good coordination	Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia Vertically slightly fragmented and little horizontal coordination
		France, Hungary, Greece, Italy Vertically integrated, but horizontally less so, little coordination	
	←—————→		
	Good coordination		Weak coordination

Source: Based on Lijphart's dimensions of "executive dominance" and "federalism-decentralization" (2012), Kuhlmann and Wollman (2019, p. 24) and Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) with own additions.

Table 5 is a tentative attempt to place countries beyond the three case studies within the framework. The countries' positions are largely based on Lijphart's dimensions "executive dominance" and "federalism-decentralization" (2012), Kuhlmann and Wollman (2019, p. 24) and Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) with some refinements by the author. The positions between the poles "coherent" and "disjointed" administration resonate largely with the performance that countries have shown on the playing field of digital public service implementation. But as this is only a cursory classification, a deeper assessment of other cases, particularly from beyond the European borders,

THREE CASES OF ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS: GERMANY, FRANCE, DENMARK

The three cases of Germany, France and Denmark represent three distinct aspects of our analytical framework. Denmark and Germany occupy the extreme ends of the framework's spectrum while France falls into the middle ground between the two.

GERMANY

Among scholars of administrative science and public policy, Germany is deemed the archetype of the continental, federal European model (Wayenberg and Kuhlmann 2018; Ongaro et al 2018; Kuhlmann

and Wollmann 2019). Its defining features are its pronounced federal character that, combined with a large scope for local self-governance, produce a highly vertically fragmented administrative setting (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, 91–93). On the horizontal axis, the cooperative style of Germany’s federalism, a generally consensus-focused style of politics, and the integrating power of its professional formation system for public servants together produce a much less fragmented structure (Lijphart, 2012). Germany undertakes considerable efforts to coordinate the output of its administrative structures but with mixed results. Horizontal coordination between Länder governments and cabinet portfolios appears to run more smoothly than vertical coordination between the federal, the Länder and the municipal level, which continues to suffer from the “joint-policymaking trap” (Scharpf et al., 1977). Taken together, the coordination efforts achieve coherent administrative action in the horizontal sense but to a far lesser degree in the vertical sense. Moreover, coordination often takes the form of coordination *ex-negativo*, settling on the smallest common denominator, and happens in a voluntary and often ineffective fashion.³³ German administrative culture is still dominated by bureaucratic norms. It is highly legalistic, moderately paternalistic and very focused on procedural correctness with little regard for targets and service quality. Private sector-style management and hiring practices have been adapted to only a small degree. But recently, mindsets have been starting to modernize.³⁴

FRANCE

Despite considerable structural reforms in the past decades, France still represents the archetype of the Napoleonic administrative model. Its vertical structures remain shaped by two centuries of centralist legacies. Decentralizing reforms undertaken since the 1980s have downshifted some responsibilities from the central state to the periphery, but without fundamentally challenging this traditional arrangement. The past decade has seen rationalization at the meso level as local units have been fused or dissolved and implementation powers have been integrated to reign in the vertical fragmentation that came with the decentralization reforms. If there is fragmentation in France’s administrative structures, it is rather to be found on the horizontal axis. Closed off personnel *corps* and ministerial domains that act independently of one another create administrative action that is well-coordinated on the vertical axis, but far less so on the horizontal axis. France lacks the voluntarist

³³ Ineffective and too-loosely managed coordination on a voluntary basis with unsatisfying, non-binding results could be witnessed in an exemplary fashion throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

³⁴ For example, the federal HR programs Tech4Germany and Work4Germany have been installed in recent years. They copy an idea from Anglo-American public administrations, where time-limited fellowships are used to introduce employees from the private sector into administrative units in the hope of instilling new mindsets, knowledge and ideas into the public sector.

horizontal coordination that marks Danish and German administrative praxis. In the vertical sense, the dominant modus of coordination happens in a top-down manner, as joined-up governance in the Danish style is not common. As a consequence, vertical administrative structures function in a coordinated manner, particularly in highly centralised policy domains. In the horizontal sense, France's administrative structures must be instead regarded as rather fragmented. Culturally, French public administration remains an archetype of the bureaucratic model. Since the 2010's individual actors have begun to purposefully institute cultural change in the contexts of digitization projects. As of today, the units in charge of digital transformation constitute (growing) islands of cultural change in a sea of traditional bureaucracy.

DENMARK

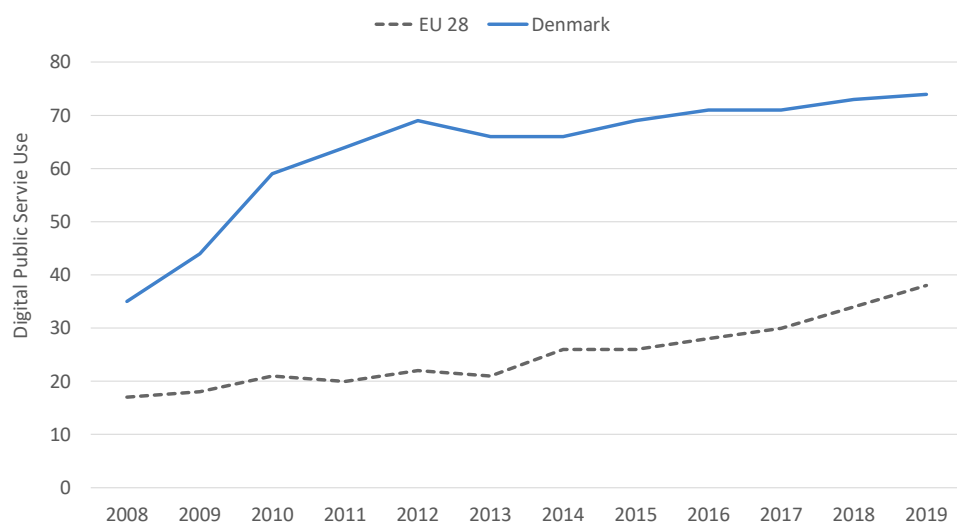
With Germany, Denmark shares a very high degree of functional decentralization, and with France, the unitary state system. This structural setting is combined with a consensual political culture and institutionalized practices of joined-up governance. As a result, the administrative structures of Denmark function in a coherent manner even though at first glance they might appear vertically fragmented. Horizontally, coherent management is not only the rule within the state cabinet but also takes place between local administrative units or government agencies. A key actor in this is the KL, which acts as an interest organisation for municipalities and participates on their behalf in matters of national policymaking, implementation and state organisation. As opposed to its German equivalent, the *Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund*, the KL regularly negotiates between local government and other state actors. The high degree of commitment the KL is able to attain among its members is a key ingredient in Danish joined-up governance, because it allows for harmonized policymaking and implementation even though state functions are highly decentralized. In terms of administrative culture, Denmark has historically come from the legalistic tradition that is typical for most of continental Europe. But this tradition has been tempered by the communal spirit of Nordic civic culture. A more level-headed relationship between public officials and their citizen-customers is one result; noticeably greater attention paid to the quality of administrative services is another. Moreover, the NPM reform paradigm has shifted Danish administrative culture further away from its continental European neighbours. In the 1980s, Danish administrative culture began to embrace efficiency as a key value of its administrative ideal and subsequently adopted management and HR practices from the private sector. As a consequence, the public sector workforce experienced more exchange with the private sector and cultural differences between the two have grown much smaller than in bureaucratic countries like France or Germany. This resulted in a service-oriented administrative culture that turned out to be easily adaptable for a digital-era administration.

Comparing Germany, Denmark and France allows us to trace the relative respective importance of administrative culture and administrative structures. Denmark teaches us that an administrative culture that is attuned to the requirements of the digital age is the key to remodelling analogue administration for the future. Its high degree of decentralization poses no obstacle to building highly centralized, national solutions, but the requirement for this appears to be tightly run, joined-up governance between all state levels so that implementation can be harmonized. What happens when a decentralized country does not manage to coordinate its administrative structure for the purpose of universal digital reform projects can be witnessed in Germany. The result is immobility or, at best, a highly fragmented, costly, non-user-friendly and ill-functioning public IT landscape. However, Germany may have alternatively been slowed down by its own bureaucratic administrative culture. By comparing Denmark with Germany, the main culprit of German backwardness is hard to discern. Is the dominant culture within public administration the main offender or is it rather the disjointed administrative structure? France sheds light on this question. Being also highly bureaucratic, but organized as a unitary country with a legacy of centralized administration, France enables us to use the power of a framework that neatly separates formal from normative institutions. The following three country chapters will closely retell the chronology of digital public service reform in Denmark, France and Germany and assess the role that structural and normative institutions have played.

03 | DENMARK

Denmark spearheads the avant-garde of digitized public administrations. It has adopted the role of policy advocate for digital public services and shares its know-how with countries which hope to learn from the Danish experience. In Berlin, for instance, the Danish Embassy regularly organizes policy learning events on the topic of public sector digitization.³⁵ In China and Silicon Valley, the world’s first “Tech Ambassador” is engaging with “TechDiplomacy” in the name of the Danish government.³⁶ The proud self-image of the Danish is no illusion. Denmark was among the very first countries to embark on the path towards a fully digitized public administration (see Figure 5). This is shown by the top positions consistently attained by Denmark in both European and international eGovernment rankings since the 2000s (European Commission, 2015, 2019, 2020; United Nations, 2020).³⁷ The following chapter looks at why this is so. How is it that this small neighbour state of Germany has been faring so much better in terms of digital public sector reform? Have its politicians fought more valiantly for digital citizens services? Or were Danish citizens calling more loudly for the modernization of their state?

FIGURE 5 | USE OF DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICES IN DENMARK



³⁵ <https://tyskland.um.dk/de/aussenwirtschaftsrat/digitalisierung/>, accessed 28 May 2021.

³⁶ <https://techamb.um.dk/en/techplomacy/>, accessed 28 May 2021.

³⁷ The European Commission has been monitoring the eGovernment output and outcomes of its member states for over a decade. Among the many measures, the Digital Economy and Society Index’s sub-component “Digital public services” is a particularly relevant topic for this study. A comparable indicator for international comparisons is provided in the United Nations’ eGovernment surveys.

Source: Eurostat, indicator isoc_bde15ei (submitting completed forms in the last 12 months, percentage of individuals), 2021

This chapter argues that neither party politics nor public opinion, but rather the specific administrative setting of Denmark has been the foundation of its successful eGovernment. First of all, the cultural specificities of the Nordic administrative tradition and the prevalence of NPM thinking has been a welcoming setting for the digital reform agenda. The normative cornerstones of this cultural legacy have made Danish public administration particularly accepting of the changes that come with the digitization of public action, notably a concern for efficiency, usability over legality, and a service-orientation towards citizens. Secondly, institutionalized practices of intragovernmental collaboration, both on the vertical and horizontal axis, have enabled the very coherent management of Denmark's decentralized administrative IT structures. Thanks to this, Denmark has been able to successfully pursue a coherent national approach to digital public service implementation that has resulted in a particularly user-friendly and high-functioning system of digital public services.

The primary data for this country chapter comprise semi-structured interviews and a survey of 15 Danish experts who have been personally involved in the implementation of Denmark's digital public service scheme.³⁸ They are complemented with a review of governmental publications, parliamentary protocols and legal documents surrounding the implementation process. The chapter begins with a brief summary of the landmarks of Denmark's digital public service reform in the past 20 years, focusing on the construction of Denmark's celebrated digital self-service portal for public citizen services, *borger.dk*. For a deeper understanding of the institutional and cultural context this is followed by an overview of Denmark's politico-administrative structures and its politico-administrative culture. Finally, the chapter assesses in detail how these two aspects carried forward the digital transformation of Danish public administration.

TIMELINE OF DENMARK'S PUBLIC SERVICE DIGITIZATION

At the turn of the new millennium, public officials in Denmark made a number of decisions that would go on to shape the subsequent 20 years of public sector reform. The incoming government of Anders Fogh Rasmussen was the first cabinet headed by a liberal since the 1970s and brought in a wave of fresh ideas. Among them was the goal to use digital technology to render the Danish welfare state financially sustainable by making its administration more efficient. In May 2001, the Ministry of Finance published a report on the state of "Digital Administration" which demanded that Danish

³⁸ Aggregated interview and survey results for Denmark can be found in Chapter 07.

eGovernment be improved. In order to achieve this, the report recommended a more effectively coordinated cross-level effort. Following this advice, Danish administration began its digitization strategy by erecting an effective governance structure for digital public sector reform. As recommended, a Joint Board for the orchestration of digital public sector transformation was set up between the municipalities, regions and the central government. The Board included high-ranking officials from all of the ministries concerned as well as mandated representatives from the local state tiers. Its first official act was the publication of a digitization strategy for the public sector. As a service unit, the Ministry of Finance put together a “Digital Task Force”, whose job it was to monitor the implementation of the Joint Board’s strategic vision. Focusing on structural questions first and technological ones later turned out to be a smart move as it enabled Denmark to orchestrate its public sector digitization in a coherent and assertive manner, thanks to a powerful and clearly mandated governance structure embedded within all relevant state actors – notably the regions and municipalities, which were the main providers of state services. In terms of policy the Danish began with small steps. The first eGovernment strategy of 2001 “Towards eGovernment: Vision and Strategy for the Public Sector in Denmark” aimed at shifting communication within the public sector, and towards citizens, from paper-based to electronic. The *e-Boks*, a secure digital post box and archiving solution for official communication had already been rolled out in 2001. In September 2003, Denmark celebrated its first “eDay” to mark the decision that administrative organisations would from now on be allowed to communicate and exchange official documents with each other via digital means. In February 2005 citizens were added to this agreement and were henceforward free to choose email as their preferred means of communication with public administration. By 2005, Denmark was already into its second digitization strategy – with many more to come. Based on the satisfactory results of a digital service portal for businesses (*virksom.dk*), the goal now became to install a similar service portal for citizens. For this, the pre-existing governmental website *borger.dk*, which had previously been merely an information hub, was turned into a self-service portal for a select range of services in 2007. It cleverly integrated two well-established legacy solutions: the *e-Boks* for the safe transfer and storage of official documents and the NemID as an accessible and already widely-used authentication method. Secondly, the portal was jointly owned and paid for by all three state levels, which helped to ensure its wide use and acceptance across the administrative landscape. Still, the secret behind the fast growth in digital public services was not merely effective service design and good-will among administrative officials – although this certainly helped. In order to reach the goal of a largely digital administration and universal usage of online solutions, Denmark tidied up its administrative structures. In 2007, major structural reform of local government coincided with the launch of *borger.dk*. Three years later, the Digital Task Force was institutionalized into the National Digitization Agency (*Digitaliseringsstyrelsen*). The tightening of these administrative structures was accompanied by a

tightening of public IT policy. Using the *borger.dk* and e-Boks public IT infrastructure was first made mandatory for administrative agencies in 2007; by 2012 the Mandatory Digital Post Act and the Mandatory Digital Self-Service Act demanded the same of all adult citizens. Simultaneously, the individual online solutions of municipalities and state agencies were phased out and replaced by universal solutions like NemID. Increasingly, the joined-up model of mutually-agreed, universal online solutions has become a general model for the Danish administration – regardless of the party in power. Under the social-democratic government of Helle Thorning-Schmidt, for instance, a considerable share of municipal tasks and employees were transferred into *Udbetaling* centres. There are currently five such national “benefit payment” centres, which function as centralized back office units for the digital administration of local public services, such as unemployment or housing benefits. They are co-owned and co-financed by all state tiers and have come to reshape, together with *borger.dk*, the very organisation of Danish public administration – from a decentralized and localised welfare state into a remote, automated and self-serviced administration that shares the look and feel of any contemporary online service provider.

TABLE 6 | TIMELINE OF DENMARK’S DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM AGENDA

Date	Activity
1968	Inception of unique citizen identifier (10-digit Central Person Registration Number), enabling the interconnection of data from different databases
31 May 2000	Act on Electronic Signature; introduction of a universal national digital signature for citizens, NemID
2001	Merger of <i>DMdata A/S</i> and <i>Kommunedata A/S</i> to build and promote national citizen digital mailbox, e-Boks
2001	Conception of e-Boks (digital post and archiving) service and decision to render mandatory the acceptance of incoming email communication for administrative units
2001	Establishment of a permanent Joint Board for the digitisation of the public sector between the municipalities, regions and the central government
2001	Establishment of the Digital Task Force within the Ministry of Finance as the intragovernmental nodal point for IT project management and implementation monitoring for the Joint Board
January 2002	Publication of First joint eGovernment strategy; renewal every three to four years since
September 2003	First eDay granting all administrations the right to send and be sent documents electronically between one another

2004	Launch of a basic business portal <i>www.virk.dk</i> , for the registration of businesses and VAT administration, and national health database <i>www.sundhed.dk</i> , to provide a central registry for patients' data
2004	Roll-out of a system for secure online communication between state agencies
1 February 2005	Second eDay, granting citizens the right to communicate electronically with public authorities and to receive electronic replies on request
November 2005	Benefit payments are from now on transferred through the universal <i>NemKonto</i> , Easy Account System.
1 January 2007	Launch of <i>www.borger.dk</i> , citizens' digital mailbox e-Boks, roll-out of online authentication solution, NemID
	"Local Government Reform" comes into effect which reduces regions from 14 to 5 and 275 municipalities to 98 and rearranges functional responsibilities between state tiers
	Requirement for all public agencies to use and maintain the central IT infrastructure (e.g. sending documents to e-Boks, providing application forms on <i>borger.dk</i>)
12 January 2010	Interstate agreement to replace various usernames/password codes with NemID secure digital signature
1 July 2010	National rollout of NemID as universal online authentication system for digital public services
2011	Foundation of Danish Agency for Digitization
2011	Redesign of <i>borger.dk</i> for increased usability
October 2012 – May 2015	Transferral of social benefit administration from municipalities to a joint remote back office organisation, <i>Udbetaling Danmark</i>
October 2012	Interstate agreement on the installation of a national and secure data distributor system <i>Danish Basic Data Programme</i>
June 2012	Mandatory Digital Self-Service Act and Mandatory Post Act
2012-2015	Consecutive roll-out of mandatory self-service solutions for a range of state services
1 November 2014	Mandatory online communication between state and citizens via digital mailbox "Digital Post"

THE POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM OF DENMARK

Denmark's digital success story is built on top of an administrative system which turned out to be particularly helpful for public sector digitization. There are two notable elements that enabled

Denmark to embark early on the path of digital transformation and to do so successfully. First of all, Denmark benefited from its administrative tradition, the cultural cornerstones of which made Danish public administration very accepting of the inherent changes that come with the digitization of public action. Notably, a focus on service orientation towards its citizen-users and attention to the efficient use of public funds. Secondly, the structures of the Danish politico-administrative system as well the joined-up style in which they are managed furthered decisive action. The result is a very coherent, national approach to digital public service implementation. The following section will give a brief overview of, firstly, the structure and, secondly, the culture of the Danish administrative system with a focus on those elements that pertain to digital reform activities in the public sector.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE DANISH POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

Denmark is a unitary but decentralized country with a strongly institutionalized, joined-up governance practice that harmonizes and tightly controls its formally decentralized administrative structures. Lower levels of government are responsible for a large number of delegated tasks, but their provision is managed through a strongly institutionalized system of coordination and through the central government. The resulting policy output is as coherent as one might expect from a strictly centralized country, but the management is characterized by vertical coordination and collaboration instead of uni-directional hierarchical rule (Andersen, 2008; H. F. Hansen, 2011, pp. 116–119).

Until 2007, Danish administration was made up of a state level and a two-tiered local level of 14 counties (*amter*) and 275 municipalities. Since then, the counties have been merged and reshaped into seven regions with considerably fewer responsibilities and less political leeway. The municipalities (*kommuner*) have equally been restructured and their number shrunk to 98 while inheriting many tasks from the abolished counties. With a median population size of around 43,000 citizens, Danish municipalities are now among the largest in all of Europe. As a reference point, the median German municipality has around 1,700 citizens, the average French municipality, only 435.³⁹ Danish municipalities have historically been responsible for the largest share of the country's public services and have seen their tasks grow through recent administrative reforms. These days they are, for example, responsible for local registry services, social services, primary schools and kindergartens, local road infrastructure and transportation, as well as for unemployment benefits and active labour market policy. They manage their activities through councils which are elected every four years and

³⁹ Data refers to the year 2017, <https://www.oecd.org/regional/EU-Local-government-key-data.pdf>, accessed 11 June 2021.

are financed in large part through income and property taxation which they levy themselves.⁴⁰ The regions, on the other hand, have been stripped of the counties' prior right to also levy taxes and are now basically administrative single-purpose units for the entirety of Danish health care services. They are unfavourably judged to be "crippled political institutions" whose character as independent units of local government is questioned, even though they also are run by elected council. However, their political and organisational functions are fairly limited (Houlberg and Ejersbo 2020, 21 as well as Blom-Hansen and Heeager 2011). The central state performs the typical national tasks of defence and overarching planning activities and, as of the recent restructuring reform in 2007, tax assessments as well as secondary and tertiary education (Houlberg & Ejersbo, 2020).

Historically, Denmark has a long tradition of strong local government in which central government also plays an assertive role. This seemingly contradictory combination of administrative decentralization and centralization may be born out of Denmark's specific political history. For most of the second millennium "Denmark" stretched across a much larger territory than it does today. It was a fractured and ever-shifting political union, precariously positioned at the centre of the Baltic Sea and under constant military attack. Much like the Austro-Hungarian empire, the Danish empire was a multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-confessional conglomerate. At the peak of its expansion it encompassed, among other territories, the Danish peninsula, the sister kingdom of Norway, the German-speaking duchies of *Schleswig* and *Holstein*, Greenland, Iceland, and parts of southern Sweden. In 1660, this rather variegated political union of kingdoms, duchies and some remote islands surprisingly turned into Europe's most absolute of absolutist monarchies. Under military and financial pressures, the previously politically dominant Danish *Rigsrådet*, a representative council of the realm, ceded its governmental rights as well as the privilege to elect their monarch. For the next two hundred years, the Danish kings ruled their empire in a strictly centralized manner and without interference from the aristocracy or the chancellery (*Danske Kancelli*) in Copenhagen (Jochem, 2012).

However, given Denmark's vast territorial spread, the changing allegiances of its territorial units and cultural and linguistic diversity, the realm continued to rely on self-sufficient local government. Despite the centralisation of Danish public administration in the absolutist era, the German-speaking territories of *Schleswig* and *Holstein*, for instance, retained their own chancellery in

⁴⁰ The fact that municipalities are the governmental unit that levies Danish income tax represents how state authority has historically been exercised through the local level in Denmark. In many other countries, even decentralized countries such as Germany which likewise share a history of strong local government, local funding primarily stems from state revenues which are handed down to the local level. So Danish municipalities and, to a smaller degree, counties have historically been financially independent of the central state. This independence has however been largely cut in practice by the central government setting of restrictions on tax rates and a tight regulation of local expenditures (Blom-Hansen, 2012).

Glückstadt and the high court in Gottorf, although they were subordinate to a specialised central administrative unit in Copenhagen, the *Tyske Kancel* (German Chancellery). When absolutist rule was abolished in 1849 and replaced with the constitutional monarchy that persists to this day, the Danish state erected a centralized state administration which nonetheless found a way to integrate the specific requirements of a large, multi-ethnic, multi-confessional and linguistically diverse periphery (Danish Foreign Ministry, 1971).

In the more recent past of the 20th and 21st century, Danish administrative structures have been shaped by a collection of reform efforts. Following a “bigger is better” logic, Denmark’s local government units have gone through several rounds of restructuring with the aim of creating large, self-sufficient units (Vrangbæk, 2010). From the 1800s up until 1970, Denmark counted 1,389 municipalities and 24 counties. The 1970s saw the number of municipalities reduce drastically, to 275, and those of the counties to 14. The second noticeable reform of administrative structures took place in 2007, merging municipalities and abolishing the county-level entirely, which were replaced with five regions. The physical restructuring was accompanied by a reshuffling of tasks that generally followed the path of decentralization (Local Government Denmark, 2009). Both reforms had the goal of simultaneously downshifting tasks to lower levels of government while preparing them by means of increasing their unit size (Andersen, 2008). In preparation for the reform of 1970, the minimum unit size was calculated for a broad range of administrative tasks. The results subsequently guided a radical amalgamation process and a reallocation of tasks to lower state levels, which were now considerably bigger (Danish Foreign Ministry, 1971, p. 143). So, decentralization has been a consistent feature of administrative reform in Denmark, but as compared to other European countries on the same reform track, the Danish have been acutely aware of the trade-off between small size units and administrative capacities. While similar restructuring plans would have spiked outrage and political opposition from the local level in other countries, the Danish have been willing to let go of the notion of historically-established and locally-embedded municipalities. In comparison with continental – and particularly Southern European – systems of local government, where nostalgia for the historic layout of politico-administrative structures has held back such reforms, the Danish have addressed the issue of their administrative structures with much more pragmatism. In the eyes of Danish policymakers, decentralization has to be accompanied by greater unit size in order to achieve the necessary administrative capacity for a taxing municipal portfolio (Andersen, 2008). It is likely that the restructuring reform of 2007 coincided with the acceleration of eGovernment reform activities. On 1 January 2007, the citizen service portal *borger.dk* was launched, the very same day that the new local government structures came into full effect (European Commission, 2015, p. 18).

Besides a preference towards larger administrative units, another characteristic of Denmark's administrative structure lies in the particular way in which they are managed. Formally, Danish administrative structures appear highly decentralized. This is true both in terms of local autonomy (Ladner et al., 2016) and on measures of fiscal decentralization (Ivanyna & Shah, 2014; Rodden, 2004). As a result, around 70 percent of all government expenditure can be attributed to the local level, making it the primary provider of public services to Danish citizens (Jensen & Fjord, 2010, p. 198). The central state only employs 24 percent of public officials; the remaining three quarters work for the regions and municipalities.⁴¹ But the high degree of formal fragmentation is hedged by a strongly institutionalized system of horizontal and vertical coordination, which considerably limits the free range of action taken by local government units. Two key players in this cooperative system are the representative bodies of the regions, *Danske Regioner* (DR), and of the municipalities, *Kommunernes Landsforening* (KL). Although these two organisations have no legal foundation in the constitution, they are quasi-representative of the subnational state and play an important role both in national legislation as well as in policy implementation. They are routinely integrated in major decisions of the Danish state and have been critically compared to an informal second chamber (Andersen, 2008). In this role, the DR and KL serve as an integrating voice for subnational interests and help inform the national government in bottom-up policymaking processes. But they also fulfil an important role in coordinating public action on the horizontal level. KL has played a proactive role in many harmonization projects, particularly in the field of local state IT. It was, for instance, on behalf of KL that Danish municipalities merged their IT departments in 1972 to form the national public company *Kommunedata* (KMD), which would go on to function as the key provider of IT services to state and local government.⁴²

KL and DR are also the organisational mechanisms for vertical coordination in the top-down direction. Thanks to a high degree of internal commitment, both the DR as well as the KL can negotiate on behalf of their members and oblige them to follow through with the agreements they obtain. A prominent example of this quasi-corporatist arrangement of intra-state coordination is the "budget cooperation system". These annual negotiations, so called "budget talks", form an intricate system of joined-up fiscal decision-making between the central state and the local level (Jensen & Fjord, 2010). Their historical origin lies in the fiscal crisis of the late 1970s, when uncoordinated welfare spending at

⁴¹ International Labour Organisation (ILO), ILOSTAT (database), public employment by sectors and sub-sectors of national accounts, data from 2017/2018.

⁴² KMD was sold by the KL in 2009 and has been acquired by the Japanese owned IT company NEC in 2018, <https://www.computerworld.dk/art/245884/japanske-nec-koerber-kmd-for-otte-milliarder-kroner>, accessed 30 December 2021.

the local level had amassed a public debt burden that brought the country to the literal “financial abyss”.⁴³ Up until 1979, the national government had no control over local governments’ spending. Given that local governments were providing most of the welfare state’s services and benefit payments and were financially largely independent of the central state, a better oversight and control mechanism for the country’s total spending was needed. The incumbent conservative government of 1982 established a cooperative system between the Ministry of Finance on the one side and KL as the representative of local government on the other for setting spending ceilings, tax rates and deficit targets. Over the course of the years, this system evolved from informal talks generating a couple of pages of results into a sophisticated national steering system for economic and fiscal policy. The regime was considerably tightened during the 2000s, which saw the establishment of spending ceilings, combined with a sanction system for municipalities which missed their spending targets, and a freeze on the overall tax rates,⁴⁴ which means that for any municipality wishing to raise taxes, another must accommodate by lowering theirs. Coordinating the aggregate spending and taxation levels across the municipalities is the responsibility of the KL, which demonstrates the powerful role they hold in the management of the overall politico-administrative structure that comprises the Danish state.

Critical observers feel, however, that the arrangement amounts to the de-facto curbing of local government’s independence (Houlberg & Ejersbo, 2020). It limits, for example, the taxation right of municipalities considerably – up to a point where they exist merely on paper (Andersen, 2008). And indeed, the budget cooperation system is but one instance of an overall trend in Danish politics and administration to tightly coordinate the country’s formally decentralized structures (Suenson et al., 2016). Andersen (2008, p. 15) summarizes this trend as one of “centralized decentralization”; he sees it exemplified in the administrative reform project of 2007 that saw, on the one hand, further delegation of tasks to the municipalities which, at the same time, were merged to even bigger units and placed under ever tighter coordination regimes by the central state. For this to be possible, the Danish state’s unitary structure must be noted. While the municipalities are mentioned in the Danish constitution and their right to “to manage their own affairs independently under the supervision of the State”⁴⁵ is put in explicit terms, the practical interpretation remains open for debate. As opposed

⁴³ The Social Democratic Minister of Finance, Knud Heinesen, declared that Denmark’s public finances were “heading towards the abyss” in an infamous TV interview in 1979 (Zohlnhöfer, 2017).

⁴⁴ The “Budget Law” of 2012 institutionalized these provisions further. For example, mandatory spending ceilings that had existed prior 2012 were not consistently respected. This changed when a system of economic sanctions was implemented. The budget law furthermore stipulated that municipal budgets be balanced, effectively prohibiting local governments from making use of debt-financing (Suenson et al., 2016).

⁴⁵ Article 82, Constitution of Denmark.

to France or Germany, Danish public administration is not governed by a detailed corpus of administrative law, but is built to a vast degree on customs and regulations documented only through soft law (H. F. Hansen, 2011, p. 116; Lægreid & Pedersen, 1994). In the words of their top organisation, municipalities have to recognize that “there are no guarantees of local self-government except the fact that the Constitution says that we must have ‘municipalities’. But the Constitution does not say anything about how the system of local government is to be organised.” (Local Government Denmark, 2009, p. 9). They also lack legal recourse against governmental decisions made in Copenhagen. Such a comparatively weak degree of formal institutionalization makes the Danish decentralized administrative structures very pliable, as fragmentation can be reined in without having to fear judicial veto (Immergut, 1990). It is on top of this more open institutional background that the very coherent management system of Danish administrative structures has been built.

The third key player in the vertical and horizontal coordination of Denmark’s politico-administrative structures is consequently the Ministry of Finance. Originally just one ministry among equals, it has evolved into a *primus inter pares*. This is despite the fact that Danish cabinets tend to be made up of independent ministers, often from different parties, who run their jurisdictions under their own responsibility (Danish Foreign Ministry, 1971, p. 135). Still, over the years, the Ministry of Finance has come to be recognized as a central actor for governmental steering, particularly in the field of administrative policy, where it acts as a driver for state modernization. Together with the KL and DR, the Ministry forms a sort of policy triangle for administrative policymaking (Christensen 2009 and Hansen 2011). The issue of administrative reform has thus been systematically anchored with the ministry. And ever since the first budget reform of the 1980s, it has been framed as a matter of the state’s expenditure policy. For that reason, public sector reform in Denmark has an in-built focus on cost-saving (Lægreid & Pedersen, 1994). It can furthermore rely on strong institutional backing when national roll-outs are planned, as the Ministry of Finance can use its power as the provider of public funds to nudge, or straightforwardly dictate, efficiency-driven reforms. The integration into the Ministry of Finance furthermore makes for a “concentrated” approach to public sector reform (H. F. Hansen, 2011). For the purpose of ensuring state-wide roll-outs, the Ministry has established an institutionalized form for cooperating on reform projects with the KL and DR. Cooperation takes place in the form of a national Steering Committee for Joint Government Cooperation (*Styregruppen for Tværoffentligt Samarbejde*, STS) which was founded in 2001. It unites high-ranking representatives of KL and the Danish Regions and key national ministries including, notably, the Ministry of Finance.

Although NPM-inspired reforms have been actively pursued ever since the 1980s, beginning with the Modernization Programme of 1983, Denmark has followed the cultural and managerial

prescriptions rather than the structural ones. Hansen finds in her assessment of the impact of NPM-style reforms in Denmark that neither privatization and outsourcing, nor “agencification” or decentralization have played a large role in the Danish administrative reforms since the 1980s. Instead, reforms have sought to achieve the very opposite: administrative units have been merged and intermediate governmental tiers dropped (H. F. Hansen 2011, 119). When new specialized governmental bodies were founded, it was to concentrate and centralize supporting tasks, notably in the area of IT, instead of decentralizing them (H. F. Hansen 2011, 2016–19). Outsourcing and the privatization of public tasks have been considerably less well-received in Denmark compared to other NPM-friendly countries like the UK, Australia or New Zealand. The reason for this is likely the greater trust in government and the different self-conception of the Danish state, which takes pride in the central role it plays in Danish citizens’ lives and does not consider public services as a last resort for those who cannot afford private options. Privatization of some of the few publicly-owned industries occurred in the 1990s, but did not compare to the scope of privatization activities in, for instance, Germany during the same period. Similarly, Danish municipalities and regions are still the main provider of public services as the level of contracting out municipal services to private or non-profit providers remained at a stable low of around 12 percent between the 1980s and the mid-2000s and has only recently climbed to an average 26.5 percent (H. F. Hansen 2011, 118). Still, hiring skills into the public sphere instead of buying competency from consultants and private contractors has been the general policy in the field of public IT development. This separates Denmark from other countries, for example Germany, which has relied largely on public tenders for the provision of software solutions.

In summary, the administrative structures of Denmark have historically been highly decentralized with strong, autonomous municipalities. Their functional scope is large and they have had considerable fiscal independence for a long while. The radical structural reform of 2007 saw their remit grow as their size increased even further. However, the last four decades have witnessed a trend towards reducing administrative fragmentation. This happened by way of diminishing the importance of meso-level public administration and merging local government. Possibly even more important was the establishment of an extremely coherent system of vertical coordination between state tiers. While the fiscal coordination scheme served as a template, administrative policy of all sorts is managed in a coherent manner across the Danish state. The most important players in this are the KL and DR on the one side and the Ministry of Finance on the other. The KL and DR coordinate public action on the horizontal level, integrate the voice of local government and function as a transmission belt for the implementation of the mutual agreements that local government strikes with the central state. The Ministry of Finance has a prominent role compared to other portfolios because it is recognized as the

coordinator for matters of national interest, among them the digitization of the public sector. But despite the trend towards tighter orchestration of public action and Denmark's unitary state organisation, the management style is of vertical cooperation rather than of top-down steering. The institutional mechanism for such cooperative steering are the intra-governmental Steering Groups, where representatives of all three state levels come together as equals and make binding policy decisions. It is in this manner that the digitization of the Danish state is being orchestrated. An eGovernment steering Group with representatives from the KL, DR and the Ministry of Finance as well as some other national portfolios have been coordinating digital administrative reform from the get-go. The jointly-made decisions have been rendered binding through soft law in the form of intergovernmental eGovernment strategies, that are updated approximately every four to five years. Their implementation is being overseen by the Ministry of Finance, which has lent its authority and agenda-setting power to the cause of digital public sector reform. Denmark has struck a good compromise between centralizing its public digitization programme while including the breadth of the country's administrative landscape in an effective manner. Jointly made decisions about targets and technological choices have given legitimacy to the implementation of national eGovernment policy and thanks to the high degree of internal organisation of KL and DR, those decisions were put into effect at all state levels. As opposed to countries with smaller, weaker municipalities and a more fragmented administrative landscape, local government in Denmark was included effectively at every step of the reform process and turned into an active player from the very beginning. The coherent management of Danish administrative structures has enabled the country to build a uniform public IT environment with unitary, universal solutions. This has been beneficial for take-up and subsequent development, since users are not faced with a cacophony of apps, authentication methods and user accounts, but profit from a highly recognizable service offer.

THE CULTURE OF THE DANISH POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

The culture and socio-psychology of northern Europe differ noticeably from the rest of Europe, finds Sven Jochem in his seminal work on the political systems of the Nordic countries (Jochem, 2012, p. 36). These cultural differences in Nordic societies at large are also reflected in their distinct administrative traditions. Peters (2021) has accordingly devoted an entire administrative tradition to the Nordic countries. He considers it to be a stand-alone with its own particular features, albeit integrating some elements from the Germanic Weberian model, the Napoleonic model, as well as from the typically Anglo-Saxon NPM agenda. With the Weberian model, Denmark shares the historical roots of the *Rechtsstaat* tradition, even though law today plays a far less important role than in, for example, Germany, and legalism is not a normative feature of Danish administration. Instead, Denmark has eagerly adopted managerial thinking and its public labour force is not dominated by lawyers. With

France, Denmark has in common the concept of a strong and self-assured state. However, the Danish interpretation of “a strong state” is far less *étatiste*, as it is hedged by an egalitarian Nordic spirit that abhors big power differentials. At the same time, some core values of the NPM agenda have been adopted by Danish administrative culture, notably an appreciation of lean processes and efficiency, an orientation towards measurable targets and the concept of the citizen as customer. All in all, the particular administrative culture of Denmark mixes elements of other traditions, but in such a way to create a brand of its own. Danish administrative culture is, in the words of its public executives, the key to understanding the enormous success their country achieved in the field of eGovernment. That is because Danish administrative culture approximates in the closest possible way the ideal type of the digital-era administrative culture (see Chapter 2): a similar way of operating the private and the public sector, a symmetrical relationship between citizens and the state, a service-orientation and modern, non-hierarchical ways of steering. These characteristics are explained in greater detail below. The section concludes with hypotheses about how those norms enabled the early and swift digital transformation of the Danish public sector.

Danish public administration does not consider itself removed from the rules and norms that are valid for the private sector. This is opposed to the legalistic *Rechtsstaat* concept, which considers the goals of the state – and consequently of the administration as its representative – to be fundamentally different from those of private business. In legalistic administrations, the guiding objective is to ensure the correctness of administration and questions of efficacy or service quality are secondary at best. Among the Nordic countries, such legalistic thinking has largely been replaced by a more business-like conception of what administration is for – namely to provide good services to customers at a low price. When private businesses started to shift customer access points to the internet and use digital technologies for automation and cost-saving self-service procedures, public officials in Denmark were quick to wonder how they could copy and apply these ideas to public administration. Such a line of thinking is possibly more pronounced in Denmark than in Sweden or any of the other Nordic countries (Peters, 2021, pp. 94–116).

The reason for this is the fundamental normative shift in Danish politics in response to the fiscal crisis of the late 1970s. Having looked “into the abyss” of crushing public debt, the politico-administrative system learned a lesson: if the Danish welfare model was to persist into the future, its finances would have to be sound. But in contrast to the cutbacks undertaken in other parts of the world, notably in the Anglo-Saxon countries, the Danish solution was to look for ways of saving the welfare state by making it more efficient and not less generous (Zohlnhöfer, 2017). Coming from this economic history, Denmark turned eagerly to the ideas of the NPM in the early 1980s and integrated

them into the normative concept of the Danish welfare state: generous, but efficiently run. To Denmark, the NPM agenda was no reform fad but permanently altered the values of Denmark's administrative body. In order to still be able to provide generous benefits of high quality to its citizens, Danish public administration had to become as concerned for costs and as nimble in its operations as a private business. Legality and due process were not thrown out of the window, but they had to be measured against the efficiency of administration (H. F. Hansen, 2011).

In response to the new conscientiousness around capping public sector spending, Denmark embarked on a number of public sector reforms in the spirit of the NPM reform paradigm during the 1980s. As a consequence, NPM techniques such as "management by objectives" were introduced early, as were inquiries into user demands and their satisfaction with how public services are being provided (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). In the context of eGovernment projects, Denmark has lately erected a highly professional project management framework, where costs and progress are continuously monitored.⁴⁶ But, as opposed to the interpretation of the NPM in most of the English-speaking world, Denmark – alongside Sweden and Norway – embarked on a reform agenda that is best described as "modernizing" rather than "marketizing". From the ideological buffet that is the NPM, Denmark has primarily selected the framing of citizens as users of public services and concern for the cost-effectiveness of public action. Marketization, privatization and the overall ideal of a lean state in the role of an enabler (rather than provider) to business and society has not gained a hold (Hansen 2011, 119).

The somewhat self-effacing identity of Danish public administration as a provider of services at good value for money is another core feature of its value system (Peters, 2021, pp. 109–110). Even though the Danish cherish the idea of a large and strong state, they do not buy into the *étatiste* glorification that is typical of French administrative culture. In the eyes of Danish public officials, state and society see eye to eye; there is no hierarchy between the interests of citizens and public administration (Peters, 2021, pp. 96–97). It may be that the newly found consciousness of the costliness of a big welfare state may partially explain why Danish public officials do not consider themselves removed from the citizens they serve. But more importantly perhaps, the specific norms of Nordic culture at large shine through, namely, egalitarianism and an aversion towards power differentials between the state and the individual (Hofstede, 1984, 2003). In Denmark, as in the rest of

⁴⁶ The so-called IT Programme model is mandatory for any public IT project exceeding 60 Million DKK. https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/inline-files/eGovernment_Denmark_February_2016_18_01_v3_02.pdf, accessed 03 March 2022

the Nordic countries, public officials seek to minimize the creation of an *étatist* elite that is set apart from the remainder of society. As a consequence, working in public administration, even in high-ranking positions, does not carry the same kind of gravitas that it does in similarly affluent nations (Peters, 2021, p. 95). What furthermore contributes to the symmetrical relationship between state and society in Denmark is the mixing of public and private labour markets. Gregory and Christensen (2004) describe the Danish civil service as the one that “has moved perhaps farthest away from traditional personnel management, with many officials not being on individual, limited-term contracts” (Gregory & Christensen, 2004; Peters, 2021, p. 104). Without a closed civil service with exclusive career paths, personnel filter in and out between the public and private sector labour markets, bringing with them a more business-oriented approach to the provision of public services (M. B. Hansen, 2011).

Not only is the relationship between the Danish state and Danish society symmetrical, public officials in Denmark are very committed to offering citizens an excellent service experience. Citizens are not subjects to be administered correctly; they pay high taxes and are consequently deserving of high-quality services in exchange (Peters, 2021, pp. 109–110). Christensen and Lægreid (2002, 15) consider this concept of the state as contractual and compare it to the ideal of a supermarket offering public services. That the Nordic countries show an extraordinary commitment to service is no empty cliché – it has been repeatedly documented in comparative research. Surveys among public sector employees have shown that Scandinavia outranks all others in terms of service commitment (Bullock et al., 2015; Houston, 2011; Thunman & Persson, 2015). In contrast to the goal of “providing excellent services”, Nordic public administrations are less vested in the procedural correctness that dominates the bureaucratic service experience for continental European citizens. As stated above, the *Rechtsstaat* tradition has somewhat waned and has never been as highly institutionalized as in Germany or France. Danish administration is much less formalized as there is, for example, no exclusive administrative judicial system and steering is more frequently based on customs, informal agreements or soft law. The numerous bodies of administrative law that dictate German, Italian and French public action are absent from Danish public administration (Peters, 2021, pp. 94–99).

The last particularity of Danish administrative culture which shall be mentioned for the purpose of its role in eGovernment reform is the collaborative and pragmatic style of steering that is customary both between state tiers and within individual administrative units (Vrangbæk, 2010). The classic ideal of bureaucratic steering – the hierarchic pyramid with a director at the top who manages administration in a vertical, top-down manner – has been softened by the communitarian spirit of the Nordic societies (Jochem, 2012). In his cross-country comparison of national cultures, Hofstede (1984,

2003) finds Denmark to be among the countries with the least acceptance for power differentials between individuals. In the context of work environments this means that bosses can refer to their formal hierarchy when interacting with their employees only to a very limited degree. Integrating subordinate personnel in decision-making and participatory management styles are ways in which these social norms manifest in work culture. This does not mean, however, that Danes spend their workdays in endless meetings, participating in cumbersome bottom-up decision-making processes or that they have trouble with making and accepting decisions. To the contrary, Danish work culture has been observed as hands-on, open to risk-taking and not prone to over-debating and over-thinking decisions. Such general observations about Danish work culture at large also apply to the more specific domain of administrative culture. Hansen (2011, p. 117) describes Danish administration as “pragmatic” when compared to more bureaucratic continental administrative cultures. And Jochem (2012, p. 73) even finds that the Danish have developed a somewhat rougher “shut-up” style compared to their Scandinavian neighbours, which shortens lengthy political debates. For the sake of running effective digitization projects, this management style that merges participatory elements with pragmatism has been found to be particularly appropriate (Meyerhoff Nielsen, 2019; OECD, 2010). Meyerhoff elaborates furthermore that the abstract and creative elements of implementing digitization projects require greater freedom for public officials. According to him, much of the success behind Danish eGovernment implementation can be explained by the particular governance style of Danish public administration, which empowers public employees at all state levels to participate in the grand project of digital state transformation while ensuring commitment once a group decision has been made.

To sum up, Danish administrative culture comes close to the ideal of an organisational culture that is fit for the digital era. Though historically close to the Germanic model, it has moved far from the bureaucratic ideal. Instead, Danish public administration has drawn closer to the norms and values that govern the private sector. As a consequence, law doesn't play a large role since target-orientation, efficiency and contemporary managerial practices have partly replaced it as the steering mechanism. The overarching goal, however, is to ensure a high standard of services to citizens who are regarded as customers. Although the state is granted a large role, power differentials are frowned upon and it sees eye to eye with citizens. The preference for symmetrical relationships extends to the way the administration is run. A cooperative, participatory management style wins over hierarchical top-down steering. But a particularly Danish goal-orientated pragmatism ensures that this does not prevent swift and effective decision-making.

For the large-scale policy project that is the digitization of the public sector, Danish public

administration has likely played an important role. Its pronounced service commitment and attention to finding more efficient ways of running the generous Danish welfare state make the digitization of public services a no-brainer. Any software developer will confirm that putting yourself in the shoes of the customer so that digital services are designed from their perspective is crucial for success. For Danish administration, this perspective did not require a normative shift. Instead, it fit very well with the pre-existing service-culture. Moreover, the administration's collaborative spirit and pragmatic goal-orientation provided an excellent cultural context for the demanding governance of a state-wide reform agenda. Digital services thrive on common solutions and an established practice in joined-up, consensual policymaking makes it more likely to be achieved.

THE STORY OF PUBLIC SERVICE DIGITIZATION IN DENMARK

In comparison to Germany, Denmark started the digitization of its state services much earlier. It is today widely regarded as one of the most advanced countries with respect to digital governance. At the heart of Denmark's digitized public sector is the internationally renowned online public service portal, *borger.dk*, which translates to "citizen.dk". Although one of the most visible products of Denmark's digitization efforts, *borger.dk* has been accompanied by a chain of technological improvements and the institutionalization of digital public service reform into a permanent working structure. The chain of policymaking and implementation in the area of digital public sector reform was set off in 2001. Since then, the Danish state administration has agreed on joint eGovernment strategies at regular intervals between the three state levels: national, regional and local (Agency for Digitization, 2011, 2016; Digital Task Force, 2001, 2004, 2007). The third instalment, the strategy for the years 2007-2010, "Towards Better Digital Service, Increased Efficiency and Stronger Collaboration", set the goal of building a common Danish portal infrastructure via which citizens could find all services offered by the Danish state.

Today, the portal is made up of three building blocks, each developed in a joint manner, meaning the result was a national solution for all of Denmark and all types of public service – municipal registrations, social benefit allowances, permissions of any kind or tax filings. Firstly, a digital post box (e-Boks) for sending and receiving official documents in a safe manner; secondly the portal infrastructure itself (*borger.dk*); and thirdly a secure means of online authentication (NemID) for citizens logging into their e-Boks or *borger.dk* accounts. At the time of its inception, *borger.dk* was primarily meant as a central starting point to steer citizens to the respective websites where the desired services were hosted; the portal was initially not meant to host services but to function as an index and guide to the decentralized websites of different government agencies (e.g. tax authorities

or pension funds) or state levels (local community websites). But in contrast to the German Joint Portal Network, *borger.dk*'s primacy over other governmental websites was uncontested and it quickly became the primary point of entry for citizens looking to conduct administrative procedures. Perhaps even more importantly – in contrast to the multitude of solutions that sprouted in Germany – only one digital mailbox, user account and authentication mechanism was ever developed.

THE MAKING OF BORGER.DK – REAPING THE BENEFITS OF INSTITUTIONAL LEGACIES AND NORDIC ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE

The website *borger.dk* was launched 2007, but a number of important prior steps had already been taken which, would facilitate the subsequent digitization of Danish administrative services. Those earlier policy decisions did not set Denmark on a predetermined path, but they had created a system that promised increasing returns to further digitization efforts. For instance, *borger.dk* profited from a decision which dated back to 2001 to compel all units of public administration to accept incoming email communication from citizens. This step normalized digital communication between citizens and the state at an early stage. The e-Boks dated back to around the same time. This secure alternative to email had been developed by KMD, the joint public service provider of Denmark's municipalities, as early as 2000 and made for a convenient addition to the national public service portal because it enabled the portal to be used for sending and receiving sensitive administrative documents. Furthermore, Denmark had focused early on the digitization of its intra-governmental communication. In 2004, a secure means of communication between state agencies had been rolled out, similar to what later became e-Boks for the outward-bound communication (European Commission, 2015).

But why did Danish public administration actively pursue those digitization efforts which promised a great deal of work and risked making many public sector jobs obsolete? Scholars from the institutional school of thought would argue that public employees who provide state services will organize against changes that would erase their jobs (Pierson, 1995) or make their work life more demanding. But in Denmark, public officials warmly embraced political initiatives for the digitization of administrative action instead of rebelling or tacitly ignoring them. As a matter of fact, several of the experts who were interviewed for this case study affirmed that politicians consensually supported administrative digitization projects, but that they did not need to dictate this reform agenda to an unwilling public administration. Instead, they were met with open ears. Instead of politicians, it was arguably Danish civil servants who pushed digital public service reform forward: "eGovernance in Denmark is not politically driven, but driven by public administration. And it was driven by cost-saving,

and that was how it was sold politically,"⁴⁷ said one expert, summarizing the relation between politicians and public officials.

Thanks to an administrative culture that proved particularly open to the promise of digitization that could be relied upon, a common understanding grew in the Danish public administration regarding the necessity and desirability of digitizing public services.⁴⁸ Both high-ranking executives as well as the main body of public sector staff agreed on two key beliefs. Firstly, digitization for the sake of efficiency would free up valuable resources to be used for better purposes. Secondly, Danish citizens rightfully expected their state's public services to be modern, high-quality and tailored for their needs; in an increasingly digital economy this meant online services at the same level of quality that private companies were offering online.⁴⁹

These two beliefs manifested several norms that are integral to the Nordic administrative tradition. Danish public officials did not draw a line between the developments in their national service economy and their work in public administration. Instead, they observed that their fellow citizens were eagerly making use of digital private services, using online banking and booking their holidays online. At the same time, many companies were starting to automate parts of their services in order to save costs. Both developments were keenly observed and Danish public officials quickly realized the potential for digitizing the labour-intensive aspects of public administration. With a keen eye for ways to reallocate funds, one municipal chief administrator of citizen services dryly remarked on Denmark's large public sector staff that "it costs a lot of money and time and sometimes we would like to use it differently."⁵⁰ Many of the earlier Danish eGovernment documents stress that Denmark's first steps towards a digital-era administration were driven by financial concerns, "the need to finance our welfare state."⁵¹ Denmark has, more than many other countries, pursued the digitization of its citizen services as a means to save money (Digital Task Force, 2001, 2004, 2007). Containing the high costs of the Danish welfare state forced a thorough and successful switch to cheaper self-service solutions (OECD 2010; Lippert 2014). A former member of the Ministry of Finance confirmed that the idea to build a digital self-service portal for citizens was in fact partly inspired by the observation that "you

⁴⁷ Interview nr. 8, min. 23.

⁴⁸ Interviews nr. 2 and nr. 9.

⁴⁹ Interviews nr. 6, nr. 10, nr. 14 and nr. 15.

⁵⁰ Interview nr. 4, min. 45.

⁵¹ Interview nr. 4, min 46.

could save a lot of money, if you let people do stuff themselves."⁵²

What supports this point is that both waves of digitally supported centralization occurred in times of fiscal crises: the mid-1970s and the period after 2008 (Scupola, 2018). When leaving office in 1979, the minister of finance Knud Heinesen stated in a television interview that Denmark was fiscally *en route* to the abyss. Successive government heeded the call by agreeing on reforms which aimed, among other things, at reducing the public sector's financial burden by digitizing public administration tasks (Zohlnhöfer, 2017). Twenty years later, the eGovernment Strategy for the period from 2011 to 2015 set out to reduce administrative costs by 40 million Euros within five years by means of digitizing most citizen services and making their online use mandatory (Agency for Digitization, 2011). At least during the initial construction phase, Denmark's primary motivation to pursue eGovernment reforms were efficiency gains – not quality improvements or other reasons – as an OECD survey among public sector actors from 2010 shows. When asked for the most important reason to adopt eGovernment, by far the most frequent answer was efficiency (47 percent). This compares with only 27 percent who found that improving the quality of services was the most important (OECD, 2010, p. 248f). The same interest in cost-saving was demonstrated in the parliamentary debates surrounding Bills L160 and L159, which required citizens to install and use their digital post boxes (L160) and made the use of the digital-self service solutions mandatory (L159) for a range of common public services. The debate transcripts showed not only unambiguous consensus among all but one minor party for both bills (regardless of their placement on the left-right axis) but featured references from every single party spokesperson of the purpose being cost-saving. Service-orientation was by contrast mentioned far less often (see Folketing 2012).⁵³

So, a widespread acceptance of efficiency as a guiding norm for good public administration drew the interest of Danish public officials to public service digitization early on. But this does not mean that the opportunity to save costs was the only perspective uniting Danish public officials in their agreement over digital public service reform. The second widely-shared assumption in Danish public administration was a feeling of duty towards their citizens to provide high-quality services that please their users first and their providers second. Since Danish administrative culture entertains a

⁵² Interview nr. 7, min. 22.

⁵³ Danish Folketing, Collection of Bills 2011-2012, L 160, Proposal for Public Digital Post Act. First Reading, 26.04.2012, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/2011/lovforslag/L160/BEH1-75/forhandling.htm>, accessed 30 January 2020.

Danish Folketing, Collection of Bills 2011-2012, L 159 Proposal for an Act amending the Act on the Central Register of Persons [...]. Transition to compulsory digital self-service for citizen. First Reading, 26.04.2012, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/2011/lovforslag/L159/BEH1-75/forhandling.htm>

symmetrical relationship with its citizens and prioritizes their satisfaction, digitizing public services was seen as a way to improve the user experience for citizens who have to apply for unemployment benefits or are looking for a daycare spot. Regarding digital public service, a former member of the team that headed the implementation of *borger.dk* exclaimed, "We wanted to give our citizens what they wanted from us."⁵⁴

Besides a welcoming cultural background in digital-friendly Danish public administration, the implementation of *borger.dk* also profited from institutional legacies that dated back several decades. One of these was the merger in 1972 of the many municipal IT service organisations into a single public company (*Kommunedata*, KMD) to function as an overarching IT provider to all Danish local governments (Borum et al., 2018, p. 16). Creating one unified actor early on prevented the dispersed growth of public IT provision that happened in, for example, Germany. Instead, the merger made sure that a forceful company could benefit from economies of scale and develop unrivalled standards that fit well with one another. For this reason, the IT landscape in Danish public administration was far less fragmented than in Germany. Introducing new software tools was less fraught with issues of compatibility because of the longstanding unity of KMD as a key provider of hardware as well as software services (Borum et al., 2018, pp. 16–19). For the development of *borger.dk*, having only one nationwide public IT provider also simplified the implementation process of digital public services, because it reduced complexity in the project's governance (Lippert, 2014).

Another beneficial policy legacy was Denmark's national personal registration number (CPR number). This unique personal identifier was established in 1968 along with a centrally hosted national registry, thereby supplanting the different municipal identifiers that were in use before. The CPR number has proven invaluable for digital public service reform because it enables the connection of citizen data from different agencies through a common identifier. Its use for digital service completion was pioneered by the Danish tax authorities whose experiences went on to inform many practices that were later applied to the rest of the country's administration. According to many experts on eGovernment, this has been one of the key ingredients by which Denmark's citizen-friendly and efficient online service portal is run (Lippert, 2014).⁵⁵

Both KMD and the national citizen registry with its CPR number happened to be the result of

⁵⁴ Interview nr. 7, min. 5.

⁵⁵ Interview nr. 3, nr. 8 and nr. 16.

mergers of formerly decentralized municipal solutions. These mergers were at the time motivated by financial or otherwise unrelated concerns but would go on to become highly advantageous for the development of a coherent system of digital public services under *borger.dk*. Both were the results of institutionalized vertical and, particularly, horizontal cooperation within Danish public administration – most notably, the effective self-coordination of Danish municipalities. This coherent way of managing the output of a nominally decentralized public administration had produced over the course of several decades an institutional legacy in the form of coherent public IT providers and solutions. By 2007 this legacy was benefiting Denmark in the implementation of a coherent system of digital public services.

Good cultural fit and beneficial institutional legacies put Denmark in a convenient starting position for digital public service reform. According to many of the experts who were interviewed for this study, as well as Danish governmental publications⁵⁶ and eGovernment scholars, one of the most important factors behind the success of *borger.dk* was its strong and coherent project governance combined with an assertive style of project management (Agency for Digitization, 2016; Danish Ministry of Finance, 2017; Igari, 2014; Meyerhoff Nielsen, 2011, 2019; Meyerhoff Nielsen & Yasouka, 2014; Scupola, 2018; van Os, 2011).⁵⁷ Setting up the organisational units in charge of carrying through the strategies early gave “flesh to the bone” of policymaking. At the heart of the implementation governance, Denmark set up a high-ranking intergovernmental Steering Committee for Joint Government Cooperation (*Styregruppen for Tværoffentligt Samarbejde*, STS) in 2001, which would oversee the execution of Denmark’s first eGovernment strategy as well as all subsequent ones (European Commission, 2015).⁵⁸ The Steering Committee was made up of representatives from central, regional and local government, and formed the top decision-making body in the realm of eGovernment for the country. In contrast to Germany, where only representatives from the local level had the right to listen in on meetings, the Danish KL was actively involved in all decision-making from the very beginning, thanks to its seat on the Steering Committee (Piaggese 2011). The Committee was wisely endowed with ample formal decision-making powers and furthermore profited from the fact that its members were at the level of state secretaries or managing directors. The regions and government in 2008 made sure that the Danish public service portal would not suffer shipwreck over money woes or disputes (Lippert 2014), especially through the lasting and binding agreement over a

⁵⁶ <https://denmark.dk/innovation-and-design/denmarks-digital-success>, accessed 27 April 2021.

The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosts an entire website dedicated solely to the international promotion of Denmark’s prowess in the public digitization: <https://digitaldenmark.dk/>, accessed 27 April 2021.

⁵⁷ Interviews nr. 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 12, 16.

⁵⁸ The committee not only oversaw the coherent implementation of a national eGovernment strategy, it also worked on a range intergovernmental good governance projects.

stable financing pact for all IT matters between the municipalities. Thanks to a corporatist tradition, “the joint governance came naturally”⁵⁹ to Danish public administration because it reproduced the coherent fashion in which Danish public administration routinely organized its work. The Steering Committee’s collaborative decision-making, which included the voices of all relevant state actors, contributed to the legitimacy of its steering.⁶⁰ Both its institutional authority as well as its collaborative character lent the committee the force to make binding decisions on behalf of all Danish public administration and to strictly enforce their implementation. It was from this position of strength that the Steering Committee elected an assertive style in their project management.

But the Steering Committee was only a decision-making body. Wielding its own budget, the Steering Committee was able to employ a large operational unit and pay its staff which gave it the opportunity to not only make decisions but to actually see them through. For the actual IT development legwork, it was supported by the “Digital Taskforce”, which acted as the service unit to the Steering Committee and turned out to be highly relevant for the successful implementation of a coherent Danish digital public service scheme (Joinup 2015; Christensen and Lægheid 2016; OECD 2010). The Digital Task Force consisted of deputised civil servants from different administrative bodies and was located in the Ministry of Finance, a position that endowed it with particular power. A former Task Force member recalls how “we could just call the Ministry of Finance and make a meeting with a high-level executive and they would make a deal for us ONLY because our ministry had the right to cut the budget if they did not behave. If I had called from the Telecom Agency they would have stalled.”⁶¹ It had been set up as early as 2001 for prior eGovernment projects and by 2007, had thus collected considerable expertise when *borger.dk* was slated for development. This Task Force became the project managing unit for developing *borger.dk* until it was supplanted by the Danish Agency for Digitization in 2011. In contrast with the German IT Planning Council, the task force had its own budget and staff from the very beginning and was thus successfully designed to run the operative day-to-day business. Having a steady body of operational officers in the Digital Task Force enabled the professional project management of *borger.dk* (Agency for Digitisation 2018). For example, the Digital Task Force used its resources to closely monitor progress at the local level and quickly develop testable pieces of software.

The STS steered the Digital Taskforce not through official legislation, but through soft law. The

⁵⁹ Interview nr. 8, min 67.

⁶⁰ Interviews nr. 4, nr. 8, nr. 10 and nr. 12.

⁶¹ Interview nr. 7, min. 18.

motor which propelled Danish eGovernment forward was its intergovernmental digitization strategies. "It's all been driven by the strategies," summarized a long-standing executive from the Digitization Agency.⁶² According to this executive, these jointly agreed and deftly implemented strategies were the reason why "Danish government was maybe ahead of other European governments" when it came to public digitization.⁶³ That they were renewed every three years proved to be a powerful motivation for the development of a digital public service portal. The first strategy was released in 2001 and until this day the Steering Committee has regularly published updated versions.⁶⁴ What set the strategies apart from similar publications in other countries which lacked bite was that they were enriched with timed implementation goals whose progress was diligently monitored by the Digital Task Force and reported to the STS. Catherine Lippert (2014) revealed that tardy project managers risked being called in for an official hearing by the STS where they would have to explain why their implementation was stalling, such was the level of commitment to the digitization strategies. By the time *borger.dk* was introduced, the strategies had become recognized as a legitimate and binding means for policymaking, supplanting parliamentary legislation entirely in the area of eGovernment policymaking in favour of swift, unfussy administrative policymaking.

And yet, the Steering Committee and Digital Taskforce could only achieve so much given their limited staff. Although the main components for the platform were developed centrally, the implementation of the online service relied heavily on decentralized development and voluntary engagement by municipalities. Decentralized actors were expected to each deliver their services as their own responsibility and provide their own local platforms during the first years of Danish digitization efforts. On a voluntary basis, many common services were developed together by groups of local communities, but fundamentally the service development happened in a decentralized manner, just like it later would in Germany, the key difference being a much tighter and coherent support structure from the central state.

This coherent governance went together with an assertive style of managing the state-wide implementation of digital public services. Typical of this assertive style is that the eGovernment Steering Committee would often choose mandatory provisions, both vis-à-vis citizens as well as regarding the civil service itself. "We weren't asked to do things, but we were told to do things,"

⁶² Interview nr. 10, min. 30.

⁶³ Interview nr. 10, min 33.

⁶⁴ Towards eGovernment: Vision and Strategy for the Public Sector in Denmark (2001-2004); Realising the Potential (2004-2006); Towards Better Digital Service - Increased Efficiency and Stronger Collaboration (2007-2010); The Path to Digital Welfare (2011-2015); A stronger and more secure digital Denmark: The digital strategy (2016-2020).

remembered one chief of citizen services from a mid-sized municipality without bitterness.⁶⁵ This was done step by step, using the common IT infrastructure that had been made mandatory for all state actors between 2005 and 2010. With the launch of the *borger.dk* platform, communities and state agencies were, for example, required to use the common infrastructure and follow mandatory service design guidelines (Lippert 2014; Agency for Digitisation 2018). This meant that as of 2007, all administrative units across the country were required to connect their services to the central IT infrastructure which surrounded *borger.dk* and integrate them into their work routines. After these decisions had been irrevocably made by the intergovernmental committees of STS and *Styregruppen for den Fællesoffentlige Digitaliseringsstrategi* (DSTG), there was no room left to manoeuvre at the lower levels of the administrative hierarchy. For the mid-level executives and ordinary public employees in the regions and municipalities the governance scheme meant “love it or leave it”. Once the bottom-up phase of deliberation and participation was closed, everyone had to commit to the collective’s decisions. Those decisions entailed, for example, that administrative application forms now had to be supplied to citizens through *borger.dk* and that official documents had to be sent to a citizen’s e-Boks if she or he wished. One municipal chief administrator tersely summarized the spirit during the implementation phase of *borger.dk* as, “If you don't work for this you cannot work here.”⁶⁶

This assertive implementation style which relied on central decision-making, mandatory rules and top-down enforcement may come as a surprise to those who (wrongly) associate the Nordic tradition with a soft governance style that focuses solely on consent and collaboration. In reality, the administrative culture requires a more nuanced description. Danish administrative culture is marked by two characteristics that are seemingly at odds with one another, but help explain the successful eGovernment implementation. On the one hand, decision-making is, indeed, traditionally collaborative, propped up by the Nordic culture of consensual policymaking (Elder et al., 1988; Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019). Collaboration and consensus are cultural features that are reinforced by political and administrative institutions, such as a strongly representative democracy and the embeddedness of corporatist actors (Lijphart & Crepaz, 1991). This cultural legacy inserted itself into the governance structures of *borger.dk*'s implementation. In the conception of their implementation governance, Denmark made the voice of municipalities and regions strong from the very beginning by including the representative bodies of municipalities and regions in the Steering Committee. Both bodies are well established actors in the political landscape and were influential in the decision-making

⁶⁵ Interview nr. 4, min 92.

⁶⁶ Interview nr. 4, min. 89.

process behind *borger.dk* (Local Government Denmark 2009). Including them ensured that technical solutions fit with the realities of municipal services and secured support among local civil servants for the ambitious project (Meyerhoff Nielsen 2019; Lippert 2014).

The inclusion of municipal voices in a national implementation project was by no means a rare occurrence in Danish public administration. Quite the opposite – it was an exemplary instance of Denmark’s knack for the coherent management of their decentralized administrative structures. Andersen fittingly described the Danish administrative system since the major reorganisation reform of the 2000s as a “centralised decentral” administration (Andersen 2008). This paradox tries to capture the coherent management with which Danish public administration ensures uniform policy results across the country while granting regions and municipalities a large scope of administrative responsibility. Danish municipalities are, for instance, responsible for the implementation of 70-80 percent of public services (Meyerhoff Nielsen and Yasouka 2014) and do so in a very independent manner, without much interference from national government as to the details of regional and local administrative procedures. But the freedom that this high degree of decentralization bestows on the local level does not result in a vertical fragmentation akin to Germany’s administrative system because it is hedged by a tight net of voluntary collaboration that can be described as corporatist coordination. An important role in this kind of “state corporatism” is fulfilled by the KL (*Kommunernes Landsforening*), which acts as the de facto representative of local governments’ interests even though this function is not formalized constitutionally. KL is not only heard on policymaking matters that concern the local level but is regularly involved in the conception of these laws, provoking critics to consider it an informal second chamber to the national parliament (Local Government Denmark 2009).

On the other hand, the Danish civil service is no stranger to top-down decision-making. There is a no-nonsense attitude to accepting decisions from the top if they follow legitimate goals and stem from legitimate decision-making processes. This has to do with the high levels of trust that the Danish bestow on social and political collectives. Arellano-Gault and del Castillo-Vega explain the seemingly paradoxical inclination of Danish administrative culture to be both accepting of top-down implementation while cherishing consensus and inclusion at the same time (2004, 522): “The Scandinavian model of public administration emphasizes a strong belief and confidence in the capacities of collectivities to administer themselves. Power exists and it is a necessary feature of social relationships, but it is expected that individuals and groups endorse the general value of collectivity, a value that endorses the general well-being of society and makes it the centrepiece of their behaviour. [...] Power, thus, is not a problem; it is an instrument for responsible collective action.”

While Denmark had made good progress with the digitization of many of its public services, the country ramped up its implementation even further in the 2010s. After an OECD report about the state of Danish eGovernment output found Denmark to fall short of its potential, the Steering Committee developed a much more ambitious vision in its subsequent eGovernment strategy (OECD, 2010). The new eGovernment strategy staked out improvements for *borger.dk* which were to be accompanied by a centralization and professionalization of the governance structures.⁶⁷ The portal was to be redesigned and relaunched with increased user functionality; citizens were compelled to switch to online services as analogue services were shut down. This move was accompanied by a rare instance of parliamentary legislation. The “Digital Post Act” compelled all Danish citizens above the age of 16 to install and use their e-Boks by 1 November 2014 if they had not already done so.⁶⁸ From now on, official documents from governmental bodies were to be transmitted only through the e-Boks system; regularly checking it was made mandatory.⁶⁹ Simultaneously, state actors were required to ensure all of their services were digitized by 2015. At the same time, a national secure data distributor system was installed, which aimed at realizing the once-only principle which facilitates sharing citizens’ data between different state agencies (Horst et al., 2014).

Mandatory provisions to citizens compelled them to swap the administrative routines they were accustomed to for digital-only access to their *borgerservice* (municipal citizen centre). It was not inconceivable citizens would balk at such a proposal. And yet, many of those involved in the digitization of Danish public services were convinced that the move to a more assertive, mandatory style in the implementation of those services would be necessary for success. How did this go together with the Nordic administrative tradition that values the citizens’ perspectives and wants to offer services in a way that they will appreciate? Experts highlighted two reasons for why they were convinced throughout the digital reform phase that they were “giv[ing] our citizens what they wanted from us”.⁷⁰ First of all, Denmark’s citizens were particularly keen adopters of the internet and digital private services. “Our banks were doing it and people liked it,” explained a former member of the Digital Task Force who had personally worked on the conception of *borger.dk*.⁷¹ Plus, “We knew we had the right

⁶⁷ Danish Government, eGovernment Strategy 2011-2015 – The Digital Path to Future Welfare. <https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/collection/egovernment/document/digital-path-future-welfare>, accessed 02 February 2020.

⁶⁸ Promulgation of the Digital Post Act for post from administrative bodies, 15 April 2021.

⁶⁹ <https://www.dataguidance.com/news/denmark-digital-post-act-published-official-gazette>, accessed 22 May 2021.

⁷⁰ Interview nr. 7, min 5.

⁷¹ Interview nr. 7, min. 5.

IT skills in our population.”⁷²

Several respondents pointed out a second reason that had strengthened them in the belief that mandatory digitization would be the right road to pursue: trust in the Danish state.⁷³ Indeed, many social scientist have remarked upon the unusually high trust that the Danish citizens feel towards their state (Igari, 2014; Laursen et al., 2018; Transparency International, 2019). The Danish Government’s website even has an entire subsection dedicated to showcasing the extraordinarily high levels of trust in the country (Danish Foreign Ministry, 2019). Without the supposition that citizens would feel comfortable with their public administration embarking on a digital transformation, many of the mandatory digital provisions could have felt oppressive and not at all citizen-friendly. But, as opposed to many other countries, the Danish would “rather trust the state than an Internet company with their data” (Lippert 2014) and it may be for this reason that the Danish government has faced considerably less resistance from civil society when digitizing citizen data and administrative processes. In particular, data protection and privacy is less of a concern than in countries like Germany where sensitivities are greater and cause larger impediments in the development phase of eGovernment (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2017).

This more ambitious vision of a digital-only public administration was supported by stronger governance for Denmark’s public digitization efforts. In a report from 2010, the OECD had critically remarked that the Steering Committee’s mandate was not sufficiently clear for pushing eGovernment implementation, because of its rather broadly formulated responsibilities for governmental cooperation. The report instead suggested the introduction of a more strongly mandated state actor and even tighter governance for public digitization projects (OECD, 2010). Denmark reacted accordingly and set up a specialised Steering Group for its eGovernment strategies, the DSTG, which was in fact a sub-committee of the STS to which it reported, and which remained in charge of global budgets and the strategic direction. The purpose of the DSTG was to “increase the number of participating organisations and ensure more-frequent and closer coordination between key stakeholders” (Meyerhoff Nielsen & Yasouka, 2014, p. 8). Moreover, DSTG was to provide “a more ‘hands-on’ management and implementation oversight” of the decentralized landscape of administrative units and project teams which were charged with eGovernment implementation

⁷² Interview nr. 7, min. 6.

⁷³ Interviews nr. 2, 3, 9

(Meyerhoff Nielsen & Yasouka, 2014, p. 8).

The second element, through which Denmark sought to strengthen its coherent governance approach to eGovernment implementation, consisted of the foundation of a new central governmental body to support the rest of Denmark's public administration in their implementation efforts. For this, the Digital Taskforce was "beefed up". It was enlarged, professionalized and remodelled as the national Danish Digitization Agency in 2011 (*Digitaliseringsstyrelsen*, DIGST) (European Commission, 2015). It merged different governmental units which worked on aspects of public digitization – most notably the Telecommunications Agency – with the Digital Taskforce.⁷⁴ The newly founded agency remained with the Ministry of Finance, which continued to support its powerful position in interactions with other state actors.⁷⁵ In contrast to the Digital Taskforce, the DIGST was made up of permanent as opposed to seconded staff and allowed for even further professionalization (Lippert 2014). With the DIGST, Danish public administration made a big leap towards an administration fit for the digital era by virtue of bringing the necessary skills home into the administrative body itself. This move towards a broader, digital-ready skill-set is something that experts said they would recommend to any public administration striving for the digital provision of its services because it lessens the corrosive dependency on external contractors. "You need to know your core business [IT development]. Don't hire consultants all the time!" exclaimed one ex-developer from the Digitization Agency.⁷⁶ Four years after its foundation, the DIGST consisted of around 140 employees skilled in IT development and IT project management (Meyerhoff Nielsen & Yasouka, 2014, p. 9). Together with the STS and the DIGST the Digitization agency formed a three-tiered governance system that managed to manufacture support and gather insights from representatives of all state levels, ensured political goodwill from one of the highest-ranking ministries, and had the manpower to support and supervise the entirety of Danish public administration in the digitization of their services.

It was the administration's trust in their citizens' trust that encouraged their daringly affirmative and centrally coordinated approach to administrative digitization. The assurance that Danish citizens would welcome their administration's efforts to shift public service provision to the internet was described by many experts as a prerequisite for their reforms and encouraged those in

⁷⁴ <https://all-digital.org/agency-for-digitisation/>, accessed 04 May 2021

⁷⁵ Interview nr. 7, min. 22.

⁷⁶ Interview nr. 3, min 14.

charge towards decisive administrative action. Based on the assumption that citizens would appreciate digital public services and prefer them to be easily accessible through a professional one-stop-shop, administrative executives went for an increasingly tight and centrally managed approach to implementation over the years. Finding and keeping the balance between central coordination, or even completely centralized IT components and infrastructures, on the one hand and trusting lower levels in the administrative hierarchy with their decentralised responsibilities will be a key challenge of digital-era administration. As far fewer street-level bureaucrats and simple administrative clerks are required in order to provide services to customers in a fully formed digital-era administration, there could be an institutional power shift away from local administration to central-level administrations. One respondent deplored the shift that she was witnessing towards an increasingly centralized and impenetrable Digitization Agency which had slowly replaced the formerly much more collaborative implementation experience.⁷⁷ It is conceivable that hosting, maintaining and improving digital public services will gradually move out of the hands of local and regional government because these things can be done easily and efficiently by central actors like the Digitization Agency. This would indeed create an institutional pull-effect away from the trend of recent decades to decentralize administrative action and instead further the re-centralization of public administration. If this comes to pass, it may threaten the role of local government, which – for the moment – still assumes the role of providing a human interface to the digital machinery of the state. Such a development may frighten members of local administration, but Danish citizens are content with the outcomes of a less localised public service provision. As of 2018, over 90 percent of Danish citizens used *borger.dk* for their administrative affairs and admitted to being highly satisfied with it.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

Denmark has become a posterchild for the digital transformation of public administration across affluent nations. Its success story is often told by Danish public officials as one of trusting citizens and a nation that is optimistic about digital technology. While these factors may have contributed to Denmark's success in the arena of digital public sector transformation, this case study points rather to the positive role the administration itself played – notably assertive governance across state tiers in the development of *borger.dk*, its helpful institutional legacies in the field of state IT, its strong motivation to save administrative costs, and a beneficial cultural background of high service

⁷⁷ Interview nr. 4.

⁷⁸ In a 2019 survey, 95 percent of citizens responded “yes” when asked whether they knew about *borger.dk* and 93 percent said they felt confident in using *borger.dk*. Overall satisfaction with the portal lay at 92.5 percent (Danmarks Statistik, 2020, <https://www.dst.dk/Site/Dst/Udgivelser/GetPubFile.aspx?id=29450&sid=itbef2020>, accessed 04 January 2021).

orientation within the civil service.

Danish digital transformation has taken place in the context of a unitary country that is formally highly decentralized. But the potential for vertical fragmentation is circumvented by an increasingly tight system of intra-state coordination. Joined-up governance across the three state tiers has its historical roots in the fiscal crisis of the 1970s but has become a template for other state-wide policy issues, notably the digital transformation of public services. By now, a well institutionalized cooperation regime on both the horizontal and vertical axes of the Danish state is the dominant feature of its administrative structures. Representative organisations for local government serve as connectors between the state tiers, as they possess the power to commit their members to binding horizontal coordination. In the field of public IT administration, such voluntary horizontal coordination has a long history. As a result, the technological background at the beginning of the 2000s was favourable to a national transformation project. Public IT service providers of local government had been merged in 1975; preparations for an interoperable system of public databases had been made with a common citizen identifier in the 1960s. Given the cross-cutting nature of digital administrative reform, such coherent management is the key to building a coherent IT landscape, which in turn facilitates its use for citizens. A single, common online service portal like *borger.dk* is easier to run, promote and develop than a multitude of different agencies' and state tiers' individual portals. Of course, the Danish experts who were interviewed for this case study focussed on factors that explain the great success that Denmark achieved in its eGovernment. However, the perspective of country experts is constricted by the peculiarities of the case they themselves witnessed. Consequently, the Danish experts did not feel that their unitary state structure put them in a better position for digitization because they lacked insight into their federal counterparts in Germany. Nor could they fully appreciate the assertive, top-down governance they had erected for the implementation of *borger.dk*. In their own self-descriptions, they still overarchingly considered themselves to function in a decentralized manner. Yet, they widely acknowledged how much jointly agreed-upon digitization strategies and harmonized technological implementation helped the cause of public service digitization.

The Danish were, however, very conscious of some of the cultural characteristics within their public administration that pushed them towards digitizing their public services. Their administrative culture is marked by a strong service commitment towards citizens, a symmetrical relationship between state and society, a willingness to work together as equals across hierarchical divides and the conviction that the public sector is not detached from the rules of the private sector. Danish experts made a strong point of these normative success factors, many of which were plainly absent in the expert narratives in the French and German case studies. For instance, public officials in Denmark

particularly stressed the motivation to reduce costs as an important force behind the digitization of public services. In their understanding, the desire to render the beloved but costly Danish welfare state affordable by means of efficiency through a digitized administration was key. As one interviewer put it deftly, it was “because of the need. The need to finance the welfare state”⁷⁹ that Denmark turned to digital public services so much earlier than other developed countries. They furthermore debunked the popular explanation that it is the small size of many successfully digitized states such as Denmark (but also Finland and Estonia) that explains their swift progress in eGovernment. “This is not the analogue world. In the digital world size does not matter as much,” was the common response when asked about state size. In the experience of many experts, state size plays no role as stakeholders are also copious in small states and developmental expenses are as high as they would be in a larger state, despite being shouldered by smaller state budgets. If anything, larger states profit from economies of scale. Should smaller size matter at all, it is likely through the normative mechanisms described by the “small states literature”. For example, Jugl (2020) has found small states to be more conscious of the need for effective governance to make up for their relative disadvantage.

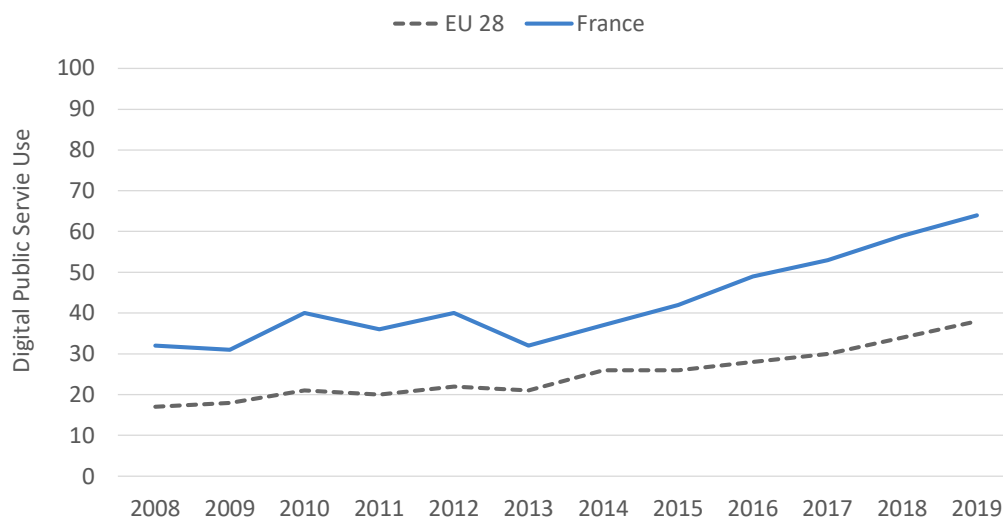
So, a smaller size does not make state digitization simpler, but it creates a more beneficial mindset among public officials, motivating them to collaborate on effective public IT across administrative structures. For the future of public administration, these countries are very well prepared. Digitization is no fad. It is not limited to one piece of legislation or implementation but rather describes an entirely new modus of administration. In the business world, companies have by now realized that no business model is exempt from being overhauled by digital technology. In the public sector, this realization has been slower to gain traction. But here, too, the internet, smartphones and machine learning will drastically change what things are done and how. Denmark has been quicker than others to grasp and embrace this, thanks to the cultural disposition of their public administration. But it was thanks to their well institutionalized collaborative praxis that the multitude of administrative units across the country was able to produce highly effective national IT solutions. As the unifying pull of digital technology will persist, it is countries like Denmark which will find it much simpler to coordinate their public action in a coherent way, making them the stars of a new digital era.

⁷⁹ Interview nr. 4, min. 28.

04 | FRANCE

The digitization of public services in France is the story of a strong contender who tripped over their feet and lost their head start. This chapter explains how France, a country with a highly capable and ambitious public administration ended up only in the midfield of European digital public service reform. It argues that the specificities of the French politico-administrative system, namely its vertically centralized but horizontally fragmented structure and its bureaucratic culture, have shaped the reform project's implementation process as well as its outcome. France started its digital public service reform early. With the help of Minitel technology, the French government envisioned easy-to-use access for citizens to the French state's many services. Despite ongoing political support across subsequent national governments, unfortunate choices in the early governance structure of eGovernment policy implementation stymied the implementation process and halted digital public service use (see Figure 6). Digital services were spread across several responsible actors without a powerful *primus inter pares* to coordinate them. This was capped by a highly bureaucratic and administrative culture with deep divisions between ministerial portfolios and a lack of horizontal cooperation. As a result, a national approach to digital public services became unfeasible. Digital progress was still possible, but only within the limits of administrative jurisdictions.

FIGURE 6 | USE OF DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICES IN FRANCE



Source: Eurostat, indicator isoc_bde15ei (submitting completed forms in the last 12 months, percentage of individuals), 2021

A change occurred around 2012-2013. Thanks to new personnel brought in from outside the state machinery, a cultural transformation was ignited and a more effective governance scheme for implementing digitization projects put in place.

To demonstrate the before and after, we first offer the reader a summary of the key events that defined the French history of eGovernment reform. This is followed by an overview of the politico-administrative system of France. We then analyse its impact on the eGovernment reform agenda in a chronological manner. The chapter concludes by discussing the results drawn from an expert survey on the key factors that influenced the development of digital public services in France.⁸⁰

TIMELINE OF FRANCE'S PUBLIC SERVICE DIGITIZATION

Politicians and centralization kick-started digital public service reform in France but a hierarchical administrative culture and deep divisions within the administrative structure cost the country its head start. France got off to a comparatively early start with its public digitization efforts, thanks to political initiatives by president Mitterrand, but lost the reform momentum in the implementation phase. A legalistic, top-down, administrative culture stunted interest in providing truly citizen-oriented public services, and hindered pragmatic collaboration to build a user-friendly coherent digital service offer across administrative domains. Instead, a seemingly centralized – but in reality, horizontally divided – executive balkanized responsibility for public digitization and consequently balkanized the reform output. The results were several botched, aborted and failed public IT projects which made public digitization efforts come to a near halt between 2008 and 2013. A turn-around was achieved thanks to outside intervention when, after yet another catastrophic IT failure (this time a botched open data portal), a group of private sector mavericks were brought in by the incumbent prime minister Jean-Marc Ayrault in order to “hack” the civil service. With the help of innovative institutional solutions, these individuals set off a paradigmatic cultural change, initiating state start-ups and an informal network dubbed *beta.gouv* to support a “coalition of the willing” across the administrative landscape. These bridged the French administration’s horizontally fragmented structures and propelled cultural change from bureaucratic to service-oriented. Still, the vertical divisions in the state structure remain. For this reason, IT development still happens mostly in horizontal silos – thereby deepening the divisions between frontrunners and laggards. French administrative culture is very slowly adapting to digital era governance, but its structures and embedded routines are more resistant to change.

⁸⁰ Aggregated interview and survey results for France can be found in Chapter 07.

TABLE 7 | TIMELINE OF FRANCE'S DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM AGENDA

Date	Activity
1984	National rollout of Minitel terminals to all phone subscribers by France Telecom, enabling users to access an electronic telephone and address directory for free, as well as other Videotex-based public and commercial services over a closed network.
1996	Launch of <i>AdmiFrance.fr</i> , the first governmental website for administrative forms and information by <i>Documentation française</i>
August 1997	Prime Minister's speech (<i>Discours d'Hourtin</i>), making digital public service a policy priority
January 1998	Publication of first IT strategy "Governmental Action Programme for the Information Society" (PAGSI), by Inter-Ministerial Committee for the Information Society (CISI).
October 2000	Launch of citizen administrative portal <i>service-public.fr</i>
August 2001	Foundation of first specialised Agency for ICT in Public Administration (ATICA)
12 November 2001	Decision for the program <i>Copernic</i> to modernize and digitize tax services vis-à-vis French citizens
August 2002	Launch of municipal content syndication service <i>Service-public.local.fr</i> by the <i>Caisse de Depots</i> , enabling local and regional administration to offer local digital services and connect them to <i>service-public.fr</i>
February 2003	Reorganisation of the Telecommunication Agency (<i>Agence pour les Technologies de l'Information et de la Communication dans l'Administration</i> , ATICA) into an agency in charge of coordinating eGovernment policymaking and implementation including technical support to state administration (<i>Agence pour le Développement de l'Administration Electronique</i> , ADAE).
9 February 2004	Publication of first French eGovernment strategy ADELE (<i>ADministration ELEctronique</i>) for the years 2004-2007
2005	Merger of eGovernment agency ADAE with newly founded Directorate General for State Modernisation (DGME).
8 December 2005	Adoption of "Teleservices ordinance", granting email correspondence between citizens and public administration the same legal status as paper-based correspondence and allowing the use of electronic signatures
January 2007	Launch of new eGovernment website "Administration 24h/24", a one-stop shop for accessing, filling in and receiving replies to online administrative forms
February 2008	Merger of Administration 24/24 website with the eGovernment portal <i>service-public.fr</i>
November 2008	Launch of <i>mon.service-public.fr</i> , a personalized citizen account to transmit, manage and store digital documents exchanged with the public authorities (like

	birth certificates or tax declarations) in a secure manner
5 July 2010	Relaunch of <i>mon.service-public.fr</i> as a subsection of <i>service-public.fr</i> with added features
February 2010	Start of <i>IDéNum</i> programme, to replace the multitude of public solutions for online identification when using digital public services with one single and highly secure eidentity
12 February 2010	Publication of influential Riester Report, which harshly criticizes the state of digital public services in France
24 November 2010	Decision to create “Etalab”, a single national portal for public sector information.
2011	Closing down of project <i>service-public.local.fr</i>
21 February 2011	Reorganisation of responsibility for eGovernment in a newly founded separate Interdepartmental Directorate for State ICT Systems (DISIC) as well as foundation of Etalab mission
30 October 2012	Merger of the two directorates formerly in charge of telecommunication and state modernization into a single General Secretariat for State Modernization (SGMAP); it is placed directly under the authority of the Prime Minister
January 2013	Henri Verdier nominated as head of Etalab and given the mission of creating Public Open Data Portal <i>data.gouv.fr</i> . Reorganisation of Etalab as an agile unit
28 February 2013	Presentation of governmental strategy paper ‘Roadmap for the Digital Economy’
December 2013	Re-launch of <i>data.gouv.fr</i> by Etalab
6 November 2014	Adoption of ordinance no. 2014-1330 on the right of users to communicate with administrative via electronic means. It defines the right and the necessary procedures for exercising the right of users to communicate electronically with the different administrations.
2015	Implementation of first digital services incubator <i>beta.gouv</i> .
1 January 2016	Coming into force of <i>Code des relations entre le public et l'administration</i> , regulating all matters of digital communication among public administration and between citizens and public authorities.
June 2016	Launch of eidentity solution <i>FranceConnect</i> , seeking to unify the many rival public eID solutions
1 July 2016	Closing down of <i>mon.service-public.fr</i> and merger of common functionalities with <i>service-public.fr</i>
13 October 2017	Launch of governmental modernization program <i>Action Publique 2022</i> (700 million Euros eGovernment funding over 5 years, objective to fully digitize public services by 2022).

November 2017	Decree to reorganize state modernization and eGovernment by splitting up SGMAP into Inter-ministerial Directorate of Public Transformation (DITP) and Inter-ministerial Directorate for Digital Affairs and State Information and Communication System (DINSIC).
2018	Publication of “Concerted Development of the Territorial Digital Transformation Programme” (DCANT) by Minister of State for the Digital Sector launched to boost regional digital transformation.
1 March 2018	Launch of public sector portal <i>démarches-simplifiées.fr</i> to help public administrations to create their own online forms.
April 2019	Launch of public IT strategy and action plan for the years 2019-2022, <i>Tech.Gouv</i> (public eID, public cloud and network infrastructure, improved human IT resources).
8 June 2020	Start of “Commando UX” improvement program for 250 most relevant public online services

THE POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM OF FRANCE

France’s performance in the arena of digital public services has been affected to a large degree by the country’s political and administrative system. Consequently, a basic understanding of how public services have been traditionally run is needed in order to understand the impact of the structure and culture of the French public administration on the digital transformation of these services.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE FRENCH POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

The politico-administrative system of France today is built on the historic legacy of an absolutist monarchy, the Jacobin republic, Napoleon’s empire and General de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic (Bezes & Jeannot, 2011). In contrast to its tumultuous political history, France’s administrative system has proven to be remarkably stable (Owen, 2002, p. 56). This is true for both its structural and cultural features. Structurally, its defining feature is its unitary character, which is amplified by the ideal of a strong and centralized state and supported by a highly capable and assertive administration (Meininger, 2000; Rohr, 1996). France has often been depicted as the classic example of the Napoleonic administrative system (Cobban, 1946; Godechot, 1968; Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2014; Ongaro, 2010), although Meininger finds the Napoleonic administrative system to be a “myth which suits the French because it affords an explanation of [their] administrative tradition” (2000, 189), which is that of a somewhat paternalistic state that is steered from the capital and whose guiding ideology is the pursuit of the public good or “general will” (*volonté générale*). While the state administration represents the “general will”, the “will of all” (*volonté de tous*) is represented by parties, politicians

and the deliberations of liberal democracy (Bezes & Jeannot, 2011; Owen, 2002; Rousseau, 1794). The self-assured role of French bureaucracy can furthermore be explained by virtue of fact that the French State (*l'État*) preceded French democracy by at least two centuries (Owen, 2002, p. 52).

The French *État* is organized as a unitary state, meaning that ultimate political power lies with one undivided national government. Its administration is structured along five tiers, the so-called *collectivités territoriales*. These are legal bodies of local government possessing their own elected bodies and fiscal autonomy. As of 2020 there are 18 regions (*régions*), 101 departments (*départements*) and around 3,800 municipalities (*communes*). Because of their small size, many *communes* have organized themselves into intercommunal entities (*Établissements publics de coopération intercommunale*, ECPI) for the joint provision of communal services. There are around 2,133 ECPI, whose purposes range from waste management to cultural activities, and around 12,700 technical intercommunal entities (*syndicats*) (Wienen & Mosler-Törnström, 2016). Not to be confused with those three tiers of local government is the altogether separate structure of the deconcentrated regional offices of the central state's administration. Despite this, their regional offices and departmental *préfectures* mirror the layout of local government; the sub-departmental *arrondissements*⁸¹ however have no equivalent on the local level.

This juxtaposition of deconcentrated (yet centralized) state administration and decentralized local administration is known for creating confusion not only among the French citizens, but also among its public officials. It makes it difficult to gauge which side is responsible for what, and who has the last say in case of doubt. This multi-layered complexity is exacerbated by the fact that the departmental, regional and municipal levels elect local councils whose role then becomes coordinating a bureaucracy in charge of implementing (often national) policies. In the case of the *départements*, the situation is especially convoluted. The departmental president is elected locally but has to share his power over the department with a prefect chosen by central government in Paris.

For these reasons, the allocation of tasks to the different tiers of government, as well as to the different levels of the state administration, is a complicated matter that has been contested and changed many times in the past decades. For a long time, the municipalities were relegated to managing relatively few tasks of limited and local scope by themselves. Even though Article 72 of France's 1953 constitution granted local entities the "power to make regulations for matters coming

⁸¹ To add to the confusion, larger cities are sometimes organized into administrative districts called *arrondissements municipaux*. They have nothing to do with the state level, nor are they a separate local entity.

within their jurisdiction”, in practice they have held little power over relevant questions (Wiener & Mosler-Törnström, 2016, p. 19). Instead, the *départements* were the most important player, licensed as agents of the central state until well into the 1980s.

The relative weight of the central state’s administration vis-à-vis local government is the main reason why France was (and is still) characterized as the emblematic unitary and centralized state (Hoffmann-Martinot & Wollmann, 2006, pp. 231–232; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017a, pp. 288–289), sometimes with both terms used interchangeably. This imprecise labelling can blur the important distinction between a unitary state, which is defined as a state whose powers are undivided (as opposed to divided, as is the case in a federal state like Germany), and a centralized state, which organizes governance and policy implementation via central units (Lijphart, 2012). Centralization, however, is not to be confused with geographical concentration in Paris. Quite the contrary. As already shown above, the French state has traditionally made use of a deconcentrated organisation in order to stretch the power of central government across the entire territory of France. As early as 1789 the Jacobins divided the newly founded Republic of France into today’s administrative *départements* with the aim of curtailing the power of local elites by means of installing administrative units of the central state all over the republic’s territory.⁸² In 1800, Napoléon created the function of the departmental *préfet* (prefect),⁸³ to which he appointed trustworthy servants from the national level whose role remains, to this day, oversight of local government and ensuring the implementation of policies made in Paris (Peters, 2018, p. 146). Thus, historically marginalized as “executive-hierarchical instruments of centralized government”, local government in France had been limited to merely carrying out administrative tasks which had been decided upon elsewhere, until well into the 1980s (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014, 74).

The small size of many of the 35,885 French *municipalités* further adds to their dependency on the national or departmental level (Peters, 2018, p. 145).⁸⁴ The average French commune comprises fewer than 2,000 citizens which severely limits its financial capacity and, ultimately, its steering power (Bel and Warner 2015). The disadvantage is particularly dire in areas like the digitization of public services which require investments into infrastructure and the means to employ expert personnel.⁸⁵

⁸² Law Dividing France into Departments, 22 December 1789, French National Assembly.

⁸³ Decree Concerning the Division of the Republic’s territory and administration, 17 February 1800, Consulate of Napoleon.

⁸⁴ For comparison: Germany has 16 million more citizens but only 10,799 *Gemeinden* (municipalities).

⁸⁵ <https://www.lagazettedescommunes.com/telechargements/Barometre-de-le-dematerialisation-2014-JVS-Mairistem.pdf>, accessed 22 October 2020.

As a consequence, most French municipalities are organized in communal associations and have set up a large number of special purpose associations to carry out tasks which range from waste management to public IT infrastructure – thereby rendering the local administrative landscape more complicated.

Since the Napoleonic era, this structure has proven rather resistant to change, albeit with some loosening of central control over the last 40 years. The biggest nod to the general European trend towards devolution was the creation of the regions (*régions*) as in 1982.⁸⁶ The 1980s saw a reorganisation of administrative charges, with the delegation of many tasks to lower levels in the state hierarchy.⁸⁷ The role of the *préfets* and *sous-préfets* was redefined to be more cooperative and less authoritative vis-à-vis local government (Peters, 2018, p. 146). Along the same lines, the “Deconcentrating Charter” of 1992 sought to establish the principle of subsidiarity in the hope of further clarifying the allocation of administrative responsibilities. The next important milestone in the process of French administrative devolution was the constitutional amendment of 2003. This changed the self-ascribed characterization of France’s organisational model from centralized to decentralized, considering the devolution reforms of the 1980s and the 2000s.⁸⁸

Indeed, the image of a unitary country subjugated to the ruling of a political and administrative elite in Paris was probably never entirely realistic given the sheer volume of tasks undertaken in a developed welfare state, as well as the size of the country and the large number of administrative units (national, departmental, regional intercommunal and municipal). In light of four decades’ worth of structural reform between the layers of French public administration, the image of an administrative *millefeuille* appears to be a more adequate metaphor.⁸⁹ Consequently, the lower administrative levels could, at least in theory, wield some considerable power over the manner in which many public services are delivered. For example, the choice between analogue versus digital service provision. This would be supported by the constitutionally backed doctrine of “free administration” (*libre administration*), which in theory grants local authorities “the power to make regulations for matters

⁸⁶ Law Nr. 82-213 regarding the Rights and Liberties of the Communes, Departments and Regions, 2 March 1982.

⁸⁷ See http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/connaissance/fiches_synthese/septembre2012/national-assembly.pdf, pp. 71, accessed 15 October 2020.

⁸⁸ Constitutional Amendment regarding Article 1 of the French Constitution, 17 March 2003.

⁸⁹ The term *millefeuille* literally means “a thousand layers” and refers to a French layered pastry. It is a regularly used metaphor to describe the French administrative system. See <https://www.latribune.fr/opinions/tribunes/la-simplification-du-millefeuille-administratif-attendra-541036.html>, accessed 22 October 2020 or <https://granddebat.fr/projects/lorganisation-de-letat-et-des-services-publics/collect/participez-a-la-recherche-collective-de-solutions-3/proposals/alleger-le-millefeuille-administratif-francais>, accessed 22 October 2020.

coming within their jurisdiction,”⁹⁰ but which the French Supreme Court has tended to interpret unfavourably vis-à-vis decentralisation (Wienen and Mosler-Törnström 2016, 18). In combination, the multitude of administrative strata and the ongoing reallocation of tasks between them have created “a deeply divided and internally fractious” system (Peters, 2018, p. 164) with ample confusion about who is in charge of what. And despite a definitive growth in local autonomy, there are centralist legacies which limit how much of the newly granted autonomy is exercised in reality. Still, local government has garnered greater responsibilities, though the degree to which they can benefit from this freedom is limited by their financial and organisational capacities as well as their willingness to make use of it.

We have shown how power in the French politico-administrative system has traditionally been centralized yet deconcentrated. This has led to an ongoing struggle between the centre and the periphery about how to share power – over both decision-making and matters of implementation. But governmental power struggles take place not only on a vertical axis, but on a horizontal axis too. For instance, political decision-making in France is divided among political actors such as the president, the prime minister and the cabinet, parliament’s first and second chamber, the supreme court and so forth, as one would expect of a developed democracy. The Fifth Republic has provided France with a working system of checks and balances that does not lead to the infamous blockages the Fourth Republic was known for. And while in the 1980s and 1990s cohabitation was a common occurrence, thanks to changes made to the electoral system in the early 2000s there has been no divided government for nearly 20 years.⁹¹

However, for the purpose of this thesis horizontal power sharing between *political* actors in government is barely relevant because digital public sector reform in France has never been a politically contested issue.⁹² Instead, horizontal divisions between portfolios – that is between ministers, their ministries or interministerial directorates – have played a much larger role for the development of French digital public services. That is because digital public service reform is a type of administrative reform that crosses established portfolio lines. Such a type of reform requires cooperation between, and coordination across, the ministerial domains. Unfortunately for French

⁹⁰ Article 72, Sentence 3, French Constitution of 4 October 1958.

⁹¹ The president’s term was shortened from seven to five years to match parliament’s periods. Presidential elections were moreover timed with parliamentary elections to encourage matching turnout. See Constitutional Amendment Nr. 2000-964 regarding the Length of the Presidential Mandate, 2 October 2000 and Law Nr. 2001-419 respectively modifying the Expiry Date of the Powers of the National Assembly.

⁹² Policymaking and implementation in the field of digital public sector reform was pursued without disruption or meaningful change in priorities or quality all throughout the years 1997-2020, despite the array of different political parties in power.

administration, such horizontal cooperation and coordination are in conflict with the routines of the French politico-administrative system. Instead, vertically integrated silos of policy domains, ministries and agencies rule the day-to-day business of the “undivided state” (Peters, 2018, p. 145). This means that communication, cooperation and coordination may function very well within a policy domain, for example education, but far less so across two or more different domains, for example across education and social services. Ministers and directors rule jealously over their “fiefdom”. Interdepartmental coordination is far less institutionalized in France than in more corporatist countries like Germany where this practice has a name of its own: *Ressortabstimmung* (departmental coordination). Consequently, cross-cutting policy issues like the digitization of public services have proven particularly challenging for the French administration.

To sum up, France is a unitary country with a strong centralist legacy which has been softened in recent decades. Local government is traditionally weak and has been accustomed to merely administering decisions made at the state level. Tasks have been reallocated between levels of government, creating complexities and uncertainty about responsibilities for public services. While the state used to exert a lot of influence over local government via the departmental prefects, nowadays municipalities and regions can act more independently – at least in theory. Big cities with good financial and human resources benefit from this more than the many small rural communes. France is successful at harmonizing policymaking and implementation within policy domains and across the country, yet experiences divisions between policy domains. Thus, for the realization of digital public services, the structure of France’s politico-administrative system proves to be simultaneously advantageous and cumbersome. Its centralist legacies and high degree of vertical integration should be beneficial to developing digital services as resources can be pooled for each policy domain and standardized platforms or solutions can be developed and implemented with greater ease – state-wide cloud server for all public schools would be an example of this. Yet the horizontal divisions between policy domains present a hurdle for developing standards that reach across portfolios, such as a general online citizen account or a national electronic identity. Moreover, we should expect high-quality solutions for digital public services over which the state has a say. Services which, on the other hand, lie in the hands of local government should be expected to be more fragmented, with different levels of speed and quality in their digitization process. Similarly, different policy domains should show varying degrees of digitization and cross-domain IT standards and solutions should be scarce.

THE CULTURE OF THE FRENCH POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

State structure is only one of two key components that define the French politico-administrative system. The second important feature is its administrative culture. There is a famous quote among

management scholars, sometimes attributed to the influential management guru Peter Drucker: “Culture eats strategy for breakfast” (Coffman & Sorensen, 2013).⁹³ The saying asserts that a strategic change – like the digital transformation of an entire country’s public services – requires a cultural context that is open to the upcoming changes in order to implement them successfully. The idea-driven school of policy scholars, among the likes of Peter Hall (1990, 1993), mirror this appreciation of pervasive ideas in their explanation for policy change. In a similar vein, Rothstein (1998) observed how different administrative cultures explain why policies are successfully implemented in one place but fail in another.

For these reasons, the administrative culture of France is likely to have had a considerable impact on the development of French digital public services. The following section hopes to shine a light on the general features of French administrative culture that have played a role in digital transformation. It does so in the knowledge that “culture” is a flimsy category, difficult to observe and prone to prejudice. And yet, there are cultural specificities that experts on the French politico-administrative system agree upon, namely, a focus on legality and compliance with rules, differentiation between the private and public realm, an elitist and meritocratic civil services which is organized into vertical silos of rank, careers and corps, and lastly, a tradition of top-down decision-making and paternalistic rule over its citizens (Meininger, 2000; Ongaro, 2010; Owen, 2002; Peters, 2018; Rouban, 1999).

The importance of formal law and strict adherence to written rules is a key feature of all Napoleonic systems, including, of course, France (Ongaro, 2010, p. 174). Napoleon Bonaparte gifted the French state with a collection of systematic legal codes,⁹⁴ the *code civil*, the *code de procédure civile*, the *code d’instruction criminelle*, the *code pénal* and the *code de commerce*, which greatly contributed to the emergence of the kind of rule of law we experience in most developed democracies today (Wiedemann, 2004). To this day, the curricula for aspiring French civil servants focus on legal matters (Owen, 2002, p. 66). Although they have been updated to also teach management skills (Guyomarch, 1996, 1999; Owen, 2002, p. 68), the lessons of NPM play only a relatively small role in the formation of the administrative body (Owen, 2002, p. 66). This could explain why French civil servants lack an appreciation of middle-range management. Ridley (1996) finds that the ideas and procedures of NPM – which focus on efficiency, service quality and management by objectives – do

⁹³ See also <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0319-morrison-featherstone-20140319-column.html>, accessed 29 October 2020.

⁹⁴ The legal codes which were developed under the rule of Napoléon Bonaparte were considered so convincing that they were adopted or partly copied by many European countries, effectively replacing the local systems formerly in use (Wiedemann, 2004).

not go well together with the French administrative system (see also (Meininger, 2000, p. 208)).

Another reason for the French civil service's reserve towards applying managerial thinking to its public service provision stems from the belief that there is a fundamental difference between the public and the private realm. As Owen (2002, p. 68) formulates it: "The state is different. Relationships involving the state are of a different order to relationships between private citizens and they call for different arrangements." This belief is institutionalized by a separate body of administrative laws and administrative courts (Cassese, 2000). While in a country like, for example, the United Kingdom, conflicts between a citizen and the state are regarded and treated as no different to private litigation, for the French, such a view would appear strange. In the French line of thinking it is not self-evident that the state, in its provision of services, should pay attention to things like good customer service or modern standards of service. The term "customer service" is actually at odds with the traditional French perspective on the relationship between a body of public administration and the recipient of its services. It does not regard it as a relationship between a service provider and its customer but rather between a public authority and a claimant.

This view, that the state operates at and exists in a different, higher sphere, above mere mortals, is further strengthened by the elitism and *esprit de corps* which mark the *fonctionnaires* of the French civil service, particularly at the state level. The French administrative elite is selected through a harsh, meritocratic selection process in specialised universities, the *grandes écoles*, and highly competitive entrance exams called *concours*. The most famous of the *grandes écoles*, the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS), *École Polytechnique* and most importantly, *École Normale d'Administration* (ENA) produce small numbers of graduates who are highly regarded for their intelligence and fill the top ranks of the French civil service (Rouban 1999, 68).⁹⁵ The focus of these educational institutions is to produce excellent generalists for the state administration who are well versed in law and abstract thinking and instil them with a sense of public duty. Local governments' civil servants on the other hand are trained in separate institutions and generally do not come from any of the highly regarded *grands corps*, whose members are made up of the top graduates of the *grandes écoles* and who are channelled into the state's most powerful administrative bodies (Rouban 1999): the Court of Audit (*Court des Comptes*), the Supreme Court (*Conseil d'État*) and the Inspectorate General of Finances

⁹⁵ President Macron recently vowed to close ENA to end the decades-long criticism of the overbearing nature of ENA's influential elite (Lough, 2019). But despite ongoing criticism and ideas of breaking the stronghold of ENA graduates to top positions in public administration and politics, the *énarques* are still held in high regard in France. See for example: "Why Emmanuel Macron wants to abolish ENA, France's most elite college" ("Why Emmanuel Macron Wants to Abolish ENA, France's Most Elite College", 2019). Owen suggested that the reason behind the lack of change might be that the French remain "convinced of the intellectual superiority of the *énarques*" (Owen 2002, 66).

(*Inspection Générale des Finances*).⁹⁶ The *corps* form one of several systems which create divisions within the French civil service. Bezes and Jeannot (2011, p. 10) wryly observe the contradictory poles between the ideal of an undivided and neutral body of *fonctionnaires* governed by an integrated statutory law on the one hand and the “highly fragmented structure corresponding to the large number of ‘*corps*’” – around 1,500 in the year 2000 – on the other.⁹⁷ They define the *corps* as groupings “of public agents managed under similar conditions of recruitment, training, careers, promotions and pay” (Bezes & Jeannot, 2011, p. 10). Members, particularly of the most highly regarded *corps* share a strong sense of common identity. The identities of the *corps* are generally perceived as a structural element which tends to deepen the divides between different state organisations. But they can also act as a binding force, when members of *corps* are dispatched to lower-ranking units or the deconcentrated office of the central state’s administration.

Further divisions between civil servants stem from the differentiated systems of ranks and career tracks as well as different statutory categories of employment⁹⁸ (Desbarats & Kopel, 2005; Silberman, 1993, pp. 10–14). These systems constitute “organisational boundaries” which favour early commitment to a bureaucratic role and specific career during the educational process (Silberman, 1993, pp. 10–11). Civil servants generally are not recruited for a specific job, but rather for a rank- or *corps*-based career. Because of this, the specific skills needed for certain jobs play a subordinate role in the recruiting and promotion processes, while law and public management are favoured areas of expertise in the *concours*. But to the growing number of French civil servants who have to perform tasks in the areas of IT development or project management, their legal expertise is of little use. Only recently has public sector recruitment begun to value and actively search for candidates who are more market-oriented and have IT skills.⁹⁹ This skewed skill base has left the French public sector dependent on hired IT consultants, which furthermore hindered the formation of proper skills to effectively work

⁹⁶ Members of the *grands corps* (like the *Corps du Conseil d’Etat*, the *Corps du Cour des Comptes* or the *Corps des Mines*) are often dispatched to other administrations, but do not lose affiliation to their *corps* as a result. It is through these missions, which generally have them placed in top management positions, for example in departments or state agencies, that they exert their influence over the entirety of the French public administration.

⁹⁷ Their number was reduced to around 380 as of 2010 in an effort to create a more homogeneous civil service (Bezes & Jeannot, 2011, p. 10).

⁹⁸ Like the Germans, the French differentiate between employees whose privileged working conditions are regulated by statute (*fonctionnaires*) and employees for whom regulations from the private sector are applied instead (*contractuels* formerly called *non-titulaires*). See: <https://infos.emploi-public.fr/article/emploi-dans-la-fonction-publique-ce-que-signifie-etre-contractuel-eea-5849>, accessed 04 November 2020.

⁹⁹ One of the national IT strategy plan *Tech.Gouv’s* missions, dubbed “Mission Talents” aims at recruiting more business and technological expertise into the public sector. See: <https://www.fonction-publique.gouv.fr/la-dinum-veut-plus-de-profil-numeriques-dans-la-fonction-publique>, accessed 03 November 2020. In a similar vein, the French Digitization Agency (DINUM) and several ministries seek to attract IT students to positions in public administration by means of a visiting programme called “*Vis mon Job*” or “See my job”. See: <https://www.bercy-numerique.finances.gouv.fr/l-information-en-continu/lancement-de-vis-mon-job-des-etudiants-a-la-rencontre-des-professionnels>, accessed 03 November 2020.

on the digitization of public services within public administration itself. In the 2000s the deficiencies of the French civil service came under attack from prime minister Sarkozy who issued criticism against the French historical model¹⁰⁰ and vowed to reform it by abolishing the *corps* system, replacing the career track system with a job-based recruitment system – all in all with the aim of rendering it more similar to the private sector. Some changes were made and some flexibility introduced, but overall the French civil service’s institutions proved rather resistant to neo-managerialization and substantial institutional reform (Bezes and Jeannot 2011, 2), thereby preserving an ill-equipped staff for overseeing and implementing a user-friendly and effective digitization of public administration in concurrence with an ambitious private sector.

At last, the attitudinal attributes and behavioural routines of many of those who work in the French public sector make up a sizeable part of France’s administrative culture. This set of attitudes and practices, summarized by the term “administrative style” can determine just as much as formal institutions how apt or awkward an administrative public body is at handling a challenge like the digitization of its services (Bayerlein et al., 2020; Knill & Fellésdal, 2001; Richardson et al., 1982; Vogel, 2012). For France, most agree that the highly selective placement procedures and the influential rankings of schools, degrees and *corps* have led to an (intellectual) elitism. In the workings of the French administrative machine, this entails a firm belief in the legitimacy of intellectual and, by consequence, organisational hierarchy. The internal hierarchies of bodies of public administration mirror the rankings of the special purpose universities and *grandes écoles*, because of a tacit consensus about the intellectual superiority of the winners of the *concours* or the top-ranking graduates of ENA (Owen, 2002, p. 66). For the way of organizing work within the bodies of public authority this entails a chain of command where the intellectual elite at the top decide which way to march. Cooperation on an eye-to-eye level with people from different hierarchical levels, *corps* or ranks in a mutual working group would not be a workable arrangement that would fit well with the traditional French administrative style. The top-down, elitist logic of organising how work is done applies both for single organisations like a ministry or a directorate, but also for the country at large. As the administrative elite is concentrated in the units of the central state, a secondary hierarchy creeps into cooperation between the national state level and the local level.¹⁰¹ Local administration is subordinate not only because of structural centralist legacies but also because of an elitist and *dirigiste* administrative style

¹⁰⁰ For more details about the specifics of his criticism, see the speech given by President Nicolas Sarkozy to students of the Regional Institute for Public Administration about his plan to modernize the public sector in Nantes (Sarkozy, 2007).

¹⁰¹ The strong influence of the *grandes écoles*-trained administrative elite is both exemplified and exacerbated by the fact that despite their small, absolute number they are overrepresented in presidential and prime ministerial cabinets as well as in top management positions of both the public and private sector (Owen, 2002, pp. 58–59).

that holds the Parisian elites in a high esteem (Bezes and Jeannot 2011, 2).

Moreover, the hierarchical style not only operates within the administration itself but also comes into play in the interaction between public administration and its citizens. Citizens all over the world complain about haughty or, in some areas, downright corrupt public officials. But asymmetric relationships between public administration and their clients fall far more neatly into the line of French culture than, for example, in northern European countries. In the Hofstede model of national cultures France is ranked 68 out of 100 on the scale of “Power Distance”, which is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1983, 2003).¹⁰² According to Hofstede, hierarchical differences are pronounced and deference to superiors or people in positions of authority, such as public officials, is expected. This cultural norm may help explain why the shift from regarding citizens as deserving (or undeserving) claimants to clients who demand a modern customer service experience requires a big(er) leap from French public administration.

In summary: the culture of the French public administration constitutes a second, important factor in the development of digital public services, alongside its structural features. The French administrative system’s culture is marked by the importance of law and standardized administrative rules which are to be followed across the entire country. Because of that, its civil service is historically well trained in administrative law and accustomed to pronounced hierarchies with a top-down, and, at times paternalistic style of leadership. This attitude is also shown vis-à-vis citizens, who, for the French are not seen as customers but as subjects of a strong and assertive state. The civil service is run by a small but influential state elite which serves as a binding force across otherwise rather steep divisions between ministerial domains. They are revered for their intellectual prowess but are rather disconnected from the lower levels of civil servants, particularly local administration. The *grandes écoles* elites as well as the civil service at large have proven rather resistant to change. Strong organisational identities, largely thanks to *corps* memberships, stand in sharp contrast to the idea of the undivided state but have a “balkanizing” effect on interministerial cooperation. These cultural legacies of French public administration contain both promising as well as obstructive elements for the digital transformation of its services. France’s legalistic and paternalistic tradition as well as the state’s special status work against the service orientation that is inherent to the digitization of services. Horizontal divisions and the absence of cross-domain cooperative practices make isolated solutions

¹⁰² <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/denmark,france,germany/>, accessed 05 November 2020.

for each policy domain more likely than integrated standards for all public administration. On the other hand, we can expect swift decision-making and implementation wherever administrative elites are in favour of digitization – at least for their domain. Where this is the case, the aptitude of the French civil service is likely to produce high-quality outcomes, particularly if there have been investments in cultural change and accompanying skill development. Where state elites remain tied to the traditional ways however, the strong hierarchies are not likely to leave room for digitization against the will of those at the top.

THE STORY OF PUBLIC SERVICE DIGITIZATION IN FRANCE

France stumbled on the complexities of implementation and lost its head start. Implementation was heavily affected by two aspects of France’s administrative system: the state structure and the administrative culture. Between a bureaucratic administrative culture that is legalistic, top-down and authoritative, and a centralized but horizontally divided administration with weak local government, reform implementation was slowed down or altogether obstructed. With multiple weak and changing governmental units in charge of public digitization efforts, effective development of standardized and nation-wide accepted public IT solutions was thwarted. Instead, the responsibilities for digitizing public services remain dispersed across different ministerial departments or directorates, which leads to highly unequal results in terms of digital services, ranging from excellent to non-existent. Dependency on external consultants (because of a lack of proper skills within the administration itself) and a reliance on obsolete steering and management methods have exacerbated the problem. As a result, important public IT projects failed and progress came to a near halt. Setbacks in the use of digital public services in France between the years 2008 and 2013 were particularly noticeable. The troubled implementation only picked up pace again in 2013, thanks to a decisive change of personnel and a subsequent remodelling of the implementation governance (see again Figure 6 **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.**).

This turnaround was achieved after yet another catastrophic failure – this time of a national portal for open data that was severely overdue despite an already overstretched budget. A group of private sector mavericks were brought in to have a go at the nearly abandoned portal. Their approach was to “hack” the French administrative system by introducing new ways of thinking and collaborating, with users’ needs as their starting point. Their ever-growing network of state start-ups has challenged the reform-resistant French administrative system and may be the starting point for paradigmatic cultural change, the goal of which is to make the French administrative system fit for a post-industrial, digital-era society. However, horizontal divisions in the state structure remain powerful and have so far led to highly uneven results in terms of public service digitization. Able and willing ministerial

domains produce good results whereas small and less digitally inclined ministries, as well as the vast majority of small municipalities, fall further and further behind.

A HEAD START LOST – FROM THE DISCOURS D’HOURTIN TO THE CLOSURE OF MON.SERVICE-PUBLIC.FR

In the late 1990s, there was a feeling among the political establishment of France that the *grande nation* was falling behind other developed economies in terms of its adoption of information technologies. The last government project which had aimed at making France a frontrunner of IT competence,¹⁰³ the “IT for All Plan” (*Plan informatique pour tous*) dated back to 1985.¹⁰⁴ Its idea had been to provide all French schools with computer equipment and instruct teachers how to use them. Within a year, the programme was considered an abject failure by the General Inspection¹⁰⁵ and had to be discontinued once the company which had provided the computers stopped their production line in 1989.¹⁰⁶ In 1997, ten years later, the newly elected government of Lionel Jospin vowed to fight “French backwardness in information technology” and to give French digitization efforts another go (Jospin, 1997). In his famous *Discours d’Hourtin* (1997), the prime minister set the stage for the start of a digital reform programme for French public administration which continues to this day.¹⁰⁷ Jospin’s speech acknowledged the demands of the digital era on the economy and the state, and announced France’s first comprehensive public IT strategy, the “Governmental Action Plan for the Information Society” (PAGSI), setting underway a series of public digitization programmes which would govern France’s activities in the area of digital administration. Despite the technological opportunities at the time being much more limited than they are today, the prime minister formulated the (at the time) visionary ideal that “eventually, everyone should be able [...] to complete and send their tax return via the network or have their registration card renewed.” (Jospin, 1997) France was well equipped to become the avant-garde of digitizing public services because it could profit from its experience with the widely-used Minitel system, a network of household devices for electronic communication and business as well as public services (Klumpp & Schwemmler, 2000, p. 42).

¹⁰³ Prime minister and Ministry of Education, (1985), Brochure « *Informatique Pour Tous* », <http://epi.asso.fr/revue/histo/h85-ipt.htm>, accessed 16 November 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Jacques Baude, (March 2015), Le plan « Informatique pour tous », <https://www.societe-informatique-de-france.fr/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/1024-5-baude.pdf>, accessed 16 November 2020.

¹⁰⁵ La Croix, (13/05/2005), Les débuts de l’informatique à l’école, https://www.la-croix.com/Actualite/France/Les-debuts-de-l-informatique-a-l-ecole-NG_-2005-05-13-589290, accessed 16 November 2020.

¹⁰⁶ franceinfo, (05/08/2015), The MO5, real R5 of the microcomputer. The Computing Plan for All, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/histoires-d-info/le-mo5-veritable-r5-de-la-micro-informatique-le-plan-informatique-pour-tous-1985_1777497.html, accessed 16 November 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Action Publique 2022 (2017-2022); Programme de Développement Concerté de l’Administration Numérique Territoriale (DCANT) (2018-2020); France Numérique 2012 (2008-2012) ; ADministration ELEctronique (ADELE) (2004-2007).

Now that the internet was starting to become a globally dominant medium, the Jospin government decided to abandon public services on Minitels and instead aim at bringing French public services to the internet. One of the most important decisions for the development of digital public services was formulated by the PAGSI. In this document, the Jospin government proposed the establishment of a national online portal for digital public services, similar to what had been practiced to some degree via the Minitel network.¹⁰⁸ The portal, named *service-public.fr*, came to life by means of a prime-ministerial decree in November 2000 and was to serve two key purposes. It was supposed to provide (1) a comprehensive overview of all public services, be they national or local, including the contact details of those in charge of the service, and (2) manage citizens' email addresses for those who wished to communicate via email with public service providers.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the starting point for what would later become the French portal for digital public services was a sort of Internet-based directory of services and email addresses with an address repository for users who were willing to communicate with administrative actors via the internet. Indeed, one of the people in charge of building *service-public.fr* at the time states that "the objective [of *service-public.fr*] was to make the administration more accessible and to inform all users about their rights and the administrative procedures, including the possibility of completing the procedures online."¹¹⁰

But at the outset, the *Discours d'Hourtin* formulated a more implementable goal that proved influential for the choice and design of a responsible administrative unit for *service-public.fr*. Digital public services were intended to "enable everyone to find administrative forms on the Internet" (Jospin, 1997). This conception of the internet as primarily a means of information, not of services, more generally shaped how public IT services were thought of and how the policy implementation following the PAGSI was then organised. In its earliest conception, *service-public.fr* was to serve as nothing more than an information platform.¹¹¹ In this respect, *service-public.fr* shares a common history with the highly accomplished Danish citizen self-service platform for digital public services, *borger.dk*. But in opposition to *borger.dk*, *service-public.fr* has retained its profile as a networked information hub to this day.¹¹² The actual execution of digital public services today happens to a large extent on entirely separate, policy domain-specific online platforms like *impots.gouv.fr* (for taxes),

¹⁰⁸ "Service-public.fr was the Prime Minister's idea", says an interview partner (nr. 30, min 35).

¹⁰⁹ Order relating to the creation of an internet site entitled "service-public.fr", 6 November 2000, Prime Minister of France.

¹¹⁰ « L'objectif [de *service-public.fr*] était de rendre plus accessible l'administration et de renseigner tous les usagers sur leurs droits et sur leurs démarches, y compris sur la possibilité de faire leurs démarches en ligne. » (Interview nr. 30, min. 11.)

¹¹¹ Interview nr. 30.

¹¹² Interview nr. 24 and 25.

caf.fr (for social services) or *assure.ameli.fr* (for public health insurance). With respect to *service-public.fr* these other platforms “remain rather independent, even if we have this public service portal *service-public.fr* [...] which is more of an information portal and which will then redirect to each of these dedicated services.”¹¹³

The difference between the Danish experience (gradual evolution from an information website to an online self-service portal)¹¹⁴ and the French case of *service-public.fr* stems from a formative choice at the moment of creation. The French government in their understanding of the internet as a medium for legal information followed “an editorial logic”¹¹⁵ and, “after some fighting about who would do it to the *Documentation française*,”¹¹⁶ entrusted the implementation to a public agency which served as the publishing house for the French government.¹¹⁷ Moreover, the French reliance on the Minitel system kick-started a path dependency which favoured the *Documentation française*, which had historically broadcast information about administrative procedures via the Minitels. In 1996 the organisation had even started, of its own accord, to launch the first website for administrative forms, *admiFrance.fr* (European Commission, 2014).

The chosen locus for *service-public.fr* would have knock-on-effects for the subsequent 20 years of digital public service creation. “The *Documentation française* was an editor, a real specialist for the contents [...] it is in the DNA of *service-public.fr* that it was developed around the contents and not around the administrative procedures,”¹¹⁸ explained a lead member of the team which was charged with the portal’s construction at the time of its creation. It must be added that the *Documentation française* used to be a stand-alone agency which ranked rather low in the internal hierarchy of France’s state administration. One expert remembers how “in the beginning we felt pretty awkward and tried not to impose on anyone”¹¹⁹ despite “a clear political mandate”.¹²⁰ Its weak position in a state structure with a pronounced sense of hierarchy, where the more powerful “web sites of the ministries

¹¹³ « Aujourd'hui cela reste globalement indépendant même si on a ce portail service-public [...] qui est plutôt un portail d'information et qui ensuite va rediriger sur chacun de ces services dédiés. » (Interview nr. 24, min. 9-10.)

¹¹⁴ See Chapter 03 | Denmark.

¹¹⁵ « Dès le départ on était dans une logique assez éditoriale. » (Interview nr. 30, min. 11.)

¹¹⁶ « Après il y avait une bataille sur qui allait le faire et c'était confié à la *Documentation française*, mais une fois que c'était confié c'était accepté par les autres. » (Interview nr. 30, min. 6.)

¹¹⁷ In 2010, *Documentation française* merged with the Directorate of Official Journals to form the Directorate of Legal and Administrative Information (DILA), which is now the administrative body in charge of running *service-public.fr*.

¹¹⁸ « La *Documentation française* était un éditeur, voire un spécialiste des contenues [...] (14) c'est dans la DN de service-public que ça a été développé autour des contenues et non pas autour des démarches administratives. » (Interview nr. 30, min 14-15.)

¹¹⁹ « Au début on était dans nos petits souliers, c'est à dire qu'on ne s'imposait pas. » (Interview nr. 30, min. 13.)

¹²⁰ « Une annonce politique claire. » (Interview nr. 30, min 35.)

looked at us in a condescending way”¹²¹ influenced the way in which the portal was implemented. “We were extremely careful not to impose ourselves and say that we were going to replace all the sites”¹²² even though this integrated approach of a one-stop-shop had “perhaps been the ideal for a while.”¹²³

Over the next two decades, the dedicated team at the *Documentation française* would build and improve the national online portal for public services, without much support from the national ministries in charge of the services. At the same time, a similar project was launched at the heart of the French tax authorities, entirely independently of *service-public.fr*. The General Directorate of Taxation (*Direction Générale des Impôts*, DGI) and the General Directorate of Public Accounts (*Direction Générale de la Comptabilité Publique*, DGCP) launched their joint program “Copernic” in 2000 with the goal of digitizing communication between taxpayers and the tax administration. It was initially provoked by the many outdated and disintegrated software tools in use by the administrative clerks in charge of calculating and collecting taxes, and the confusing landscape of personal identifiers used by the different sub-units of the tax authorities. Over the course of its run time the project grew in scope and ambition, with a total budget of 911.5 million Euros. By 2009, the taxation authorities’ software and hardware environment had not only been modernized, there was also a new unique national identifier for each taxpayer, an integrated online tax account and an online interface for communication as well as for the exchange of documents between citizens and the tax authorities (French Court of Accounts, 2009, pp. 1–2).

In common with Germany and Denmark, the French tax authority seized the role of spearheading the development of well-functioning and widely adopted digital public services for citizens.¹²⁴ But France’s tax authorities would only serve as an example to be aspired to by other administrations, not as a helping hand for digital public service transformation as a whole. On the contrary, its powerful position in the state hierarchy and excellent domain-specific solutions caused the ministry of finance to be disinclined towards concentrating cross-domain measures which could have supplanted their identifier or account solution. This held true even when it became increasingly clear that a growing multitude of IT solutions, “a dramatic frenzy of creating new websites”¹²⁵ were awkward for users and standardized solutions would be preferable. A representative of the ministry

¹²¹ « Au début les sites des ministères nous regardaient de haut. » (Interview nr. 30, min. 12.)

¹²² « On était extrêmement prudent pour ne pas s'imposer et dire qu'on allait remplacer tous les sites. » (Interview nr. 30, min. 12.)

¹²³ « Il [un portail intégré pour tous les services] a peut-être été l'idéal à un certain moment. » (Interview nr. 30, min. 29.)

¹²⁴ Interview nr. 22, minute 3 and interview nr. 30, minute 18.

¹²⁵ « Une frénésie de créer des nouveaux sites web qui est dramatique. » (Interview nr. 30, min. 28.)

of finance itself observed that “today in France we have a real heterogeneity of online solutions.”¹²⁶ An interviewee in charge of digitization at another ministry agreed that “users are fighting today with multiple accounts and identities”¹²⁷ because “each ministry has developed its own solutions despite the aim to create concentrators”¹²⁸ such as *service-public.fr* or a common identity solution. He described the root of the problem as the “protectionism of the ministerial corps”, and “ministerial silos”. A public official at the Interministerial Directorate for Digitization (DINUM) mirrored this assessment, characterizing French public administration as “extremely territorial”, making it “very hard to exceed the limits of administrative units” for those who try to negotiate overarching digitization projects like *service-public.fr*.¹²⁹ He evoked the image of “Gallic villages” to describe the bodies of the French public administration, whose oppositional culture makes horizontal cooperation particularly hard.

The combination of a vertically divided state structure on the one hand and an underdeveloped culture of cooperation balkanized the implementation project which was formulated by PAGSI, namely, an integrated offer of digital public services for all citizens. As a result, the implementation of Jospin’s vision for a fully digitized service offer by the French state to its citizens quickly crumbled into a multitude of parallel implementation projects, as opposed to a single, harmonized and collaborative project. Today, the quality of digital public services varies considerably between the different policy domains. Experts agree that the tax authorities above all, but also social services offered by the *Caisse d’Allocation* and services for the unemployed offered by *Pôle Emploi*, have reached a high degree of digitization whereas other departments such as health, education and justice are far behind.¹³⁰

But the tax authorities’ project *Copernic* is only one of several examples that shows how *service-public.fr* experienced strong competition from the digital service projects of other state actors from the very beginning. In terms of governance this competition is indicative of a weak degree of “coordination, which arrived belatedly”, leading to an “erratic” development of digital public services.¹³¹ Regarding responsibility for the content of *service-public.fr*, “each ministry was

¹²⁶ « Nous avons aujourd'hui en France une véritable hétérogénéité des solutions en lignes. » (Interview nr. 22 min. 8.)

¹²⁷ « Les usagers se battent aujourd'hui avec une multiplicité des comptes, des identités. » (Interview nr. 29.)

¹²⁸ « Chaque Ministère a développé ses propres solutions malgré la volonté de créer des concentrateurs. » (Interview nr. 29.)

¹²⁹ « Tabou de changer les structures », « très difficile de dépasser les limites administrations », « ils sont extrêmement territoriaux dans l'administration. » (all interview nr. 25, min. 13.)

¹³⁰ See interviews with the representative of CNAF, *impot.gouv* and *service-public.fr* (Interviews nr. 22, 24 and 30).

¹³¹ « Coordination est arrivée tardivement », « un développement erratique » (Interview nr. 29.)

autonomous in the fabrication of their services”.¹³² Without a strong mandate for the various state actors charged with coordinating the digitization efforts, they could do little more than “encourage the tendencies [to go digital] rather than prescribe a structured plan” for state ministries and local government.¹³³ In such an organisational setting, the host organisation *service-public.fr* could not even dictate a colour scheme to the ministries’ websites and service portals.¹³⁴ “From 2002 it would have been necessary to develop a brand strategy and therefore be able to affiliate services that are not provided by the *Documentation française*. And I think this is something that the *Documentation française* has failed to do and it is extremely unfortunate,” deplored one expert in her interview.¹³⁵

But weak governance also badly affected the development of central state IT infrastructure, such as an eID solution or a safe means of transferring sensitive public documents. The core issue, again, was divided responsibilities in the ongoing IT development. As mentioned above, *service-public.fr* was handed to the state’s publishing house because of a historical legacy which made sense at the time. But already, shortly after the launch of *service-public.fr* in 2001, the overall management and coordination of eGovernment was given to another state actor, the newly founded and first specialised Agency for ICT in Public Administration (ATICA) with the hope of institutionalizing eGovernment reform efforts.¹³⁶ Until then, eGovernment reform had been the job of an interministerial mission, a time-limited operation of smaller scope without their own dedicated staff.¹³⁷ The locus of digital service reform implementation would go on to change numerous times over the course of the following 18 years. In 2005, the General Directorate for State Modernization (DGME) swallowed ATICA, combining the responsibility for eGovernment reform with other state modernization and budgetary reform projects. In 2011, DGME was joined by Interministerial Directorate of State Information and Communication Systems (DISIC), only to be merged with the Interministerial Direction for the Modernization of Public Action (DITP) in 2012. Three years later another merger created the Interministerial Directorate for Digital Affairs and Information and Communication Systems (DINSIC). But despite the numerous reorganisations, *service-public.fr* always

¹³² « Chaque ministère est autonome dans la fabrication de leurs services. » (Interview nr. 19, min. 14.)

¹³³ « Tendance générale d'incitation des administrations assez dirigée plutôt qu'un plan structuré. » (Interview nr. 22, min. 2.)

¹³⁴ Interview nr. 30, minute 19.

¹³⁵ « Dès 2002 il fallait développer une stratégie de la marque et donc être capable d'affilier des services qui ne soient pas réalisés par la Documentation française. Et je pense que c'est une chose que la Documentation française n'a pas réussi à faire et c'est extrêmement dommage. » (Interview nr. 30, min. 19.)

¹³⁶ ATICA was created for a period of three years by Decree No. 2001-737 of 22 August 2001.

¹³⁷ Interministerial mission of technical support for the development of information and communications technology in the administration, created by Decree nr. 98-751 of 27 August 1998.

remained the authority of the *Documentation française* (and its successor, DILA) and was hence consistently cut off from the organisational epicentre of eGovernment expertise.

For the development of an integrated offer on *service-public.fr*, this turned out to be a disadvantage. When the minister for the Budget and State Reform, Jean-François Copé, launched the Electronic Administration programme (ADELE) in 2005, he handed over implementation to DGME, not to the *Documentation française*. One of the programme's central goals was the digitization of all public services by 2008. To this end DGME proposed their own internet site, fittingly called *mon.service-public.fr*¹³⁸ in reference to the site run by DILA. Envisioned as a single-sign-on one-stop-shop for the entirety of French public services, the idea was to expand the account to other, pre-existing accounts like that of the tax or unemployment agency (European Commission 2014, 6) and was in that form considered a prime example of mature eGovernment services (Homburg & Dijkshoorn, 2013). The plan was to somehow integrate *service-public.fr*'s content into this more ambitious eGovernment portal and replace or, at least, make other portals redundant. But integration turned out to be unfeasible and pre-existing account solutions were jealously defended by their host organisations.

By 2010 an expert report commissioned by the ministry of finance to help improve eGovernment in France heavily criticized redundant structures and the unfortunate, divided responsibilities between the two state agencies (DILA for *service-public.fr* and DGME for *mon.service-public.fr*) (Riester 2010). The Riester report recommended that both sites be merged and put under the authority of only one agency. "The two sites had become competitors."¹³⁹ As a result, *mon.service-public.fr* as was closed down, and with it the idea of creating a one-stop-shop for all French digital public services. All the while, other policy-specific service portals like *impots.gouv.fr* remained active.

The disjointed governance for the PAGSI and, later, ADELE led to a disjointed digital public service landscape which only went on to grow more incoherent over the years. Looking back, one interviewed expert concedes that "at the beginning the idea of *service-public.fr* was to be THE only website and to always go by it [...] and in the end it did not work out this way."¹⁴⁰ The key reason behind this failure to implement an effective, centralized online hub for public services was that it was "taboo

¹³⁸ The URL literally translates to "my public service".

¹³⁹ « Ces deux sites [*service-public.fr* et *mon.service-public.fr*] sont devenus concurrents. » (Interview nr. 30, min. 23.)

¹⁴⁰ « L'idée au début de service-public c'était d'être LE site unique et de passer toujours par service-public [...] et en fait ce n'a pas marché. » (Interview nr. 23, min. 4.)

to change the governing structures”¹⁴¹ in a profound manner which ultimately gave way to a dysfunctional governance for all public digitization reform. Indecision about where to place a cross-cutting policy issue like digital state reform led to frequent reorganisations, shuffling staff, expertise and points of contact for collaboration in ways which made coherent implementation impossible. Another interviewed expert summarized that implementation of effective digital public services in France had been impeded by the fact that French “public administration has no centralised body for digitization. It is a hydra of four heads: DILA, DINUM, which does not make *service-public.fr*, the Government Information Service and the Interministerial Directorate of Public Transformation. These four, they are all getting in each other’s way and no one really knows who is the real boss of digitization.”¹⁴² The experts describe the problem behind the problem – an “explosion of public agencies which the French state does not know how to reverse” and the “unwillingness of ministries to give up existing solutions”¹⁴³ – not as a bug but as a feature of French administration. “It is a French particularity to have decentralised [IT] projects because there is no global organisation and unfortunately this leads to a natural selection process,”¹⁴⁴ observed an independent IT contractor with a heavy heart. And one of *service-public.fr*’s founders regrets how “French administration competes with itself on the internet for lack of coordination because no one coordinates the many coordinating interministerial directorates.”¹⁴⁵

The disjointed governance not only took the form of noxious competition at the national level. At the local and departmental level, intercommunal cooperation was missing just as much as support by the central state.¹⁴⁶ As can be expected of a heavily centrist state like France, most deliberations and activities around digital transformation took place at the heart of state agencies with little to no interaction with the local level. In the preparation of *service-public.fr*’s launch, one expert remembers how “the territorial entities were represented at the table” but later on, development of local digital services did not receive much attention from Parisian administrative elites. The only nod in their direction for a long while was the dedicated website *service-public.local.net*, a syndication service

¹⁴¹ « Tabou de changer les structures. » (Interview nr. 25, min 13.)

¹⁴² « Il faut voir que dans l'administration il n'y a pas un organe centralisé sur le numérique. C'est une hydre de quatre têtes. La DILA, DINUM mais qui ne fait pas *service-public.fr*, le Système d'Information du Gouvernement et la DITP. [...] Ces quatre identités là, ils se tirent un peu dans les pattes, on ne sait pas qui est vraiment le chef du numérique. » (Interview nr. 23, min. 24-25.)

¹⁴³ « L'État français aujourd'hui ne sait pas comment revenir sur cette explosion des agences. » « Les Ministères ont du mal à effacer des solutions existantes. » (Interview nr. 29.)

¹⁴⁴ « C'est une spécificité française d'avoir des projets [numériques] décentralisés parce qu'il n'y a pas une seule entité globale et malheureusement il y a une sélection naturelle. » (Interview nr. 23, min. 26.)

¹⁴⁵ « L'administration française se fait concurrence à elle-même sur internet par manque de coordination. » (Interview nr. 30, min. 21.)

¹⁴⁶ Interview nr. 27, minute 13.

financed by the *Caisse de Dépôts*, which enabled local and regional administration to offer digital services, connected them to *service-public.fr* and allowed them to use the national portal to enrich their own information that they offered on municipal websites (Chevallerau, 2005, p. 173). But *service-public.local.net* was closed down in 2011, remembers one expert, “from one day to the other”, which eradicated many investments made by bodies of local government.¹⁴⁷ For a long while after, digital public services on the local level stagnated. One expert from the departmental level recalls that the development of departmental online portals only started in 2013. Digitizing the services, which were to be hosted on those portals began even later – in her department as late as 2016. Given that at state level the full digitization of online forms was already decreed by 2008,¹⁴⁸ the temporal gap makes clear how much the French state focused first and foremost on Paris and on the rest of the country as an afterthought.

In this respect, local government bodies suffered twice under the governance structure of DPS implementation. Not only were they left out from the state’s main initiatives which concentrated efforts on the bodies of state administration, they also were badly equipped for digitizing their services, as wide-reaching horizontal cooperation is less institutionalized in France than in countries with a stronger corporatist tradition like Germany or Denmark. A departmental official in charge of digital services admitted in her interview that on the local level “unfortunately we each work in our own corner, which is problematic”¹⁴⁹ and that while “there is a lot of exchange happening there are no links between *départements* regarding online services.”¹⁵⁰ Lacking routine cooperation meant that cooperative development between *départements* had comparatively high transaction costs. The alternative route meant that IT solutions were developed in parallel, lowering the financial power for each developing unit.¹⁵¹

The same financial barrier is faced by the multitude of small French communities to whom even modest IT investment costs can be prohibitive.¹⁵² While this may not be a problem for large municipalities like the city of Rennes, a frontrunner of local digital services, a “municipality with only

¹⁴⁷ Interview nr. 21.

¹⁴⁸ Order relating to electronic exchanges between users and administrative authorities and between administrative authorities, 8 December 2005, Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Industry.

¹⁴⁹ « Malheureusement on [les collectivités] travaille chacun dans son coin - c'est un peu problématique. (Interview nr. 16, min. 27.)

¹⁵⁰ Il y a beaucoup d'échanges [...], mais il n'y a pas de liens entre chaque département sur les démarches en ligne. » (Interview 27, min. 17-18.)

¹⁵¹ Interview nr. 18, minutes 1:40-1:41.

¹⁵² Interview nr. 25.

few citizens cannot do the same things as a community of a million inhabitants.”¹⁵³ The comparatively small size of French municipalities also means that investment into the particular competences needed for digital transformation is out of reach, which is why “many small *communes* fall back on private solutions” instead of developing their own software.¹⁵⁴ Cooperation between municipalities, at least in the area of digital transformation is scarce due to the vertical orientation of the state and potential “linkages are barely exploited,”¹⁵⁵ for example by developing solutions in a group setting of multiple municipalities or by re-using pre-existing solutions, leaving the local entities to fight for themselves.¹⁵⁶ As a consequence, the spread and quality of digital local services is very uneven and varies from municipality to municipality,¹⁵⁷ reflecting that “the online services of the *mairies* [town halls] were developed municipality by municipality and not at the national level for all municipalities in France.”¹⁵⁸

The heterogenous landscape is punctuated every now and then by centralized rollouts of online solutions for typical local services. But those occur not by means of intercommunal cooperation, but through ministries becoming active on behalf of their respective domains. One among many examples is the online service for requesting a birth certificate which was decreed in February 2005 and rolled out to all *communes* by June 2006 (European Commission, 2007, p. 5). All in all, the heterogenous situation at the local level reflects both the centrist legacies of France, with its concentration on developing state solutions first, and the demands of IT, which benefit from standards and central platforms which could be effectively realized by several of the strong ministries at the national level for the state services of their respective domains.¹⁵⁹

RESURGENCE UNDER NEW GOVERNANCE – FROM ÉTALAB TO THE PRESENT DAY

But even the well-equipped ministerial bureaucracy of the central state experienced some difficulties in the implementation of their policy goals during the first era of France’s public administration digital transformation. A lot of progress was made, in some policy domains more than others. But, simultaneously, projects failed, were aborted or received only minimal uptake from users – particularly those that aimed at harmonizing existing solutions or building cross-domain concentrators like *service-*

¹⁵³ « Une commune de peu d’habitants ça ne va pas pareil dans une commune d’un million d’habitants. » (Interview nr. 27.)

¹⁵⁴ « Les communes sont trop petites, elles recourent sur des solutions privées. » (Interview nr. 18, min. 1 :4.)

¹⁵⁵ « Les liens [entre les collectivités] sont mal exploités. » (Interview nr. 28, min. 9.)

¹⁵⁶ Interview nr. 28, minute 10.

¹⁵⁷ Interview nr. 24, minute 43 and interview nr. 27, minutes 33-34.

¹⁵⁸ « Les services en ligne des mairies étaient développés commune par commune et pas au niveau national pour toutes les communes en France. » (Interview nr.24, min. 23.)

¹⁵⁹ Interview nr. 24, minute 43.

public.fr, the general-purpose online citizen account, or a nationwide eidentity (Riester, 2010).¹⁶⁰ This first phase of policy implementation lasted from 1997 (the *Discours d'Hourtin*) to 2013, when Henri Verdier was nominated as the head of Etalab, a unit at the state agency for digitization at the time.

The second phase of digital public service reform witnessed a paradigmatic change in the administrative culture surrounding the implementation of digital reform projects. Thanks to the actions of then freshly elected prime minister Jean-Marc Ayrault and his chosen confidants, the political outsiders Henri Verdier and Pierre Pezziardi, from 2013 onwards, the bureaucratic style of those tasked with implementing digital public services was slowly but steadily transformed into a service-oriented approach. Alongside the cultural change these outsiders introduced to the French civil service, they also noticeably improved governance for implementing digital services in French public administration. Although the turnaround was triggered by an incoming new government, it is noteworthy that French eGovernment strategy remained stable during both the first as well as the second phase of implementation across various presidencies and prime ministerial cabinets. Thanks to a different approach to governance and the surrounding administrative culture, digital public services are now being created with greater speed and quality. For the administrative system of France these changes might be the beginning of a greater transformation to digital era governance, towards which Anglo-Saxon and Nordic regimes have been heading quite some time. However, structural obstacles to effective digital public services in France remain to this day.

Incidentally, France mastered its turnaround in the field of digital public service implementation in the wake of failing to develop a functioning open data portal. The portal, *data.gouv.fr*, had been contracted out to an IT consulting company in 2011 by way of public tender. But the results were found to be lacking, “nothing but a huge spreadsheet [...] a piece of shit” one interviewee summarized.¹⁶¹ The unsatisfying data portal was the latest in a line of disappointments where results from independent contractors were unusable despite an excess of time and money spent.¹⁶² Frustrated by the lack of progress made in digital public services by his predecessors, new prime minister Jean-Marc Ayrault decided on a number of changes.¹⁶³ On a structural level, he united Etalab – the unit in charge of developing the national data portal – and DINSIC with the Interministerial

¹⁶⁰ Compare also interviews nr. 17, 23, 25.

¹⁶¹ “Before that the open data portal was just a big catalogue of Excel spreadsheets. It was a piece of shit. It was super expensive.” (Interview nr. 31, min 36.)

¹⁶² « Excès de l’argent et du temps sans résultats utilisables. » (Interview nr. 17, min. 22-23.).

¹⁶³ Note the seamless transition from a sequence of three conservative prime ministers (Raffarin, Villepin, Fillon) to the socialist government of Ayrault. Despite the diverging political affiliations of national government, eGovernment strategy remains stable.

Directorate for the Modernization of Public Action to form a General Secretariat for the Modernization of Public Action (SGMAP) which he placed directly under his own authority.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, he made an influential recruitment choice in January 2013, picking political outsider Henri Verdier – half-intellectual, half businessman with a background in all things internet – as the new head of the Etalab mission, which sought to bring the national data portal to fruition.¹⁶⁵ Henri Verdier swiftly used his modest position to make several structural decisions of his own. The first pertained to the question of who would build the second version of *data.gouv*. Instead of preparing the next public tender for *data.gouv.fr*'s remodelling, he opted for an inhouse, public solution and hired external IT consultant Pierre Pezziardi and two software programmers.¹⁶⁶ The goal was to lower development costs, ensure a better product and install relevant knowledge about the final product in the administration itself.¹⁶⁷ His decision reflects a wider move towards the reintegration of savvy staff into the administration proper that has been made out as an important lever in this second wave of digital era governance (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013). Too often, external development had led to IT products swiftly becoming obsolete because knowledge about them remained with private contractors¹⁶⁸ or the results did not fit the wishes of administration. "Every time we wanted to digitize sizeable services we used to contract them out to big companies like Capgemini, Sopra Steria, Orange. These are crappy companies who do not know how to do this and who do not have the [right] skills. [...] We refuse to work with them [now],"¹⁶⁹ one public IT developer remembered. It turned out that bringing home IT competence paid off immediately as Pezziardi and his two programmers managed to rebuild *data.gouv.fr* in a matter of just a few months and at a fraction of the cost of the first private hire.¹⁷⁰

Bolstered by the success of *data.gouv.fr* and other consecutive development projects and promoted to the head of DINSIC, Henri Verdier made his second structurally relevant decision. With the positive experience of *data.gouv* he went on to remodel the governance of public IT development

¹⁶⁴ Order nr. 2012-1198 relating to the creation of a General Secretariat for the Modernization of Public Action (SGMAP), 30 October 2012, Prime Minister of France.

¹⁶⁵ <https://www.etalab.gouv.fr/henriverdierestnommedirecteurdetalab>, accessed 08 January 2016.

¹⁶⁶ Interview nr. 31.

¹⁶⁷ Interview nr. 31.

¹⁶⁸ Interviews nr.31, min 35 and interview nr. 20, minute 11.

¹⁶⁹ « Chaque fois qu'on a voulu faire la dématérialisation aux grosses démarches on a fait appel à des grandes boîtes comme Capgemini, à des entreprises comme Sopra Steria, Orange. Ce sont des boîtes nulles qui ne savent pas faire et qui n'ont pas de la compétence et qui utilisent des vieilles méthodes. En France on a vraiment des entreprises du numérique qui ne sont pas compétentes et pour ça nous dans les start-ups d'État refusent de travailler avec elles. » (22)

¹⁷⁰ Interview nr. 20, minute 12.

on a larger scale.¹⁷¹ By 2015 he had erected the public start-up incubator, *beta.gouv*, through which public servants from all kinds of administration were channelled and coached to quickly produce functioning digital public services. The necessary programming was and still is mainly done by its own staff of IT developers. The incubator *beta.gouv* came to serve as a structural governance template for French digital public service implementation and over the next five years, 186 “state start-ups” were incubated and released, thereby increasing the speed and quality of digital public service development.¹⁷²

Verdier’s DINSIC did however not turn into a more effective Digitization Agency for the rest of the state. Instead, the governance choice for scaling up service production was to install many more of these incubators and distribute them across policy domains and state levels. Indeed, as of 2020, 11 ministries and other state agencies had chosen to build their own, independent digital public service incubator in the style of *beta.gouv*. For instance, the *Fabrique numérique des ministères sociaux* for the Ministry of Social Affairs, *Lab MI* for the Ministry of the Interior, and *Incubateur du MEFR* for the Ministry of Economy and Finance. And, in line with the general tendency to focus primarily on the central state’s services, the last incubator to be added was that of the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion (*Agence nationale de la cohésion des territoires*), founded as late as July 2019.¹⁷³ In this, French public administration reproduced the horizontal divisions between policy domains and its focus on the national state level. But in so doing, it finally found a successful way to tackle the problem of how to digitize.

With the change in governance also came a change in the surrounding administrative culture from bureaucratic to service-oriented. A representative of today’s Interministerial Direction for Digitization (DINUM), the organisational successor of DINSIC, sums up the role of *beta.gouv* as a catalyst for cultural change in many parts of the French administration.¹⁷⁴ It did this by setting a positive example and spreading knowledge about effective project methods, IT competence and pro-digital attitudes to other administrations. Quickly, *beta.gouv* transformed itself from one, single innovative organisational unit into a network of supporters for other administrations which wanted to “go digital”, a sort of “coalition of the willing”. The many public servant “intrapreneurs” channelled

¹⁷¹ Interview nr. 31, minutes 34-37.

¹⁷² <https://beta.gouv.fr/en/>, accessed 08 January 2021.

¹⁷³ Law nr. 2019-753 referring to the creation of a National Agency for the Territorial Cohesion, 22 July 2019, French National Assembly. It is, again, telling of the inner workings of the French public administration that an incubator for the subnational level had to be decreed by President Macron of the French Republic, rather than being founded through the coordinated effort of local government itself.

¹⁷⁴ Interviews nr. 19, 20, 29, 31.

through the state start-up incubators have served as multipliers for both digital competence and, perhaps even more importantly, cultural change. Many interview partners stressed the “pivotal role”¹⁷⁵ that the network *beta.gouv* played for the cultural transformation of French administration, which they deem responsible for a positive turnaround in digital public service creation. “It all coincides with the creation of *beta.gouv*.”^{176, 177} As an anti-digital, bureaucratic culture had inhibited reform implementation within French administration for so long, the motives of the founding members of *beta.gouv* were “to create [*beta-gouv*] within administration but somehow against administration” in order to facilitate change.¹⁷⁸ Membership was, and remains, voluntary and un-formalized, but weekly online conferences to support one another in implementing digitization projects are a routine feature.¹⁷⁹

A central part of the digital-friendly culture that the network promotes is an aversion towards traditional hierarchies. “Those who cannot work with us have very hierarchical and orderly views of the administration. There is a chief at the top and those who are in the background perform.”¹⁸⁰ Instead, the rotation of positions – for instance from a simple administrative clerk to project leader, or collaborative teamwork across administrative boundaries – have marked the implementation of digital public service projects. With this goes renunciation of traditional, legalistic ways of managing work and careers. This is because the successful implementation of digital projects requires job-specific competences and hiring practices which are at odds with the French public administration’s rank based-careers and generalist elites trained in legal studies.¹⁸¹

Another important cultural change for French administration is the shift from a state-centric perspective that views its citizens as subjects of state authority to a more citizen-oriented approach.¹⁸² One IT designer dates the starting point of this change to 2012, when “Etalab and the state start-ups began to improve [digital public services] by putting the users in the centre.”¹⁸³ The new mode posits

¹⁷⁵ « Le rôle important de *beta.gouv*. » (Interview nr. 18, min. 39.)

¹⁷⁶ « Cela coïncide avec la création de *beta.gouv*. » (Interview nr. 20, min. 12.)

¹⁷⁷ Interviews nr. 18, 19, 20, 29, 31.

¹⁷⁸ « On [*beta.gouv*] s'est créé dans l'administration un peu contre l'administration. » (Interview nr. 20, min 8.)

¹⁷⁹ Interview nr. 20, minute.

¹⁸⁰ « Ceux qui ne peuvent pas travailler avec nous ont des visions très hiérarchiques et ordonnés de l'administration. Il y a un chef en haut et ceux qui sont en fonds exécutent. » (Interview nr. 20, min. 18.)

¹⁸¹ Interviews nr. 19, 20, 31.

¹⁸² Interviews nr. 17, 20, 24, 29, 31.

¹⁸³ « Depuis 2012 il y avait un mouvement, grâce à ETAlab et les Startups d'État, d'améliorer et de mettre les utilisateurs au centre. » (Interview nr. 27, min. 10-11.)

the citizen's preferences, needs and wishes as the baseline for how public services ought to be run. The two modes need not necessarily contradict one another, but in practice have tended to be pitched against one another. For instance, a popular smartphone app for the administration for social services, (*Caisse Nationale d'allocations familiales*, CNAF) "was initially considered nothing but a showy toy, but is now our most heavily used tool."¹⁸⁴ Designing services around the preferences of users as opposed to the structures of bureaucracy demands a very different way of thinking. The effects of this change should therefore not be underestimated.

Becoming service-oriented required letting go of the legalistic way of thinking about administrative problems in order to take a more pragmatic approach. In short, being more interested in the results in terms of take-up than the written words of intent. The difference can be illustrated in the opposing ways of approaching the digitization of public services on *service-public.fr* versus the more recent applications which were developed by the new landscape of start-up incubators. Services on *service-public.fr* were ordered and displayed according to their legal origin. The main objective was to inform citizens about the content, responsible administrative units and required forms and documents when they wished to make use of a public service. The intention, however, of digital public services these days is to facilitate them as much as possible for the user. "We started by 'dematerializing' [analogue processes] and putting information online and have now moved on to offering a set of services that covers all types of relations with the users" said one expert.¹⁸⁵ This may, for instance, imply translating the legalistic language of administrative forms into simple, every-day language or merging services from different administrative units into one application. A good example for this is the state start-up *mes-aides.gouv.fr*, an online personalised search engine which helps citizens in need of different forms of social services realize what benefits they are entitled to.¹⁸⁶ This service-orientation goes beyond passively offering legal information and actively tries to help citizens actualize their rights.

To some extent, a growing body of civil servants who embody a digital-era style of administration functions as a bridge between the persistent silos that constitute French public administration. The informal team of the 11 (and potentially growing) start-up incubators, and the

¹⁸⁴ Aujourd'hui notre application mobile [CNAF] est notre offre le plus utilisé alors qu'au départ il a semblé du gadget, de la frime. (Interview nr. 24, min. 21.)

¹⁸⁵ « On est parti d'une démarche de dématérialisation et d'information en ligne à un offre des services digitaux qui englobent toute la relation aux usagers. » (Interview nr. 24, min. 12.)

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.gouvernement.fr/argumentaire/mes-aidesgouvfr-un-site-pour-evaluer-ses-droits-aux-prestations-et-aides-sociales>, accessed 05 January 2021.

many more intrapreneurs currently working on their projects thanks to their support, are sowing a new mode of thinking. Like a political grassroots movement, as this movement grows, it acts as a cohesive between the otherwise barely-connected digitization efforts of different ministerial domains and state levels. But with the key principle being voluntary participation and the persistently weak institutional setting of public service digitization – DILA being responsible for *service-public.fr* and DINUM only nominally for the rest – the digitization of French public services remains haphazard and dependent on the will of single-minded actors. Several interview partners from a range of administrations agreed that successful digitization in their organisation depended on “heroes”, spokespersons in the higher ranks of civil servants with a strong vision.¹⁸⁷ Where a hero was missing, little progress has been made. Voluntary cooperation furthermore entails that it often enough does not take place. There is, for example, little collaboration between the tax authorities and other actors from the *beta.gouv* network because, as one network coordinator said, “they are very ‘top-down’. There, the directors decide everything. They have another way of going about things and have trouble understanding autonomy, which is not compatible with our way of working.”¹⁸⁸

With a landscape of independent incubators and an informal but strongly institutionalized network to loosely connect them, France has erected a governance structure for implementing the digitization of its public services that mirrors its general administrative structure. After many years of searching, it found a way to bridge the divides thanks to a structural solution that fit its deep horizontal divisions, underdeveloped cooperation and weak local government. More so, the ensuing results – the actual digital public service solutions – also represent the horizontally divided administrative structures of France with their focus on the central state. In a way, the key to relative implementation success lay with finding IT solutions that work in this specific setting. Those who were tasked with digital implementation projects in recent years have come to accept a somewhat jealous, horizontally fractured administration and offered IT solutions that go with, instead of against, these characteristics. For instance, the failed identification projects *IDéNum* and *mon.service-public.fr*¹⁸⁹ were relaunched with far more success thanks to the different angle taken by the successor project *FranceConnect*.

¹⁸⁷ Interviews nr. 18, 20, 22, 26, 27, 31.

¹⁸⁸ « Chez les impôts c'est très directif. Ce sont des directeurs qui décident tout. C'est une autre manière de faire, ils ont du mal à comprendre l'autonomie. [...] ils ne sont pas compatible avec notre manière de travailler. On ne fait pas grand-chose avec les impôts. » (Interview nr. 20, min. 16-17.)

¹⁸⁹ The website, *mon.service-public* went beyond being merely a digital sign-on-solution and also offered a secure mailbox and communication channel for safe document transfers. It had hoped to serve as a general go-to spot for any type of service-related communication between the state and its citizens, which would have made it a *de facto* single-sign-on solution for French public administration.

FranceConnect is “a Single-Sign-On solution, which provides users with an identification mechanism recognised by all digital public services available in France” (European Commission 2018, 24–25). It was launched in June 2016 by DINSIC, by then headed by Henri Verdier.¹⁹⁰ Without seeking to replace the pre-existing suppliers of digital public identities, *FranceConnect* combined the different online accounts opened by users within different administrations (European Commission, 2018, pp. 24–25). This means that *FranceConnect* chose to not override established solutions for digital identification but to instead to link them into one interoperable pool. This allows, for example, for the use of an existing account issued by the digital tax authority for logging into the public health insurance system portal. The idea has been popularized by big suppliers of digital user accounts, such as Facebook and Google, which are accepted as a safe means of identification by many other websites, thereby rendering it unnecessary to open a specific user account for any new website that provides personalized services. As of 2018, 2.8 million users in France had signed up (European Commission 2018, 25). *FranceConnect* supplanted the project *IDéNum*, France’s first attempt at a national identification tool, which had started in 2010 but fizzled out after five years of little progress (Legrand, 2016). Despite a second go in 2013, after lengthy delays in its development and the initial project partners’ desertion of the project, the *IDéNum* was closed down officially in 2016 (Cazenave, 2019). *IDéNum* was the second unsuccessful attempt at distributing a universal identity to all French citizens. The first, dubbed INES (*Identité Nationale Électronique Sécurisée*) was initiated as early as 1999, in the course of the first IT Action Plan, but had suffered a similar fate to *IDéNum* and was abandoned in 2005. The multiple development failures surrounding France’s eID solution demonstrate how hard a time France’s public administration has had in finding its way towards the successful implementation of digital projects. The key to success with *FranceConnect* lay with the fact that it did not seek to replace powerful state actors’ pre-existing solutions with a single, central technology – an unlikely feat. One interview partner with first-hand insight into the implementation process summarized, “Fully centralized sites, [for] the people in France – it doesn't work very well [*laughs*], because we have trouble with that [...]. There is always a politician, something at stake, an official who says 'no, we'll do it differently'. For us, what others offer us sucks, and that is why we preferred another strategy on *FranceConnect*, which was to say we will not force you link to our site but we will put our button on your site.”¹⁹¹ Instead, it honoured the implementation efforts which CNAF, *Pôle Emploi* and the tax

¹⁹⁰ It is now being administered by its organisational successor, the Interministerial Directorate for Digitization (Direction interministérielle du numérique, DINUM).

¹⁹¹ « Des sites tout centralisés, [pour] les gens en France cela ne marche pas très bien [rit], parce qu'on a du mal..., il y a toujours un homme politique, un enjeu quelque part, un fonctionnaire qui dit 'non, on fera différemment'. Chez nous c'est nul ce que les autres nous proposent et c'est pourquoi on a préféré une autre stratégie sur *FranceConnect* qui était de dire on ne va pas vous forcer à aller sur notre site mais not mettons notre bouton sur votre site à vous. » (Interview nr. 23, min. 3.)

authorities had already invested into their digital identifying schemes and cleverly bundled them into a group-based solution that can finally be deemed successful.

In summary, France managed to “pick up its pace considerably in the last five years”¹⁹² with respect to digitizing public services thanks to a cultural shift and to governance and technological solutions which recognize the given administrative structures of France. With the onset of structural and cultural change, the take-up of digital public services began to rise (compare again Figure 6). We can reasonably draw the conclusion that this was facilitated by the network of highly competent start-up-incubators with their “updated methods and skills”¹⁹³ and, even more importantly, the “paradigmatic change towards user-orientation in the spirit of *beta.gouv.*”¹⁹⁴ The interviewed experts overwhelmingly agreed that the paradigmatic change in French administrative culture was finally meeting success in the field of digital public services and felt optimistic that they had reached a positive point of no return. Thus, looking back, the overall process of implementing digital public services in France has “worked out rather well, with maybe six or seven years of delay”¹⁹⁵ concluded one expert, which summed up the overall feeling of several interviews.¹⁹⁶

The price of this relative success was letting go of the idea of universal, national platforms and solutions. This meant abandoning the “idea of turning *service-public.fr* into THE one and only website to pass through” because in the given administrative structure it would simply “not work out this way.”¹⁹⁷ For a country that cherishes the idea of a grand and undivided nation, this is a bitter pill to swallow. Despite many difficult experiences in the recent past, the French state has continued to ponder “whether there should not be an encompassing portal that allows access to all digital public services. But for now, the services remain independent [solutions] even though we have this *service-public.fr* but which remains an information site that will rather link out to the dedicated service websites.” Trying to “integrate too many partner administrations into the identification scheme of *service-public.fr* did not go well and for that reason [the central approach] was dropped.”¹⁹⁸ Instead, a more networked approach of mutually coexisting, parallel platforms and solutions like *FranceConnect* seems to be how digitized administration will look for France in the future.

¹⁹² « Une forte accélération [des services en ligne] les derniers cinq années. » (Interview nr. 24, min. 18.)

¹⁹³ Interviews 17, 18, 20, 23, 31.

¹⁹⁴ « La transformation va être dans l'esprit de *beta.gouv.fr*. L'approche qui se concentre sur les usagers [...] Le vraie changement arriverait de la - c'est un changement paradigmatique. » (Interview nr 29, no time stamp.)

¹⁹⁵ « Ça s'est plutôt bien déroulé avec quand même six ou sept ans de retard. » (Interview nr. 24, min. 17.)

¹⁹⁶ See, for example, interviews 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32.

¹⁹⁷ « L'idée au début de *service-public* c'était d'être LE site unique et de passer toujours par *service-public* [...] et en fait ce n'a pas marché. » (Interview nr. 23, min. 4.)

¹⁹⁸ « Ils ont pris une technologie extrêmement complexe et couteux; intégrer des nombreuses partenaires dans le système d'identification de *service-public* fonctionnait mal; pour cela l'identification à travers de *service-public* était abandonnée. » (Interview nr. 23, min. 13-14.)

The one drawback with this approach is that although things are finally starting to change for the better, successful implementation varies considerably across the French administration. Large cities and digitally savvy ministerial domains at the national level are making ever faster progress with the digitization of their public services thanks to a virtuous cycle of optimistic attitudes, competence building and successful results. On the other side some ministerial domains and the numerous small municipalities are falling behind. This is because on the one hand, “in social services, in the unemployment agency or in tax administration it is only us and the users, which makes it easier to roll out” than in more complex settings with multiple actors.¹⁹⁹ These state-level administrations are fiercely centralized and profit from their large resources and independent ways of developing their own IT. One expert from CNAF testified that her organisation “centrally develops for their network of departmental branch offices”, while on the other side “the townhall’s digital public services are developed municipality by municipality”.²⁰⁰ CNAF alone employs around 70 internal IT developers and admin staff, which is more than the entirety of the digitization directorate DINUM.²⁰¹ The ensuing heterogeneity is thus a direct consequence of the administrative structures of the French state. Instead of moving to a more centralist approach, the current way of tackling the divide between the central state and local administration is to offer networked support on a voluntary basis, and software templates and other forms of self-help through the state’s main digitization directorate, DINUM, and its adjoint network *beta.gouv*. In this way, the local level might catch up at some point, but for now, the divide between the digital avant-garde and laggards keeps growing, with digital excellence at one end of the spectrum and little to nothing at the other.

CONCLUSION

France is a unitary state with a strong centralist legacy, despite a tentative trend towards devolvement in recent decades. The state structure is organized along a vertical hierarchy with Paris at the apex and comparatively weak local government, particularly among the majority of small municipalities. Horizontal divisions between ministerial domains are deep. Horizontal coordination and routine forms of intra-state collaboration are rare. The fragmented governance structure for digitizing public services without a strong central actor reflects these divisions and lack of collaboration. Culturally, French administration can still be summed up as bureaucratic in a classically Napoleonic manner: hierarchies

¹⁹⁹ « Nous, au niveau des Aides Sociales, Pole Emploi, les Impôts, c'est nous et les usagers et c'est plus facile à déployer [que dans le domaine de la Santé]. » (Interview nr. 24, min. 27.)

²⁰⁰ « Nous dans la CNAF on est organisé en réseau et c'est au niveau national qu'on fabrique les services en lignes pour tous les départements. » « Les services en ligne des mairies étaient développés commune par commune et pas au niveau national pour toutes les communes en France. » (Interview nr. 24, min. 23.)

²⁰¹ Interview nr. 24, minute 55.

are strong, as is deference to influential Parisian elites, and decision-making happens in a top-down manner. The concept of the state is strong and considered to be distinct from the private realm: citizens are not seen as customers but as subjects of the sovereign state.

France's structural and cultural legacies have affected how much success it has met with in its goal to offer its citizens high-quality and user-friendly digital public services. In the first phase of policy implementation, France profited from a strong political mandate and an established practice of providing remote services thanks to the Minitel networks, but a horizontally fractured state administration, a centrist focus on state services and a weak, under-supported local level that lacked IT competence and financial resources hampered the development of coherent digital public services across the nation. Moreover, historic legacies and rivalry between ministerial domains led to a governance structure without a strong actor in charge of building harmonious digital public service solutions for the entire country. Without an established practice of horizontal cooperation and intra-state collaboration, the ministerial domains worked for themselves, producing horizontally divided solutions with varying degrees of scope and quality, which depended on the individual ambitions of administrative elites in the respective departments. At the local level, public service creation depended on local political initiatives and the size and financial prowess of municipalities, which led to a similarly heterogeneous coverage with digital local services.

A second phase of public service digitization began around 2013, thanks to a handful of actors. The new prime minister in office appointed Henri Verdier and Pierre Pezziardi to influential positions in charge of public digitization efforts. They kicked off a paradigmatic cultural shift and a helpful change in the structural design of public service solutions and the governance of their creation. As outsiders to the administrative system and its pervasive bureaucratic culture, they introduced a new way of thinking about citizens as well as effective methods for creating digital services, both of which they borrowed from the private sector. By means of their influential yet informal network *beta.gouv* and their state start-ups, they tried with some success to sow a new service-oriented style of public administration. This style stresses agile and user-friendly IT development instead of legalistic, waterfall-style planning. Furthermore, the service-oriented style of administration demands civil servants be open to change and have a positive attitude towards digitization, focussing on what citizens want instead of what the state needs. It is based on flat hierarchies, horizontal collaboration and bottom-up decision making instead of rank-based elitism, and practical competences rather than abstract intelligence.

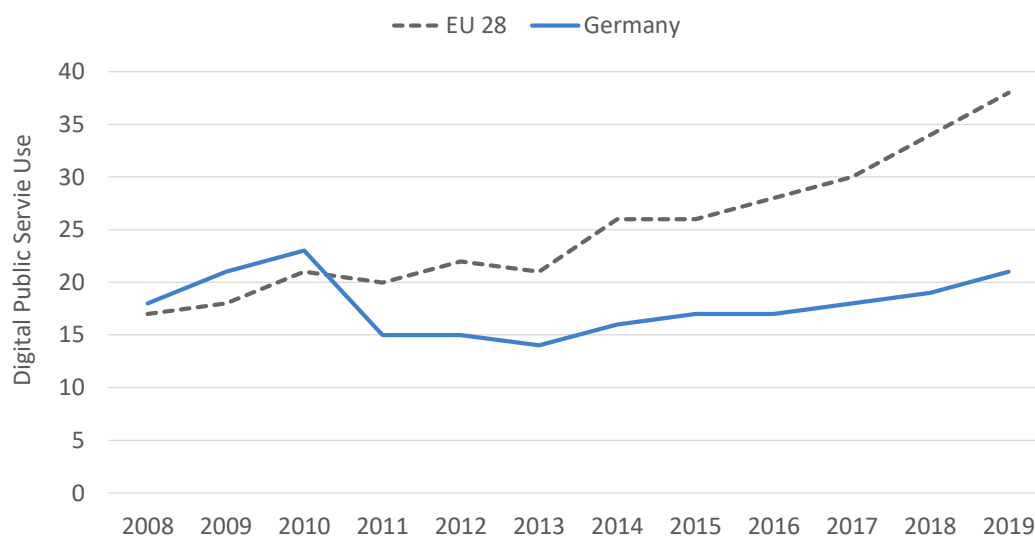
This service-oriented style is more naturally aligned with the character of Nordic and Anglo-

Saxon administrative cultures. For the French, their bureaucratic administrative culture instead proved to be a barrier to transformation. The bureaucratic style of public administration in France was marked by legalism (opposed to pragmatism), steep hierarchies (instead of flat hierarchies), top-down (instead of bottom-up) decision-making and a state-centric approach (opposed to a citizen-oriented approach). With the general transformation of entire societies from an industrial to a digital age, change is also underway for public administration. In the 19th and 20th century, French public administration evolved from small entities whose focus was on defence and war, and which were staffed based on favouritism, to encompassing support institutions for industrialized economies and welfare states. Many of the features that French administration adopted in their process of rationalization – such as legalism, rank-based hierarchical organisations, top-down chains of command and horizontal specialization – fit well with that age and its requirements. To the degree that economies and societies are evolving, public administration has to change with it. Those demands have become particularly visible in the digitization projects most public administrations are undergoing these days. How easily and how successfully states will be able to change will depend to a great degree to their structural and, more importantly, cultural legacies. The more bureaucratic the tradition, the harder the change will be. France has proven that it can change its culture, but has also shown how slow and thorny this process is. Changing its structural legacies, namely the horizontal divisions which are enshrined in strong ministerial institutions, the corps system and the French administrative and civil service code, is even more daunting. But how far a country like France, which used to spearhead modern administration, can adapt to new requirements will determine whether it will be able to maintain its administrative capacity in the future.

05 | GERMANY

Germany started its public sector digitization late and has so far failed to catch up with the group of more digitally advanced states (Bahrke et al., 2016; Härtel, 2017; Mergel, 2019, 2021). One of modern administration's founding nations, Germany today faces high barriers when it comes to updating its public administration to the digital era (Fromm et al., 2015; Stember & Hasenkamp, 2019). Had it not been for EU policy initiatives and their benchmarking of member states' eGovernment progress, Germany would have quite possibly continued putting off the digitization of its public services. Yet despite its belated but earnest political decision to try and catch up with the rest of Europe, implementation is going badly. Germany consistently underperforms on the EU's Digital Public Services (DESI) ranking (European Commission 2020) and on the United Nation's Online Service Index (OSI).²⁰² Figure 7 shows how German public administration has literally made zero, at times even negative, progress in terms of digital public service implementation over the course of the last ten years. Lately, things have begun to look up, but its implementation in relation to the rest of Europe keeps widening.

FIGURE 7 | USE OF DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICES IN GERMANY



²⁰² European Commission. (2014-2021). Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2021. Yearly Country Reports, Germany. The index is built out of yearly survey data as well as direct observation studies by Capgemini, first calculated in 2015. However, data on most dimensions is available for more years, going back to the middle of the 2000s.

United Nations. (2003-2020, in irregular intervals). UN eGovernment Survey, New York. The UNDESA Division for Public Administration and Development Management has been regularly publishing a composite eGovernment index based on a direct assessment of the state of national online services, telecommunications infrastructure and human capital since 2003. It is repeated in now yearly, but until 2018, biennial, intervals and covers most countries.

Source: Eurostat, indicator isoc_bde15ei (submitting completed forms in the last 12 months, percentage of individuals), 2021

This chapter argues that the particular features of the German politico-administrative system, namely its federal organisation with a focus on decentralized, autonomous administration at the state and local level, and a built-in tug-of-war between the different tiers of the federation hampers Germany's public digitization efforts (Bahrke et al., 2016; Kropp & Behnke, 2016; Mergel, 2021). At the same time, the combination of Germany's bureaucratic administrative culture with a special brand of national angst has further impeded swift and effective implementation in the area of digital public services (Hammerschmid & Oprisor, 2016; Schuppan, 2012). While the politico-administrative system's culture only slows down implementation, its structure shapes the process of implementation all the way down to the technological solutions, which ultimately determine citizen take-up. But while administrative culture has started to shift noticeably from bureaucratic towards digital-era-friendly, the structures are much more unresponsive to the institutional change required from the German public sector in the digital era.

This chapter lays out the timeline of digital public service reform in Germany. It then provides an overview of the characteristics of the German politico-administrative system that are affecting the digital reform agenda. Finally, the chapter reviews Germany's implementation efforts of the last 20 years while focusing on the implementation of a particular reform project: the creation of a national system of online administrative portals for citizens and businesses through which to digitally access Germany's public services. The chapter is built on a survey and in-depth interviews with 21 experts, all of whom have been professionally involved in the implementation of digital public services in Germany.²⁰³

TIMELINE OF GERMANY'S PUBLIC SERVICE DIGITIZATION

The earliest steps towards an eGovernment reform agenda date back to the early 2000s, when chancellor Schröder announced the coming of an "Information Society" and formulated in a public speech at a conference in Hannover the vision of an internet portal for all of Germany's digitized public services.²⁰⁴ However, no immediate efforts to implement his vision were undertaken. It took several years before the issue of improving public IT infrastructure and services was picked up again by the first Federal Reform Commission. The commission's work resulted in a milestone constitutional

²⁰³ Aggregated interview and survey results for Germany can be found in Chapter 07.

²⁰⁴ "Internet für Alle - Schritte auf dem Weg in die Informationsgesellschaft", speech given by Prime Minister Gerhard Schröder, 18 September 2000, D21 Congress, Hannover, <http://archiv.bundesregierung.de/bpaexport/rede/73/18573/multi.htm>, accessed 28 November 2021.

amendment in August 2009, which allowed the federal government and the Länder for the first time to cooperate on IT matters and define mandatory IT standards for the whole country.²⁰⁵ Based on the amendment, a national IT-Planning Council (*IT-Planungsrat*) was quickly set up with the objective of coordinating joint IT projects between the *Bund* and the Länder in the hope of finally advancing the state of eGovernment in Germany. Among its most immediate activities, the IT Planning Council released the first comprehensive national eGovernment strategy in the fall of 2010.²⁰⁶ This was likely in reaction to the Malmö Declaration, in which EU ministers in charge of public IT had announced their commitment to digitizing public services for the benefit of their citizens the year prior (European Commission, 2009). But again, six years would pass before any concrete steps were taken to implement such a policy in Germany. Developed in an informal meeting between the Ministry of the Interior and the IT Planning Council, a proposal for a national online service portal was placed on the political agenda in May 2016 (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2016). By the end of the same year, the Online Access Bill, or OZG, had made its way through parliament. It required administrative bodies at all state levels make their services for citizens and businesses digitally accessible by 31 December 2022. But in a notable change to the initial idea of a single national one-stop-shop, the OZG now foresaw the erection of an interconnected system of one federal and 16 Länder portals (Drucksache 18/12589, 2017).²⁰⁷ Fearful of the effects of Germany's interlocked system of eGovernment responsibilities on implementation, the bill was accompanied by yet another constitutional amendment. The new Article 91 c 5 Basic Law strengthened the directive role of the federal government in the arena of digital public services (Schallbruch, 2017). However, the Bund elected not to make use of its new powers. As a consequence, the IT Planning Council had to conceive of a complex joint implementation program ("*Verteiltes Vorgehen*") to distribute implementation duties for the OZG across all 16 Länder and selected municipalities.²⁰⁸ As of 2021, the Bund, Länder and municipalities continue to work on the digitization of their services in a haphazard and decentralized fashion. As a result, experts in the field express concern that the OZG's target to see all of Germany's public services offered online by 2022 will be missed by a large margin because of the labour-intensive, complicated and costly decentralized approach to implementation (National Regulatory Control Council, 2021). For this reason, the ideal of an interoperable service portal system now has been quietly abandoned in favour of service-specific

²⁰⁵ Constitutional Amendment Article 91 c Basic Law.

²⁰⁶ *Nationale eGovernment Strategie 2010*, 23 September 2010, IT Planning Council, <https://www.cio.bund.de/SharedDocs/Kurzmeldungen/DE/2010/20100927-nationale-e-government-strategie.html>, accessed 30 November 2021

²⁰⁷ Compare the draft bill from 13 February 2017 with the bill's final version that passed through parliament on 14 August 2017.

²⁰⁸ IT Planning Council, Federal Cooperation, <https://www.it-planungsrat.de/foederale-zusammenarbeit/ozg-umsetzung>, accessed 04 December 2017.

joint portals²⁰⁹ alongside the promotion of reusing digital service solutions across municipalities in line with the slogan “*Einer für alle*” (“One for all”).²¹⁰ Yet, there are concerns that the decentralized IT architecture and landscape of actors that has been erected has locked Germany onto a course that will be difficult to reverse (Kuhn et al., 2021).

TABLE 8 | TIMELINE OF GERMANY’S DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM AGENDA

Date	Activity
23 March 2000	Government declaration regarding the “Information Society” by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder
March 2007 – March 2009	Federal reform commission assesses the need to harmonize federal, state and local public IT infrastructure and services
1 August 2009	Constitutional Amendment Article 91 c Basic Law allows Bund and Länder to cooperate regarding IT-solutions and grants the right to define mandatory standards
11 November 2009	Malmö Declaration of European ministers announcing commitment to digitizing access to public services
1 April 2010	Interstate Agreement to install a national IT-Planning Council for coordinating joint IT projects between Bund and Länder
24 September 2010	First national eGovernment strategy
11 May 2016	Idea for a Joint Online Service Portal for Germany is developed in a meeting between the IT Planning Council and the Ministry of the Interior
14 October 2016	Heads of state and federal government commit to building a national “citizen portal” at an interstate conference
14 December 2016	Federal government formulates Draft Online Access Bill, OZG
13 July 2017	Constitutional Amendment Article 91 c 5 Basic Law allows federal government to unilaterally regulate online access to administrative services for all federal levels with Bundesrat’s assent
14 August 2017	Bundestag passes Online-Access Law, requiring online access to all public services by 2022
September 2017	Bund launches beta version of <i>Bundesportal</i> , which offers access to select services provided by federal agencies only
16 October 2017	IT-Planning Council prepares the construction of a Joint Online Public Service Portal and agrees on key principles of the IT architecture (16 + 1 portals); a Coordination Group picks 100 public services to be piloted by 2018

²⁰⁹ Assessment by Ernst Bürger, head of the Digital Administration unit at the Federal Ministry of the Interior, given at a talk at N3GZ on 29 November 2021. The most prominent example is *Einfache Leistungen für Eltern* (ELFE) which translates as “easy services for parents”. <https://onlinedienste.bremen.de/Onlinedienste/Service/Entry/ELFE>, accessed 30 November 2021.

²¹⁰ Federal Ministry of the Interior, Implementation, Efa, <https://www.onlinezugangsgesetz.de/Webs/OZG/DE/umsetzung/nachnutzung/efa/efa-node.html>, accessed 30 November 2021.

October 2017	IT Planning Council releases OZG Project Catalogue which distributes all necessary tasks for implementing the OZG across the administrative landscape of Germany
February 2018	IT Planning Council reviews proof of concept favourably and decides to commission a pilot portal by October 2018; Coordination Group “Joint Portal” is charged with overseeing the construction
September 2018	European Council agrees on the construction of a Single Digital Gateway for the administrative services of all European member states. The Council requires the member states to build and connect their online portals to the European gateway and to enable the completion of 21 services fully online
December 2018	Hessen and Hamburg start testing Länder service portal pilots
January 2019 – ongoing	<i>Bundesportal</i> : Integration of most services into its portal; Ministry of the Interior will launch a user account for citizens and for businesses specifically for its <i>Bundesportal</i> Länder Portals: Further work on the construction of the portals

Source: Bundesministerium des Inneren, Referat DG II 3, 2019, enriched with information from various sources

THE POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM OF GERMANY

The German case study revealed that Germany’s backwardness in terms of modern (i.e. digital and citizen-oriented) public administration and its ongoing struggle with the implementation of digital public services has been primarily caused by two features of its political and administrative system. The first issue is the state’s administrative structures. They are marked by stark, vertical fragmentation and their coordination is governed by the principles of consensus and voluntarism. This results in time-intensive and non-binding collaboration that tends to produce disconnected results of the smallest common denominator. Second, Germany’s administrative culture is still deeply bureaucratic, despite new shoots of change. Far-reaching historical legacies continue to promote a bureaucratic mindset that is at odds with the requirements of a public sector fit for the digital era. For a better appreciation of the German case study, the following section gives an overview of the historic structures and cultural tradition of the German politico-administrative system that determine the digital reform agenda.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE GERMAN POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

Germany is made up of 16 Länder, which are all independent legal entities with their own elected parliament, political executive and constitution. Although the particular territories of the Länder are largely the artificial results of the post-World War II era, this federal set-up connects today’s German Republic with its historical roots. For centuries Germany was a loose political association of independent kingdoms, duchies and city republics. Until the formation of the German Reich under the reign of the Prussian King in 1870, the German states existed independently of one another with only little coordination in the areas of tariffs and trade (Laufer & Münch, 2013). The brief 12-year period of Hitler’s hyper-unified (“*gleichgeschaltetes*”) Reich presents an anomaly in the administrative history of the German territories that was rectified in the aftermath of Germany’s capitulation. After the

dissolution of the national-socialist German Reich in May 1945 and a brief intermission of military occupation, it was the Länder that came into (re-)existence first. The decision to re-found (western) Germany as a *federal* republic was not only meant as a resurrection of the prior status quo but followed the explicit goal of dispersing political power in the new German state. This was to ensure a weakened federal-level executive, preventing Germany from rising to a threatening power again (Rudzio, 2019, p. 35).

VERTICAL FRAGMENTATION

The result was a “state without a centre” (Timmins, 2000, p. 82) which was to be organised along the principle of subsidiarity.²¹¹ This is to say that that legislative decisions and the power of implementation lie at the lowest possible level by default. This principle distributes power on a vertical axis across four – or five, in some Länder – politico-administrative layers. The Bund (Federation), 16 Länder (equivalent to states in the American federal system) and a two- or three-tiered local level. The smallest unit of local government is made up of the *Städte und Gemeinden* (“municipalities”) and so-called *Kreisfreie Städte* (“county-free municipalities”). The municipalities belong to counties whose job is to provide local public services which require larger scales, like the running of schools, public hospitals or the maintenance of a road infrastructure.²¹² Some tasks, which require particular expertise or infrastructure are administered by special-purpose units which are responsible for sometimes larger, sometimes smaller, areas. IT infrastructure is a typical example of this. In the north of Germany, the public company Dataport is charged with hardware and some software provision for several Länder, while in North Rhine-Westphalia, IT infrastructure is provided by a large number of regional intercommunal special purpose units, all independent of one another. Generally, public IT services are highly decentralized, albeit in varying ways, and most local administrations are in charge of their own IT solutions. There is little to no national IT infrastructure to support local administration (National Regulatory Control Council, 2021, pp. 4–7).²¹³

Within this vertical politico-administrative system Germany has decentralized executive powers of implementation to a large degree (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019, pp. 91–93). The Bund may

²¹¹ Article 23 Basic Law.

²¹² County-free municipalities provide both municipal and county-level services in an integrated fashion. To make things slightly more complicated, several Länder (Bavaria, Sachsen) add a further district level above the counties, (*Regierungsbezirke*).

²¹³ As of 2021 some tentative steps towards providing national IT components and platforms have been made, for example through the launch of the “FITSTORE”, which offers access to local digital service solutions, or the common, public IT cloud for federal administrations. See: <https://www.itzbund.de/DE/itloesungen/egovernment/bundescloud/bundescloud.html>.

play a considerable role in legislation, but implements these laws only in select policy domains: defence, taxation, highways and the canal- and river system as well as, peculiarly enough, unemployment benefits and counselling.^{214, 215} The constitution allows for federal administration and regional field offices only in these tightly prescribed areas. The default setting for the implementation of policy which is set by Article 83 Basic Law demands that “the Länder implement federal laws as their own”. This means that the Länder use their own staff and define the specifications of how exactly implementation is to look without interference from the Bund – not only for their own but also federal laws.²¹⁶ The Länder can choose to – and regularly do – delegate the implementation of Länder and federal laws to the counties and municipalities. At the same time, the Basic Law explicitly forbids the federal government from doing the same, effectively cutting off their ability to steer the service design of local government.²¹⁷ Considering that the digital provision of services falls into the scope of such specifications, the digitization of public services has been an extremely complex decentralized project across Germany’s administrative structures (Hustedt & Trein, 2020; Kuhn et al., 2021). In practical terms this has led to frustrating situations – for example during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Federal Ministry of Health could not order local health offices to use the same software platform for sharing information about new infections.²¹⁸

Peculiar as such a case may seem, the Basic Law explicitly protects the autonomous scope of municipalities from any federal steering, reflecting a “long tradition in local self-government” (Ruge & Ritgen, 2021, p. 123). The tradition is institutionalized through Article 28 (2) of the Basic Law which states that “municipalities must be guaranteed the right to regulate all local affairs on their own responsibility, within the limits prescribed by the laws.” As any scholar or practitioner of public policy will confirm, having the power to decide over the intricacies of policy implementation yields great influence (see for instance Van Meter and Van Horn 1975; Meyers et al. 2007; Grindle 2017). Around 70-80 percent of all public services are offered by the municipalities and counties (Ismayr, 2009, p. 555; Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019, p. 94). This decentralized setting gives actors at the local level great leeway over how public services in Germany are provided. By consequence, it lends itself to a great

²¹⁴ See Articles 83, 86 and 87-90 Basic Law.

²¹⁵ The Basic Law technically also attributes the running of the postal service, telecommunication, trains and air travel to the federal level, but the administrative entities of these policy domains have been privatized and are thus no longer public services in the definition of this thesis.

²¹⁶ Article 84 Basic Law.

²¹⁷ Article 85 (1) Basic Law.

²¹⁸ Zeit Online, (04.02.2021, 15:34), <https://www.zeit.de/news/2021-02/04/viele-gesundheitsaemter-lehnen-neue-corona-software-ab>, accessed 30 November 2021

variety of administrative procedures across the German state's territory (Knemeyer, 2007).

For the digitization of public services, this highly decentralized authority over the implementation of public policy has direct consequences. This is because the switch from analogue to digital provision has been considered as falling into the autonomous scope of local self-governance. This means that the Bund had for a long time no direct means of implementing any sort of nationwide digital public service strategy. A German citizen portal for public online services along the same lines as the Danish *borger.dk* would not have fallen under the jurisdiction of the federal government. This situation was changed drastically by constitutional amendment in 2010.²¹⁹ The new Article 91 c GG allows the Länder and the federal level to cooperate on IT matters (91 c (1) GG) – something that would have been considered unconstitutional prior to the amendment (Ipsen, 2012, p. 182). This is because so-called mixed administrative responsibilities (*“Mischverwaltung”*) generally go against the federal principle of the Basic Law unless they are clearly exempted.²²⁰ The amendment ought to be considered as a conscious effort to better harmonize the vertical fragmentation that previously hindered Germany's public digitization efforts (IT Planning Council, 2010a, p. 5).²²¹

HORIZONTAL COORDINATION

This effort to “heal” the Basic Law's vertical disintegration is a typical move for the German style of cooperative federalism (*Verbundföderalismus*). It is distinct from a decentralized unitarism like France and from the “divided federalism” (*Trennföderalismus*) of, for example, the United States, where responsibilities are more clearly divided between the federal and the state level, and single states operate in a more independent fashion (Watts & Rovinsky, 1999). Despite many principles of separation in the German post-war constitution – the pledge to subsidiarity, the Länder's privilege over policy implementation, the general competence-clause for municipalities, the restriction of the Bund to finance and steering policies beyond the limits of its jurisdiction and the prohibition of mixed administration – the Federal Republic of Germany quickly developed into cooperative federalism in the first decades of its existence (Rudzio, 2019, p. 307). For instance, Article 91, a Basic Law, exempts economic and agricultural development as well as coast protection from the general prohibition of

²¹⁹ Law on the contract to establish an IT planning council and on the principles of cooperation in the use of information technology in the federal and state administrations – Contract about the implementation of Article 91c of the Basic Law (GGArt91cVtr), 27.05.2010 https://dejure.org/BGBI/2010/BGBI_I_S_662, accessed 16 February 2021.

²²⁰ For example, Article 91 e Basic Law explicitly allows mixed administrative responsibilities in the field of unemployment assistance.

²²¹ See also this interview with federal CIO and first chair of the IT Planning Council Martin Schallbruch: AWW Informationen, (22.04.2010), <https://www.awv-net.de/upload/awv-info/pdf/Info-3-10-Interv-Schallbruch.pdf>, accessed 24 March 2010.

mixed multi-level responsibilities. Several more exemptions followed over the years, including the digitization of state IT and public services in Article 91c Basic Law.²²² The praxis of cooperative federalism reflects an uneasiness with the potentially centrifugal results of a divided federal order among the German political establishment. The installation of the joint IT Planning Council is a prime example of this impulse to coordinate the vertically disintegrated administrative landscape. Its members are the federal and Länder state secretaries in charge of public IT; the interest groups of municipalities and counties are allowed to send counsellors.²²³ This purely executive institution is charged with making major decisions of a binding nature on all matters regarding Germany's state IT. Lacking staff to actually implement its ideas, it still leaves the brunt of implementation to the Länder and local level. Yet, its creation bears witness to a certain distrust towards the decentralized administrative federalism that is common to the German administrative system. In order to coordinate the vertical fragmentation of the German state, a range of committees and other cooperative measures have been developed over the course of the decades (Kropp, 2010; Laufer & Münch, 2013).

But those measures can cause problems. As early as the 1970s, Fritz Scharpf and others deplored how the high degree of cooperation in both policymaking and administration between the federal level and the Länder stifles change and obscures who is actually in charge of what (Scharpf et al., 1977). In this tug-of-war between decentralized administration and the wish for consistent digital public services, the IT Planning Council is emblematic of the German politico-administrative system's tendency to harmonize policy output and its implementation via horizontal executive cooperation. This is not to say that the German politico-administrative system has been slowly remodelled from a true federation to a highly coordinated, quasi-unitary state in the post-war years (Halstenberg, 1974, p. 139). To the contrary, the federal principle of subsidiarity and the desire for autonomy remain strong among Länder and municipal representatives thanks to institutional path dependency. Three large federal reforms have sought to disentangle the build-up of "joint decision-making" (Scharpf 1979) and implementation in the last 20 years. The Federalism Reforms I and II of 2006 and 2009 broadened the number of policy domains in which the Länder can legislate on their own but also turned some into the sole domain of the Bund (Kropp 2010, Schmidt 2019). This reduced the need for joint legislation to some degree, albeit not as much as hoped for, and limited the power of the federal level, but at the same time increased the heterogeneity of policy output across the federation (Bogumil & Jann, 2009,

²²² The concept of *Kooperativer Föderalismus* ("cooperative federalism") goes back to the Tröger-Commission of the 1960s which coined the term to describe the desire of the German federal and Länder governments to harmonize and co-finance their political projects (Rudzio 2015, 307). The commission's recommendations resulted in the first constitutional amendment to allow for mixed multi-level responsibilities (*Mischaufgaben*).

²²³ Section 1, subsection 2, no. 2, sentence 2 of State Treaty on the Foundation of an IT Planning Council.

p. 77; Gunlicks, 2007; Schmidt, 2016, pp. 220–221). But a turnaround followed quickly; the reorganisation of the federal financial equalization scheme (*Länderfinanzausgleich*) in 2016 saw the Federation take over administrative and operational competences in the subnational space, notably in the field of eGovernment “in exchange for agreeing to ‘pay the bill’ in the future” (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019, p. 92). This reordering can be considered as yet another instance of trying to lessen the negative consequences of a decentralised, yet interlaced, politico-administrative system (Wollmann 2017, Behnke and Kropp 2018)).

In summary, the politico-administrative system of Germany is vertically fragmented. Its decentralized character has persisted thanks to institutional path dependence, despite efforts to strengthen the federal tier. While the federal government is comparatively powerful in the area of policymaking, policy implementation, including the provision of (digital) administrative services, remains the constitutionally protected domain of the Länder and particularly the local level. The federal government is generally not in the position to steer the administrative procedures of municipalities and counties. Local-self-governance provides the municipalities and counties with a far-reaching authority over the manner in which it offers its public services. German municipalities are larger than their Southern-European counterparts, independent and strong, but at the same time cannot count on much support from either federal or Länder governments when it comes to digital reform.

The steep vertical fragmentation of Germany’s executive federalism is entangled with a sprawling system of both vertical coordination between the federal government and the Länder, and horizontal coordination between Länder or municipalities. This allows for the centrifugal tendencies of the German state to be harmonised, but it comes at a price. Coordination requires time and consensus, thus slowing down decision-making processes and reducing many decisions to the lowest common denominator. The system of formal and informal joint decision-making (Scharpf) or voluntary self-coordination (Laufer) furthermore weakens accountability and can confuse even its members about who is in charge of what when it comes to policymaking and implementation.

For the provision of digital administrative services, this vertically decentralized and ill-coordinated regime is likely to produce fragmented results across the territory of the German state. Moreover, it poses an institutional barrier to any concerted effort surrounding the digitization of public services and hence hampers progress. As IT development benefits from widely accepted technological standards, decentralized authority in the area of administrative service provision presents a hurdle for centralized solutions. A national online public service portal, a standardized eidentity or even a

common design templates for public websites should not be expected anytime soon. Instead, IT solutions are likely to be developed at the local level, or, when larger investments are required, at the Länder level. Digital public services thus provide a heterogeneous picture, differing between the Länder and even from municipality to municipality. This is because coordination for the joint development of IT services and infrastructure is likely to only happen on a voluntary basis between the federal tiers, thus only encompassing smaller groups of municipalities or Länder, but never their entirety. We can moreover expect single municipalities or Länder, which draw their strength from their respective financial resources and personal commitment, to stand out as frontrunners, while the less well-off or dispassionate will remain behind. On the whole, Germany's loosely coordinated federalism, headed by a timid federal government which dares not make use of its legal powers, is likely to stall the development of digital public services, both in their initiation as well as their ongoing development.

THE CULTURE OF THE GERMAN POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

Germany is, next to France, one of the countries to which much of what constitutes modern public administration has been attributed. In the same way that French absolutism and Napoleonic ambitions have fettered a sophisticated system of public administration, the Prussian state and military steering have moulded many elements of what we today consider a classic, bureaucratic administration. German public administration is marked by the "strong legalistic orientation of administration and the rule-of-law culture following the Roman law tradition. A crucial difference from the Napoleonic group is, however, the important role of the subnational decentralized level and the principle of subsidiarity as opposed to a strong central state" (Wayenberg & Kuhlmann, 2018, p. 844) also (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014; 2019). Among scholars of public administration, this setup, for which Germany is a typical example, is classified as the Continental European federal type of administrative culture (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019, p. 91). In opposition to other administrative cultures, particularly the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic ones, the Continental European Federal type of administrative culture is defined by its relatively persistent adherence to the classical elements of Weberian bureaucracies (Rosser, 2017; Wollmann, 2000). All in all, this lends it to an administrative culture marked by a focus on legalism and rule-based steering, a differentiation between the private and the public realm and the need for a specially trained body of civil servants. Untypical for a Weberian bureaucracy, however, is an uneasiness with vertical hierarchies and top-down decision-making (Hofstede, 1983, 2003). Instead, subsidiarity and horizontal self-coordination are important values that define the inner workings of German public administration (Thedieck, 2007).

Formal law remains the main vehicle through which German public administration is steered, and administrative activities are tightly controlled through a system of judicial review. A separate body

of administrative law developed in Germany long before the advent of today's democratic political control sets tight boundaries on what German public administrations can and cannot do. From this historical origin stems the pronounced legal orientation of German administrative culture (Reichard & Schröter, 2021, p. 206). *Rechtsstaatlichkeit*, meaning the legality of administrative actions vis-à-vis the citizen, is the guiding principle for those who work in the German civil service (Reichard and Schröter 2021, 206). In practice this can often mean that due process and strict adherence to current rules is prioritized over quick, efficient or simple results. The switch demanded by NPM – a greater emphasis on customer satisfaction and results – has not yet been achieved (Rosser, 2017, p. 1024). This is despite some attempts to apply the principles of NPM to Germany through the concept of the *Neue Steuerungsmodell* (New Steering Model) (Ongaro & Van Thiel, 2018, p. 15). But Germany's legal culture has proven rather resistant to managerial change. Legal expertise and education in law, particularly public and administrative law, remains a prerequisite for occupying even minor positions in German public administration – even more so for leadership roles.

This legalistic mindset is likely to impact German digital transformation, because by virtue of its inherent preferences, neither digitally-driven efficiency gains nor a greater citizen-satisfaction with state services is likely to motivate digital change in German public administration, as those are not important values in a legalistic culture. When change does happen, Germany's legal culture shifts the focus to procedural questions such as protecting privacy rights or finding an adequate replacement for obligatory written signatures (Daniel-Paczosa, 1987).²²⁴ Moreover, striving for procedural correctness and avoiding formal mistakes above all else is an attitude that can inhibit innovation, because innovation carries the inherent risk of making mistakes (Thedieck, 2007, pp. 78–79).

Apart from the starkly legalistic culture, another key reason why the New Steering Model never gained much traction in Germany is the firm belief that there exist fundamental differences between the state and the public realm on one side and the private sector on the other. In contrast with the attitude among Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries, where public administration is considered more akin to a service provider, administrative services in Germany are considered to have a special nature (Reichard & Schröter, 2021, p. 206). In this line of thinking it would be improper to subject administrative action to the same goals or principles which are applicable to organisations providing private services. Brandsen et al explain the pervasive idea behind the “separate-ness” of Germany's

²²⁴ In the spring of 2020, data protection concerns rather typically eclipsed functionality during the conception of a national German Covid-19 tracing app: Spiegel Online, Ulrich Kelber, (23.11.2020), “Weniger Datenschutz hilft auch nicht gegen Covid-19”, <https://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/netzpolitik/corona-warn-app-weniger-datenschutz-hilft-auch-nicht-gegen-covid-19-a-a3a31c6b-e876-44cb-bb84-baf95681b53f>, accessed 05 December 2021.

public administration by virtue of the fact that "countries like France and Germany have developed an incredibly sophisticated legal philosophy which justifies the need for a specific civil service" (Branden & Holzer, 2010, p. 18). In the eyes of German public administration there is a stark difference between ordinary services which could theoretically also be provided by a private body, and *hoheitliche Aufgaben* ("sovereign responsibilities") which are legitimized by means of sovereign political power. It is the "otherness" of the *hoheitliche Aufgaben*, be it the registration of a birth or the provision of unemployment benefits, which has them appear somewhat above and beyond the ordinary services of the private sector. In the eyes and language of a German civil servant, a citizen who seeks to receive public services is not a customer, comparable to the client of a bank or insurance company, but a legal claimant. Or, as a critic of the Germany administrative culture would have it, a legal subject who has to be dealt with in a legally correct manner – but no more than that.

The German civil service has been moulded accordingly. Its prime objectives are to uphold the *Rechtsstaat* and execute sovereign power over the state's subjects in a neutral and procedurally correct manner (Thedieck, 2007, pp. 77–79). Consequently, its reality comes quite close to the Weberian ideal of a civil service: a legally trained, somewhat aloof civil service organized along ranks and appointed to life-long careers (Reichard & Schröter, 2021, pp. 211, 221). The formation of civil servants in Germany prioritizes good knowledge of law, particularly administrative law; lawyers are strongly represented, particularly in the upper ranks of the civil service (Lynn 2008). But even at the middle and lower level, civil servants will very often have received intensive training in administrative law. Besides a law degree, specialized state administrative schools and vocational formation offering degrees in administrative studies are typically prerequisites for becoming an employee in the German public administration ("*Juristenmonopol*") (Ongaro, 2009, p. 15). Despite highly decentralized authority over hiring decisions and HR development in the federal landscape, the standardized degree of the *Verwaltungsfachangestellte* makes for a fairly uniform educational background of public staff. Project management skills or IT competency is no general feature in these curricula. In 2020, an Internet-based eGovernment Campus was launched as a training platform for public service staff, but its impact is yet difficult to assess.²²⁵

What adds to this uniformity is the fact that the German civil service is very closed off to exchange with the private sector as career switches in either direction are not common (Reichard & Schröter, 2021, p. 207). This is because hiring practices privilege internal candidates over external

²²⁵ Kommune21, (2.11.2020), "Bundesweiter Start für Lernplattform", https://www.kommune21.de/meldung_35033.html, accessed 05 December 2021; and <https://egov-campus.org/>, accessed 05 December 2021.

candidates or career changers, particularly for senior positions. Work experience or skills from the private sector often are disregarded (Brandsen et al 92). For career changers from the private sector this can lead to penalties in pay. The highly regulated wage regime is another barrier to adequately remunerating external skills and work experience from previous private-sector employment, particularly for high paying jobs from the IT sector. Last but not least, recruitment for the civil service still assumes a subsequent life-long career even though state employers have increased the number of public employees (*Angestellte*), who are hired under a private, third-party contract compared to traditionally-employed civil servants (*Beamte*), who are hired for life. In practice however, this formal dualism carries little meaning as the pay, working conditions and job security of those two classes are close to identical. For that reason, particularly given the long job tenures, German public employers follow a career-based hiring logic instead of a job-based logic, which has become the norm in Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries, regardless of the formal status of the employee (Brandsen et al, 92). This can be to the detriment of flexible hiring for job-relevant skills and diverse mindsets (Reichard & Schröter, 2021, pp. 207–208). With entrenched labour rights and comparatively high levels of union membership as well as a “vertically decentralized and horizontally fragmented” authority over the education and selection of civil servants, this system is unlikely to change swiftly (Reichard and Schröter 2021, 209).

As much as the German civil service adheres to the ideal form of Weberian bureaucracy, in many respects it diverges in at least one relevant dimension. The vertical chains of command that belong to Weber’s definition of the bureaucratic mode and which are to ensure the smooth implementation of political decisions by a subservient administration go against the “consociational, consensual, multi-party, and corporatist tradition” of Germany (Ongaro & Van Thiel, 2018, p. 15; Painter & Peters, 2010). It is because of this tradition that public officials in Germany feel uneasiness with strict vertical hierarchies and top-down decision-making, even though these are ingrained features of bureaucratic organisation. Instead, subsidiarity, horizontal self-coordination and bottom-up participation are important values that define the inner workings of German public administration. This is true both in an intra-organisational sense (i.e. within one particular administrative entity) but also for the working relationship between the state levels (Painter & Peters, 2010, pp. 19–22). In practice this means that the chief officer of a state agency who makes full use of the decision-making that formal hierarchies provide them with would experience that power as authoritative overreach. A digital re-haul of internal processes would, for example, not be decided from above and then rolled out but would be prepared by internal working groups and hinge on the approval of the lower levels. Formalized participation through staff councils and informal modes of bottom-up participation are common. The *Beteiligungskultur* (culture of participation) is an entrenched feature not only of single

organisations but also shapes collaboration between the state levels (Painter & Peters, 2010, p. 19). Even when upper levels formally have the right to dictate policies, consulting the lower levels and finding common solutions is often expected by both sides in order for decisions to be considered legitimate.

In this respect, German bureaucracy differs starkly from the Napoleonic type of bureaucracy which France represents, where formal hierarchies and vertical chains of command instead still dominate over horizontal decision-making-processes. One reason for the dominant *Beteiligungskultur* in German public administration certainly lies with the subsidiary build-up of the constitution and formal rights for participation for public employees.²²⁶ But broader cultural norms come through as well. According to Geert Hofstede, the accepted power distance between individuals is a relevant dimension of national culture (Hofstede, 1983, 2003). He counts Germany among the national cultures with a low tolerance for power distance. For the German workplace culture, it follows that “co-determination rights are comparatively extensive and have to be taken into account by the management.” And “a direct and participative communication and meeting style is common, control is disliked and leadership is challenged to show expertise and best accepted when it’s based on it.”²²⁷

In brief, Germany’s administrative culture affects the way that digital public sector reform plays out, and has an important role in its success. The culture of Germany’s public administration is classically bureaucratic in most respects. Law plays an important role for internal steering and recruitment. Procedural correctness outranks managerial values such as efficiency or customer satisfaction. The public sector is thought of as fundamentally different from the private sector and held in high esteem. The civil service is vertically and horizontally fragmented in terms of organisation, but fairly homogenous with regards to its attitude thanks to standardized paths of professional education which stress legal training. Career-based instead of job-based hiring, long job tenures and little exchange with the private sector make for a sedate and rather inflexible civil service which differs noticeably from the workforce of the German private sector. Germany diverges from the ideal version of a classic bureaucracy only by virtue of a preference for working collaboratively and a rejection of steep vertical hierarchies and top-down decision-making. This collaborative and anti-hierarchical style is true both for the macro level of inter-state cooperation and the micro level of individual

²²⁶ See Federal Law on Employee representation and consultation (BPersVG), 15 March 1974, for federal employees. Similar laws exist also for Länder and municipal employees.

²²⁷ <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/germany/>; accessed 12 March 2021.

administrative entities.

For the digital renewal of German public administration, the culture which pervades it poses obstacles but also offers some potential. With little interest in the goals of the NPM, efficiency gains and service orientation, Germany's public officials do not necessarily see great promise in the digitization of their work. Without enthusiasm for digital reforms we can expect them to arrive later and spread more slowly than in countries which embrace efficiency and think of citizens as customers. With little expertise in IT and project management, the law-savvy German civil service is badly set up to develop IT solutions on its own accord and is likely to face difficulties when externally-purchased solutions are rolled out and have to be maintained. Given its fragmented character, a reform of the civil service's human resources to make it better prepared for digital-era administration can only happen bit by bit and would have to get by without central steering. The anti-hierarchical, collaborative style of decision-making can be beneficial for developing well-functioning and widely accepted new digital solutions. But as cooperation is likely to happen at the local or Länder level and only on a voluntary basis, results will only have a limited scope. Crafting national IT standards or software solutions at the federal level for generalized roll-out is not a realistic scenario. Progress in terms of digital public services will probably be made in an organic and only loosely coordinated manner, which will take a long(er) time and result in a vertically fragmented and uncoordinated landscape of digital service offers.

THE STORY OF PUBLIC SERVICE DIGITIZATION IN GERMANY

The following chapter section analyses how it came to this and finds that neither the belated dive into digital public sector reform nor its deeply troubled implementation is down to bad faith. The section will explore how the specificities of Germany's politico-administrative system, namely its vertically fragmented, federal structure and its traditionally bureaucratic culture, have impeded the switch from analogue to digital public administration for a long time and are slowing down implementation now.

A LATE AWAKENING – THE ONLINE ACCESS LAW

On 14th August 2017 the German national parliament passed the Online Access Law, or OZG, and created much anguish among German bureaucrats who had, until then, fairly little to do with digital public sector reform. The OZG promised a state-run internet portal, from where citizens would be able to digitally access all the services that Germany's public administration offers – from the registration of a car or a new-born to the filing of one's yearly taxes. However, compared to its neighbouring countries, the Netherlands, Austria and Denmark, Germany had sat on a reform backlog – of up to 20 years in many areas – concerning digital government. Denmark, leader of the digital avant-garde had, for example, digitized its public filing system in 2001; Germany planned to do it by 2022. The Danes

had, in a similar vein, begun to digitize their public service administration back in 2008. Now, the German public administration was to do the same and offer citizens and businesses online access to the entirety of its public services – in only five years’ time. How was it that Germany, once renowned for its impeccable public administration, had fallen so far behind?

Around the year 2000, governments all over the world started to ponder what consequences might arise from the fact that the relatively new technology of “the internet” was gaining traction.²²⁸ Conversations were spun out from the framing device of the “information society” and politicians in many European countries wondered how to quickly move “their” societies towards this (see Klumpp and Schwemmler 2000 for an overview). At the European as well as the national level, congresses were held and the requirements of the Information society were pondered.²²⁹ When Germany’s chancellor Schröder gave a speech entitled “Internet for all – Steps on our way into an Information society” at a congress about “Life, Learning and Work in the Information society” in Hannover in 2000 (Schröder, 2000), he was thus speaking with the digital future of state and society in mind. There, he announced a number of steps to be undertaken in light of that very goal – from the computerization of schools, to educating the unemployed about the internet. Step five promised that the federal government would “seek to offer all [...] federal administrative services online by the year 2005”. Moreover, the federal government would “cooperate with the Länder to quickly implement the electronic services of all state levels, federal, Land and local.” He promised that within five years’ time “it would be the data, which have to be ‘on their feet’ and not the citizens. From the application to the receipt and the paying back of one’s BAföG [student loan], everything will happen online”. For the locus of these online public services, chancellor Schröder envisioned “the construction of a common internet portal as an important step for the modernization of public administration” (Schröder, 2000).

The vision remained a vision. Over the subsequent ten years, no concerted effort was made to turn chancellor Schröder’s promises of a common internet portal, offering digital access to all public services, into a reality.²³⁰ Precisely why nobody in German public administration took action to craft the necessary policies and implement them is difficult to pin down – the causes for action are usually

²²⁸ UNdata, Popular statistical tables, country (area) and regional profiles, Communication, “Internet Usage”, Updated: 5-Nov-2020, https://data.un.org/Docs/SYB/PDFs/SYB63_314_202009_Internet%20Usage.pdf, accessed 29 March 2021.

²²⁹ See for example Chancellor Schröder’s speech in front of the Bundestag on 6 April 2000 concerning European and German efforts surrounding the information society. The efforts were part of an agreement made at the European Council’s extraordinary meeting on March 23-24, 2000 in Lisbon. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-gerhard-schroeder-808126>, accessed 17 March 2021.

²³⁰ The one noteworthy exception is the German tax authorities’ online tool ELSTER, which enables taxes to be filed via the internet. However, the tool was conceived and implemented solely by the tax authorities, with no aspiration to turn it into the starting point of, or the template for, widespread digitization across the rest of the public service.

more easily discernible than the causes for non-action. But there appears to be unanimous agreement on at least two main reasons for Germany “sleeping through” the digitization of public administration.²³¹ First, the delegation of most administrative services to the lowest state tier acted as a barrier to concerted change.²³² The state’s structure does not allow for regulating eGovernment in a top-down manner, and the responsibilities for service provision and the accompanying IT solutions are spread across a “multi-tier-system” with “municipalities that do not effectively play along”.²³³ In Germany, it is formally the job of the municipalities to carry forward the digitization of public services,²³⁴ but for the most part they either lacked the financial resources²³⁵ or the willingness to tackle the task on their own. One executive from the municipal level remarked with some self-irony that when it came down to public sector digitization his “colleagues [...] hold up the flag of the local self-government, but that also entails a slew of changes, that you have to have the courage, the strength [...] so many will shy away from it.”²³⁶ An IT specialist working for many German communities agreed with him about the unfortunate situation that “95 percent of administrative services for citizen take place at the municipal level and the whole thing has to be implemented there. And that's why I find federalism difficult at this point, because [it] is, to put it harshly, unrealistic, since this is difficult to implement in the municipalities.”²³⁷ At the same time the federal government was well aware that “it would not have been a solution to set tough standards from above because it lacked the power to sanction. If a Land hadn't participated, what could they have done?”²³⁸ So, when it came to public service digitization, the federal government had its hands tied, but the municipalities could not or would not act on their own accord.

Second, the lack of financial and human resources at the municipal level played into a lack of motivation to take on the sizeable project of digitizing their citizen services. As explained in the previous section of this chapter, German public administration still clings to a state-centric and

²³¹ „Deutschland hat das recht lange verschlafen.“ (Interview nr. 41, min. 14.)

²³² Interview nr. 40, min, interview nr. 44, min 26-28.

²³³ „Die Mehrebenenzuständigkeit. Dass die Kommunen da nicht richtig mitspielen.“ (Interview nr. 44, min 26.)

²³⁴ See this chapter’s subsection on the structure of Germany’s politico-administrative system.

²³⁵ Interview 40, min. 9-14.

²³⁶ „Die Kollegen [...] halten die Fahne der kommunalen Selbstverwaltung hoch, aber das heißt auch den ganzen Rattenschwanz hinten dran, dass man für sich selbst den Mut, die Kraft, die Vernunft haben muss [...] da werden sich viele scheuen.“ (Interview nr. 37, min. 20.)

²³⁷ „Das Verwaltungshandeln gegenüber dem Bürger findet zu 95% auf der kommunalen Ebene statt und da muss das Ganze umgesetzt werden. Und deswegen finde ich an der Stelle den Föderalismus schwierig, weil das was beschlossen wird, hart gesagt, realitätsfern ist, weil es bei den Kommunen schwer umsetzbar ist.“ (Interview nr. 40, min. 8.)

²³⁸ „Es wäre keine Lösung gewesen, wenn der Bund gesagt hätte, wir geben knallhart Standards vor. Dazu fehlt es [...] an der Sanktionsmacht und Durchgriffsstärke. Wenn ein Land nicht mitgemacht hätte - was hätten sie tun können?“ (Interview nr. 41, min. 12.)

legalistic view where “nothing happens unless there are legal requirements with deadlines.”²³⁹ From the point of view of a bureaucratic administration, improving service quality carries no inherent benefit. Many of the interviewed members of the civil service confessed that until very recently, German public administration did not operate in a citizen-oriented manner.²⁴⁰ One ministerial officer remarked that German administration was only belatedly starting to catch up with the service-standards known to customers from the business world.²⁴¹

For these reasons it took until 2010 for the first comprehensive, national eGovernment strategy to be released which formulated the goal of digitizing public services (IT Planning Council, 2010a). The publication of this strategy followed the Malmö declaration of November 2009 in which European member states had committed themselves to rendering citizen services online (European Commission, 2009). EU ministers pledged to boost eGovernment services by 2015 and invited the EC’s support through common policy priorities and a European eGovernment Action Plan.²⁴² Without this nudge from its European partners, Germany might have remained content even longer in its traditional analogue way of running its public administration. But the comparison with its neighbours was sobering. A nation used to heading many international rankings was appalled to realise that it was only trailing along the midfield of the DESI ranking, which measures progress in the area of digitization and eGovernment (Capgemini et al., 2010). As a consequence, the national eGovernment strategy staked out a goal to “reach a top European ranking position by 2015” (IT Planning Council, 2010a, p. 7). Indeed, the unflattering position was so irksome to German policymakers that the reference to the bad DESI ranking was repeatedly mentioned. It reappeared, for example, in a policy evaluation report by the Council for Regulatory Control (*Normenkontrollrat*) (National Regulatory Control Council, 2017) and even the introductory text to the OZG bill (Online Access Law. Draft Bill, 2017).

But the self-conscious appeals to do better were to no avail. Between 2010 and 2013 the share of citizens who used the internet to digitally apply for public services dropped from 23 percent to 14 percent.²⁴³ Discontented with the lack of progress, the German federal coalition government vowed to push for change. For the first time, digital public service reform was put explicitly into a federal

²³⁹ “Im öffentlichen Sektor liegt der Fall so, dass sich ohne eine Deadline leider nichts bewegt.” (Interview n. 40, min. 7.)

²⁴⁰ Interview nr. 37, min 7, interview nr. 38, min 8-10, interview nr. 44, min. 26.

²⁴¹ Interview 38, min. 8-10.

²⁴² European Commission Press Corner, 19.11.2009, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_09_1738, accessed 19 March 2021.

²⁴³ Eurostat, isoc_bde15ei (Internet use: submitting completed forms (last 12 months)), all individuals, percentage of individuals, 2010-2013.

coalition agreement in 2013. There, they agreed to “swiftly provide the 100 most important citizen services online” (CDU, CSU & SPD, 2013). But four years later, the annual report of the *Normenkontrollrat* deplored that, still, not more than one of the 100 services had been consistently digitized throughout Germany (National Regulatory Control Council, 2017). Not only had there been virtually no progress in the digitization of public services for citizens, digital public service use had continued to contract²⁴⁴. In its assessment, the report found that the reason for the sluggish implementation lay with a lack of effective governance. The project needed to be steered more tightly across the federal landscape. In order to achieve this, the report suggested many elements that had worked well in the Danish context. For example, a strong mandate for the key national actor – the IT Planning Council – and the setting up of a national German digitization agency. Similar suggestions were also made by the federal government’s Expert Commission for Science and Innovation in their report on the state of Germany’s eGovernment (Bahrke et al., 2016). They recommended centralising the implementation of state IT projects and strengthening the coordinating role of federal government. Those suggestions did not go unheard by policymakers and were referenced explicitly in the introductory statement of the final OZG bill, which stressed that “only through better steering mechanisms can we make significant progress in the digitization of our public services” (Online Access Law. Draft Bill, 2017).

But the OZG was only the latest effort made by politicians who were frustrated with Germany’s lack of progress towards a digital and service-oriented public administration. The frustration had built slowly but steadily and found its first major outlet in 2009, when a political expert commission assessed the effectiveness of federal cooperation in the arenas of policymaking and policy implementation and found it to be lacking. The purpose of the commission, made up of members of both the Bundestag and the *Bundesrat*, had been to suggest “solutions for de-bureaucratizing public administration and to render it more efficient”²⁴⁵ (Federal Reform Commission II, 2010) but also to disentangle the knotted cooperative federalism that had grown more and more difficult to manage over the years (Heinz, 2011; Jeffery, 2008; Kropp & Behnke, 2016). Regarding the matter of eGovernment, the commission concluded in their report that federal cooperation in the arena of public IT was failing in a range of important aspects: security, a common infrastructure, and the digital availability of administrative units. In order to develop functioning digital public services Germany’s administration was “lacking binding IT standards and was being slowed down by a missing commitment to interoperability.” But in

²⁴⁴ Eurostat, isoc_bde15ei (Internet use: submitting completed forms (last 12 months)), all individuals, percentage of individuals, 2010-2018.

²⁴⁵ Bundesrat, 21.03.2014, <https://www.bundesrat.de/DE/plenum/themen/foekoll/foekoll-node.html>, accessed 19 March 2021.

order to change that, German administrative federalism was “without an agreed-upon procedure that would allow for quick decisions about such binding standards” and its “current landscape of IT committees between the Bund and the Länder was too complex and confusing” (Federal Reform Commission II, 2010, pp. 175–176).

After some deliberations in which the Bund’s representatives suggested taking on the provision of central IT infrastructure and standards, but was rebutted by the Länder and municipal representatives, a compromise was struck. In order to overcome the conundrum between the desire for national standards and solutions on the one hand and the rejection of central responsibility at the state level on the other, the German polity would erect a new, national intergovernmental committee for all matters IT, christened the IT Planning Council (*IT-Planungsrat*). The Council was quickly founded in April 2010, by means of an interstate agreement between the Bund and the Länder.²⁴⁶ For once, it hoped to replace the multitude of operational-level committees and working groups for IT matters that had haphazardly grown throughout all state levels (Federal Reform Commission II, 2010, p. 176). Furthermore, it sought to replace the practice of mixed responsibilities over public IT, where each administrative unit had the right to independently manage their own IT, with a joint, cooperative approach. The idea behind the IT Planning Council was to collapse the independent interests into one central steering committee and thus circumvent the need to take away the constitutionally enshrined right to local self-governance in the area of government. Entrusted with the power to decide on national IT matters, and even to override state-specific or local solutions,²⁴⁷ the IT Planning Council was to square the circle of centralising authority over all questions of public IT without touching upon the legally decentralized authority of the administration of public services.

True to the spirit of cooperative federalism, the federal reform had not so much disentangled the responsibilities over public IT, but reorganized them as a joint task. The legal base for the Bund and Länder to provide digital public services in a joint manner was prepared by means of a constitutional amendment in August 2009. The newly formulated Article 91 c Basic Law exempted the provision of digital public services from the constitution’s general ban on mixed responsibilities between the state levels. It allows the “the federal government and Länder to cooperate with respect to the planning, construction and operation of information technology systems.”²⁴⁸ But instead of paving the way for a

²⁴⁶ State IT Treaty on the Reestablishment of the IT Planning Council, 01.04.2010, <https://www.it-planungsrat.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/ITPlanungsrat/Staatsvertrag/Staatsvertrag.html>, accessed 19 March 2021.

²⁴⁷ Thanks to a change in the German constitution (Article 91c Basic Law).

²⁴⁸ Article 91 (1) Basic Law.

strongly mandated joint actor, the Article was designed so as to preserve everyone's veto powers,²⁴⁹ and granted the Länder the option to run IT systems without federal involvement.²⁵⁰ The IT Planning Council was furthermore erected without any proper staff besides a small secretariat. This meant that for any legwork required, it depended on the administrative staff of the Länder ministries or the federal government. As a consequence, the IT Planning Council remained a political committee, debating and discussing public IT projects in three sessions per year, but lacked an organisation to directly see its decisions through. It was set up to produce policy decisions about public IT, and not IT solutions themselves. In this, the German state had stayed true to its executive, administrative federalism. Any implementation of the Planning Council's policy decisions had to happen at the hands of civil servants in local, federal or Länder administrations.

This highly path dependent institutional set-up of Article 91 c Basic Law and the IT State Treaty may explain why we cannot observe progress in terms of more digitally available public services in the aftermath of the IT Planning Council's foundation. In 2010, after the first three meetings of the IT Planning Council, its Chair was still confident that "thanks to the joint e-government strategy of the federal, state and local governments, we will achieve faster progress with [...] the digital public services that citizens and companies alike desire" (IT Planning Council, 2010b). But in subsequent years, the supposedly improved institutional set-up did not translate into actual, usable digital public services. By 2017, an annual report from the Council for Regulatory Control (*Normenkontrollrat*) passed harsh judgement, stating that it "considers it a strategic omission that in Germany there are still no effective decision-making, control and implementation structures for effective and comprehensive digitization" (National Regulatory Control Council, 2017, p. 35). The report's authors worry that "if this slow pace continues, Germany will not be able to catch up with the leading e-government nations in Europe and abroad for the foreseeable future – to the displeasure of its citizens and companies" (National Regulatory Control Council, 2017, p. 36). The report suggested drastic changes to the way that decisions were made and implemented across the federal landscape: a National Digitization Agency, the strengthening of the IT Planning Council's mandate, abiding by simple majorities instead of consensual decision-making and just generally greater speed (National Regulatory Control Council, 2017, p. 38).

Among scholars of the German political system, the continuous lack of progress in the arena of

²⁴⁹ Article 91 (2) Basic Law.

²⁵⁰ Article 91 (3) Basic Law.

public digitization was not met with surprise. Instead, the stagnation, despite a clear political consensus to do otherwise, was widely interpreted as yet another symptom of Germany's self-entrapment in a federal system incapable of coming to quick and effective decisions (Kuhn et al., 2021; Stember & Hasenkamp, 2019). Although some point out that federalism and decentralized responsibilities need not necessarily put a stopper on digitization efforts (Härtel, 2017) and that the federal landscape could at least in theory create a situation of competition between "testing labs" (also Härtel 2017), most publications discuss Germany's federal system as an "obstacle to digitization" (Härtel, 2017; Kuhn et al., 2021; Rüscher, 2017; Stember & Hasenkamp, 2019). The broad spread of IT responsibilities across ministerial departments and between municipalities, Länder and the central state appears to be such an obvious cause for the generally bad state of German eGovernment that even governmental publications do not shy away from open lament. In its own reporting regarding the implementation of the reform agenda "*Digitale Verwaltung 2020*", the Ministry of the Interior admitted that Germany's public IT needs more concentration and coordination in order to succeed (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2017).

In 2016, some politicians who were fed up with the measly progress in digital public service reform implementation decided to seize the opportunity for digital change in yet another round of federal re-negotiations about finances and responsibilities. Their ambition was twofold: to strengthen the power of the central state in the implementation of digital public services and to enshrine the goal of digitally accessible public services into hard law. The window of opportunity was an intra-state conference on 14th October 2016, in Berlin (Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany, 2016). The conference had nothing to do with digitization per se. Instead, its aim was to renegotiate the complex web of financial equalization schemes that had evolved in the German federation over decades and which had become inscrutable. But it so happened that earlier in the year, on 11th May 2016, representatives of the Federal Ministry of the Interior had met with members of the IT Planning Council for a special workshop during which they conceived of the idea of joining existing online service portals to create a joint national portal infrastructure with a common brand and re-usable IT modules (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2016). Things then proceeded quickly. The IT Planning Council rejoiced in the idea and created a working group to be run by the federal level. The working group was tasked with the further development of the portal and swiftly conceived the detailed steps to follow.²⁵¹ Thanks to good timing, the plan was presentable just in time for the conference which brought together the heads of states and the federal government for talks on the

²⁵¹ IT Planning Council, https://www.it-planungsrat.de/SharedDocs/Sitzungen/DE/2016/Sitzung_21.html?pos=4, accessed 22 March 2021.

federation's financial equalization scheme. The Länder heads and their chief officers in charge of financial policy had many things to discuss – eGovernment was but a side note and the participants were experts on finance, not public IT.²⁵² But they were easily thrilled by the enticing idea of a common, national citizens' online portal which could handle all public administrative procedures. They quickly decided that "digital administrative services are to be made accessible to all citizens and companies via a central citizen portal [*"Bürgerportal"*], set up by the federal government, via which the Länder also have to provide their online services." (Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany, 2016, p.). The vision which politicians formulated for Germany's digital public service portal at the interstate conference was clear, simple, and attractive from a user's perspective. They consensually favoured a user-friendly Danish model for the portal as a centralized one-stop-shop.

But the idea was soon scrapped. The federal government was unable to defend the architecture of a single, central portal against the interests of the Länder representatives who insisted on their responsibility for state-level and municipal services as well as on their prerogative to decide freely about their IT solutions.²⁵³ At the ensuing meeting of the IT Planning Council, the IT policy representatives from the Länder and Bund negotiated the details of the "citizen portal" in preparation for the Online Access Bill. In the course of this meeting and the ensuing policymaking process, the national citizen portal was (re-)engineered into a loose network of pre-existing Länder portals (*"Portalverbund"*) with some common functionalities (Bundesministerium des Inneren 2016b). What remained was the legally binding commitment to provide citizens digital access to the entirety of public services²⁵⁴ and to create an interconnected digital interface by linking the multitude of existing and future administrative sites into one, large joint web portal. For the first time, Germany committed itself by law to finally achieve a turnaround towards a citizen-oriented, modern, digital public service offer.

However, the intricacies of the OZG in particular, but also the general mode of promoting public digitization, turned the policymaking process of the Online Access Bill into a tug-of-war between the federal level and the Länder. Overarchingly, politicians from both levels agree that "the clear deficits in the digitization of public administration in Germany was down to the slow speed and the non-binding character of the interstate cooperation between the Bund and the Länder" (Schallbruch, 2017). Frustration is particularly acute in the federal government. There, the lack central steering is seen as

²⁵² Interview nr. 36, min. 32.

²⁵³ Interview nr. 36, min. 13-14, min. 29 and interview nr. 37, min. 8.

²⁵⁴ §1 (1) Online Access Law.

primarily responsible for the fact that “many services from municipalities and the Bund have become available online, but they are designed in an inconsistent manner and need to be found via different URLs on the internet,” thereby impeding swift and widespread take-up of digital public services (Bundesregierung 2017). New decision-making powers for the federal government and majority decisions by the federal states were intended to remedy this. In exchange for greater federal funding, the states agreed to amend Article 91c Basic Law and grant the federal level the prerogative to regulate access to digital public services – albeit with the Bundesrat’s assent.²⁵⁵ In the end, the federal government managed to slightly widen its scope vis-à-vis the Länder and municipalities. In contrast to the consensual procedure of the constitutional amendment, the Online Access Bill now granted the federal government the “powerful right to define technological solutions and standards for interoperability and security through executive decrees” (Bundesministerium des Inneren 2016b). This small but relevant switch was introduced at the last minute by members of the responsible Bundestag committee (Drucksache 18/12589, 2017, p. 56). While the draft bill still required the Länder’s assent, the final version granted the federal level the authority to regulate the details of digital public service provision through executive orders without the Bundesrat’s assent, to the dismay of some Länder representatives.²⁵⁶ In the plenary debate at the Bundesrat, the spokesperson for North Rhine-Westphalia Franz-Josef Lersch-Mense criticized the bill for “granting the Bund greater competence in the area of administrative online services” (Bundesrat 2017). On the other side, the Bundestag member Ralph Brinkhaus admonished the Länder for refusing to let go of their IT responsibilities and summarized the federal level’s position that “our federalism is creaking and cracking and there need to be improvements [...] for the field of digitization” (Bundestag 2017).

RACING TO CATCH UP – IMPLEMENTING THE ONLINE ACCESS LAW

A bureaucratic mindset that did not recognise the need for making public services digitally available and a vertically fragmented administrative structure impeded the digitization of Germany’s public services for a long time. Since the initial political push at the beginning of the new millennium, Germany’s public administration had made little progress in the subsequent two decades, at times even losing ground. Finally, however, politicians could tie Germany’s public administration to a hard law: on 14th August 2017 the Bundestag passed the OZG. This set the goal of digitizing all public

²⁵⁵ The amendment of 13 July 2017 added a fifth paragraph to Article 91 c Basic Law, stating that “Overarching questions of digital access to the administrative services of the Federation and the Länder is regulated by federal law with the consent of the Bundesrat.”

²⁵⁶ Compare the formulation of §4 (1) Online Access Law “For the electronic handling of administrative procedures [...] the federal government is authorized, in consultation with the IT Planning Council, to issue executive decrees without the consent of the Bundesrat, in order to dictate certain IT components,” with the original version in with the same paragraph of the bill’s draft version of 13.02.2017: “For the electronic handling of administrative procedures [...] the federal government is authorized, in consultation with the IT Planning Council, to issue executive decrees without the consent of the Bundesrat, in order to dictate certain IT components.”

services by 2022, and making them available for citizens via a joint online public service portal network.

However, the critical infrastructure for a swift implementation of such a state-wide portal was all but missing: No more than 5 percent of German citizens owned the necessary equipment to use the digital functions of their identity cards, the *DE-Postfach*, a secure online mailbox suffered from an even smaller take-up (Bahrke et al., 2016; German Federal Court of Auditing, 2019). Furthermore, in terms of infrastructure it quickly became clear that the multitude of file standards, software applications, APIs and unconnected local data registries in use across the administrative landscape of Germany would require forceful standardization.²⁵⁷ Decades of decentralized responsibility over public IT solutions had spawned a landscape of fragmented IT legacies.²⁵⁸ In light of the goal to offer a neat and integrated online portal, an expert from North Rhine-Westphalia deplored that “the many individual software procedures that we have constitutes a problem.”²⁵⁹ The legacies were tied to a similarly fragmented landscape of public IT service providers. As an example, the expert pointed out that in the case of “the software procedure to apply for a passport, [...] in our region alone there are several different IT providers.”²⁶⁰ Those IT providers had often invested heavily into their respective solutions and were not keen to see the fruits of their labour become obsolete.²⁶¹ And even provided they would be open to agreeing on new standards in lieu of their local IT products, “it just takes longer when there are many chefs in the kitchen” admitted one employee from a public IT service provider.²⁶² With such a fragmented status quo in terms of public IT, building a joint national portal could not take place on a blank slate but had to take pre-existing solutions into account, finding compromises among a wide-ranging set of actors involved in public IT.

For the execution of the OZG this poised a first difficult question. Who to task with the job of building this new, joint portal and the services to fill it? The administrative responsibilities for implementing public services were dispersed, bringing a large number of potential stakeholders to the table: two rival federal ministries, a federal digital state secretary albeit without a budget, the IT Planning Council with authority but no staff, 16 Länder governments and 400+ local communities as

²⁵⁷ Interview nr. 40, min. 5-6, interview nr. 46, min. 5-6.

²⁵⁸ Interview nr. 35, min. 4-6, interview nr. 36, min. 13-14, interview nr. 40, min. 16.

²⁵⁹ „Historisch sind [...] das Problem die einzelnen Verfahren, die man hat.“ (Interview nr. 51, min. 11.)

²⁶⁰ „Der Anbieter, der den Prozess durchführt, zum Beispiel einen Reisepass zu beantragen, [...] allein hier bei uns in der Region sind das unterschiedliche Anbieter.“ (Interview nr. 51, min. 11.)

²⁶¹ Interview nr. 41, min. 8-11.

²⁶² „In NRW ist das anders, da gibt es eine sehr heterogene IT-Dienstleisterlandschaft und das hat natürlich Einfluss auf die Geschwindigkeit der Transformation. Wo mehr Köche in der Küche stehen, dauert es länger.“ (Interview nr. 40, min. 16.)

well as some additional specialised governmental units for IT matters.²⁶³ To make matters worse, the federal legacy of Germany encompassed a dispersed landscape of regional public IT-providers whose role in implementing the OZG was similarly unclear. In order to overcome the conundrum between a national project requiring universal standards and solutions on the one hand and a multitude of constitutionally independent actors on the other, the German polity charged the IT Planning Council with the construction of the joint online service portal. Its job was not to program the tool by itself, but to oversee the implementation of the OZG while navigating the federal political and administrative landscape. In what effectively amounts to the role of a project manager, the IT Planning Council staked out a project organisation, decided on the key architecture of the portal, selected the actors responsible for doing the legwork of the project and delegated tasks to them.²⁶⁴

Given the size of the project – digitizing over 575 public services and building a secure portal environment for, among other things, user accounts, tools for sending and storing official documents and payment methods – the IT Planning Council decided to follow a decentralized or “distributed” approach (*“Verteiltes Vorgehen”*). The division of labour foresaw that each Land, the Bund itself, federal regulatory agencies and individual local communities, were all to be charged with one or more thematic public service bundles, i.e. “family”, “work” or “unemployment”. Once responsible for a bundle, the actor was to deliver the associated online services, fit for reuse by other Länder and municipalities. For the sake of reusability, certain interoperable standards were to be followed. Working groups were set up to define those standards and specify the requirements for the components of the portal and services (Stocksmeier & Hunnius, 2018).

Although it was lauded by many as a clever idea that also honoured federal principles,²⁶⁵ the vertically decentralized project organisation soon proved to be impracticable. Listing, defining, bundling and then distributing all services took a long time and created confusion about implementation responsibilities for more than a year after the law had passed. “This grassroots-democratic approach does not go hand in hand with the swift pace of the OZG,”²⁶⁶ found one IT developer. He and others concluded that with decentralized project management, the time schedule

²⁶³ Noteworthy are the *Koordinierungsstelle für IT-Standards* (KoSIT), a coordinating unit for IT standards, set up as an independent institute in Bremen and the *Föderale IT Kooperation* (FITKO), another coordinating unit for a harmonious federal IT landscape situated in Frankfurt. FITKO acts as of 2020 as the IT Planning Council’s operative unit: FITKO, https://www.fitko.de/Start#dsarticle_5045184, accessed 28 March 2021.

²⁶⁴ Federal Ministry of the Interior, <https://leitfaden.ozg-umsetzung.de/display/OZG/OZG-Leitfaden>, accessed 29 March 2021.

²⁶⁵ Interview nr. 45, min 4-5, interview nr. 47, min. 9-10, interview nr. 41, min. 12., interview nr. 38, min. 6., interview nr. 41, min. 11.

²⁶⁶ „Das basisdemokratische Vorgehen geht schlecht mit dem "sportlichen Tempo" des OZG einher.“ (Interview nr. 35, min. 7-8.)

to digitize all public services in a user-friendly manner by 2022 would not be possible.^{267, 268} Some Länder pursued the implementation of their service bundles less than enthusiastically and with little regard towards quality and the agreed-upon standards; others worked possessively on alternative solutions for bundles they had wanted but not received.²⁶⁹ The municipalities were informed unsystematically and entered the process too late and in a serendipitous manner, eclipsing vital practical knowledge during a phase when important decisions were made.²⁷⁰ As of 2019, a representative of a municipal interest group expressed concern that “around 50 percent of all German municipalities do not even know about the joint online service portal.”^{271, 272} Overall, responsibilities remained unclear and information did not flow where it was needed. As a result, solutions arrived late, not at all, in duplicate or in a disjointed manner.

The main idea behind the “distributed” approach, to build in a decentralized manner, according to agreed-upon standards, and bring everything together at the end, turned out to be unfeasible.²⁷³ Building dozens of interoperable²⁷⁴ portals simultaneously rendered many of them effectively “un-interoperable” because the reference points for interoperability were in constant flux. While, for example, a group of jobcentres from Hessen built an online form for unemployment benefits according to standard x, the Federal Employment Agency was doing the same thing at the same time according to standard y.²⁷⁵ The inefficient process ate up considerable resources and produced solutions that were not user-friendly from the perspective of citizens, because it spawned a confusing multitude of public portals and user accounts, with different templates and payment methods, incoherent registration requirements and varying quality depths to the online user journeys.²⁷⁶ Nor was it practical from the state’s point of view, as centralized procurement would have delivered a cheaper, more

²⁶⁷ „Das OZG ist bis 2022 umzusetzen. Das wird [...] nicht möglich sein bis zu diesem Zeitpunkt alle Dienste nutzerzentrisch neuzudenken.“ (Interview nr. 35, min. 11.)

²⁶⁸ Interview nr. 37, min. 10, interview nr. 35, min. 11., interview nr. 50, min. 9.

²⁶⁹ Interview nr. 39.

²⁷⁰ Interview nr. 37, min. 18., interview nr. 44, min. 19.

²⁷¹ „Die Kommunikation über die Umsetzung ist hochschwierig - ich habe da den kommunalen Fokus. Rund 50% aller Kommunen wissen noch nicht einmal, was das genau ist [der Portalverbund].“ (Interview nr. 41, min. 3.)

²⁷² Also interview nr. 37, min. 9. and Bearing Point, Survey “Digitale Verwaltung bis 2022”, September 2019, <https://www.bearingpoint.com/de-de/unser-erfolg/insights/umfrage-digitale-verwaltung-bis-2022/>.

²⁷³ Interview nr. 36, min 12-14, min. 24, interview nr. 54, min 9, interview nr. 46, min. 7 & min. 11.

²⁷⁴ The term “interoperability” is defined as the “ability of information systems to exchange data and enable sharing of information”. (Definition by European Commission, 2018)

²⁷⁵ Interview nr. 39.

²⁷⁶ Interview nr. 51, min 3, interview nr. 46, min 5-6 and 16.

coherent result that would have been easier to maintain and later adapt.

The “distributed” organisation of the project’s implementation was described as particularly problematic in the initial phase of implementation, from 2017 to mid-2019. Regarding the problematic aspects, interview partners complained that the consensus principle of the IT Planning Council,²⁷⁷ the IT Planning Council’s initial lack of staff,²⁷⁸ and the reluctance of key actors to make top-down decisions (namely, members of the IT Planning Council and others in charge of IT at the federal and state level),²⁷⁹ stalled implementation. Furthermore, the decentralized approach to developing solutions was said to have caused a diffusion of responsibility and confusion regarding what was already being developed when, by whom and with what degree of obligation. It furthermore prevented, or at least hindered, the establishment of national standards for public IT.²⁸⁰ Failing to establish widely accepted IT standards led to situations like the following, where “one municipality developed one [service] and the adjacent municipality wished to re-use it but found that it could not because they used a different mechanism for online authentication.”²⁸¹

The vertically fragmented approach to digitization even shaped the technological layout of Germany’s digital public services – but not for the better. A prime example for politics moulding what should have been a technological decision is the interoperable, joint network of more than 16 service portals, which are only flimsily bound together. “Initially there were thoughts to build one national portal and host all digital public services there, but this was abandoned”²⁸² in favour of the networked approach. However, none of the experts interviewed for this chapter appreciated the joint portal network’s layout. “I do not think that anyone wants or needs the joint portal network. That is not at all how users search online,”²⁸³ criticized one IT expert who was deeply involved in the technological implementation of the OZG. Even the former head of the IT Planning Council conceded that the

²⁷⁷ Interview nr. 44, min. 27, interview nr. 41, min 7-8, interview nr. 52, min. 16.

²⁷⁸ The IT Planning Council was supported only by a small ministerial unit until 2020, when the *Föderale IT Kooperation (FITKO)* was enlarged to function as the Council’s operative body. The decision went back to October 2018, but organisational and hiring processes took some time before the FITKO was up and running. (FITKO, Decision nr. 2018/37: https://www.it-planungsrat.de/SharedDocs/Sitzungen/DE/2018/Sitzung_27.html?pos=1)

²⁷⁹ Interview nr. 41, min. 4.

²⁸⁰ Interview nr. 47, min. 9., interview nr. 35, min. 4, interview nr. 40, min. 5, interview nr. 41, min. 9

²⁸¹ „Wenn wir als Kommune eine Sache entwickeln und meine Nachbarkommune [...] das mitnutzen will, die können das dann nicht mitnutzen, weil der Authentifizierungsmechanismus ein anderer ist.“ (Interview nr. 51, min. 8.)

²⁸² „Es gab ganz anfällig Überlegungen dazu, ein Bundesportal zu bauen und dort alle Onlinedienste einzustellen. Aber das ist am Ende nicht weiterverfolgt worden, so dass wir jetzt über einen digitalen Portalverbund geben.“ (Interview nr. 42, min. 4.)

²⁸³ „Ich glaube, dass den Portalverbund niemand will und niemand braucht. [...] Das ist überhaupt nicht das übliche Suchverhalten der User.“ (Interview nr. 43, min. 8.)

technological solution for an interoperable network instead of a new, unified platform was down to the federal legacies of state and municipal portals which were to be honoured and should not be taken down.²⁸⁴ As a consequence, political lines of thinking ultimately came to shape the implementation and thus the design of Germany's digital public services. This is although the actors involved in the implementation fully recognized that the OZG was meant to kick off a user-centric innovation of administrative services.²⁸⁵ But many experts had to reckon with the observation that the "multi-layered responsibilities" of German federalism were "detrimental to user-orientation."²⁸⁶ One ministerial representative in charge of his state's OZG implementation neatly summarized the difficulties that Germany's politicized, federal approach causes for public digitization projects: "The legislative decision for a portal network in the OZG already meant surrendering to the phenomenon that we cannot provide [digital services] in a uniform manner to our citizens [...] because it was not possible to agree on uniform access and a service account. This is due to the federal structure and the fact that all actors try to protect their investments and efforts once they have been made. It is of course also because we have not given – nor will give – any rights of intervention to anyone in the federal system and now we are meandering around, somehow trying to make everything [...] interoperable with each other, but of course that takes an incredibly long time."²⁸⁷

The later stages of the project's organisation, marked by the instalment of a new head for the IT Planning Council, Hans-Henning Lühr, in 2018, were lauded as having somewhat mitigated the negative influence of German administrative federalism. Several of the decisions taken under his lead were said to have had positive effects on policy implementation. Lühr decided to install centralized staff in charge of implementing the IT Planning Council's ideas and swiftly build pilot services with the help of consulting companies and street-level bureaucrats from the local level. With the help of central staff, the IT Planning Council was able to steer the implementation of digital standards and services more tightly, and workshops with street-level and IT experts from the private sector introduced new

²⁸⁴ Interview nr. 44, min. 14.

²⁸⁵ „Unsere [Dataports] Meinung ist, dass das OZG das nutzerzentrische Neu-Denken der Verwaltungsdienste bewegen möchte und nicht stupide und stumpf vorhandene Formulare als ausfüllbare pdf auf irgendeinen Server stellt.“ (Interview nr. 35, min. 10.)

²⁸⁶ „Die Mehrebenenzuständigkeit. Dass die Kommunen da nicht richtig mitspielen, also ihre Interessen nicht einbringen können und dass wir wenig Interessenorientierung haben für die User.“ (Interview nr. 44, min. 26.)

²⁸⁷ „Die Normierung des Portalverbundes im OZG ist schon die Kapitulation vor dem Phänomen, dass wir [digitale Verwaltungsleistungen] nicht einheitlich für den Bürger bereitgestellt bekommen [...] weil man sich nicht auf einen einheitlichen Zugang und auf ein Servicekonto einigen konnte. Das liegt an der föderalen Struktur und daran, dass sämtliche Akteure versuchen, ihre einmal getätigten Investitionen und Bemühungen zu schützen.

Das liegt natürlich auch daran, dass wir im föderalen System keine Durchgriffrechte und irgendwen gegeben haben oder geben und nun mäandern wir da rum, dass wir versuchen irgendwie alles miteinander [...] interoperabel sein muss, aber das dauert natürlich wahnsinnig lange.“ (Interview nr. 53, min. 7-8.)

methods and user-centric approaches to the administrative establishment. Both decisions were said to have improved policy implementation by centralizing and depoliticizing the process. Now, the focus was deemed to be more set on citizen-friendly, technologically sound results than on federal interests. Several experts expressed hope that the introduction of new skills in the fields of design thinking, project management and agile IT development on the one hand and a service-oriented mindset on the other would help to overcome the outdated, bureaucratic approach to providing citizen services.²⁸⁸ German public officials tentatively recognized that times were changing for the public sector and that “it would need to keep up with the standards of service that citizens have learned to expect from the private sector.”²⁸⁹ With its goal of user-friendly public administration that compares itself to the look and feel of private-sector services, the “OZG may come to function as the vehicle for a paradigm change in German public administration.”²⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

Germany is a federal state with administrative structures that are highly vertically fragmented. Subsidiarity is the organizing principle between its different state tiers. While the federal level has a predominant role in legislation, the implementation of state services generally is the prerogative of the Länder which in turn delegate most of it down to the local level of the counties and municipalities. The high degree of vertical fragmentation is reined in by a culture of vertical as well as horizontal cooperation. Here, the governing principle is consensual decision-making and political compromise, as cooperation takes place not only on an operational, but particularly at the political level. This style of coordination is not coherent enough for a harmonious public IT environment. As a consequence, responsibilities over public IT remain fragmented which has led to a disjointed landscape of historic IT solutions and institutional actors who feel invested in them. This structural set-up is difficult to change and has largely remained as it is, despite repeated attempts at state reform by the German polity.

Apart from its preference for cooperative decision-making and aversion towards vertical hierarchies, Germany’s politico-administrative culture is still marked very much by classically Weberian values. The reformist concepts of NPM such as service orientation, management by objectives and efficient processes, have had only a limited impact on Germany’s administrative culture. Legalism remains strong and procedural correctness and adherence to formal rules guide civil servants in their

²⁸⁸ Interview nr. 35, nr. 38, nr. 54.

²⁸⁹ „Was die Bürger erwarten - man kennt das ja von den Unternehmen, das ist die Erwartung -, da muss die Verwaltung auch hinkommen.“ (Interview nr. 54, min. 30.)

²⁹⁰ „Das OZG ist ein Vehikel, um Verwaltungshandeln einem Paradigmenwechsel zu unterziehen.“ (Interview nr. 47, min. 11.)

daily actions. In this light, effective results, constant innovation or citizen satisfaction carry little meaning for the administrative system. Instead, the state is considered a different realm, where such private-sector values do not count for much. Consequently, citizens are generally not regarded as customers but as deserving (or undeserving) applicants. From the administration's perspective, the state does not offer services akin to a private service provider, but rather processes legal requirements. To judge the quality of public services from a customer's point of view is still a novel perspective for many German administrative officials. For that reason, politicians have found it hard to motivate Germany's public administration to launch itself into a digital rehaul of its service offer. There is little intrinsic motivation to be found among the German public sector for this type of reform agenda. A particularly strong risk-aversion, possibly a by-product of the legalistic focus among large parts of the civil service, does the rest.

For the process of implementing digital public services, the conjunction of a vertically fragmented state with burdensome institutional legacies – a disjointed landscape of IT solutions and actors – and a risk-averse culture bound up in unproductive cooperation has proved to be the worst of all combinations. In most other policy areas, Germany's brand of federalism and its commitment to subsidiarity promise to produce solutions which best fit varying local needs. It is a governing system which is bound to comparatively small territorial units. This is in stark contrast to the defining principle of all things digital: the transcendence of physical territory. Digital solutions gravitate towards topical niches, which in turn are accessible everywhere. Digital platforms, be they for hailing taxis, watching videos or sharing homes, have an in-built centralizing force. The greater a platform's reach among users (that is to say, the greater its reach over the physical space across which users live), the more effectively it can run. This is why cutting up digital space according to regional lines of demarcation is non-sensical.

And yet this was the approach that the Germany polity chose when it finally committed itself to the digital transformation of its public administration. One of the defining moments, which would determine its chances for successfully implementing digital public services, was the decision to forego a national approach to digitization and instead reproduce the vertically fragmented responsibilities of Germany's analogue public administration. Not one German portal, but potentially one for each state, county and municipality; not one public citizen account, but possibly just as many as there are public service portals. By deciding against a national approach, the German polity passed over the opportunity to create generally accepted, widely known and recognized digital solutions for its citizens. These might have included a unique digital identifier to log into different public websites, or a universally accepted and secure citizen account to store personal information and send and receive

official documents for the purposes of communicating with the entire range of German administrative bodies. Instead, the decision to recreate the physical set-up of Germany's politico-administrative system will now produce a potentially confusing marketplace of public digital identifiers, accounts, apps and websites. Harmonizing them ex-post or trying to belatedly superimpose standards will prove very hard indeed.

The decision to make a digital copy of the analogue world was no coincidence. This chapter has tried to show how Germany's trouble with implementing citizen-friendly digital public services stems directly from two elements of its politico-administrative system. For one, the negative impact of vertically fragmented responsibility for public services in general, and public IT in particular, is easily discernible. This brought to bear the baggage of incompatible historic legacies (both in terms of state IT and service practices), conflicting interests in the federal landscape and an implementation template that favours subsidiarity above all else. Second, a different mindset could have made the difference, but Germany's administrative culture is still very much traditionally bureaucratic: state and private sector are separated into different realms and citizens are considered applicants to legal procedures which are organized to maximise correctness. Services are designed from the perspective of the administrative unit, not from the perspective of the citizen as user. For running a public administration in the manner of the 19th and 20th century, this poses no problem. Indeed, for the administration of mass procedures such as unemployment or retirement benefits, the bureaucratic form of organisation was a perfect fit. But in order to make the jump from analogue to digital, public administration's beliefs and values have to be changed.

The fundamental technological choices of the OZG will possibly have long-lasting effects on Germany's ability to implement a user-friendly, coherent digital public service offer. The same is true for the way the IT Planning Council was set up as the principal actor in charge of public digitization, namely as an executive committee of intra-state representatives with consensual decision-making and few staff. While the council's staff is to be enlarged even further in 2022, there is yet no national digitization agency in sight.²⁹¹ No national digitization ministry has been erected so far, despite public demands to do just that. The states were quicker, with digitization agencies and ministerial units popping up in a growing number of Länder.²⁹² Furthermore, there is no discussion about shrinking the

²⁹¹ Although it is rumoured that there may be political commitment to change this after the next federal election. Handelsblatt, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/bundesregierung-unionspolitiker-draengen-auf-eigenes-digitalministerium/25486860.html?ticket=ST-882616-74NRMK933OQzbjXrzgrT-ap2>, accessed 08 April 2021.

²⁹² For example, in Lower Saxony, Thuringia or Brandenburg.

number of public IT service providers or reorganising their tasks. It appears that the fragmented structures of Germany's public service provision and state IT will persist, despite widespread acknowledgments among those in charge that the current situation hurts Germany's prospects of transitioning into a public administration fit for the 21st century.

But all is not lost. Institutions can make good implementation harder but they do not render it impossible. With more cohesive governance, good IT solutions could emerge, even out of this difficult set-up with its many independent actors. The voluntary association of several of the northern states into the DataPort union has shown that the reorganisation of public IT providers is possible and leads to better results by means of joining resources. A cultural change that puts the citizen at the centre of implementation activities is very slowly picking up pace. For instance, a voluntary group of several states, headed by Bremen, joined forces to launch a digital service package which unites all public services on offer for parents into one application (*Einfach Leistungen für Eltern*, ELFE).²⁹³ With its demanding structural set-up, which is unlikely to evolve in a quick manner, it can only be through changing attitudes among leaders of the civil service that Germany will be able to offer digital service which citizens will really use. In order to achieve this, they will have to prioritize user-friendliness over the institutional self-interest of governmental units. With voluntary cooperation based on a paradigmatic cultural conversion from bureaucratic to service-oriented it is unlikely that Germany will attain a cohesive and user-friendly service offer anytime soon. Implementation will probably continue in a very slow manner due to extreme demands for coordination, with breakthroughs likely to happen on a regional level, where coalitions of the willing will join resources and create novel service offers. The emerging landscape of IT solutions for citizens will probably be highly fragmented and there will probably be few, if any, state-wide standards. Instead, German citizens will probably have to navigate a multitude of accounts and apps, while the scope and quality of the services they can access will depend on where they live.

²⁹³ <https://onlinedienste.bremen.de/Onlinedienste/Service/Entry/ELFE>, accessed 30 November 2021.

06 | DISCUSSION

This chapter sums up the key empirical findings from all three country cases and links them to the relevant debates in the academic literature. First of all, the discussion hopes to clear up the noise from the many best-practice reports and solo case studies to shed some light on what really matters for successful public digitization projects and what does not. At a broader level, the chapter discusses what the findings mean with respect to digital public service reform and the trajectories pursued by the administrative systems to which we are accustomed. Specifically, what forms “digital era governance” (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, et al., 2006; Dunleavy, Margetts, Tinkler, et al., 2006) can take in different institutional settings. Through this, the findings can add valuable insights to the ever-growing body of historical institutional literature by showcasing how administrative institutions can evolve over time and even achieve paradigmatic change.

A plethora of case studies suggests a variety of factors to be important for successfully reforming analogue administrations and turning them into administrations fit for the digital era. This explorative study tried to address in breadth the most common hypotheses, to reject those that turned out to be false and to find out which ones really matter:

1. Access to fast internet
2. Data protection rules
3. State size
4. The public’s attitude towards digitization
5. Key actors, such as politicians and high-ranking civil service executives
6. Financial resources
7. Central IT infrastructure
8. Project organisation
- 9. The politico-administrative structure**
- 10. The administrative culture, particularly the openness to change and attitudes towards digitization among civil service employees and middle management.**

Of those ten potential factors, the German, Danish and French case studies rejected the first four as relatively unimportant. Actors played a role, albeit only in a limited way. The same applied to financial resources, central IT infrastructure and the way in which the implementation of digital public sector reform was organized. However, these latter factors were largely derivatives of the politico-administrative structure and ought to be considered a symptom rather than an independent characteristic. The case studies revealed that the [degree of fragmentation within a country’s politico-](#)

administrative structure and the administrative culture of its civil service determined whether a state was able to produce well-functioning and attractive digital public services in a timely fashion.

Figure 8 shows an overview of more detailed results from the case study interviews and survey. The numbers represent the frequency with which a success factor was mentioned in the interviews with the experts from each country. The colour code indicates the survey average from that country for that specific item. A grey shade indicates disagreement with the statement. A blue shade means that respondents agreed with the statement that success or failure in the implementation of digital public services had mostly depended on the specific survey item. The reader should note that in some fields response frequency and survey average do not match strongly, suggesting uncertain results for the given country. Where a high response frequency is matched by a high survey average, we can assume greater significance for that answer. Relevancy was assumed, whenever the respondents of at least two countries gave a response frequency of at least 3 and the survey average matched the result. More details about the expert samples and interview/survey method as well as the ways in which they were analysed can be found in annexe A Aggregated interview and survey results.

FIGURE 8 | HEATMAP OF INFLUENTIAL FACTORS FOR DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICE IMPLEMENTATION

Success/failure depended mostly on...	Response frequency Denmark (n=15)	Response frequency France (n=17)	Response frequency Germany (n=21)		
Access to fast internet	1	1	0	irrelevant	
Data protection rules	0	0	1		
State size	0	0	2		
Public attitude towards digitization	7	1	0	relevant	
Politicians	3	7	0		
Civil service executives	2	6	1		
Financial Ressources	4	2	5		
Central infrastructure	4	1	2		
Project organisation	12	13	15		
State structure	1	7	13		
State structure: Local self-governance	1	0	7	Survey average	
Attitude to digitization in civil service	3	3	4		>2.5
Openness to change in the civil service	2	5	3		2.0 – 2.5
Civil service middle management and employees	4	3	0		1.5 – 2.0
					1.0 – 1.5
				0.0 – 1.5	

Source: Own expert interviews and survey, 2019-2020. Survey average is an unweighted average of respondents' agreement with the

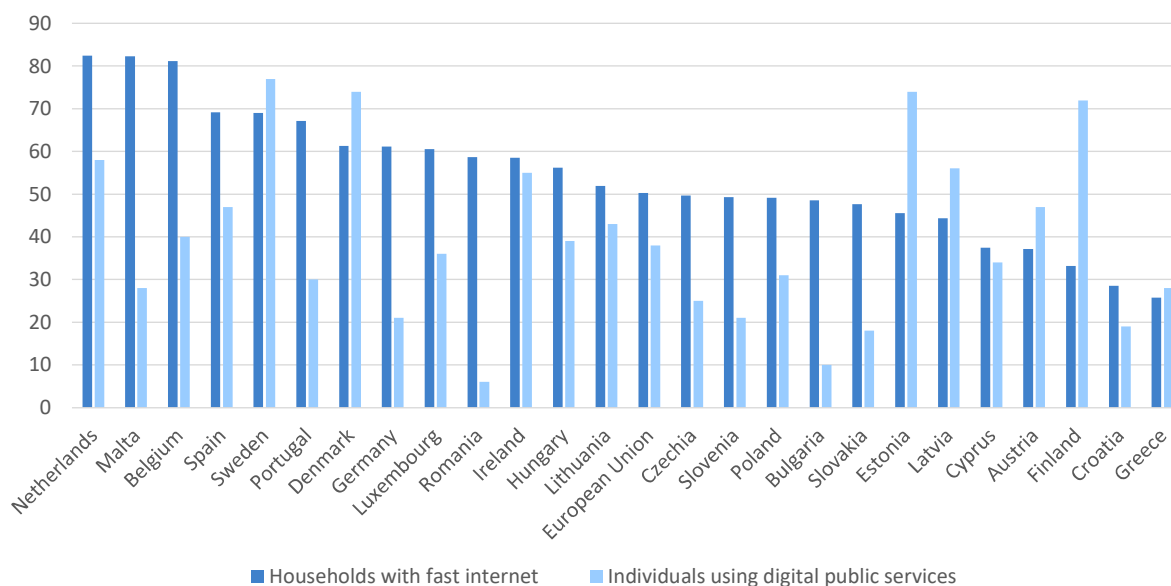
statement that success/failure depended mostly on the given item (3=fully agree, 2=rather agree, 1=rather disagree, 0= fully disagree).

THE THINGS THAT DO NOT MATTER

From three case studies, we can draw only limited conclusions about what causes success in digital public service reform. But we can, with some confidence, state what is neither necessary nor sufficient; namely, all those potential causal factors that did not play a role in the three observed cases.

A first key observation is that although the steady progress of eGovernment reform across nearly all developed countries may suggest some functional impetus at work, there was no clear association between digital progress and the prevalence of [access to fast internet](#). Obviously, without the internet there would be no state digitization. Without sufficiently fast and widely available internet connections, digital public services would be neither desirable nor feasible as a project. But judging from the data in Figure 9 there is no apparent connection between a country's fast internet coverage and its progress with digital public service reform. The data show that Germany features about as many households with fast broadband connections as Denmark and far more than, for example, Estonia and Finland, even though all three are considerably more advanced when it comes to state digitization.

FIGURE 9 | HOUSEHOLDS WITH FAST FIXED BROADBAND CONNECTION



Source: Eurostat, Percentage of households with fast fixed broadband connection (2020) and Filled Forms (2019), April 2021.

The reason for this disconnect is simple. While digital services do necessitate some form of access to the internet, for the majority of citizens as well as for the ensemble of administrative bodies, online

services require only modest up- and down-stream capacities. A regular internet connection will generally suffice for using or providing digital public services. By now, nearly all European countries have established a comprehensive internet infrastructure that covers those basic needs. As of 2020, 91 percent of all households in Europe had access to the internet from their home.²⁹⁴ Once every country has more or less established near-total internet coverage, it can no longer serve as an explanatory variable for the still sizeable differentials in the implementation of digital public services.

Another potential hurdle for public digitization similarly turned out to be irrelevant. The institutional setting of **data protection rules** was thoroughly rejected as a reason for failure (or success) when digitizing public services by the expert interviews in all three country cases. Despite ample anecdotal evidence that an overly tight data protection regime was, for example, obstructing German digitization projects, the interview respondents considered data protection rules to be the least of their problems.²⁹⁵ It is true that public officials in Germany tend to interpret privacy laws strictly and often prioritize data protection over other goals in their IT projects. This can, at times, be to the detriment of a user-friendly service design (Scientific Advisory Board at the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, 2021). But overall, respondents overwhelmingly viewed ambitious privacy and data protection regulation as beneficial to their implementation efforts as they felt that citizen take-up depended on it. Danish interview respondents in particular stressed that strong data protection was necessary for citizens to trust their service offers and felt that privacy provisions were supporting rather than obstructing their efforts to build effective digital public services.

State size was another potentially relevant variable which revealed itself to be of little impact. The assumption is that small states have it easier than larger states because they bring a smaller number of actors to the table of reform implementation. The underlying reasoning, that state digitization projects require consensus over national IT standards and solutions, is fair and valid. Indeed, this thesis found a lot of evidence to support the hypothesis that digital reforms demand more coordination than past reform agendas. This is because digitizing a country's administrative services requires many unifiers: APIs, platforms, file standards and so forth. But it turns out that even a small country features a staggering number of stakeholders within this policy domain. Digitizing a state's entire public administration is, by nature, a cross-cutting reform project. Even a comparatively small

²⁹⁴ Eurostat, indicator isoc_bde15b_h, "Households with access to the Internet at home", year 2020.

²⁹⁵ See for example this article complaining about privacy concern obstructing remote schooling during the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany: Zeit Online, Oskar Piegsa, 10 May 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/hamburg/2020-05/digitaler-unterricht-corona-krise-hamburg-software-whatsapp-zoom>, accessed 12 April 2021.

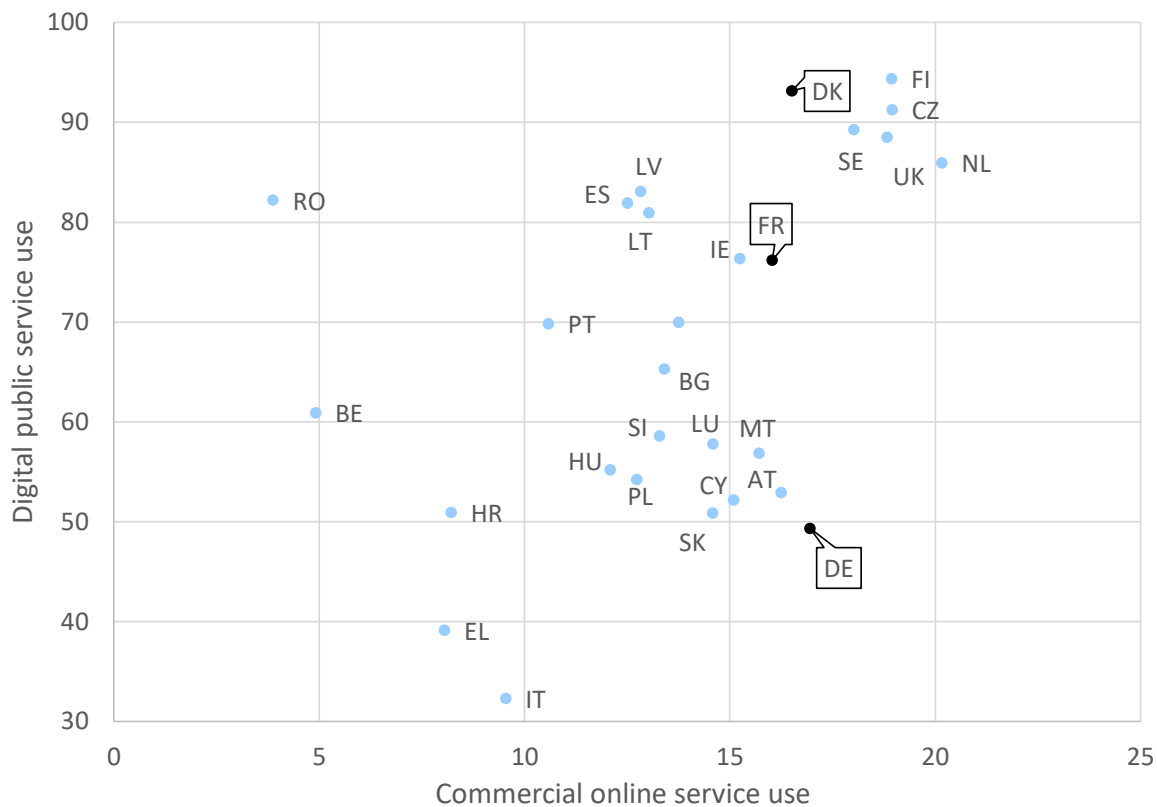
state like Denmark had to involve 104 municipalities, 5 regions, about a dozen ministerial portfolios and a handful of specialized IT and telecommunication agencies in their implementation project. To this could be added the professional users among the civil service who have to apply the digitized services in their daily work. These numbers require a pyramidal governance scheme that manages consent and harmonizes the interests of the many stakeholders just the same as in a larger state. It figures that neither the Danish experts experienced their comparatively modest state size as a benefit nor did the German or French experts attribute their struggles to their own states being larger. The respondents from all three case studies did not regard state size as influential in their own state digitization projects. They did at times point out that in Europe the highest achievers in eGovernment are all very small states.²⁹⁶ But an international comparison suggests that this is either a coincidence or that there is an underlying hidden variable, as the global champions of eGovernment features both very small and very big countries, like Australia, the United States or South-Korea (United Nations, 2020, p. 11). These four countries can be found among the top ten of the United Nation's global E-Government Survey in the category Online Service Index (OSI), which is comparable to the EU's Digital Public Service index.

While the three variables above turned out to be of little to no importance, citizens' [attitude towards digitization](#) and [policymaking actors](#) carried some relevance, albeit only in an indirect manner. In the academic literature about policy change, citizen attitudes are a well-studied topic (Burstein, 2003; Soroka & Wlezien, 2005; Stimson, 2018; Wlezien & Soroka, 2007). The theory is that the actions of policymakers in democratic political systems are routinely linked to the desires of their voters. With respect to digital public service reform these theories suggest that if citizens were to wish for a more accessible and service-oriented public administration, politicians would make it their goal to represent those interests in order to attract voters or to minimise voter loss. Following this logic, countries whose citizens are particularly welcoming of the internet and are prone to using digital services from the private sector ought to be more advanced in the digitization of the public sector as well. Attitudes are hard to measure but Figure 10 shows that there is in fact a positive connection between citizens' use of commercial internet-based services and digital reform in the field of digital public services. The chart plots two indicators from the EU's Digital Scoreboard: the share of individuals who needed to interact with public administration and used an eGovernment service to do so in the last 12 months, and the share of individuals who use the internet for commercial activities like banking, shopping or selling

²⁹⁶ The top five positions in the 2020 DESI ranking for the subcategory Digital Public Services were held by Estonia, Spain, Denmark, Finland and Latvia.

things online.

FIGURE 10 | CITIZENS' USE OF PUBLIC AND COMMERCIAL ONLINE SERVICES COMPARED



Source: European Union, Digital Scoreboard. Y-axis: 3c Transactions (weighted average of the normalised indicators: 3c1 Banking (33%), 3c2 Shopping (33%) and 3c3 Selling online (33%)). X-axis: 5a1 eGovernment users (people who sent filled forms to public authorities, over the internet, previous 12 months)

The data indicate that there is some association between the two types of digital service use. This is understandable as both phenomena measure at least partially the same underlying thing: the ability and willingness of citizens to make use of the internet for their day-to-day business. But the data also show that this association can only explain the level of digital public service implementation to a very limited degree given that the variation on the y-axis is very high – much higher than in the commercial sector on the x-axis. For instance, Danish citizens are about as likely to make use of commercial services through the internet as their German and French counterparts. Yet, the difference between digital public service use between Denmark and Germany is a staggering 40+ percentage points. This indicates that the digitization of citizens' commercial activities does not automatically trigger the state to catch up with the business world. More importantly, citizens in all countries are more prone to using the internet for administrative matters than for their private business. This undercuts the theory that it is citizens who are used to running their private-sector errands online who precipitate digital public

service reform. Instead, states embark on their mission towards eGovernment reform independently of the public's attitude towards using internet-based services. Public opinion consequently does not matter a lot for eGovernment policymaking – at least not in the sense that Wlezien or Stimson suggest. Interview data from both the German and Danish cases confirmed the inconsequential role of the public's attitudes towards public digitization projects. Danish experts differed in this by assigning at least some relevance to what they believed was a very digital-friendly Danish mindset.²⁹⁷ However, they agreed that this mindset did not unfold as political action, but “skipped the middleman” and directly influenced the actions of civil servants in charge of administrative services instead. In that respect, a country's overall positive attitude towards digitization could propel eGovernment reform forwards, but only insofar as these attitudes are also shared by its civil servants.

Indeed, all three case studies suggested that the sizeable differences between countries' eGovernment reform output do not stem from issues of policymaking. Instead, the differences arise during implementation. For this reason, typical variables which explain variation in policymaking success, like public opinion or party politics, fall flat from the outset. Over the course of the past 20 years, virtually all European countries have engaged in some kind of eGovernment reform policymaking.²⁹⁸ This did not necessarily require “hard law” but was often managed through executive orders and soft law like the French and Danish national eGovernment programmes. But even where hard law was required, like in the instance Germany's OZG or Denmark's Mandatory Digital Post Act, these policies faced little to no political contestation.²⁹⁹ State digitization did not come up in electoral campaigns or citizens' petitions; it rarely even features in party programmes and if it does, it remains a niche topic that features neither in campaign slogans nor political talk show discussions.³⁰⁰ Media coverage is kept to niche outlets and the occasional notification. Furthermore, in neither Germany, Denmark nor France were there any noticeable differences in party positions with respect to eGovernment. It appears to be one of the rare topics where politicians from both right and left agree with each other and are universally supportive. If there is any cleavage to be found at all, it instead

²⁹⁷ Interviews nr. 3 and 9.

²⁹⁸ The European Commission has put in place an observatory that monitors member states' digital reform activities and publishes yearly factsheets about them: <https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/collection/nifo-national-interoperability-framework-observatory>, accessed 05 March 2021.

²⁹⁹ Denmark experienced some pushback from organisations representing the elderly in light of the Mandatory Digital Post Act, but the movement remained comparatively small and at no point threatened the policymaking process (Interview nr. 2).

³⁰⁰ In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the backwardness of Germany's public digitization received greater public scrutiny for the first time as it was deemed to be partly responsible for the apparent mismanagement of the crisis (Scientific Advisory Board at the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, 2021).

runs between politics and public administration.³⁰¹ For that reason, we can neither resort to party politics nor to public opinion when trying to explain why some countries are so much further ahead or so far behind with their public digitization efforts: the topic is neither salient among the general public nor politicized across the political parties. In this respect, digital public service reform differs from other types of administrative reforms, such as anti-corruption or restructuring policies, which tend to be hotly contested issues which thus provoke more political engagement.

Thus, the three case studies revealed that policymaking actors, (i.e. [politicians and high-ranking civil service executives](#)) play only a limited role in making digital public sector reforms succeed. In Denmark, Germany and France, politicians brought the issue of digital public services to the political agenda around the same time – at the turn of the millennium. But thenceforth, Denmark swiftly proceeded with the implementation of a digital service offer for citizens while France struggled and Germany appeared all but paralyzed. This showcases how powerful actors are a necessary starting point for digital public sector reform – but their support is by no means sufficient for success. In all three countries, heads of state or high-ranking cabinet members were reported to have lit the fuse of the long implementation campaigns towards a digital administration. But it is the nature of policy implementation that it generally takes place beyond the attention of a president or prime minister. When the job of implementation is handed over to the mandarins, the relevance of invested politicians can quickly fade. In Denmark, ongoing support from the financial minister as well as his relatively powerful position in the cabinet ensured a constant drive behind the state’s digitization efforts. In France, implementation stalled after president Mitterrand delegated “away” the project of digitizing the French state, which had to be reignited by an incumbent prime minister in 2013. The French experts stressed the important role of the “hero” at the forefront of any digital implementation project. But the French as well as the German and the Danish cases also showed that in order to become a hero, a politician or high-ranking civil servant requires not only courage but also a number of the allies and a welcoming climate among the public service when it comes to digitization. Actors become active in the realm of eGovernment, so goes the insight from the case studies, if they can reasonably assume that their ideas will not be rejected by the civil service at large. That is because digital state reform is a cross-cutting type of reform that is impossible to achieve without at least passive support from the breadth of public administration, as opposed to a more narrowly defined topical reform that could be enacted by a small cadre group. For that reason, the takeaway of this

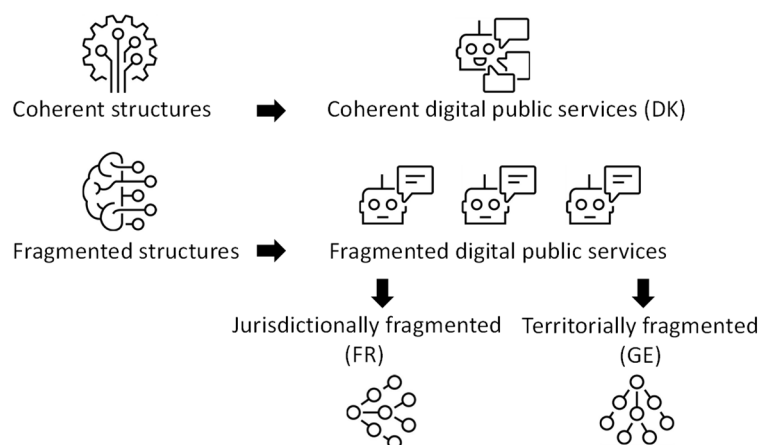
³⁰¹ Anecdotal evidence for this cleavage between public administration and politics is for example supplied by Jörn Riedel who recounted how State Secretary for Digitization Dorothee Bär had demanded an online application process for the Germany identity card only for it to be shot down by the responsible civil servants at the Ministry of the Interior (Riedel 2019, 29).

study is that political actors – politicians and high-ranking bureaucrats – decide the starting point of eGovernment reform. It is due to them that one country embarks earlier than another on the road towards digital era governance. The speed of implementation, however, is not in their hands. How swiftly and how effectively digital administration is enacted depends on factors beyond their immediate control. This is because in the implementation phase, the lower levels of the civil service take over (compare Pressman and Wildavsky 1984) while the pre-existing institutional setting determines which governmental or administrative bodies are put in charge. Once implementation is out of the hero's hands, institutional forces take over: the administration's cultural norms and structural organisation.

THE ROLE OF ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES FOR DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

Two elements of a country's administrative regime turned out to be primarily responsible for whether or not digital public service reforms could be implemented successfully. First, the degree to which the politico-administrative structures played out in a coherent or fragmented fashion and second, the predominant politico-administrative culture. As for the politico-administrative structure, the implementation of digitization projects benefited from coherent administrative structures, whereas a fragmented administrative structure hindered the implementation of those projects or produced undesirable and fragmented results. The more a state's administrative bodies worked in a coherent fashion to provide administrative services, including the state's IT services, the easier it was to install a coherent and well-functioning system of digital public services. The more a state was vertically decentralized or the more autonomously its ministerial jurisdictions acted from one another, the harder it was to erect a harmonious digital eco-system.

FIGURE 11 | THE ROLE OF ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES FOR DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM



THE EFFECTS OF ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES IN DENMARK

Denmark was a positive example of the benefits of a coherently organized [administrative structure](#). Its unitary political system endows the national level with undivided power, although in practice the country is far more decentralized and municipalities enjoy a large scope of action as they provide most citizen services. Yet, for the implementation of digital services, the unitary character of the state put the national government in a powerful position from which it could call the shots about what to regulate nationally and what to leave to the discretion of the municipalities. This meant that despite Denmark's self-conception as a decentralized state, the central government ultimately held the power to impose national standards on the regions and municipalities if need be. The right to local self-government for Danish communes is not as strictly institutionalized in legal terms as that of their German counterparts. As the Danish restructuring reforms of the 2000s showed, the national level can intervene in the way administrative services are offered at the lower levels of regions and municipalities in order to ensure maximum efficiency and quality. A similar reordering in Germany would in all likelihood fail given the many constitutionally ensured veto points for changing administrative responsibilities.

As a consequence, Denmark can deviate from its decentralized routine of day-to-day administration if required, and it made use of this option in order to establish a comparatively [centralized IT infrastructure](#). Most notable in its successful digital public service reform were a mandatory digital citizen post box and a universal eID scheme. But these are only the two most visible national IT solutions; behind them, the managerial infrastructure was consolidated as early as the 1970s. In lieu of a myriad of local IT service providers with divergent interests, Denmark's organisational landscape of public IT support and development is less fragmented than France or Germany's. This reduced the need to merge IT standards and made it easier to establish new ones – like, for example, a common data infrastructure that allowed data sharing between different administrative bodies without creating huge databases that would hurt citizens' privacy rights. This so-called Danish Basic Data program renders many digital public services more user-friendly because it relieves citizens of the need to provide the same data over and over again to different state agencies, and also facilitates the automatic issuance of benefits by cleverly connecting information about a citizen. For this to work, files and APIs had to be standardized, or at least interoperable. This is just one example of why certain institutional legacies in the form of digital infrastructures – common platforms, file standards, eIDs, interoperable data registries – are important for successful digitization endeavours. These types of central infrastructures were, in turn, the results of a coherent administrative structure in the area of public IT service provision.

THE EFFECTS OF ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES IN GERMANY

The polar opposite of Denmark's coherent [administrative structures](#) was Germany. Organized as an executive federal system, administrative responsibilities are fragmented across the state. This means that most administrative services are provided by the Länder and municipalities, including any underlying IT to support these services. This fragmentation is enshrined in the constitution and, as a consequence, is almost impossible to challenge, as the last attempts at federal reorganisation have shown.³⁰² Particularly dire for Germany's attempts at public digitization is the fact that the Basic Law principally forbids the federal government from specifying how administrative procedures at the level of Länder and municipalities are to be run. This highly decentralized administrative regime was set up to shield the municipalities in particular from federal interference.

Over the course of the post-war-era this has resulted in a highly fragmented landscape of administrative procedures and equally-fragmented IT to support them. [Central IT infrastructure](#) is all but missing. Instead, software solutions and file standards are unique to each municipality. Exchanging information between different administrative bodies – a very rare occurrence – routinely founders as data registries follow their own respective logic and are generally not interoperable. Attempts have been made to install a German eID solution ("*Digitaler Personalausweis*") and a secure email alternative called *DE-Mail*. But both products have so far flopped,³⁰³ due to design choices that were unappealing to users as well as meagre efforts to put them to use across a wide range of administrative bodies.³⁰⁴ A series of unsuccessful attempts to launch digital unifiers shows that Germany's fragmented administration has not only produced fragmented IT results in the past but keeps doing so in the present. Currently, Germany is erecting a multitude of digital online service portals and online citizen accounts in the course of implementing its Online Access Law. This is despite widespread acknowledgement among the political establishment that digital era governance requires a more coherent approach to providing administrative services. Yet, the heavily institutionalized logic of decentralisation and local autonomy have locked Germany into a path that is difficult to leave.

Germany's decentralized approach to public administration poses a very practical problem to implementing the necessary changes for digital era governance. With each administrative unit left to

³⁰² This refers to Federal reform I and II (2006; 2009) and the Reorganisation of the federal financing scheme (2006).

³⁰³ DE-Mail was announced to be discontinued by 31 August 2022. Source: Spiegel Online, Marcel Rosenbach, "Telekom schaltet DE-Mail ab", 31.08.2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/netzpolitik/telekome-schaltet-de-mail-ab-a-1cf7a036-c4ad-4d3c-b8d8-2f3d1afa7944>, accessed 10 October 2021.

³⁰⁴ The German digital ID required a card-reading device that had to be ordered by the user. This step prevented many potential users from ever making use of their theoretically digital-ready ID card. In Bavaria, eID use increased noticeably when local administration simplified the process and dropped the card-reader (Zeitschrift der Bundes-Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Kommunalen IT-Dienstleister e.V., April 2020, "Interview with Johannes Ludewig", https://www.vitako.de/Publikationen/Vitako%20aktuell%2004-2020_web.pdf, accessed 03 May 2021).

its own devices, the [financial resources](#) required for developing and maintaining new IT products and infrastructure are dispersed across the administrative landscape. And since IT development and maintenance are costly, this has produced a paradoxical situation in which the total spending on digital change in Germany is high, while at the same time funds are deemed as lacking at the local level. Smaller administrations and municipalities have found themselves locked into analogue services because IT development is too costly for them. At the same time, the total amount spent is great, because of the parallel development of multiple solutions for identical problems. If resources are to be joined up between regions, counties and municipalities, transaction costs are considerable.³⁰⁵ French interview respondents expressed the same concerns. In comparison with the German and French case studies, Danish experts did not consider large financial resources to be necessary for a successful IT project. Instead, Denmark showed that through a pooled approach, replacing analogue services with digital means generally results in lowered costs. Digital public sector reform can finance itself, if well managed. Given that both France and Germany are affluent countries, their financing problems are not down to precarious state finances. Instead, insufficient financial resources are a symptom of fragmented administrative structures and the inability to build bridges by means of more coherent governance for IT implementation projects. The overall conclusion that we can draw from this is that wealthier states do not necessarily have a great advantage in digitizing their public administration compared to poorer nations. Instead it is a matter of managing the required funds with a national perspective in order to invest into digital infrastructure as efficiently as possible.

THE EFFECTS OF ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES IN FRANCE

In terms of its [politico-administrative structure](#), France is an interesting middle case between Germany and Denmark. With Denmark, France shares its unitary state system. But with its ample size and more pronounced degree of administrative fragmentation, it also resembles Germany. France has devolved some of its state power to the level of municipalities and departments and has considered itself “decentralized” ever since (Philippe, 2004). But compared to countries with traditions of strong or even politically independent local government, like Denmark or Germany, its decentralization remains modest in practice.³⁰⁶ This is why France’s administration is not particularly fragmented on a vertical, meaning territorial, level. Its dividing lines rather run horizontally across the central state’s

³⁰⁵ Consider for example the lengthy discussions around how to allocate the 3 billion Euros, which had been planned as a quick “cash boost” for cash-strapped municipalities in the OZG implementation in 2020. Instead of distributing the funds quickly to where they were most needed it took nearly an entire year of negotiations between the federal government and the Länder and a detailed written administrative agreement before any money could flow (Federal Ministry of the Interior & Federal States, 2021).

³⁰⁶ A constitutional amendment on 28 March 2003 officially adopted the self-description of a “decentralized organisation” (Constitutional law relating to the decentralized organisation of the Republic, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT00000601882>, accessed 04 May 2021). For more details about the path taken by France’s recent decentralization efforts, consider Xavier Phillippe’s legal review (2004).

administration, with deep trenches between the ministerial domains and their independent civil service corps. In this respect, it shares some similarities with Germany, which is also highly fragmented, albeit in a different – that is to say, vertical – manner.

In terms of success with digital public sector reform, France and Germany consequently resembled one another for many years. France balked at the creation of unifying digital solutions for the entire state administration, just like Germany. But while Germany failed to bring the territorial units of Länder and counties/municipalities together, France struggled at harmonizing IT landscapes across its different ministerial domains. At the level of the Bund, Germany has had little trouble unifying IT solutions across the ministerial domains. But in France, much of the state's IT provision happens within individual ministerial domains, and is relevant only for that domain, including the subordinate administrative bodies and their regional offices. In contrast to Germany, France lacks the informal yet highly institutionalized practice of intra-state cooperation and coordination. As a consequence, there is little cross-cutting infrastructure between ministries and their affiliated administrations.

This horizontally segmented logic prevented joint action in the area of digital public sector reform at the national level. To make matters worse, it was in particular the pioneers of digital public services like the Ministry of Finance and its tax authorities which stood in the way of developing national unifiers. As they had established effective infrastructures and standards that worked well for them, pioneering administrations were not keen to cede their own investments for rival national solutions. At the same time, the policy issue of public digitization was institutionalized only weakly, broken up across multiple and varying state actors.³⁰⁷ With public sector digitization being a cross-cutting topic, lacking a strong state actor's backing, it often evolved more successfully in the fold of a single ministry. National projects like the digital public service platform *mon.service-public.fr*, or national eID solution *IDéNum* never took off as they were side-lined by already-established and successful sector-specific IT solutions.

A turnaround was only achieved when smart innovations were introduced to digital public sector reform project management around 2013. Borrowing the private sector idea of start-up incubators and innovation networks, France found a way to bridge the horizontal divides of its

³⁰⁷ The national portal for digital public services *service-public.fr*, was for instance managed by the Documentation Française, at its core a state publishing unit, whereas most other digital public service projects were run by a string of eGovernment sub-units and stand-alone agencies (ATICA, ADAE, DGME, SGMPA etc) which constantly changed their names, scope of action and ministerial affiliation.

administrative system while avoiding forceful centralisation. Governance for implementing some of the state's key public digitization projects was revamped and further encouraged a "soft centralisation" which focused on spreading digital competence and a new service-oriented spirit, as well as injecting digital prototypes into more administrations than before. Moderate unifiers like the joint online authentication mechanism *FranceConnect* managed to link pre-existing solutions while at the same time creating recognizable national brands of digital public service solutions. Overall however, digital public service implementation in France has remained fragmented due to a persistently divided administrative structure. Some policy areas, like taxes, unemployment support and social services have reached a high degree of functionality, whereas many municipal services and the education sector are still far behind. As a result, France attains only mixed results on digital public service indicators.³⁰⁸ Its horizontally fragmented administrative structure has reproduced a digital service landscape with isolated top-notch solutions but is lacking in breadth.

The differences between policy domains are down to ministry-specific dynamics, most notably [high-ranking civil servants](#) or [politicians](#) in the role of ministers who made digitization a personal affair. It is possibly for this reason that the French interview respondents valued the role of single actors, whether politicians or prominent civil servants, much more highly than the German or Danish experts. Danes, for instance, stressed how much of their success was owed to the institutional backing of their Ministry of Finance and their national Digitization Agency. In France it was individual actors who were reported to have "kicked-off" relevant digital reform processes. French experts recounted numerous instances where the weak institutionalization of public sector digitization made it necessary for single actors to relentlessly push the issue within their own administration if projects were to succeed. In two instances, prime ministers were the ones to (re-)launch a faltering national digitization campaign. Along the same lines, numerous interview respondents assigned the turn-around that France achieved in the years 2013-2020 to the impact of a small group of individuals surrounding Henri Verdier and Pierre Pezziardi. The takeaway from the French experience is that with a weak degree of formal institutionalization, successful instances of digitization reform require heroic individuals.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES ARE INFLUENTIAL BUT HARD TO CHANGE

The takeaway from all three case studies is that administrative structures mattered immensely for the

³⁰⁸ Common eGovernment indicators are the EU's DESI with a range of sub-indicators on digital public services, the United Nations' EGD (E-Government Development Index), OSI and LOSI (Online Service Index and Local Online Service Index, respectively) and the International Civil Service Effectiveness (InCiSE) which contains a "Digital Services" subdimension. France's ranking positions are in the midfield of these indicators.

way that digital public services were implemented. That is because administrative structures inform the way in which a policy project's implementation will be organized. To some degree, this should not come as a surprise because governance structures have been recognized to influence the success of policy implementation in the scholarly field of public policy before. A publication by Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky, which contributed substantially to the growing subfield of implementation studies, found, for example, that the longer the chain of actors involved in an implementation project, the likelier its failure (1973). Now, implementing digital public services tends not to involve particularly long, vertical chains of command. Instead, project teams are often small and situated in eGovernment units at the national level. Complications arise rather from the need to involve many, or all, units of a state's public administration. Still, the underlying theory that involving more actors puts any implementation project at a greater risk of failure also remains applicable to the digital reform activities which this study assessed.

Yet, the case studies suggested that the cross-cutting nature of digital public service reform makes administrative structures matter even more than they would in other policy areas. Digitizing a state's administrative services means subjecting large parts of a nation's public administration to digital standards and shared platforms. As opposed to other forms of policy implementation, like the economic programmes Pressman and Wildavsky assessed, digital public service reform cannot be handed over to just one strand of public administration. The cross-cutting nature of digitizing administrative services as a whole means that any administration that issues some kind of public service, from tax collection to benefit provision to social counselling, will be involved. The cross-cutting character of the digital reform agenda furthermore means that the decentralization of administrative tasks and the proliferation of hyper-specialized agencies have become a liability for administrative digitization. Decentralization and agencification were once deemed beneficial administrative reforms because both were believed to put administrative action in better touch with local needs (Caiden, 2014; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004b, pp. 1–31). This is why they were part of the NPM reform agenda (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). But for today's efforts to digitize national public administration, this trend towards smaller and more dispersed administrative responsibilities created a difficult institutional heritage because it also decentralized IT applications, file standards and data registries. Younger trends in public management reforms like "Networks", "Governance" and early forms of localized eGovernment³⁰⁹ also sought to broaden the number of people involved in administrative decisions and

³⁰⁹ Typical instances of eGovernment projects in the 1990s and early 2000s were digital participatory budgets and other forms of so-called liquid democracy that aimed at involving citizens in political and administrative processes which had been typically closed off to them.

procedures (Osborne, 2010). If managed well, a governance-oriented approach to public administration can work very effectively for the digital rehaul of administrative procedures, as we have witnessed in Denmark. But an undifferentiated inclusion of more voices just for the sake of greater inclusiveness is fraught with problems because it risks blowing up the number of actors involved in the implementation and thereby slowing the process.

So, earlier reform paradigms hoped to improve administrative action by making it more locally embedded. While this may be a promising idea for an analogue world, local embeddedness carries no advantage in a digital world. Instead, German and French counties and municipalities openly admitted to not being up to the task of digitizing their own services because they were too small. Digital reforms profit from larger scopes far more than other types of administrative reform. The first reason for this is financial. IT development requires big investments at the outset. Later on, hosting and maintenance are also far less expensive when pooled. A second reason against localized IT development and provision is professionalism. Hiring the specialized skills of IT developers and project managers is expensive for a single administrative body, which is why competent digitization units require coherent administrative structures so that competences and resources become affordable. In their absence, IT products risk being executed in an unprofessional, haphazard manner. Either that, or they need to be contracted out, which potentially leads to undesirable results that quickly turn obsolete, as the French case study showed. Furthermore, from the perspective of citizens, one-stop shops are far more desirable than a dispersed, fragmented service offer – something we all know from our personal experience on the internet. The allure of platforms like Facebook, Spotify or Amazon lies in their promise that users do not have to look elsewhere because they contain the entirety of whatever the user might be searching for. Without recognizable national brands and well-known platforms for public IT, a cluttered and complicated landscape of service offers, platforms, apps to download, accounts to manage and authentication methods to juggle risks confusing or putting users off.

To sum up, a certain set of (coherent) administrative structures appears to favour the creation (and support) of a digitized public administration. Should this mean that administrative structures ought to be changed accordingly? On a normative level, this may be a fair conclusion. But as it turns out, administrative structures tend to be deeply embedded institutions which are often extremely hard to change. Germany's constitutionally defined structure of administrative responsibilities is a prime example. Many attempts have been made to substantially clarify and simplify public responsibilities, among them two ambitious federalism reform commissions (*Föderalismusreformkommission I & II*), but to little avail (Heinz, 2011). At the same time, the German case exemplified (as did the French and the Danish) that administrative structures heavily inform the structure of a state's digital service-offer

for its citizens. A fragmented administration therefore produces a fragmented digital counterpart that will be hard, if not impossible, to reverse. So, the current administrative structures, which were built for an analogue, territory-bound world, will likely shape our administrations' digital futures.

THE ROLE OF ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE FOR DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

But the politico-administrative structures were not the only factor that the case studies revealed to be highly meaningful for implementing digital public services. Independently of hard and unmoveable state structures, the prevailing norms of the administrative system also played an important role in the implementation stories of our three case studies. In brief, a bureaucratic administrative culture proved obstructive to producing citizen-friendly digital solutions – or any solutions at all – whereas a more service-oriented and collaborative mindset facilitated the change from analogue bureaucracy to digital public services. Moreover, a collaborative administrative culture appeared to lend itself to a more holistic and user-friendly digital service-design: for example, one-stop-shops or national eID solutions.

THE EFFECTS OF ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE IN DENMARK

It is thanks to Denmark's collaborative and consensual political culture that its unitary constitutional order did not play out in a top-down manner. Bringing together the best of both worlds – coherent state structures and a citizen-focused and collaborative yet pragmatic and goal-oriented administrative culture – Denmark managed to erect an inclusive, but simultaneously decisive, governance structure for implementing its state digitization project. At its core, a powerful intra-state committee of representatives united from all state levels – national, regional and local – and endowed them with the authority to make fundamental and binding decisions for the entire country.

Interview respondents from Denmark were even more convinced than their French and German counterparts that a beneficial culture within the Danish public service had been a key driver for their digital success story, because it had promoted [positive attitudes towards digitization](#). Even before its digital turn-around, Danish public administration was renowned for its service-oriented customer experience (Jorgensen, 2006; Rose & Persson, 2012). A foreigner used to the small humiliations that interacting with public administrations can entail in some countries would be surprised at how pleasant and geared towards its citizens Danish administration is. Denmark takes part in the Nordic administrative tradition that values a citizen-centric approach as opposed to a strictly legalistic way of designing procedures. It favours collaborative decision-making and is averse to hierarchical management.

At the same time, high levels of trust in the state and fellow citizens facilitates the implementation of state-wide projects because they make Danes more accepting of collective decisions and thus more [open to change](#) in general (Svendsen et al., 2012; Svendsen & Svendsen, 2004). Before digitization became the defining reform paradigm for the Danish public sector, NPM-style reforms had met with open ears and early on set the Danish administrative system on a more goals- and citizen-oriented path (L. Hansen, 2013). As a consequence, Denmark benefited from cultural legacies which valorised pragmatic action, served the taxpayer, and took customer-satisfaction seriously. These legacies moulded the conditions for digital innovation to receive a warm welcome in the Nordic countries. Indeed, this cultural institutional background resonated well with the two key promises of a digital public administration: more customer-friendly procedures on the one side and a leaner, more cost-efficient way to offer them on the other. Although the focus on cost-saving would have had the potential to provoke hesitancy among Danish civil servants to support public digitization in the name of reducing the number of public sector jobs, respondents denied that there was much resistance. Instead, Danish civil servants were said to have embraced the promises of digital innovation in the public sector with optimism. Respondents described a consensus surrounding the benefits of a digitized Danish public administration, citing citizens' expectations and the possibility of reallocating resources to the welfare state which were to be saved through automation.

THE EFFECTS OF ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE IN GERMANY

Germany's administrative culture is marked by a noticeably different set of norms to its Scandinavian neighbour, Denmark. Although both countries have a lot in common from an international point of view, a closer look reveals that public officials in both countries think and behave differently – both as individuals and as a collective. Many, if not all of these differences, can be summed up by contrasting the Danish service orientation with Germany's bureaucratic orientation. Both the German and French case studies revealed that certain bureaucratic norms and values have persisted into the 21st century, and the imperatives of NPM and good governance have not (yet) affected the cultural foundation of either country's administration. Essential elements in the bureaucratic administrative culture are the important roles played by laws and written rules for internal steering, a focus on procedural correctness, the notion of the state's "separate-ness", a rank-based civil service that is trained predominantly in administrative law, and a hierarchical order with strict, top-down vertical chains of command. Of these characteristics, German public administration shares all but the very last.

The German interview respondents unanimously agreed that a cultural change among the entirety of the administrative body was necessary for a digital turnaround. Many had witnessed a blossoming of more open and positive [attitudes towards digitization within the civil service](#) in recent

years. They stressed that this was a new phenomenon and limited to only a minority of public officials. The majority remains caught up in a bureaucratic tradition dominated by legalistic thinking, top-down attitudes towards citizens and a focus on procedural correctness over quality of service. In keeping with public administration scholars, many experts also complained that German public administration was generally not very [open to change](#) and that digitization was only the latest instance of its resistance to reform (Rosser, 2017, p. 1024; Thedieck, 2007). And yet there was widespread optimism among the experts who were interviewed for the German case study that this attitudinal change would persist and slowly but surely squeeze out the bureaucratic norms and values which they perceived as still dominating German administrative culture.

They attributed the cultural shift to the eGovernment laws and particularly to the OZG, the Online Access Law,³¹⁰ which they say made it clear to many [civil service employees and mid-level executives](#) that there would be no escaping the digital transformation of public administration. Already accomplished implementation projects, like the digitization of the formerly paper-based file systems, had furthermore sparked a benign circle where positive experiences with small digital innovations were making a growing number of civil service employees and executives more confident and competent with regards to digital technologies at their workplace. Until lately, however, there has been an extreme skills shortage in IT development, project management and service design which experts considered a big obstacle for digital improvements. With a career-based instead of a job-based civil service that still emphasizes legal training above all else and receives little inflow from the private sector, they feared it would take considerable effort to quickly improve skills and mindsets.

The [attitude towards digitization among the general public](#) in Germany, on the other hand, had barely played a role in this according to them – neither in a positive nor negative sense. Respondents rejected the clichéd notion that a specifically German neurosis surrounding privacy on the internet or IT security issues were a reason for Germany's tardy digital public service reforms; but nor had the wide-spread familiarity with digital services in citizens' private lives created a sense of urgency among German public officials to make public administration catch up with the business world. Quite the opposite. Despite a highly digitized economy and society, Germany's bureaucratic administrative culture acted as a stopper to digital reform of the public sector. A lack of relevant skills and hesitant attitudes towards change in general, and digitization in particular, among the majority of civil service employees and mid-level executives long prorogued the initiation of digital public service reform and

³¹⁰ The Online Access Law was ratified on 14 August 2017 by the German parliament. It declared that all bodies of German public administration be required to digitize their public service offers by 1 January 2022.

slowed the pace of implementation.

THE EFFECTS OF ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE IN FRANCE

The French case study confirmed scholarly categorizations of administrative cultures which describe the French administrative culture as very similar to Germany's (e.g. Peters 2021). The French experts painted the picture of an administrative culture that was also heavily marked by bureaucratic elements. Legalism, a separation between the public and the private sphere, and a state held in high esteem. In contrast to Germany, hierarchical differences were not only pronounced between public administration and citizens, but also within public administration itself. Top-down steering along clear vertical lines and a deference to hierarchies both within and between administrative bodies were the norm. And as in Germany, these bureaucratic legacies were in conflict with the requirements of effective digital public sector reform and stalled its progress for many years.

French experts chimed with the German testimonies on the point that bureaucratic norms and values had made French public administration less [open to change](#) in general and affected [attitudes towards digitization](#) in a problematic way. Similar to Germany, an entrenched legalism and authoritative relationship towards citizens had stood in the way of user-friendly service design. Moreover, a hierarchical leadership and management style inhibited collaboration across administrative units and hierarchy levels, which many experts felt had been detrimental to developing common solutions from the perspective of citizens and street-level bureaucrats. This resulted in public services that served the needs of administrative units but were often ill-suited to citizens' needs and preferences and resulted in low take-up.

A cultural shift was initially kick-started in 2013 by outsiders of the administrative system who were brought in from the private sector to install a [different attitude towards digitization](#) and much-needed skills in the governmental unit in charge of digital public sector reform. Thanks to a clique of progressives within the civil service and with the help of start-up incubators and a tight supportive network (*beta.gouv*), they succeeded in sowing competence and their unbureaucratic, collaborative and service-oriented attitude across a wide and ever-growing portion of the French administrative body. Many respondents attributed the measurable turn-around in digital reform activities around the year 2013 to a noticeable shift in the attitudes towards digitization. They particularly stressed that emphasizing citizens' needs above all else and conceiving of public services from their perspective rather than the state's had been fundamental for recent advances with digital reform projects and particularly for take-up.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: CULTURAL CHANGE MAY BE THE GATEWAY TO A PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION OF THE 21ST CENTURY

The case studies above have demonstrated how the cultural traditions of administrative regimes interact with administrative structures in shaping the future of digital administration. Of course, with only three cases at hand, caution is advised when trying to ascertain the number of causal factors that determine the outcomes of states' digital reform activities. But we can state with good confidence that the cultural tradition of the administrative body is among those factors. In all three cases, the experts – who were all personally involved in their country's digital public service reform projects – talked copiously of the enormous impact of cultural factors on digital reform success. Among those factors featured were [general openness to change](#). More specific [attitudes towards digitization within the public sector](#) featured very strongly, as did the [professional mindset, educational background and competences of civil service employees and mid-level managers](#).

The empirical data generally confirmed the categories of administrative systems (Pollitt, 2016; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004a, 2009) or traditions (Painter & Peters, 2010; Peters, 2021) established by administrative science scholarship. According to this literature, France and Germany are classified as bureaucratic-legalistic, while Denmark on the other hand belongs to the Nordic family which is classified as service-oriented and pragmatic (rather than strictly legalistic). Germany and particularly France turned out to still exhibit rather strongly the traits which are commonly associated with their bureaucratic administrative tradition: legalistic thinking supported by a legalistic hiring and training scheme, a strong idea of the state as a separate and higher sphere, and, particularly in the case of France, a hierarchical organisational style. From the perspective of comparative administrative science this is an interesting finding as it reveals how resilient administrative cultures are, even to grand outside forces like the digitization of our economies and societies.

At the same time, the case studies provided a prime example of how the cultural institutions of a state interact with its structural elements when digitization policies are rolled out. In Denmark, a collaborative yet pragmatic and service-oriented administrative culture found its perfect partner in a unitary state structure with strong and capable municipalities. These two characteristics “boosted” one another and produced fast and highly effective nation-wide results. In Germany, on the other hand, the vertical fragmentation of public administration alone would have posed an obstacle to producing a coherent system of digital public services for the entire nation. The fragmented administration was further frozen into their 20th century routines by the legalistic and statist bureaucratic culture, which put off reform until enough pressure had built up to motivate change. In France, the unitary state order could have offered easier structural preconditions for a fast roll-out of

key digital reform projects. But in ways that resembled Germany, legalistic thinking and a bureaucratic, top-down relationship between the state and its citizens sowed doubt among many in the French public administration as to whether the effort was necessary. What's more, when politicians and high-level administrative executives pushed for large-scale digitization projects, the particularly hierarchical French administrative tradition made horizontal collaboration, which would have been required for a well-coordinated nation-wide digital public service system, very difficult.

In opposition to the French top-down style of public management, Germany was struggling with its decentralized tradition of decision-making and implementation. Cultural legacies of anti-hierarchical steering produced a lot of complexity for the governance of a state-wide digitization wave, at least at the beginning of reform actions. Further down the line, the consensual elements of Germany's politico-administrative style – which are not typically bureaucratic but deeply ingrained into German political and administrative routines nonetheless – may help bridge the fragmented state structures. But for now, the aversion towards a more concerted effort in German state IT has exacerbated the fragmented character of the federal state and led to a cacophony of digital solutions across the public sector.

Without political pressure from the EU and national politicians, French and German public administrations would have likely remained resistant to the changes of a digital-era style of governance for even longer. The recent fledgling cultural changes in both countries only serve to highlight the disinterested or even dismissive attitudes towards digitization that pervaded German and French public administration until recently. And without the Covid-19 pandemic highlighting the advantages of public digitization, for instance in schools or local health offices, it is likely that large parts of the administrative body would have remained impassive for even longer at the prospect of modernizing their work.

The case studies support the argument that these unenthusiastic attitudes towards public digitization efforts in France and Germany were not incidental but stemmed from a bureaucratic administrative tradition that had already proven itself to not being very open to change. During the heyday of NPM, scholars of public administration remarked that Germany and France appeared particularly resistant to NPM-style administrative change (see for instance Bach & Bordogna, 2011; Kuhlmann, 2010). Now, the digital reformation has been stalled by a bureaucratic culture that is suspicious of fundamental changes to the way that administration is supposed to be run.

According to many respondents from the French and German case studies, this reduced openness to (digital) change among the administrative bodies of their respective countries was down

to a bureaucratic administrative culture which is built on legalistic thinking and steering (see Thedieck 2007, 77). Legalism focuses the attention of French and German public administration on procedural correctness above all. Moreover, it shapes the skills of the people who are hired, trained and selected for executive positions. Competence in project management, customer management or IT development carry little value in a culture that is dominated by administrative lawyers. The ideal for any aspiring young civil servant is to serve the *Rechtsstaat* or *l'État* – and not to please demanding customers. In a cultural environment where lawfulness and due process are what defines individual and collective behaviour, those norms can eclipse alternative ideals such as efficiency or customer satisfaction. These were the guiding norms of NPM but are also very much relevant for digital-era governance. When French and, particularly, German public administration tackles IT issues, its bureaucratic culture often leaps at legal questions of security and privacy. These are important but can at times squeeze out questions of efficacy and usability when developing online services.

Contrast this with the Danish experience. There, public officials recognized the virtues of a fully digital administration early on and thus engaged with digital public service reform projects much earlier. Danish experts attributed their often-praised digital design solutions – their digital identifier the NemID, their unifying public service portal *borger.dk* and their privacy-friendly data-sharing solution – to a service- and goals-oriented, pragmatic administrative culture. Putting the citizen's desires into the centre of their reform activities had informed their project governance, but more importantly, the IT solutions which were developed. They did not reflect the administrative demarcations that the French (horizontal) and Germans (vertical) exhibited but formed a well-rounded offer that followed citizens' needs as well as efficiency gains. As a consequence, take-up was high early on and cost advantages were achieved which served to motivate further reform projects.

By contrast, efficacy and usability were a self-professed weakness in the development of digital public services in the French and particularly German administration. Besides their characteristic legalistic thinking, the idea of the state's fundamental "separate-ness" from the private sector had blinded both countries to the idea that the state could in fact be a driving force behind digitization. As the digitization of economic activities progressed, the more the supposedly special nature of the public sphere was used as an excuse to avoid comparison and ultimately forego digital reforms. In Denmark, by contrast, part of the state's success was due to its timely recognition that public administration in the digital age would have to change because sooner rather than later citizens would certainly and rightfully compare state services to business services on the internet. And yet, when service standards drastically changed due to new digital technologies like mobile internet and big-data-based algorithms, the bureaucratic line of thinking has instead served to fend off demands for modernizing the service

provision of the public sphere. The notion of the state as a higher sphere disqualified a supposedly profane private sector as a reference point for standards of service among public administration. Adapting to these changes would have required recognizing the recipients of public services as customers. But for German and French bureaucratic culture, this way of thinking was radically new while for the Danes it fit well with the service-orientation that was already well established in their administrative culture.

Summing up the role of administrative culture on the digital transformation of public services, we recognize that some administrative cultures are more prone to this type of reform activity than others. The digitization of our economies and societies is fundamentally changing the way we conceive of services and customers. It is because of this global transformation that the established ideal of how public administration is supposed to look is being challenged. The new demands that external forces are imposing on public administrations across the world include aspects like 24/7 mobile availability, quick results and customer support, customer autonomy and an overall pleasant experience. In short, public services in the digital era require that citizens as customers become the focal point of administrative activities, supplanting administrative traditions that were centred around the state's own needs and intrinsic logics. This new set-up of public administration in the digital era goes hand in hand with the administrative style that has been common in countries that belong to the Nordic and the Anglo-Saxon administrative regime. These administrative regimes are supported by a cultural tradition that fits the needs of digital-era public administration. They have an easier time accommodating the changes that digital public service reform brings with it. The measurable results of this cultural fit between digital-era governance and service-oriented administrative cultures are earlier, faster and more successful reform activities. An administrative regime which is built around a bureaucratic administrative tradition on the other hand means that a state's public administration has a longer way to go in terms of cultural change. That is because bureaucratic administrative traditions involve deeply embedded legalistic thinking, a notion of the state's special character and a hierarchical relationship between the State and its citizens. France, as the archetype of the Napoleonic administrative regime, and Germany, as the archetype of the Continental-federal type, revealed how limited the potential for truly effective digital transformation is in the absence of a digital-ready organisational culture. All three case studies exemplified how the digitization of administrative action is causally connected to cultural change. In the Danish case, an already digital-friendly culture facilitated digital reforms. In France, cultural change was required for reform activities to gain traction. And in Germany, the first steps into digital administration fostered an understanding among public officials that their attitudes would have to change. The frustrating conclusion we can draw from this is that it may take a long while to make public administrations in bureaucratic regimes catch up with the

rest of their digital societies, because changing culture is hard. But not as hard as changing the iron institutions of politico-administrative state structures.

WHERE ADMINISTRATIVE REGIMES ARE HEADED

Above, we tried to shed some light on what really matters when states embark on digital public service reform. We learned that among the many causal factors behind success (or failure) two stand out: the degree to which the administrative culture of a country adheres to classic ideals of bureaucracy, and the degree to which administrative action, particularly in the field of public IT, is fragmented. The less fragmented its administrative structures, the easier it is for a state to build a comprehensive and coherent digital public service offer for its citizens. And the less bureaucratic, the likelier it is that a state's public administration will have adopted digital public services early on, with little internal contestation and user-friendly results.

From there we now seek to draw some further-reaching, theoretical conclusions based on our case-studies as well as the scientific literature. So far, this study has focused on explaining the present. Based on only a limited number of cases, extrapolations about other cases and predictions about the future must be made with caution. But given our general finding that up to now, the institutional features of administrative regimes have had a major impact on the present, it could reasonably be concluded that their influence will similarly extend into the future – at least for a limited amount of time (Peters, 2021). It is therefore acceptable to try and answer the questions that follow. What projections can reasonably be made for the (digital) future into which our administrative regimes are headed? And what can the findings of this study add to the meta-discourse about path dependence and institutional change?

REGIME-SPECIFIC PATHWAYS GIVE WAY TO DIGITAL-ERA CONVERGENCE.

The futures of administrative regimes and the question of overarching administrative reform paradigms that span across all regime types are two recurring topics of scholarly debate in the administrative sciences (see for example Chandler 2014; Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019; Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; Peters 2018; 2021; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009; 2017a). The two topics reflect different answers to the same research question. Namely, whether developments in public administrations are shaped more by their respective institutional boundaries or whether there are overarching reform paradigms which provoke similar changes across different regimes. For some time now, digital public services have been assessed as a candidate for a new administrative reform paradigm, which could supplant prior paradigms, such as NPM and various types of governance (Torfing et al., 2020).

And indeed, as of 2021, all developed countries appear to have engaged at least to some degree with digital public service reform. They do so with different levels of enthusiasm and with varying results, but comparative data from the EU and United Nations show that there is no country to be found which does not exhibit at least some digital reform activities.³¹¹ This speaks in support of all those who consider “Digital-era governance” (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, et al., 2006; Dunleavy, Margetts, Tinkler, et al., 2006; Margetts, 2008), the “Information Polity” (Bellamy & Taylor, 1994; Taylor, 1998, 2012), “Digital Government” (Dawes & Pardo, 2002; Janowski, 2015; West, 2005) or “eGovernment” (Chevallerau, 2005; Kraemer & King, 2006; Schmid, 2019; Von Haldenwang, 2004) the new influential paradigm that dictates the forms taken by administrative reforms around the globe. It is advisable, however, to be at least somewhat doubtful of such propositions, because founding new paradigms is a fashionable activity in the social sciences. Not all turn out to be as influential as initially suggested, while some reveal themselves to be little more than short-lived fashions. For instance, many of the proclaimed reform paradigms surrounding governance never really made the jump from academic analyses to the reform discourses of practitioners (see for instance Osborne’s New Public Governance (2006, 2010)).

However, with AI, machine learning and revolutionary innovations in hardware there is no longer any debate about governments’ inescapable need to adapt, and to suggest otherwise might seem quixotic, or out of touch with reality. As is observable to anyone, services all over the private sector are shifting from analogue to digital provision, turning digitized service provision into the new normal. That is because smartphones and mobile internet, growing bandwidths and technologies of automation have set off a “fourth wave of industrial revolution”, akin to those sparked by the invention of the steam engine in the 1700s, electricity in the 1800s and computers in the middle of the 20th century (Schwab, 2017). In economic studies, the revolutionary capacity of those innovations has been widely recognized and sparked a wave of predictive research that asks how countries’ economies will adapt. Consider for example the widely recognized works of Acemoglu and Autor (2011) or Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014). Given that many well-known digital business brands, from Facebook to Amazon, AirBnB to Uber, operate globally, they are advancing a universal ideal for customer relationships in the service sector. As businesses and entire economic sectors change drastically, at dizzying speed, they are exerting adaptive pressure on public administrations – and public

³¹¹ This refers to the yearly Digital Economy and Society Index which is published by the European Union and eGovernment Surveys of the United Nations.

administrations all over the world react.³¹²

Secondly, the size and complexity of a digital transformation agenda for public services makes it unlikely that this is only a fad. Compared to the, in hindsight, quirky and small-scale eGovernment projects that dominated the 1990s and early 2000s – for example, creating websites for public authorities or preparing municipal budgets in online Wikis with citizens’ participation – digitizing public service provision is not just a single project. It cannot be done and dealt with in a brief amount of time. Consider for instance the enormous to-do-list that Margetts and Dunleavy (2013) sketched for what they consider the agenda of eGovernment’s second wave, ranging from automated service provision to algorithmic governance. Embarking on a digital transformation agenda will produce ongoing reform efforts for many years to come.

Thirdly, digital public services have by now become a concrete enough reform agenda that practitioners grasp what needs to be done. This is in positive contrast to much vaguer scientific suggestions that public administration “erect a Neo-Weberian State” (Lynn, 2008; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004a), create “Public Value” (O’Flynn, 2007), engage in “Good governance” (Rothstein, 2012; Weiss, 2000) or, even more dubious, “Network governance” (Sørensen & Torfing, 2016). Progress with digital public service reform has become a well-defined reform programme, at least for European countries, by virtue of the EC, which actively pushes member states to fulfil neatly formulated goals, which are in turn supported by a wide range of hard metrics.³¹³ We have come to a point where digital public service reform policies are measured at the output and outcome level, which can be taken as an indicator that the field is invested in this reform agenda. With this background, the suggestion of a new universal administrative reform paradigm around digital public services (or digital governance) is more than credible.

NORMATIVE INSTITUTIONS DETERMINE THE SPEED OF DIGITIZATION. POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS DETERMINE ITS SHAPE.

Based on the empirical findings of this study, it should be acknowledged that digital-era governance may be universally influential, but reform activities and results are far from universal. There appears

³¹² Consider for instance the ubiquity of public digitization strategies, which are being issued by governments all over Europe, as well as the EU itself. See, for example: The EU initiatives “Shaping Europe’s Digital Future strategy”, the “White Paper on Artificial Intelligence”, the “Strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe” and the corresponding “eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020”, Germany’s “Digitalisierung gestalten”, Italy’s “2025 National Innovation Plan” or Poland’s “Integrated State Informatization Program (2014-2022)”.

³¹³ The annual publication of the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), for example, serves precisely this purpose: to measure, compare and comment upon member states’ progress in the areas of both private and public digitization efforts.

to be some unspoken assumption that a digital-era reform paradigm for public administration applies to each and every country in more or less the same manner. Or, to be more precise, digital-era governance is considered a trajectory of convergence because its challenges, and hence its policy proposals, are expected to be applicable to many countries in a relatively similar manner (Batubara et al., 2018; Fishenden & Thompson, 2013; Lips, 2019; Margetts, 2008; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013). It is possible that in the implementation of digital public services, governments will choose to aspire to the same goals and copy generously from influential private-sector companies as well as from one another. In the long run, this would consequently come down to noticeable institutional convergence. And indeed, between those who argue in favour of path dependent divergence for the future of our administrative systems and those who search for evidence of convergence, digital-era-governance is recognized as a converging force (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, et al., 2006; Dunleavy, Margetts, Tinkler, et al., 2006; Margetts, 2008). But for now at least, the emergent empirical data suggest otherwise, as there appears to be a lot of divergence within the convergence. Much like the varied implementation of NPM reforms across different countries (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019, pp. 329–343), pre-existing administrative institutional settings shape the scope, speed and success of digital public service reform – at least for the foreseeable future.

That is because the institutional factors which are predominantly responsible for digital reform trajectories in European countries are the politico-administrative structures and the administrations' cultural traditions. Both are, as far as institutions go, very difficult to change. In fact, the most fundamental elements of politico-administrative structures – like the unitarian or federal order of a country – are deeply enshrined in national constitutions and thus close to immovable. It is true, however, that Germany changed its Basic Law in order to better implement the digital modernization projects that its politicians so desired. But even such an ambitious correction could not rectify the historically decentralized administrative structures to a state where digitization would have turned into a straightforward affair for Germany. This is because the administrative structures of established nation states are the crystallisation of decades and, often enough, centuries. They have seen the emergence of thousands of administrative services, the founding of institutional actors and the allocation of one to the other. For that reason, simplifying even the most superficial element of a country's administrative structure, namely the question of which institutional body is in charge of what, is messy. While the Danish experience of reorganising public services between its state tiers and merging municipalities was a comparatively successful project that in turn yielded a more manageable administrative structure for the purpose of digitization, France and Germany have struggled in vain to reign in the fragmentation of their public services for decades and are thus producing a more fragmented digital service landscape. Moreover, Denmark benefited from institutional legacies that

date back far into the past. As early as the 1960s, Denmark implemented a national citizen number that proved extremely helpful for today's digitization projects.³¹⁴ Likewise, early mergers of formerly fragmented public IT service providers in the 1970s meant that implementation structures were coherent and thus better prepared to produce coherent results. One could even go so far back as the 1600s during which time Denmark reorganized itself into Europe's most extreme absolutism. In all, a long-standing legacy lends itself to accepting a centrally coordinated state.³¹⁵

Based on our limited empirical evidence it could be theorized that fragmented administrative structures reproduce themselves in a fragmented digital public service scheme. Territorial fragmentation translates into a territorially structured online offer of public services. This effect should, for example, show in countries with federal structures, a high degree of territorial decentralization and/or a high degree of guaranteed freedom of action in the provision of public services at the local level. Horizontal fragmentation – that is, fragmentation between a state's departmental jurisdictions – leads to a service offer on the internet that is structured along policy lines. This depends on the degree of agencification and privatization among the actors who provide public services, the level of formalized or informal horizontal collaboration as well as on how far administrative bodies are in charge of their own IT and how concentrated public IT providers are. It is possibly for this reason that the United Kingdom ranks fairly low on international eGovernment rankings, even though Anglo-Saxon countries tend to achieve good results. But the United Kingdom heeded the call of the NPM with particular fervour and outsourced many state functions to agencies and private providers in the past 40 years. To this must be added the devolution of Scotland and Wales, which have further exacerbated the fragmentation of British administrative structures. So, the NPM reformists' recommendation to decentralize might have had a negative long-term effect on the country's ability to implement public digitization reforms.

While administrative structures are near impossible to simplify, the key to producing a coherent digital public service offer nonetheless must thus lie with administrative culture. And yet, wisdom from management consulting tells us that organisational culture is very hard to change. Even provided it can be done, cultural change generally takes a terribly long time. This is why, when the implementation of an IT project trips over cultural legacies, those in charge are usually better advised

³¹⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20090119165822/http://cpr.dk/cpr/site.aspx?p=198&t=visartikel&Articleid=4327>, accessed 01 March 2021

³¹⁵ The Danish may be accepting of central coordination, but this is in no way to be confused with top-down, centralized and uniform decision-making. To the contrary, cooperation and consensus are another highly important feature of the Danish politico-administrative system.

to try and find a workaround in the structures or processes of the organisation. With state structures however, things are different because they are particularly stiff due to their constitutional protection. So, if digital government is to be implemented with success, something in the administrative culture has to adapt, because this is the more feasible route.

We learned through the case studies that gaps in the administrative structure can be bridged through voluntary cooperation and genuine service orientation in order to achieve a more coherent landscape of public IT solutions for citizens. Denmark was a prime example of this type of cooperation. Of course, Denmark has also benefited from its unitary political system, but even with a unitary state organisation, Danish administrative services are spread across three state tiers and local government traditionally has had a far-reaching scope in managing them. According to those involved with digital public service reform in Denmark, the key to producing an accessible digital one-stop-shop, like *borger.dk*, and an accompanying support infrastructure with digital national unifiers, has been a highly digital-friendly administrative culture. A genuine service-orientation that is more preoccupied with administrative procedures that appeal to the citizens than pleasing administrative interests; a collaborative spirit that favours collective solutions over agency-specific or municipal solo-efforts; the lack of sharp distinction between the private and the public realm and the absence of concerted hierarchy between the two; and, lastly, a goals-oriented pragmatic manner that is inspired by the ideals of efficiency and quality. These characteristics have been further strengthened in the last 15 years of digital reform activity. But they were able to build on a sound foundation because these cultural traits were already part of the Nordic administrative tradition, and are shared with the Anglo-Saxon administrative tradition.³¹⁶

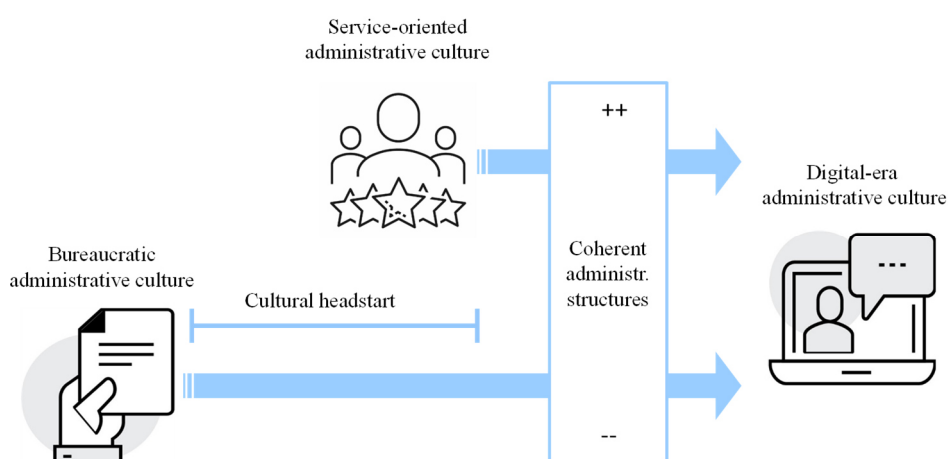
These traits have been described as conditional for successful digital public service implementation by experts from all three country cases. The Danish stressed the positive role their administrative culture played for their digital public service reform projects. By contrast, the French and the Germans deplored how their administrative culture hampered eGovernment reform projects and how it needed to change. They acknowledged that those traits demand a great deal from France and Germany because of their bureaucratic administrative traditions. For these two countries, the very bureaucratic character of their administrative traditions has stood in the way of digital public service reform. Their administrative culture is marked by a legalistic orientation, formal and hierarchical management, a sharp distinction between the public and the private sphere and an asymmetrical

³¹⁶ They also differ in other respects, but those noted above are a common ground between the two.

relationship between citizens and state. Since both sides of the cultural gulf agreed on the positive (Denmark) and negative (France and Germany) effects of having or lacking certain digital-friendly cultural traits, it is fair to assume that other countries may share a similar experience.

A first theoretical conclusion is, that Nordic and Anglo-Saxon countries have an easier time when adapting their administrative traditions to digital-era governance and are thus faster and more successful in the implementation of digital public services than their Napoleonic and Germanic counterparts. But it should be noted that there are competing definitions and country groupings for administrative regimes (for more on this, see Chapter 2). Moreover, the most popularised regimes span only a small number of mostly European countries. Even more importantly, there are always exceptions to any analytical grouping. For instance, the Netherlands are often included in the Weberian/Germanic administrative tradition, but are renowned for a highly service-oriented, NPM-friendly administrative culture. So, from a theoretical point of view it may be more advisable to avoid the amalgamation of different dimensions into administrative systems and instead rephrase the conclusion in a more specific manner: the closer the established administrative tradition resembles the bureaucratic ideal, the more arduous it will be for a country to embrace digital public service reform. In particular, those administrative regimes that run on formal rules and administrative law should be expected to care less about swiftly embarking on the road to digital-era governance. Or, to phrase it in positive terms, a service-oriented administrative culture provides a head start in public sector digitization (Figure 12).

FIGURE 12 | HEAD START TOWARDS DIGITAL-ERA ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE



But by now, islands of cultural change have emerged even among the most bureaucratic of public administrations. These islands often originated in the project implementation teams of those who were put in charge of digitizing public services, and have continued to grow from there. They aspire to

the digital-era administrative culture which has already been largely attained by countries like Denmark. In France, this cultural change has been actively brought upon by the heroic action of outsiders and a few insiders who were willing to invest in them. The heroic acts of individuals were then cleverly institutionalized through the network of *beta.gouv*, HR projects that attract private-sector talent and state start-up incubators that aim at creating ambassadors for cultural change. The noticeable acceleration in French digital public service outcomes after 2013 indicates that cultural change really did make a difference for digital-era governance. It also proves that even the most barren-seeming administrative cultures are malleable if enough effort is applied. For Germany, this observation suggests hope. What would be needed there now, is a similarly heroic intervention from above. The foundation of the DigitalService4Germany in 2020, a non-profit project for skill-sharing between the public and private sector turned into a state start-up by the former head of the Chancellery Helge Braun, might just be that blossom of change.³¹⁷

If successful public service digitization hinges more on managing a cultural change, then because mending the state's structures is not a feasible option, it is advisable for the agents of change to focus on altering the institutions that shape administrative culture. Some institutions that form administrations' organisational culture are more deeply embedded than others. The legalistic orientation stems to a large part from the existence of a large body of administrative law and a special court system to uphold them. This is a path of dependence that is probably impossible to overturn. Other institutions are more pliable, however. Systems for hiring and training can be more easily adapted to bring in relevant new skills and competences, as well as people with different mindsets. Continuing along reform paths in order to break up the rank- and career-based system of managing public personnel and employ people for positions based on job-specific requirements could also help to strategically hire and promote a different set of public officials. The more sheltered the civil service remains from adaptation, the longer its path to transforming into a digital-era administrative culture.

BUT WHY CHANGE IN THE FIRST PLACE?

It might be possible to end the study right here, with a resumé of the factors that shaped the speed and results of digital change in western public administrations. As shown above, it is a combination of administrative structures and administrative culture. But from a theoretical point of view, the development towards a digitized public administration begs the question of why this change happens

³¹⁷ Bundesregierung, 17. September 2020, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/faq-digitalservice4germany-1788778>, accessed 03.10.2022

in the first place. In contrast to private businesses, administrations face no competitive pressure to modernize. As has been demonstrated in great detail, most public administrations have no in-built interest in customizing their processes to citizens. Political actors certainly have the power to prescribe a digital make-over for their public bureaucracies, but they cannot drag them all the way through implementation. For digitization projects to succeed, administrations have to be at least complicit in their own transformation.

Looking at the current move towards digital-era administration through a historical comparative lens can provide some insight into the motivation for institutional change. While it is true that institutional theories provide ample reasons to explain inertia (March & Olsen, 1984; Pierson, 2000), younger strains of neo-institutional writing also aim at accounting for gradual change. It is debatable whether the digital revolution presents an exogenous shock that would open up the field for explanations like the “garbage can model”, “punctured equilibria” and “windows of opportunity” (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Kingdon & Stano, 1984). All of these play with the image of a frozen institutional landscape that is thawed by a drastic, short-lived event which temporarily allows ambitious actors to push through their ideas, which in normal times would have been unfeasible. But considering for how long eGovernment has been discussed by scholars and practitioners of public administration alike, one can scarcely still consider it a “shock” in the narrow sense of the word. Furthermore, digitization has so far lacked the attention-grabbing characteristic of a momentary crisis – it simply has been going on for too long by now. A window of opportunity that lasts for more than a decade cannot reasonably be applied to theories that focus on time-pressured political action.

This brings us to those theories of institutional change that try to explain slow, gradual change through time and which have been prominently discussed in the past 15 years by the likes of Paul Pierson, Kathleen Thelen and James Mahoney (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Pierson 2011; Thelen and Mahoney 2015). These researchers conceived of a number of different types of processes for gradual change. One of the categorizations put forward by Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen (2005) differentiates between displacement, layering, drift and conversion. Of those four categories, institutional change layering is the most applicable to our observations. It is defined as follows: “Layering occurs when new rules are attached to existing ones, thereby changing the ways in which the original rules structure behaviour” (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 15). We can consider the legislation that made the digital provision of public services into a mandatory project as a form of layering because it added to current routines of administrative practice. The attitudinal changes that were precipitated by the implementation of these innovative digital projects set in

motion internal debates among the public services of all three case studies about an administrative culture fit for the future.

But Streeck and Thelen's explanations focus on formal legislation specifically and the effect of regulatory change more generally. The historical analyses that were conducted for our case studies revealed, however, that soft law or formal regulation often served to motivate public administrations. But in all cases, these regulatory acts were elements of a longer "causal chain" that added up "cumulatively". In Germany, for example, the release of the Online Access Law was described by many expert witnesses as akin to being pushed across a "threshold" beyond which things finally got going much faster.³¹⁸ These concepts stem from *Politics in Time* (Pierson, 2011) where they have been discussed as variants of slow-moving causal change processes. Furthermore, all of these theories of institutional change are built around political actors as the moving force. Even when they are being discussed as veto players – that is to say, as the hurdle for change – it is politicians, parties, parliaments or governments that take the spotlight. Public administration rarely features in these theories of change or inertia. But our case studies of states' digital transformation have demonstrated how far administrative discretion can go. This implies that changes in policy that align with the interests or routines of the bureaucracies in charge of implementing them are more likely to come into force. Policy change, on the other hand, that goes against the grain for public servants can die a slow death in implementation. Radical change of, say, of income tax rates, would most likely be implemented by tax administrations without much critique. New policy to change the service culture of tax administrations, much less so.

And yet, administrations have embarked on this transition in great numbers. Indeed, the appearance of digital transformation projects across many highly diverse countries indicates that there might be a powerful force at work, which inspires similar causal chains in different places. A normative shift across the public administrations of the western world appears to be taking place. We should note that the cultural transition – the benefits of which we are witnessing today – is by no means the first paradigmatic change that public administrations have undergone. Public administration has its historical roots in the collection of taxes in early feudal societies and in supporting the increasingly professional warfare of the early modern era. The bureaucratic public administration we know today was a big step up from far smaller administrations of limited scope, which tended to be made up of low-ranking aristocracy for several centuries. It has been argued that the professional bureaucratic

³¹⁸ Interview nr 35, min. 11; interview nr. 37, min 18.

public administration we know today did not develop incidentally in parallel with the emergence of industrial, capitalist nation states, but was effectively caused by this large-scale socio-economic evolution. The logic behind this argument is that the far more complex societies and business worlds of the 19th and 20th century required well-organized support from the state, which thereby created new administrative domains that went far beyond the states' earlier core activities of taxation and defence to include administrations in charge of the economy, culture, education, the labour market and so forth (Gladden, 2019). But the shift from feudal and early modern administration to the classic bureaucratic ideal which Max Weber described in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1921) not only broadened the administrative scope of action, but also changed the mode and quality of its services. According to Weber, the process of rationalization that gripped modern economies and societies spurred a comparable rationalization in public administrations. In the same way that the industrial society of the late 19th and early 20th century found its elective affinity in a rationalistic Weberian bureaucracy, so now might public administrations feel the pull of the current socio-economic revolution: the digitization of our economies and lives. The factory-like ideal of public administration that Max Weber described as fitting for his day and age is starting to fall out of time. It is possible that bureaucrats today feel this disconnect and are heeding the call of the digital era.

Some institutions are harder to mould than others. Usually, the structures of an organisation are more easily changed than its cultural disposition. In the case of state structures, this is not the case, because they are usually constitutionally enshrined, requiring super-majorities for a make-over. Moreover, administrative actors have an inherent interest in upholding their responsibilities, as these are bundled together with financial resources and ultimately power. That's why administrative structures barely budged under the adaptive pressure of economic and societal digitization, but administrative culture has started to change for the better. Under the adaptive pressure of digitization, administrations tended to evolve through a change in "soft" (i.e. normative) instead of "hard" (i.e. political) institutions. In some countries, the cultural legacies of the respective administrative tradition prefigured the changes that are imposed by digital-era administration and gave them a head start in their cultural transformation. But sooner or later, public administrations will have to come to terms with the new realities of our increasingly digitized economies and societies, regardless of their administrative tradition.

CONCLUSION

The case studies revealed that the administrative structure's degree of fragmentation and the pervasive administrative culture in the civil service determined whether a state was able to produce well-functioning and attractive digital public services in a timely fashion or not. On the structural level,

it is determined by the degree with which administrative bodies across different state levels (national, regional, local) and ministerial portfolios (labour and social affairs, health, taxes and so forth) provide their public services in a collaborative – and hence coherent – or independent – and hence fragmented – manner. Financial resources, the effective organization of the project implementation, and the pre-existence of central IT infrastructure were important aspects through which structures manifested themselves. Coherent administrative structures meant that financial resources could be pooled, while fragmented administrative structures led to tighter finances for each governmental unit undertaking the implementation, and risked inventing the same solutions multiple times through different state actors. A legacy of generally fragmented administrative action produced fragmented governance for implementing digital public services. This tended to be closely tied to legacies of national IT infrastructures. A coherent approach to organizing public services includes questions around organizing IT support. A legacy of strong administrative cooperation like in Denmark thus tends to be mirrored by a consolidated IT infrastructure and the installation of national digital unifiers, like a comprehensive eID or data sharing across administrations.

Culturally, bureaucratic norms can stand in the way of designing user-friendly digital services while a service-oriented administrative culture helps with the transition towards digital-era governance. Legalism, a separation between the public and the private sphere, and the glorification of the state as a higher entity are all norms that can potentially come into conflict in the course of digitization. A bureaucratic administrative culture values the standpoint of the administration over that of its citizens. It does not recognize public bodies as service providers and consequently sees little need to redesign its services as long as they work fine for the administration itself. Reaching out towards citizens to conceive of services from their point of view is a novel perspective for a bureaucratic organisation to take. Its focus is on ensuring impartiality and procedural correctness. A customer's perspective – happiness with service quality and ease of use – are not built into bureaucratic organisations in the same way as they are into private-sector businesses.

With the external forces of society and economy exerting adaptive pressure on public administration, administrative systems face transformative change. In the same way that the industrial revolution forced public administrations to pass through the same rationalistic transformation, the digital revolution radically changes the demands that public administrations face. They have to become digital public service providers on a par with their private-sector counterparts. As their structural organisation remains fixed in an often constitutionally protected or otherwise immovable institutional setting, a change in attitudes could be the way forward in order to achieve ambitious state-wide digitization projects. Foregoing this transformation would endanger the legitimacy of public

administration in the long run because of a growing gap between a perceived normal standard of services and an increasingly outdated public service. Public administrations have recognized the need for modernization, sometimes thanks to the initiatives of political actors. Countries which build on a history of a service-oriented administrative tradition, like the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic types, have a shorter way to go in order to make their public administrations culturally fit for the digital era. By contrast, countries which come from a bureaucratic administrative tradition face a more substantial transformation and will probably require more time to adapt to the needs of digital-era governance.

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ANNEXE

A AGGREGATED INTERVIEW AND SURVEY RESULTS

Expert interviews form the primary data of this thesis. They are supplemented with a small-sized survey featuring the same set of individuals. The interview guide including the survey questionnaire as well the coding scheme and the dataset are included in the annexe of the thesis. The survey and interviews were conducted with active participants in digital public service reform efforts in Denmark, France and Germany. In total, 53 interviews were conducted, ranging between 45 to 90 minutes each, running up over 50 hours of raw material. The following sections document how the data was gathered and analysed and provides the reader with a succinct overview of the results, organized by country.

TABLE 9 | INTERVIEW PARTNERS' AFFILIATIONS

Organisation	Count
Interest group	9
Service provider (IT, Consulting)	11
Public administration – national level	19
Public administration – meso level	3
Public administration – local level	10
Politics	1
Total	53

In the selection of interview partners, relevant types of actor were identified as the first step in covering different perspectives on the policy implementation processes of digital public service reform. Desk research and two preliminary interviews (not included in the analysis) were used to identify relevant state actors at the national and local level as well as in the surrounding fields of politics, public administration, interest groups and think tanks and private-sector service providers. Around half of the individual interview partners were selected through snowballing and personal referrals. The other half was contacted directly via LinkedIn, Twitter or contact details published on governmental websites. Direct participation in the implementation of digital public services was a hard criterion for selection. Interviews were conducted along an open, structured questionnaire via telephone or videoconferencing tools in the native language of the interview partner for France and Germany and in English for Denmark. Given the Danish participants' excellent proficiency in the English language, no relevant distortions are to be assumed for the that country's interview data. Moreover, all interview

partners received their interview guides and survey questionnaire, translated into their mother tongue, ahead of time in order to prepare for the scheduled meeting.

Alongside open-ended questions, each interview featured a survey section with closed questions. The answers to the open questions were coded by hand according to a deductive coding scheme that directly mirrors the survey items. Thanks to this complementarity, both types of answer can be used to strengthen one another through triangulation. Experts were asked via both open interview questions and closed survey questions to evaluate the perceived success of digital public service implementation and to assess which factors they experienced as responsible. In order to specify the scope of “digital public service reform”, the experts were primed to focus their narrative on a notable implementation project. In Denmark, this was the *borger.dk*; for France, *service-public.fr*; for Germany, the common portal and service infrastructure was the Online Access Law.

GERMANY

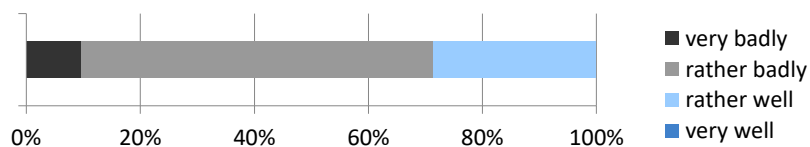
For the purposes of this case study, 21 expert interviews were conducted with professionals in charge of implementing digital public services throughout public administration in Germany. The breakdown of interviewees is as follows:

- Interest groups (5)
- Public administration, including local and the regional level as well as specialized agencies (8)
- Private-sector service providers to public administration (7)
- Politics (1)

In the eyes of the interview partners, the implementation of digital public services received a predominantly negative assessment. When asked how they felt the construction of a nationwide digital public service portal in Germany had gone so far, more than two thirds (N=15) stated it had been going rather badly or even very badly. None thought that it was going well.

FIGURE 13 | ASSESSMENT OF PAST IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS | GERMANY

How has the construction of a nationwide digital service portal in Germany been going so far?

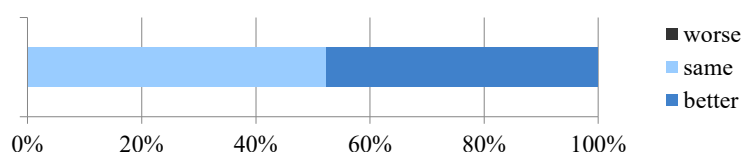


Source: Own survey; results from Germany, 2019, N=21

When asked about the future outlook, about half of the interviewed experts (N=11) felt optimistic about future implementation. The other half believed that things would stay the same. No one expected policy implementation to take a turn for the worse, as compared to the current situation. Those with a more positive outlook thought that the experience of public service digitization would prepare Germany better for all further, upcoming policy implementation steps. Furthermore, they observed budding cultural change in the direction of a more digitally-savvy and service-oriented German public administration. This made them hopeful about smoother policy implementation in the future. On the other hand, those who stressed the negative roles played by German federalism, the fragmented public IT landscape and local self-governance for policy implementation were doubtful that change would happen.

FIGURE 14 | OUTLOOK TOWARDS FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS | GERMANY

How will the construction go on in the future compared to now ?



Source: Own survey; results from Germany, 2019, N=21

Table 10 summarizes both the survey results as well as the responses to the open-ended questions about which factors the experts experienced as responsible for implementation success or failure. The response frequency indicates how often a success factor has been mentioned in response to the open questions across all German interviews. The survey average displays the average response rate for the item in the survey section of all German interviews. The average reflects the degree to which this item was stated as being primarily responsible for the success of the implementation of digital public

services. The scale ranges from 0 (disagree fully) to 3 (agree fully). A response average of more than 2 can hence be interpreted as a general agreement regarding the item's relative importance to implementation success. Since the coding scheme for the open-ended questions mirrors the survey items, both response types can be matched and compared for greater validity. For this purpose, any response item that was mentioned by at least three experts and that also received a survey average of at least 2.0 is considered meaningful.

TABLE 10 | EXPLANATORY FACTORS BEHIND IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS/FAILURE | GERMANY

Failure/Success depended mostly on...	Response frequency	Survey average
Project organisation	15	2.2
State structure (federalism)	13	2.1
Financial resources	5	2.1
Attitude towards digitization in the civil service	4	2.0
Openness to change in the civil service	3	2.2
Local self-governance	7	1.8
Central infrastructure	2	1.0
State size	2	2.1
Civil service executives	1	1.6
Data protection rules	1	2.1
Suitability of laws for digitization	1	2.2
Politicians	0	1.3
Civil service middle management and employees	0	1.4
Attitude towards digitization	0	1.7
Access towards fast internet	0	1.7

Source: Own survey; results from Germany, 2019, N=21, (3=agree fully, 2=agree somewhat, 1=disagree somewhat, 0=disagree fully).

Five explanatory factors are supported by both the survey as well as the interviews. The way in which the implementation was organized (“project organisation”), the federal structure of the state, the financial resources, and cultural characteristics of the civil service, namely its openness to change and its attitude towards digitization.

Project organisation received a survey average of 2.2, making it the most relevant factor for succeeding (or failing) at digital public service implementation. Moreover, it was the most frequently mentioned factor: when asked why they felt digital public service implementation was failing or succeeding, 15 of the 21 German experts talked about aspects of the “project organisation” code group. For the experts, “project organisation” included aspects such as decentralized and confusing

governance for implementation, the consensual principle for any decision-making among the IT Planning Council and the choice to forego central solutions that would have been rolled out across the entire country in a more template-oriented approach. Many experts mentioned how the seemingly innocuous technological decision against federal standards in lieu of “interoperable” but decentralized solutions proved impracticable for the purpose of implementation. Many of those involved reflected critically upon the faults of the project organisation but stated that its initial set-up was dictated more by political considerations than by practical ones.

Tightly connected with the project’s organisation is Germany’s federal [state structure](#). More than half of all experts (13) felt that the federal character of Germany had influenced the implementation process as well as the design of the country’s digital public services. Their assessment is supported by a survey average of 2.1. Even those who described Germany’s federal and decentralized structures positively often complained about the noxious effects the federal administrative and political structures had on the results of the implementation process. Some specified that the dispersed landscape of public IT providers was a legacy of federalism and local self-governance which rendered the construction of the German public service portal particularly difficult. This was because they blocked universal national solutions in order to defend their self-interests – in particular their prior investments and standards – out of fear of becoming obsolete. Consolidating the many IT service providers was seen as a prohibitively difficult and politically undesirable endeavour. The IT Planning Council or the decentralized approach to constructing and hosting hundreds of digital public services (“*Verteiltes Vorgehen*”) was felt to reflect decentralized authority over the analogue public services. For that reason, the rather complicated approach to organizing this state digitization project was interpreted by most experts as no coincidence but rather a direct consequence of Germany’s state structure.

[Financial resources](#), the third most frequently mentioned factor, was similarly tied to the federal state structure. With a survey average of 2.1 and five experts explicitly talking about financial difficulties, financial resources have been felt to influence the success of digital public service implementation in Germany – much more so than in Denmark or France, where financial issues were rarely mentioned in the interviews. This is noteworthy as, given the country’s wealth and the economies of scale it could exploit by means of its large size, Germany does not necessarily lack the funds for investment into public IT. And yet, several experts noted how the decentralized approach posed a financial problem for many municipalities. Multiple development costs were judged to further add to the bill. While IT development may not have been a financial obstacle to a federal ministry, the costs were judged to be prohibitive for German municipalities. Thus, some experts noticed how the

decision to forego central development and roll-out created some financial trouble for the German implementation project.

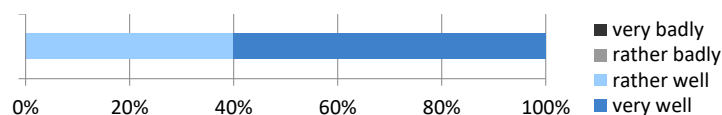
Civil service [attitudes towards change in general](#) and [digitization](#) in particular was the fourth and last factor which was repeatedly mentioned as highly impactful for building successful digital public services. In conjunction, these cultural factors were mentioned in four and three interviews respectively and are supported by survey averages of 2.0 and above. Interview partners agreed in their assessment that members of the German civil service naturally tend to be hesitant towards change, fearful of making mistakes and thus generally disinclined towards digital innovation. These attitudes were felt to be culturally ingrained in the bureaucratic style of German public administration. But thanks to tentative, positive experiences during the implementation of the very first digital public services, experts also expressed that attitudes were shifting noticeably in a positive direction. But be they positive or negative, the experts agreed that attitudes towards digitization, and change in general, in the civil service at large had a large impact on the success of widespread digitization in the German public administration. The experts noticed how successful digitization projects in the administration necessitated and, in turn also facilitated the taking of a different perspective on citizens – from subjugated recipients of services to valued customers – and on the acceptability of making mistakes. A slight shift away from bureaucratic attitudes, particularly among younger staff was observed or projected in the future.

DENMARK

Data for the Danish case study stem from 15 semi-structured expert interviews. All 15 experts were selected for their personal involvement with the implementation of digital public services in Denmark. The sample included public executives, IT developers, project managers and administrative officers.

FIGURE 15 | ASSESSMENT OF PAST IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS | DENMARK

In summary: How has the development process of the nationwide public service portal Borger.dk been going so far?

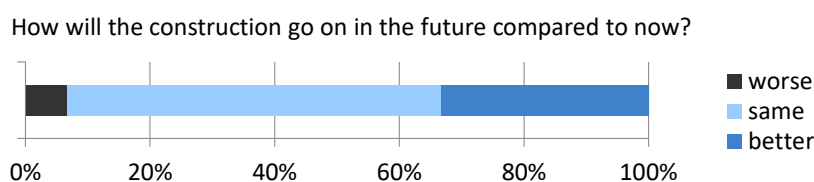


Source: Own survey; results from Denmark, 2019, N=15

The supreme success of the Danish public service portal was confirmed by the overwhelmingly positive

assessment of the interview partners displayed in Figure 15.³¹⁹ When asked about the extent to which they thought the construction of a nationwide digital service portal in Denmark had been successful, all 15 of them agreed that it had been going “rather well” (6) or even “very well” (9). The positive consensus in this survey question reflected the overwhelmingly positive manner with which all respondents discussed the implementation of digital public services in Denmark.

FIGURE 16 | OUTLOOK TOWARDS FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS | DENMARK



Source: Own survey; results from Denmark, 2019, N=15

The majority (9) of the interviewed experts expected an even better future for their country’s digital public service portal (see Figure 16). Five people assumed things would stay the same; one respondent feared that future construction work would be worse than in the past. This expert felt that the national Digitization Agency had accumulated a lot of power over the course of the years and was now using it for an increasingly centralist and top-down implementation style. According to them, the increasing centralization was suffocating the collaborative implementation style which had made *borger.dk* such a success. Those who, on the other hand, had a more positive outlook often described a benign circle in which the digitization activities of the past 15 years had prepared a stable foundation for further advances. Some pointed to increased professionalization and institutionalization in the project organisation, others to the overwhelmingly positive attitude towards public digitization efforts among the civil service that had been born out of past successes. Most notably, five respondents explained their optimistic outlook as originating in the benefits they expected to accrue from the installation of IT infrastructure for secure but easy data sharing between administrative bodies. To all of them, “better” implementation was defined by ever-increasing user-friendliness, which would be reached thanks to this kind of national infrastructure that would make intelligent use of data so that citizens could be offered custom-fit services without even having to fill in an application.

³¹⁹ N=15 : Interest groups (2), public administration - local level (5), public administration – national level (2), public administration – national agency (5), service provider (1).

TABLE 11 | EXPLANATORY FACTORS BEHIND IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS/FAILURE | DENMARK

Failure/Success depended mostly on...	Response frequency	Survey average
Project organisation	12	2.6
Attitude towards digitization	7	2.8
Civil service middle management and employees	4	2.5
Central infrastructure	4	2.2
Financial resources	4	2.0
Attitude towards digitization in civil service	3	2.4
Politicians	3	1.9
Civil service executives	2	2.0
Openness to change in the civil service	2	2.0
Access to fast internet	1	1.6
Local self-governance	1	1.4
State structure	1	1.4
Suitability of laws for digitization	--	1.9
User-friendly design for administrative clerks	--	1.6
State size	--	1.2
Data protection rules	--	0.9

Source: Own survey; results from Denmark, 2020, N=15, (3=agree fully, 2=agree somewhat, 1=disagree somewhat, 0=disagree fully).

Table 11 summarizes both the structured expert interviews as well the small survey that was conducted at the end of each interview. The table gives an overview of the factors that experts said had been primarily responsible for success or failure during the implementation of digital public service portal *borger.dk*. When prompted for reasons behind the Danish success story, the spontaneous answer that was given most often was superior [project organisation](#). Twelve out of 15 interview partners lauded the governance structure behind the decision-making and implementation process of *borger.dk*. The consensus is strengthened by a survey average of 2.6 which indicates clear support for the statement that project organisation was a major component in a successful digital implementation journey. Major policy decisions around the portal were made consensually by a group of representatives from all state levels. This included an early co-optation of municipal stakeholders. Virtually all of those who were interviewed acknowledged the collaborative spirit that underpinned the organisation of the implementation project. Once decisions were made however, major technological developments took place at the central level and were enforced in a top-down, mandatory manner by a well-staffed and highly competent central body (the Digital Task Force, later the Digitization Agency). "We weren't asked to do things, but we were told to do things," explained

the Head of Citizen Services from a mid-sized municipality.³²⁰ The council which acted as the implementation project's managing body drew its power partly from the high-ranking Steering Committee to which it reported and partly from the fact that it was situated in the most powerful of ministries, the Ministry of Finance. One interview partner recalled that "we could just call the Ministry of Finance and make a meeting with a high-level executive and they would make a deal for us ONLY because our ministry had the right to cut the budget if they [some other state actor] did not behave. If I had called from the Telecom Agency they would have stalled"³²¹ (Kirchhoff Hertzum 2019). This somewhat paradoxical combination of eye-to-eye collaboration between national, regional and local administration when decisions had to be made, and tough love when it came to seeing them through, formed the backbone of Danish implementation governance.

The focus on the chosen project governance may explain why the Danish did not attribute much relevance to their given politico-administrative structures. Danish respondents felt neither that their relatively modest *state size* (0 mentions and 1.2 survey average) nor their *unitary state structure* (1 mention and 1.4 survey average) had made the implementation of digital public services easier. State size was said to carry both negative and positive effects, as a larger size would have meant greater economies of scale – something from which big countries like Germany or France would have benefited. On the other hand, Danes expressed that state size in terms of citizen numbers really made no big difference because the number of ministries and other state actors involved in a project for digital state reform was judged to be more or less the same for any given country. For those reasons Danish respondents rejected the notion that their state's modest size had carried important advantages. As to the benefits of their unitary political system, experts explained that the administrative reality of Denmark was decentralized and not centralized service provision. Yet, their legacy of strong and capable *local self-government* was neither discussed as an obvious benefit nor as a hindrance (1 mention and 1.4 survey average). This is in stark contrast with Germany, where strongly entrenched local self-government was said to have been a great obstacle to a coherent digital public service scheme for the nation. The Danish secret, again, was the excellent management of their decentralized administrative structures. In contrast with Germany, where communities were left to their own devices and spun freely, Danish *kommuner* were tightly organized by their own interest organisation KL. Through KL, all of Denmark's municipalities were included at the top-level of the project organisation, where they held a seat on the Steering Committee. This was how savvy project

³²⁰ Interview nr. 3, min. 3.

³²¹ Interview nr. 6, min. 10.

organisation ensured the inclusion of an otherwise decentralized local government which in turn committed the municipalities (and regions) to the top-down decisions they had to follow in the implementation of *borger.dk*.

The coherent organisation of administrative IT asserted itself as two distinct factors for success which were discussed as relevant by some of the Danish experts: financial resources and central IT infrastructure. Four respondents discussed the important role of financial resources, although in the survey these figured as barely relevant (2.0). Why was that? Respondents did not recount any financial shortages in the implementation of digital public services in Denmark. But they affirmed that sufficient **financial resources** had been important in order to finance the expensive development and maintenance of public IT solutions. Given the relatively small size of Denmark, the efficient use of public funds had been key. This is why the prospect of mutualizing the costs for hiring IT skills and developing new software solutions motivated the coherent project organisation to a notable degree. Scarce financial resources were even considered to have inspired the entire policy package of digitizing public services for Danish citizens in the first place, the reason being that administrative automation was seen as a valuable tool with which to keep the generous Danish welfare state financially sustainable while conserving the broad service offer.³²²

Central IT infrastructure was another by-product of the coherently managed Danish administrative landscape. This historical legacy was cited as highly responsible for the success of *borger.dk* by four out of 15 experts; a survey average of 2.2 supports this account. Among the specific institutional legacies that interview partners repeatedly mentioned were the centralized citizen registry founded in 1968 ("*centrale personenregister*"), the national citizen identifier, CPR, that was specified in 2000,³²³ the national online authentication method NemID, and the centralized state IT provider KMD, which was established in 1972.

Besides the factors above, which relate to organisational structures in one way or another, attitudinal factors make up another side of the Danish story. The second most relevant factor for successfully digitizing public services, in the eyes of the Danish experts, was the Danish **attitude towards digitization**. To this they added the **specific attitude towards digitization among the civil service**. Both factors received seven and three mentions respectively and were underpinned by high

³²² Interview nr. 1, nr. 3, nr.7, nr. 9, nr. 10.

³²³ Danish Act no. 426 on the Civil Registration System, 31 May 2000.

survey averages (2.8 and 2.4, respectively). In stark opposition to French and German respondents, Danish experts stated that pro-digital attitudes had been a major cause of implementation success for their country. In the interviews it was at times difficult to disentangle to what degree the digital affinity of Danish public servants was distinct from, and independent of, Danish society at large. Respondents acknowledged a particular proclivity among their fellow citizens for technological progress and expressed the view that this had encouraged politicians and public officials to adopt digital solutions for public service administration earlier than elsewhere. In contrast to this, some experts felt that public officials were but a subset of Danish society and consequently held the same perspectives. This became clear as the administrative officials who were interviewed for this study shed normative insight on how good governance should look from their own preferences as citizens or from what they felt that citizens desired. But positive attitudes towards digitization did not merely translate into an early start for digital public service implementation. More than that, to Danish experts they also meant a strict orientation towards citizens as users in their policy implementation. The radical focus on citizens, as opposed to on what would be convenient for the administrative machinery, was the key to excellent services according to many respondents. Those services in turn translated into high approval of digital public services and consequently high take-up rates among the Danish population.

Since positive attitudes within public administration at large played a sizeable role, the Danish [civil service's employees and middle management](#) were noted as an important factor behind the Danish success story by four experts (survey average 2.4). This is in contrast with the German and particularly the French experience, where single, high-ranking executives and politicians were considered more important than the breadth of public sector staff. Danish respondents stressed that particular skills in the areas of project management and IT development as well as a collaborative spirit and hands-on attitude were key factors for the successful implementation of digital public service projects. However, this factor featured slightly less prominently in the interviews than those mentioned above. Only four of 15 experts considered the qualities of civil service personnel as responsible for successful digital public services, but of those experts, two deemed them the single most important factor. It appears likely that many experts regarded the qualities of the civil servants as a derivative of one of the other factors mentioned above: effective project organisation, which made sure to install competent full-time units of specially selected or trained civil servants, and the positive attitude towards digitization which translated into proactive engagement in implementation efforts.

FRANCE

For the purpose of this case study, 17 expert interviews were conducted with professionals in charge

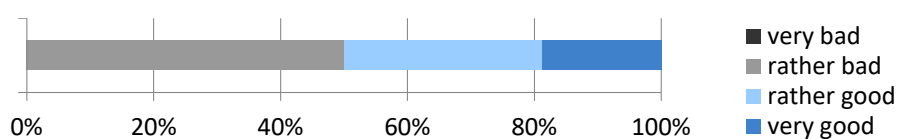
of implementing digital public services throughout public administration in France. The breakdown of the interviewed persons is as follows:

- Interest groups (2)
- Public administration, including the local and the regional level as well as specialized agencies (12)
- Freelance service providers to public administration (3)

In the eyes of the French interview partners, the implementation of digital public services received a mixed assessment. When asked how they felt the construction of a nationwide digital public service portal in France had gone so far, half of the respondents (N=8) stated it had been going rather badly. The other half felt it had gone rather well (N=5) or even very well (N=3). Those experts who worked for the state digitization agency were less favourable of the implementation than those who worked in the specialized digitization units of their respective department or ministerial portfolio. More importantly, experts' answers stressed the first phase of digital public service development or looked more to the recent past for their answer. Those who took into consideration the full spread of the past 20 years of implementation tended to answer that it had gone rather badly, whereas those who stressed the recent past tended to find it rather good or very good.

FIGURE 17 | ASSESSMENT OF PAST IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS | FRANCE

How has the construction of a nationwide digital public service portal in France been going so far?

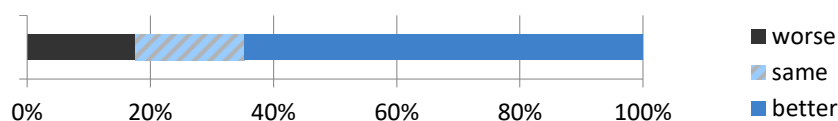


Source: Own survey; results from France, 2020, N=16

When asked about the future outlook, the majority (N=11) was optimistic, believing that policy implementation would be better in the future compared to the status quo. Three experts believed that things would stay the same and three even thought that constructing a digital public service portal would be worse in the future.

FIGURE 18 | OUTLOOK TOWARDS FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS | FRANCE

How will the construction go on in the future compared to now ?



Source: Own survey; results from France, 2020, N=17

These assessments mirror experts' experiences of the process of digital public service implementation over time. A promising start, with increasing difficulties throughout the first decade of digital public service creation. More recently, changes to the administrative governance, but more importantly, the cultural changes provoked by the very process of creating good, user-friendly digital service for citizens, are reflected by the positive outlook. Most of those who answered the question about the future outlook with "better" felt that a positive, paradigmatic cultural change was on its way in France's public administration. Those who were more focused on the persistently difficult administrative structure behind digital public service reform or who had appreciated the leadership of high-ranking civil servants who were now gone, tended to be pessimistic.

Table 12 summarizes the survey results as well as the responses to the open-ended questions about which factors the experts had experienced as responsible for implementation success or failure. The data show that for French experts, six factors were primarily responsible for the successes and failures of the digitization of French public services: the way in which implementation was organized ("project organisation"), the state's administrative and political structure, the role of politicians and civil service executives, and cultural characteristics of the civil service, namely its openness to change and its attitude towards digitization.

TABLE 12 | EXPLANATORY FACTORS BEHIND IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS/FAILURE | FRANCE

Failure/Success depended mostly on...	Response frequency	Survey average
Project organisation	13	2.5
Politicians	7	2.1
State structure	7	2.0
Civil service executives	6	2.4
Openness to change in the civil service	5	2.3
Attitude towards digitization in civil service	3	2.0

Civil service middle management and employees	3	1.8
Financial resources	2	1.3
Central infrastructure	1	1.9
Access to fast internet	1	1.8
Attitude towards digitization	1	1.7
Suitability of laws for digitization	1	1.4
User-friendly design for administrative clerks	--	1.9
Local self-governance	--	1.6
Data protection rules	--	0.7
State size	--	0.7

Source: Own survey; results from France, 2020, N=17, (3=agree fully, 2=agree somewhat, 1=disagree somewhat, 0=disagree fully).

Project organisation received a survey average of 2.5, making it the most relevant factor for succeeding (or failing) at digital public service implementation. The survey result is bolstered by the fact that 13 of the 17 experts stressed aspects in the open interview section which fell within the code-group “project organisation”. To them, project organisation included aspects such as the project’s governance, the degree of coordination within the governance structure, the aspiration towards binding national standards, the choice of project management methods (“waterfall” versus “agility”) and the use of private contractors. According to the experts’ accounts these aspects explain both the recent success but also the more troublesome first phase of implementation – for example the aim to establish a comprehensive national portal for digital public service as the single point of entry. For the first phase of implementation, between around 2000 and 2012, experts mostly talked about how problematic choices in the project’s organisation hindered successful digital public services. For instance, the lack of a strong governance, scant coordination between parallel sub-projects, and the extensive use of private contractors who employed outdated waterfall methods in their IT development. The successful turn-around of recent years was attributed to a change in the governance of both individual projects as well as the wider constellation of digital public services, taken as a whole. Likewise, experts explained that the move to agile development methods and the renunciation of private contracts had helped improve the implementation of digital public services.

French experts named **politicians** as the second most important factor for successful public service digitization. Politicians were mentioned by seven of the 17 interview partners and received an average 2.1 in the survey section of the interviews. Their role was primarily important in getting things started and functioning as a catalyst. France’s relatively early start in public digitization efforts was attributed to the political interest of Lionel Jospin. But the ensuing prime ministers and one president

(Nicolas Sarkozy) were mentioned numerous times as being responsible also for the ongoing efforts. Without them, early failures might have put a stop to implementation. But politicians, when they were committed to the benefits of digitization, had the power to restart implementation efforts which had cooled. This dynamic was witnessed by both the departmental-level experts and experts from the national level. Nearly the same was said of the importance of high-ranking civil servant executives, which was mentioned six times and received a survey average of 2.4. By working as a protective shield and continuing to push the topic after politicians had left the field, their role was to make sure implementation was not stalled by hostile forces. An interesting observation, confirmed by several interview partners, is the lack of party politics in the field of digital public services. According to the interview partners, neither right-wing nor left-wing politicians were either more or less inclined towards pushing for better digital public services. If there were lines of division in interest, experts felt that they ran not so much between politicians but rather between politicians on the one side and public servants on the other. Their explanation for the heightened role of politicians in the successful digitization of public services lay with the supposedly sluggish character of the French administration and its managers' instincts for self-preservation and disinterest in innovative change.

Right behind politicians, France's state structure was the third most often mentioned factor. Seven interview partners talked about both its positive and negative role for implementing digital public services. The survey averaged at 2.0. In terms of state structure, experts both talked about the effects of France's centralized character but also its decentralized characteristics. Most experts lauded the positive effect a centrally-run administration can have on IT development. This is because, according to them, effective IT benefits enormously from widely accepted standards and platforms. These things lower transaction costs and ensure that everything runs smoothly, both for developers but also for users. For that reason, heavily centralized portfolios like the tax administration or the social services (CNAF) spoke positively about the advantage of pooled resources, highly competent IT units, easy roll-out and the absence of strife around harmonizing different solutions. But many experts described France as a primarily decentralized state, stressing its myriad independent agencies and interdepartmental directorates which were difficult to coordinate in term of digitization. The large number of small, independent municipalities was similarly spoken of in negative terms. According to the French experts, France's decentralization was not so much born out of devolvement and thought of in the vertical sense, but instead meant a huge number of state actors on the horizontal level. Put briefly, vertical centralization was deemed a helpful feature of the French state, whereas horizontal fragmentation was considered a barrier to digitization.

Finally, the interviews revealed the important role of cultural characteristics in the civil service, namely its [openness to change](#) and its [attitude towards digitization](#). These two factors were discussed at length by five and three interview partners, respectively, and received survey averages of 2.3 (openness to change) and 2.0 (attitude towards digitization). The interview partners felt that the French civil service was particularly averse to change and named its bureaucratic administrative style as the main cause. A horizontally divided and territorial culture comprised of paternalistic and hierarchical elites combined with a confrontational spirit that leaves little room for cooperation and conviviality had inhibited change. With respect to *digital* change, the French administration's attitude swayed between disinterest – as enhancing the service experience for citizens was not a goal valued by the French administration – and an efficiency-driven approach which mainly conceived of digitization as a means to cut down on labour costs.

B INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRES GERMAN/ENGLISH/FRENCH

C CODING SCHEME

STUDY „DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICES IN EUROPE“ – INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for participating in this survey. The survey is part of a European comparative study about what makes states succeed or fail when developing online services. Specifically, the survey looks at digital self-service portals where citizens and businesses can access public services online. In Denmark the study focuses on the citizen portal www.Borger.dk. This includes the main portal site, but also the connected sub-portals and the services listed on them. Your answers will be aggregated (“clustered with others”) so that they cannot be assigned to you personally in the study report. At the end of the study, your response data will be deleted. You can view your response data at any time or arrange the deletion of your data ahead of time.

1. Family Name, First Name

2. Telephone number

3a. What organisation do you currently work for?

3b. If you worked on borger.dk at a previous organisation, what was its name?

4. What is (was) your job there regarding Borger.dk?

5a. In your personal opinion, how has the development process of the nationwide public service portal Borger.dk been going so far?

5b. In summary: How has the development process of the nationwide public service portal Borger.dk been going so far?

very well

rather well

rather badly

very badly

6. In your opinion, what factors have been responsible for the success or failure in the development process of the nationwide public service portal Borger.dk? (Multiple answers possible)

7. What makes you think this specific factor has been responsible for success or failure in the development process of Borger.dk? Can you provide an example? (Multiple answers possible)

8. If you have given several factors: Which one is the most important and why?

9. To what extent do you think that the following factors influenced the success or failure of Borger.dk's development?

	Success or failure when developing Borger.dk depended mostly on...	Agree fully	Agree somewhat	Disagree somewhat	Disagree fully
1	...politicians.				
2	...top-level executives in public administration.				
3	...low-level executives and employees in public administration.				
4	...the general attitude towards digitization in Denmark.				
5	... the attitude towards digitization in the civil service.				
6	...the general attitude towards change in the civil service.				
7	...the diffusion of central infrastructure like eID or central data registries.				
8	...widespread access to fast internet.				
9	...Danish data protection regulation.				
10	... the suitability of laws for digitization.				
11	...the unitary (centralized) organisation of the Danish State.				
12	...the local self-governance of Danish communes (Retten til lokalt selvstyre).				
13	...the way in which the project was organized and coordinated.				
14	...financial resources.				
15	...the size of Denmark.				
16	...its usability for citizens.				
17	...its usability for public sector employees.				

10. In your opinion: How will the development process of Borger.dk be like in the future?

worse

the same

better

11. If you stated “worse” or “better”, what makes you think that?

12. Is there anything else that is important when developing digital self-service portals for citizens, which you would like to mention?

ÉTUDE «SERVICES PUBLICS NUMÉRIQUES EN EUROPE» - QUESTIONNAIRE D'ENTRETIEN

Merci pour votre participation à cette enquête. L'enquête fait partie d'une étude comparative européenne sur ce qui fait que les États réussissent ou échouent lorsqu'ils développent des services en ligne pour leurs citoyens. Plus précisément, l'enquête examine les portails numériques en libre-service sur lesquels les citoyens et les entreprises peuvent accéder aux services publics en ligne. En France, l'étude se concentre sur le portail citoyen www.service-public.fr. Cela inclut le site portail principal, mais également les sous-portails connectés et les services qui y sont répertoriés. Vos réponses seront agrégées («regroupées avec d'autres») afin qu'elles ne puissent pas être attribuées à vous personnellement dans le rapport final. À la fin de l'enquête, vos données de réponse seront supprimées. Vous pouvez consulter vos données de réponse à tout moment ou demander leur suppression.

1. Nom de famille, prénom

2. Téléphone

3a. Pour quelle organisation travaillez-vous en ce moment?

3b. Si vous avez travaillé au développement de service-public.fr ou des services publics en ligne dans une autre organisation, comment s'appelait-elle?

4. Quel était votre travail dans le contexte du développement de service-public.fr?

5a. Selon vous, comment s'est déroulé le développement du portail national des services publics en ligne, service-public.fr?

5b. En résumé: comment s'est déroulé le développement du portail national des services publics en ligne, service-public.fr ?

très bien

plutôt bien

plutôt mal

très mal

6. À votre avis, quels facteurs ont été à l'origine du succès ou de l'échec du développement de "service-public.fr" et des services en ligne qui y sont liés? (Plusieurs réponses possibles)

7. Qu'est-ce qui vous fait penser que ce facteur spécifique ait été responsable du succès ou de l'échec de "service-public.fr"? Pouvez-vous fournir un exemple? (Plusieurs réponses possibles)

8. Si vous avez mentionné plusieurs facteurs: Quel est le plus important? Pourquoi?

9. Dans quelle mesure pensez-vous que les facteurs suivants ont influencé le succès /l'échec du développement de service-public.fr et des services qui y sont liés?

	Le succès ou l'échec du développement de service-public.fr dépendait principalement...	tout à fait d'accord	plutôt d'accord	plutôt en désaccord	tout à fait en désaccord
1	...des politiciens.				
2	...des cadres supérieurs de l'administration publique.				
3	...de cadres et employés de bas niveau dans l'administration publique.				
4	...de l'attitude générale à l'égard de la numérisation en France.				
5	...de l'attitude envers la numérisation dans la fonction publique.				
6	...de l'attitude envers le changement en général dans la fonction publique.				
7	...de la diffusion d'infrastructures centrales comme l'identité numérique ou les registres centraux de données.				
8	...de l'accès généralisé à une connexion Internet rapide.				
9	...du règlement français sur la protection des données en ligne.				
10	...du caractère approprié des lois pour la numérisation.				
11	...du caractère centralisé de l'État français.				
12	...de l'autonomie locale des communes françaises.				
13	...de la façon dont le projet a été organisé et coordonné.				
14	...des ressources financières				
15	...de la taille de l'État français.				
16	...de son utilité pour les citoyens.				
17	...de son utilité pour les employés du secteur public.				

10. À votre avis: comment se déroulera le processus de développement de service-public.fr à l'avenir?

pire

pareil

mieux

11. Si vous avez dit «pire» ou «mieux», qu'est-ce qui vous fait penser cela?

12. Y a-t-il autre chose qui est important lors du développement de portails numériques en libre-service pour les citoyens, que vous souhaitez mentionner?

STUDIET AF „DIGITALE OFFENTLIGE TJENESTER I EUROPA“ - INTERVIEW- SPØRGSMÅL

Tak, fordi du deltog i denne undersøgelse. Undersøgelsen er del af en europæisk komparativ undersøgelse af, hvad der får stater til at lykkes eller mislykkes, når de udvikler onlinetjenester. Undersøgelsen ser specifikt på digitale selvbetjeningsportaler, hvor borgere og virksomheder kan få adgang til offentlige tjenester online. I Danmark fokuserer undersøgelsen på borgerportalen www.Borger.dk. Dette inkluderer det primære portalwebsted, men også de tilsluttede underportaler og de tjenester, der er anført på dem. Dine svar vil blive aggregeret ("samlet med andre"), så de ikke kan tildeles dig personligt i undersøgelsesrapporten. Efter undersøgelsens afslutning vil dine svardata blive slettet. Du kan når som helst se dine svardata eller aftale sletning af dine data på forhånd.

1. Efternavn, fornavn

2. Telefonnummer

3a. Hvilken organisation arbejder du i øjeblikket for?

3b. Hvis du arbejdede på borger.dk hos en tidligere organisation, hvad hed denne så?

4. Hvad er (var) dit job vedrørende Borger.dk?

5a. Efter din personlige mening, hvor god eller dårlig har processen med at udvikle Borger.dk hidtil været?

5b. Sammendrag: Hvordan har udviklingsprocessen for den landsdækkende public service portal Borger.dk været indtil nu?

- meget godt
- godt
- dårligt
- meget slemt

9. I hvilken udstrækning tror du, at følgende faktorer påvirkede succes eller fiasko for Borger.dk's udvikling?

	Succes eller fiasko ved udvikling af Borger.dk var mest afhængig af ...	er helt enig	er enig	er uenig	er helt uenig
1	...politikere.				
2	...øverste ledelse i offentlig administration.				
3	...ledelse på lavt niveau og ansatte i offentlig administration.				
4	... den generelle holdning til digitalisering i Danmark.				
5	...holdningen til digitalisering i embedsforvaltningen.				
6	... den generelle holdning til forandring i embedsforvaltningen.				
7	...spredning af den centrale infrastruktur som eID eller det central dataregister				
8	... udbredt adgang til hurtigt internet.				
9	... dansk databeskyttelsesforordning.				
10	... andre juridiske hindringer for digitalisering.				
11	... den danske statsenheds (centraliserede) organisation.				
12	...retten til lokalt selvstyre af danske kommuner.				
13	... den måde, projektet blev organiseret på.				
14	... økonomiske ressourcer.				
15	... størrelsen på Danmark.				
16	... dets brugervenlighed for borgerne.				
17	... dens brugbarhed for ansatte i den offentlige sektor.				

10. Efter din mening: Hvordan vil videreudviklingen af Borger.dk ske i fremtiden?

værre

samme

bedre

11. Hvis du sagde "værre" eller "bedre", hvad får du til at sige dette?

12. Er der noget andet, der er vigtigt, når du udvikler digitale selvbetjeningsportaler til borgere, som du gerne vil nævne?

STUDIE „DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICES IN EUROPA“ – EXPLORATIVER INTERVIEWLEITFADEN

Vielen Dank, dass Sie an dieser Befragung teilnehmen. Die Befragung ist Teil einer europäischen Vergleichsstudie über Erfolgs- beziehungsweise Misserfolgskriterien beim Aufbau von staatlichen Online-Dienstleistungen. Konkret geht es um die Online-Antragsstellung von Verwaltungsleistungen in einem deutschlandweiten digitalen Serviceportal(-verbund) für Bürger*innen und Unternehmen. (In den Medien „Serviceportal“, „Bürgerportal“ oder „Portalverbund“ genannt).

Ihre Antworten werden aggregiert ausgewertet (gehäuft mit anderen), so dass sie im Studienbericht nicht Ihnen persönlich zugeordnet werden können. Nach Studienende werden Ihre Antwortdaten gelöscht. Sie können Ihre Antwortdaten jederzeit einsehen oder ihre Löschung vorzeitig veranlassen.

1. Vorname, Name
2. Telefon (für eventuelle Verständnisfragen)
3. Für welche Organisation arbeiten Sie?
4. Was ist dort Ihre Aufgabe in Bezug auf den Aufbau eines deutschlandweiten digitalen Serviceportals zur Online-Antragsstellung von Verwaltungsleistungen?
5. Ihrer Meinung nach: Wie gut gelingt der Aufbau eines solchen deutschlandweiten digitalen Serviceportals in Deutschland bisher?

Sehr schlecht

Eher schlecht

Eher gut

Sehr gut

9. Inwieweit erleben Sie, dass die folgenden Faktoren den Erfolg beim Aufbau eines deutschlandweiten digitalen Serviceportals zur Online-Antragsstellung beeinflussen?

	Der Erfolg bzw. Misserfolg beim Aufbau eines deutschlandweiten digitalen Serviceportals hängt vor allem ab von...	Stimme voll zu	Stimme eher zu	Stimme eher nicht zu	Stimme gar nicht zu
1	...einzelnen Politikern.				
2	...einzelnen obersten Führungskräften in der öffentlichen Verwaltung.				
3	...den unteren Führungskräften und Mitarbeitern in der öffentlichen Verwaltung.				
4	...der Einstellung zur Digitalisierung in Deutschland insgesamt.				
5	...der Einstellung zur Digitalisierung innerhalb der öffentlichen Verwaltung.				
6	...der grundsätzlichen Veränderungsbereitschaft innerhalb der öffentlichen Verwaltung.				
7	...der Verbreitung zentraler Infrastruktur wie eID, DE-Postfach oder zentraler Verwaltungsregister.				
8	...der Abdeckung mit schnellem Internet.				
9	...den Datenschutzregeln in Deutschland.				
10	...gesetzlichen Rahmenbedingungen wie z. B. Schriftformerfordernis oder Anwesenheitspflicht.				
11	...dem deutschen Föderalismus.				
12	...dem Prinzip der kommunalen Selbstverwaltung in Deutschland.				
13	...der Art und Weise wie die Entwicklung eines deutschlandweiter Serviceportals organisiert wurde.				
14	...der finanziellen Ausstattung der zuständigen Behörden.				
15	...der Größe des deutschen Staates.				
16	...seiner Nutzerfreundlichkeit für die Bürger*innen und Unternehmen.				
17	...seiner Nutzerfreundlichkeit für die Verwaltungsmitarbeiter*innen.				

10. Ihrer Meinung nach: Wie wird der Aufbau des deutschlandweiten digitalen Serviceportals in der Zukunft vorangehen?

Schlechter als bisher Genau so wie bisher Besser als bisher

11. Falls Sie besser oder schlechter angekreuzt haben: aus welchem Grund sind Sie dieser Ansicht?

12. Gibt es sonst noch irgendetwas, das für den Erfolg bzw. Misserfolg beim Aufbau des deutschlandweiten digitalen Serviceportals für Verwaltungsleistungen wichtig ist?

Coding scheme

Code category	Associated survey item	Associated qualitative codes	Exemplary quote
9.01 Politicians	Politicians	Political support, political mandate, politicians kickstarting change, strategic decision to go digital, names of politicians, prime minister, minister	<p>“Il faut avoir cette vision politique.”</p> <p>"C'était à cause d'une volonté politique ; traditionnellement c'est une politique de Droite, mais aujourd'hui cette différence s'est effacée et tout le monde pense que l'administration devrait couter moins cher ; la REM s'est inscrite dans cette révision générale de la politique administrative dès la mise en place de Sarkozy."</p> <p>"It is important that politicians say very clearly what we are going to do."</p>
9.02 Civil service executives	Top-level executives in public administration	Heads of agencies, high-ranking-bureaucrats, boss, middle management, administrative elite, Pezziardi, Verdier, Krieger	<p>"Our minister (Science and Development) had no idea what digitization was, it was not his focus. It was not politicians, but government officials."</p> <p>"Jens Krieger is the godfather of borger.dk".</p>
9.03 Civil service middle management and employees	Low-level executives and employees in public administration	Competent/dedicated/motivated, employees to have the right skills, the simple/normal/low-level/street-level employees, the people in the offices/who provide the services, personal, staff	<p>"Au sein de leur équipe [Etalab] ils avaient des gens qui étaient sensibles sur ce sujet [le numérique], experts du métier numériques et on voit quand il y a des gens qui sont expérimentés, des designers, des développeurs qui sont vraiment qualifiés, ça fait toute la différence."</p>

Code category	Associated survey item	Associated qualitative codes	Exemplary quote
9.04 Attitude towards digitization	The general attitude towards digitization in France/Denmark/Germany		"German Angst - fehlender Mut, die Zurückhaltung, Veränderungen voran zu treiben. Man sieht das in der Verwaltung hier haargenau so. Denn Veränderung heißt auch immer Risiken einzugehen. Das ist ein kulturelles Phänomen." „Auf politischer Ebene und was die Bürger erwarten - man kennt das ja von den Unternehmen, das ist die Erwartung - da muss die Verwaltung auch hinkommen."
9.05 Attitude towards digitization in civil service	The attitude towards digitization in the civil service	Culture, mindset, attitude, way of thinking, networked change, beta.gouv, against the grain + digitization/web/internet/IT, paradigmatic change to user centricity/agility,	"Aujourd'hui notre application mobile [CNAF] est notre offre la plus utilisée alors qu'au départ il a semblé du gadget, de la frime." "Das OZG ist ein Vehikel, um Verwaltungshandeln einem Paradigmenwechsel zu unterziehen."
9.06 Openness to change in the civil service	The general attitude towards change in the civil service	Culture, mindset, attitude, way of thinking, networked change, beta.gouv, against the grain WITHOUT mentioning digitization	"Une culture administrative de papa... une culture des silos ministeriels." "If you don't work for this [digital transformation] you cannot work here."
9.07 Central infrastructure	The diffusion of central infrastructure like eID or central data registries	Important institutional legacies, problematic institutional legacies, lack of national solutions from the past, national identifiers like CPR number, eID solutions like easyID, nemID, Idénium, decentralized databases, one common portal, DE-	"Les usagers se battent aujourd'hui avec une multiplicité des contes, des identities." "Es sind viele Standards noch nicht etabliert, viele Entscheidungen noch nicht getroffen worden, die sich alle auf die basale Architektur auswirken."

Code category	Associated survey item	Associated qualitative codes	Exemplary quote
		Mail, centralizer, grown web of localized solutions from the past that are difficult to overturn, data sharing mechanism	
9.08 Access to fast internet	Widespread access to fast internet	Internet, access, disadvantaged areas, homes with access to wifi, Minitels	"On a retardé l'introduction de l'internet en France parce que nous avons les Minitels."
9.09 Data protection rules	Danish/French/German data protection regulation	Data protection, privacy, specific laws/court decisions	"Data protection sometimes is an excuse for not doing something."
9.10 Suitability of laws for Digitization	The suitability of laws for digitization	Requirement of written signatures, digital-ready legislation, legal barriers, ability of administrative procedures to be rendered digital	"Hunderte Schriftformerfordernisse, Anforderungen, keine Festlegung Vertrauenniveaus -[...] da sind die rechtlichen Grundlagen nicht so, dass wir die in die kommunalen Serviceportale einpflegen können."
9.11 State structure	The unitary (but decentralized) organisation of the French/Danish State The federal (decentralized) organisation of the German state	Centralization, decentralization, federalism, intra-state cooperation/coordination, horizontal/vertical coordination, allocation of responsibility for providing public services	"L'Etat est très vertical. Parfois c'est bon, mais parfois c'est mal vécu par les collectivités et elles se trouvent seules." "We are a highly decentralized country. [...] Communities are responsible for the biggest part of public services." "Ich glaube man tut sich da relativ schwer an diesem Föderalismusgedanken. [...] Jeder hat für sich Lösungen gefunden, die sind nicht immer gleich und die sind nicht immer kompatibel."
9.12 Local self-governance	The local self-governance of French/German/Danish	Local self-governance, communes, localized responsibility, local	"Chez nous [au département du Calvados] on a un président très moteur pour la

Code category	Associated survey item	Associated qualitative codes	Exemplary quote
	communes	autonomy	<p>modernisation [...] et puis on y a mis des moyens pour avancer là-dessus et on y a mis des moyens il y a quelques années pendant que dans d'autre collectivités c'est pas du tout le cas."</p> <p>"Municipalities were an early driver to conceive of the portal."</p> <p>"Die Kollegen [...] halten die Fahne der kommunalen Selbstverwaltung hoch, aber das heißt auch den ganzen Rattenschwanz hinten dran, dass man für sich selbst den Mut, die Kraft, die Vernunft haben muss [...] da werden sich viele scheuen."</p>
9.13 Project organisation	The way in which the project [of public service digitization] was organized and coordinated	Mandatory character of digitization projects, agile project management methods, intergovernmental cooperation, strong coordination, central actor that is in charge of coordinating the project as a whole, task force, concentrated allocation of responsibilities for eGovernment	<p>"C'est dommage que c'est trop désorganisé mais je pense qu'on a une complaisance en France pour cette désorganisation."</p> <p>„It was all about the strategies."</p> <p>"Dann ist es ein gefühlt basisdemokratischer Prozess, in dem so was entwickelt wird mit ganz vielen Arbeitsgruppen und Gremien. Das ist ein anstrengender Prozess, der seine Zeit dauert."</p>
9.14 Financial resources	Financial resources	Money, financial support, advantage of greater size of communes, limitation of small communes, can/cannot afford	<p>"Le problème n'est pas l'autonomie [des communes] mais la taille."</p> <p>"Man kann viele Gesetze loslassen, aber wenn die finanzielle Ausstattung nicht</p>

Code category	Associated survey item	Associated qualitative codes	Exemplary quote
			folgt [...] dann hat man das Geld dafür vielleicht nicht."
9.15 State size	The size of France/Denmark/Germany	Country size, advantage of small countries, too many actors	"Size does not really matter, because at the central level you always have roughly the same stakeholders. The number of services is roughly the same." "As a small country we are always struggling for resources for the things we want to do." "This is not the analogue world. In the digital world size does not matter as much."
9.16 Userfriendly design for citizens	Usability [of the digitized services] for citizens	UX-design, what citizens want, how citizens search for services, adequate device	„Wenn man zu Bürgerfreundlichkeit hin möchte, wird man nicht umhinkommen, im Vorfeld, bevor man den Antrag online stellt das dem Bürger zu präsentieren und Feedback zu bekommen." (12-13) "Sonst geht das wie bei Elster, wo viele im ersten Anlauf überfordert waren."
9.17 Userfriendly design for administrative clerks	Usability [of the digitized services] for public sector employees.	Back-end, integration into workplace, processes within street-level-bureaucracy, accommodating street-level bureaucrats' needs	"Wir haben eine klare Front-End-Betrachtung und daher fehlt die Akzeptanz und das Verständnis in den Kommunen."