The biggest public sector challenges in Germany - A citizen perspective

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Summary

Background: This report provides insights into citizens' perceptions on current challenges for the public sector, both for the German public sector as a whole and for cities and municipalities. In a representative survey, respondents were asked about the challenges the public sector is facing, by evaluating ten different topics. Based on the ranking of topics and comparisons across subgroups, we can provide an insight into citizens' expectations in order to set priorities in public administration research and policy development.

Data & methods: We started from ten different topics that are often dealt with in scientific as well as practice debates. These ten topics are: (1) attract competent public sector employees, (2) keep up to date with new technological developments, (3) keep public employees motivated, (4) involve citizens in decision-making processes, (5) report performance transparently, (6) preserve a good reputation, (7) represent all groups in society (e.g. migrants, older people, etc.), (8) maintain a good public service quality, (9) maintain public infrastructure (e.g. public buildings, roads, bridges, etc.), and (10) work efficiently. For these ten topics, survey items were developed for the respondents to assess the extent that they are considered major challenges for the next three years, using a 9-point Likert scale (ranging from (-4) "No challenge at all" to (+4) "A very big challenge").

Moreover, the sample was randomly split, where one group (Group A) was asked to assess the biggest challenges for the German public sector as a whole, and the other group (Group B) assessed the same challenges for the public sector at the city or municipality level. The following questions were asked (in German):

- **Group A:** "In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges facing Germany's public sector in the next three years?" ("Welches sind Ihrer Meinung nach die größten Herausforderungen für den öffentlichen Sektor in Deutschland in den nächsten drei Jahren?") (49.33 percent of all respondents).
- **Group B:** "In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges for the next three years for the administration of the municipality or city where you live?" ("Welches sind Ihrer Meinung nach die größten Herausforderungen der nächsten drei Jahre für die Verwaltung der Kommune oder Stadt, in der Sie leben?") (50.67 percent of all respondents).

By comparing responses between those groups, we can assess whether challenges are perceived differently for these two administrative levels.

Respondents were approached by use of a professional panel provider (Qualtrics Panels) and sampled according to the criteria of representativeness for region (Bundesland), age, and gender. In total, 1573 respondents completed the survey. Additional background variables were asked regarding education, occupation, and sector of employment (see table below for descriptive statistics).

Results: For the graphs in this study, perceived challenges are ranked based on the sample mean, from ‘biggest challenge’ (top of the graph) to (relatively) least a challenge (bottom of the graph). Mean values are illustrated with a dot, along with the 95%-confidence interval around the mean. For the overall reporting of mean values for the total sample, item mean scores are also given above the confidence intervals. For other figures in this study, graphs report differences for subgroups based on the demographic variables.

Main findings: All ten topics are, on average, rated as a substantial challenge, i.e. mean values are at the positive side of the response scale (i.e. towards “a very big challenge”). The top-three challenges perceived by citizens are: (1) maintain public infrastructure, (2) work efficiently, and (3) keep up to date with new technological developments (Figure 1). Except for the observation that challenges are rated as slightly less substantial for the city and municipality level (compared to the German public sector as a whole), there are no substantial differences for perceived challenges between the public sector as a whole in Germany at the one hand and cities and municipalities on the other hand (Figure 2). In other words, we do not observe any challenges that are particularly specific to the national level or to the level of cities and municipalities. Therefore, we combine the answers of both groups (A and B) to clarify differences for other demographic variables (Figures 3 to 6).

Furthermore, the results show no major gender differences, except for women assessing the challenge even bigger of having all societal groups sufficiently represented in public administrations (related to representative bureaucracy) (Figure 3). When comparing responses based on sector of employment, public sector employees deviate most from employees in the for-profit and non-profit sectors on at least some of the topics. Compared to employees in the nonprofit sector, public sector employees rate transparent performance reporting as well as representing all societal groups as less challenging. In contrast, public sector and nonprofit employees have a similar view of the magnitude of the challenge posed by citizen participation in decision-making (Figure 4). There also appears to be an age effect, with older people seeing all ten issues as more challenging on average (Figure 5). In comparison, migrants perceive various topics as less challenging, which might indicate a different mental reference framework of migrants when evaluating a challenge in Germany, for example compared to their country of origin (Figure 6).

Download original figures – in German and English – here (Willems et al., 2021)

The raw data is available at: <https://osf.io/uv928/>

General overview (Figure 1)

All topics are, on average, rated as a substantial challenge, i.e. mean values are at the positive side of the response scale (towards “a very big challenge”). This is hardly surprising, but rather confirms our starting point, namely that these topics represent current and relevant issues. However, the order derived from the rating is interesting:

Firstly, the top-three items – ‘maintain public infrastructure’, ‘work efficiently’, and ‘keep up to date with new technological developments’ – refer (at least partly) to the provision of public services and the efficiency of the public tasks. Immediately thereafter, maintain a good public service quality, is ranked. These results show that citizens regard service provision as most challenging, indicating that their perception of a challenge is probably strongly connected to their needs or expectations what to receive (individually) from the public authorities.

Secondly, the following three items in the list show a gradual change of focus from the individual to a more social level: involve citizens in decision-making processes, report transparently on performance, and represent all groups in society. The order moves from the individual to the societal level.

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German public administration as a whole versus city and municipality administration (Figure 2)

Except for the observation that challenges are rated as slightly less substantial for the city and municipality level (compared to the German public sector as a whole), there are no substantial differences for perceived challenges between the overall public sector in Germany at the one hand, and cities and municipalities on the other hand (Figure 2). In other words, we do not observe any challenges that are particularly specific to the national level or to the level of cities and municipalities. Therefore, we combine the answers of both groups (A and B) to clarify differences for other demographic variables (Figures 3 to 6).

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Gender (Figure 3)

The results show no major gender differences, except for women assessing the challenge even greater of having all societal groups sufficiently represented in public administrations (Figure 3).

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Sector of employment (Figure 4)

When comparing responses based on sector of employment, public sector employees mostly rate the topics under study less challenging than private for-profit and non-profit sectors employees. A closer look shows that task-oriented topics referring (at least partly) to public service provision ('maintain public infrastructure', 'work efficiently', 'keep up to date with new technological developments', 'maintain a good public service quality') together with 'attract competent employees' are perceived more challenging than the more societal issues of diversity/inclusion, participation, transparency/accountability or reputation management.

Compared to employees in the public sector, non-profit sector employees rate 'report transparently on performance' as well as the 'represent all groups in society' clearly as more challenging. In general, the (rather small number) of respondents working in the non-profit sector tend to view the topics as more challenging than other groups, thereby deviating particularly strong from the public sector employees' perception. However, public sector and nonprofit employees have a similar view of the magnitude of the challenge posed by citizen participation in decision-making.

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Age (Figure 5)

When participants are differentiated by age, there is a steady increase in the perceived extent of all challenges with age.

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Migration (Figure 6)

With regard to migration background, the results show hardly any generation differences within the migrants except for ‘work efficiently’ which is perceived as less demanding by the first generation than by the second generation. However, both groups differ in an almost identical way from citizens without a migration background who generally perceive the ten topics as more challenging than migrants. Given the unusual consistency of the assessments by the two migrant groups, one could assume that their assessment scheme is fundamentally different from that of citizens who have lived in Germany for generations. In other words: Migrants’ frame of reference when evaluating a challenge might be different. Further research on the specifics of these differences would be promising and highly relevant, especially with regard to integration policy and measures.

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Extras

Public sector challenges: Items

English

Variables	Items
ChallenITEMS_1	Attracting competent public employees
ChallenITEMS_2	Keeping up to date with new technological developments
ChallenITEMS_3	Keep public employees motivated
ChallenITEMS_4	Involve citizens in decision-making processes
ChallenITEMS_5	Reporting performance transparently
ChallenITEMS_6	Preserve a good reputation
ChallenITEMS_7	Represent all groups in society (e.g. migrants, older people, etc.)
ChallenITEMS_8	Maintain a good public service quality
ChallenITEMS_9	Maintain public infrastructure well (e.g. public buildings, roads, bridges, etc.)
ChallenITEMS_10	Work efficiently

German

Variables	Items
ChallenITEMS_1	Gewinnung von kompetenten Verwaltungsbediensteten
ChallenITEMS_2	In Bezug auf neue technologische Entwicklungen auf dem Laufenden bleiben
ChallenITEMS_3	Die Verwaltungsbedienstete motiviert halten
ChallenITEMS_4	Bürger*innen in Entscheidungsprozesse einbeziehen
ChallenITEMS_5	Transparent über Leistungen berichten
ChallenITEMS_6	Einen guten Ruf bewahren
ChallenITEMS_7	Alle Gruppen der Gesellschaft vertreten (z.B. Migrant*innen, ältere Menschen usw.)
ChallenITEMS_8	Eine gute Qualität des öffentlichen Dienstes aufrechterhalten
ChallenITEMS_9	Öffentliche Infrastruktur gut instand halten (z.B. öffentliche Gebäude, Straßen, Brücken usw.)
ChallenITEMS_10	Effizient arbeiten

Descriptives Statistics

	DATA (N = 1,573)
Age	
Under 30	268 (17.04%)
Between 30 and 45	365 (23.20%)
Between 45 and 60	426 (27.08%)
Above 60	514 (32.68%)
Gender	
Female	807 (51.30%)
Male	766 (48.70%)
Region	
Baden-Württemberg	190 (12.08%)
Bayern	215 (13.67%)
Berlin	81 (5.15%)
Brandenburg	48 (3.05%)
Bremen	13 (0.83%)
Hamburg	38 (2.42%)
Hessen	114 (7.25%)
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	41 (2.61%)
Niedersachsen	140 (8.90%)
Nordrhein-Westfalen	359 (22.82%)
Rheinland-Pfalz	78 (4.96%)
Saarland	20 (1.27%)
Sachsen	89 (5.66%)
Sachsen-Anhalt	48 (3.05%)
Schleswig-Holstein	61 (3.88%)
Thüringen	38 (2.42%)
Education	
Primary school	294 (19.23%)
High school	563 (36.82%)
Higher education (3 years)	202 (13.21%)
Higher education (4 or 5 years)	234 (15.30%)
Higher education (6 or more years)	149 (9.74%)
Answered 'Not applicable'	87 (5.69%)
Occupation	
Student	96 (6.28%)
Employee	701 (45.85%)
Self-employed	95 (6.21%)
Pensioner	460 (30.09%)
Unemployed	96 (6.28%)
Migration	
No migrant	1,381 (90.32%)
First-generation migrant	77 (5.04%)
Second-generation migrant	71 (4.64%)
Sector	
Profit sector	424 (60.92%)
Public sector	161 (23.13%)
non-profit sector	46 (6.61%)
Non-Employees, or Answered 'Not applicable'	877

Correlation of items

References

Willems, Jurgen; Schmidhuber, Lisa; Schmidt, Moritz J.; Knassmüller, Monika; Ebinger, Falk; Dinhof, Katharina (2021): The biggest public sector challenges in Germany - A citizen perspective. **figshare**. Figure. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.13581050>