

# Digital Transformation in the Public Sector - Reflections on a Public Ethos

Information Policy

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Jörgen Johansson<sup>1</sup> , Michel Thomsen<sup>2</sup>  and Maria Åkesson<sup>2,3</sup> 

## Abstract

This paper investigates policy documents on digital transformation in the public sector and whether technological optimism also risks obscuring constitutional, democratic, and ethical principles. Two analytical tasks were undertaken: first, we mapped policy documents originating from a multi-level setting; and second, we explored the extent to which constitutional, democratic, and ethical principles are articulated. To explore the extent to which these principles are articulated the concept of a public ethos was utilized. A public ethos contains principles associated with a liberal representative democracy and a Weberian bureaucracy. The analysis underscores the need for research on maintaining a public ethos in politics associated with digital transformation. The policy documents that were analyzed lack ideas concerning democratic legitimacy, legal certainty, ethics in the public encounter, and systems for public scrutiny. The main conclusion is that the space in the documents is dominated by technological optimism, while constitutional, democratic, and ethical principles are given lower priority. The need for further research includes questions concerning (1) conditions for civic participation/party politics, (2) management issues concerning skill/learning development among public employees and on control mechanisms, (3) issues at the frontline of public administration on how the digital transformation affects the treatment of vulnerable/marginalized populations.

## Keywords

digital transformation, public ethos, democracy, ethics, constitution, public policy

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## Key points for practitioners

- Policymakers should not only focus on efficiency and improved management but also pay attention to democratic anchoring, ethical practicalities, street-level encounters, and values related to equality and legal certainty.
- Policies for digital transformation should be developed with instruments to strengthen public scrutiny, incorporating monitoring and evaluation elements.
- Policies for digital transformation should include guidelines to support the work environment of public employees, particularly those on the front lines of public administration.

## 1 Introduction

Political ambitions to advance digital transformation in the public sector have rapidly extended into a key policy area. Strategies supporting digital transformation have been formulated at all levels of the political system, ranging from

<sup>1</sup>School of Public Administration, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

<sup>2</sup>School of Information Technology, Halmstad University, Halmstad, Sweden

<sup>3</sup>Department of Informatics, Umeå University, Sweden

## Corresponding Author:

Jörgen Johansson, School of Public Administration, University of Gothenburg – Gothenburg, Box 712, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden.

Email: [jorgen.johansson@spa.gu.se](mailto:jorgen.johansson@spa.gu.se)

international to local politics. Political actors such as the OECD, the European Union, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national governments, regional authorities, and municipalities have demonstrated significant interest in initiating, organizing, and financing digital transformation (Ulnicane, 2022). Several researchers have also noted that the policy area is marked by a development logic characterized by technological optimism, verging on determinism (Baracska, 2023; Lindgren, 2024). A fundamental and normative framing for the perspective adopted in this article is that technological development should not be regarded as a neutral instrument of social change. Thus, our perspective is that technology should be understood in relation to society, the economy, politics, and constitutional values such as democracy, the rule of law, human conditions, and rationality (e.g., Öjehag et al., 2023; Teo, 2025).

This paper raises concerns about considerations in public policies defending constitutional, democratic, and ethical implications in the current digital transformation of the public sector. There is indeed already extensive social science research on the constitutional and democratic issues of digital transformation in the public sector (for overviews, see Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Carlsson & Rönnblom, 2022; Dunleavy et al., 2006; Johansson et al., 2023; Wirtz et al., 2019). Several studies have also critically examined digital transformation through concepts such as ‘surveillance practices’ (Pad-den, 2024), the ‘digital divide’ (van Dijk, 2020), ‘rule-bending behavior’ (Brockmann, 2017; Tummers & Rocco, 2015), ‘transparency/accountability challenges’ (Busuioc, 2021; Criadoa et al., 2020; Wessels, 2023), legal certainty (Carlsson, 2023) and ‘epistemic injustices’ (Bourgault, 2020).

This study contributes to ongoing research by analyzing how constitutional, democratic, and ethical issues are articulated in policy documents within a multi-level governance context. The analysis is performed with the support of a normative framework we refer to as a public ethos, which consists of constitutional, democratic, and ethical values associated with liberal representative democracy and a Weberian bureaucracy. The articulations expressed in policy documents constitute guiding principles for how each organization envisions and plans for digital transformation in the public sector (Freeman & Maybin, 2011). The primary focus is to analyze the extent to which these documents explicitly articulate a public ethos. We are particularly attentive to instances where digital transformation is framed through a lens of technological optimism or determinism, as such perspectives may shadow that policies weakly articulate ambitions to defend constitutional, democratic, and ethical principles. Accordingly, we ask the question: *To what extent is a public ethos represented in policy documents aimed at supporting digital transformation in the public sector?* Two analytical tasks are undertaken:

1. To empirically map policy documents from political actors in a multi-level setting.
2. To explore the extent to which constitutional, democratic, and ethical principles are articulated according to a public ethos.

The paper focuses on policies in a multi-level setting, including international/supranational actors, but with roots in Swedish politics at the national, regional, and local levels. Our analysis is confined to investigating the extent to which public policies enhance digital transformation according to constitutional, democratic, and ethical principles. Thus, it is important to note that this study does not address how these policies have been implemented or the extent to which policy goals have been achieved. Nevertheless, as materialized in policy documents, the policy formation stage represents a crucial component in policy analysis, as these documents reveal the initial approaches set by policymakers to address specific social issues (Freeman & Maybin, 2011; Howlett & Mukherjee, 2017; Salamon, 2002). In this paper, we use the concept of articulation to denote formulations made in policy texts regarding descriptions of societal conditions and as an expression of conscious or deliberate political governing (Thomas & Hewitt, 2011).

The following two sections – *Theory (2)* and *Method (3)* – outlines the methodological framework. Subsequently, in the *Analysis and results* section (4), an empirical mapping of digital transformation policies is presented, and finally, the findings and future research will be discussed in the concluding section, *Conclusion and Discussion (5)*.

## 2 Theory – Digital Transformation and a Public Ethos

From the outset, let us briefly note the conceptualization and implications of technology in the continued presentation. When reading research on digital transformation policies, it becomes apparent that the research uses a wide range of concepts to designate the technological changes being analyzed. Several researchers have noted this conceptual issue and emphasized the importance of using precise terms for digitalization in public administration. (cf. Gong & Ribiere, 2021; Mergel et al., 2019). Without further delving into these conceptual issues, the term ‘digital transformation’ is used in this paper. Digital transformation denotes processes moving from analog to new forms of digital public services that affect cultural, political, organizational, and relational changes in core processes and services of public administration (Mergel et al., 2019, p. 12).

Implementation analyses of digital transformation in public administration have highlighted several challenges. When political strategies are executed, unforeseen obstacles and failures frequently emerge. In studies examining these obstacles, a range of explanatory factors have been employed, identifying institutionally, technologically, sociopolitically, and democratically driven challenges (see e.g., Johansson et al., 2023; Kempeneer & Heylen, 2023; Kristensen, 2023; Lindgren et al., 2022; Selten & Klievink, 2024). This paper contends that policies aimed at digital transformation have thus far encountered significant challenges in adequately addressing the constitutional, democratic and ethical principles inherent to public administration. The nature of these principles as well as their empirical significance in different political systems remains a controversial topic in social science research (cf. Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Bozeman, 1987; Charbonneau et al., 2020; Eubanks, 2017; Johansson et al., 2023). This paper is based on the normative premise that the public sector should design policies and activities grounded in a public ethos of constitutional, democratic, and ethical core values. Public operations thus differ fundamentally from organizations in the private or civil sectors (cf. Rainey, 2011, 2012).

To explore the extent of articulations on constitutional, democratic, and ethical principles in public policies enhancing digital transformation, we will utilize a normative theory of a *public ethos* (see Lethbridge, 2011; Lundquist, 1998; Pierre & Peters, 2017; Rothstein & Sorak, 2017). A public ethos contains constitutional, democratic, and ethical principles associated with a liberal representative democracy and a Weberian bureaucracy. Thus, a public ethos consists of a democratic and a bureaucratic ethos (Lundquist, 1998; Pugh, 1991). Somewhat simplified, a democratic ethos is based on values such as representative democracy, civil rights, civic participation, and public ethics in creating social justice, legal certainty, and legality. A bureaucratic ethos is based on Weberian principles such as functional rationality, efficiency, productivity, professionalism, and accountability (Pugh, 1991):

A public ethos demands that public activities should apply principles of representative democracy, participation, legal certainty, and public ethics and, at the same time, stand up for bureaucratic values. Hence, we emphasize that the normative baseline for a public ethos is that both sides should be equally weighted. The one side is dependent on the other. However, a characteristic feature of the development of public activities under neoliberal governance (such as New Public Management) has been a one-sided emphasis on economic values tied to a bureaucratic ethos. Since the 1980s, demands for efficiency, productivity, professional management, and accountability based on numerical forms of service performance have been emphasized while values of a democratic ethos have been successively pushed back (Brown, 2015; Boréus, 1997; Larner, 2000; Lundquist, 1998). In the following method section, we will specify how to analyze a public ethos and its components. In the upcoming analysis, we will explore the extent of how policies in a multi-level political context articulate a public ethos for digital transformation.

### 3 Method – Empirical Setting and Policy Articulations

The analysis in this paper maps policy articulations according to a public ethos (see Table 1). The forthcoming analysis is structured in four policy stages in a system-based approach.

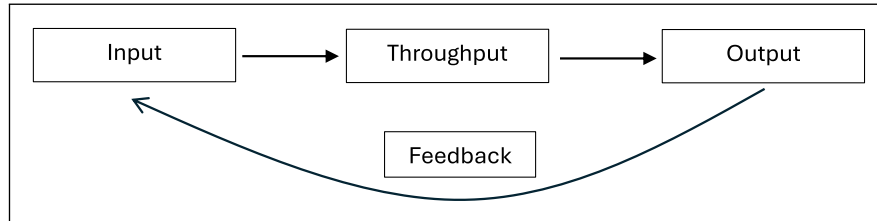
The model in Figure 1 is a conceptual simplification that allows complex processes to be analyzed more clearly, immediately, and unambiguously. Compared to the more commonly used policy-cycle model, a specific advantage of this model is that processes within the ‘black box,’ or ‘throughput,’ are given analytical attention. However, to avoid misunderstandings, it should be underlined that the model in Figure 1 is an analytical construct. Empirically, a policy process is significantly more intricate or complex (e.g., Howlett et al., 2017). As the following description will show, the model also upholds democratic and bureaucratic principles in a public ethos. We will arrange the analysis of policy documents based on the four steps presented in Figure 1.

On the *input side* of the model, the most fundamental principle is that citizens elect politicians who are responsible for making decisions on their behalf. Key principles include equal voting rights, the right to run for public office, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, citizens’ access to alternative sources of information, and the right to form and join autonomous associations (Dahl, 2000; Held, 2006, Pateman, 1970). Ultimately, digital transformation should be understood and analyzed within the context of democratic politics. Public policies for introducing advanced technologies in the public sector should be guided by democratic decisions that, in turn, are rooted in and derived from the citizens.

*Throughput* processes are guided by the principle that public administration should ensure the efficient and transparent implementation of democratic decisions. Uniquely among organizations in the public sector is the complex relationship between political decisions and administration (Farazmand, 1997). According to the model, the administration and its bureaucrats are obligated to maintain autonomy in areas such as law enforcement and the exercise of authority over individuals. The legal frameworks in many political systems are based on ideals where bureaucrats should act independently of external influences (Weber, 1978). Bureaucrats are expected to be loyal to democratic decisions and independent in applying legal rules and professional standards (Rourke, 1979). Particularly relevant to digital transformation are issues concerning how cybersecurity and personal integrity are organized and guaranteed

**Table 1.** A Public Ethos and Governing Criteria (Lethbridge, 2011; Lundquist, 1998; Pugh, 1991).

Democratic Ethos	Bureaucratic Ethos
Representative democracy, civil rights, civic participation	Functional rationality, efficiency, productivity
Legal certainty, legality	Professionalism
Public ethics in creating social justice	Accountability

**Figure 1.** System based model of policy processes in a representative democracy (Schmidt, 2013; cf. Carlsson & Rönnblom, 2022).

(Frändell & Feeney, 2022; Wirtz & Weyerer, 2017). To guarantee legally secure and profession-based case management, the employees concerned must be given room for continuous skill development and a work environment built around functioning digital systems and reasonable working hours (Bernhard & Wihlborg, 2022; Bordi et al., 2018). Hence, throughput processes aim to enhance values associated with the rule of law, efficiency, transparency, management, cybersecurity, personal integrity, skill development, and work environment.

The *output* side is associated with the delivery of goods, services, and infrastructure investments. The principles of the output flow not only contribute to fulfilling goals and intentions in relation to democratically made decisions but also to strengthening fundamental public values. Public activities are conditioned by standing up for equal treatment, which means that all citizens have the right to equal service. Public activities should also satisfy values such as legal certainty, equality, and basic ethical requirements. A feature that characterizes conditions on the output side but with implications for the entire policy process concerns the ability to combine consideration for democratic decisions and flexible case management at the front line. This problem has been described in implementation research focusing on street-level bureaucracy (see Lipsky, 2010). A large part of the public administration's decisions is based on the autonomy of individual bureaucrats with the aim of meeting needs for individual adaptation. With the increasing use of digital technologies, researchers have come to analyze the concept of 'digital discretion' as a movement in public administration from street-level to screen or system-level bureaucracy<sup>1</sup> (see e.g., Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Busch & Henriksen, 2018; Johansson, 2024). Bovens and Zouridis (2002, p. 180) distinguish between 'screen' and 'system' levels. System-level refers to more advanced systems (compared to screen-level) that can handle case management and make decisions without human interaction. This paper primarily utilizes the concept of system-level bureaucracy. In recent years, extensive research has emerged analyzing how artificial intelligence affects every day routines and working methods, particularly the administration's relationship with service recipients and users (for an overview, see Bullock et al., 2020).

The *feedback loop* provides impulses for policy changes and control so that basic constitutional, democratic and ethical principles can be guaranteed. Systems for public scrutiny can be said to return the model to the input side and form the basis for a central value in public policy, namely democratic accountability. The feedback loop contains normative mechanisms to continuously provide policy development feedback and includes public scrutiny functions, e.g., auditing, legal supervision, certifying, quality control, and evaluation efforts (Allmendinger et al., 2003).

In the analysis, articulations are documented according to Table 2 below.

The selection of policy documents is based on the criterion of gathering current and central documents linked to questions about the public sector's digital transformation. The international/supranational documents are sourced from the EU and OECD, representing leading organizations with policies for digital transformation in the public sector. The EU's policy for digital transformation consists of several comprehensive policy documents. In this paper, we have limited the scope to four documents. These include the *Berlin Declaration* from 2020, which has a particular focus on public service issues; two leading documents – *Digital Europe* from 2023 and *Digital Compass 2030* (adopted in 2021) and, finally, the *regulation Artificial Intelligence Act* adopted in 2024, which establishes fundamental rules for digital transformation and the use of AI systems.

Regarding the selection of national documents, we have chosen to include the Swedish government's strategy on digitalization (adopted in 2017), as well as two national authorities – the Agency for Digital Government (DIGG) and

**Table 2.** Analysis Scheme.

Policy-Process	Policy Articulations – Graded As ‘many’, ‘some’, ‘few’ and ‘no’ Articulations
<i>General</i>	– General articulations expressed in introductions of policy documents
<i>Input</i>	– Democratic legitimacy (representative democracy, elections, civic participation, political opinions) – Civil rights
<i>Throughput</i>	– Efficiency, productivity, administrative tasks (flexibility), rational management – Transparency and accountability (internal) – Skill development
<i>Output</i>	– Equality, gender equality, legal certainty – Legitimacy in the public encounter – Transformation from street-level to system-level bureaucracy
<i>Feedback</i>	– Individual privacy, cyber-security and data protection – Constitutional control and public scrutiny – Accountability (external)

**Table 3.** Data Source Breakdown.

Policy Level	Details
International	– <i>Berlin Declaration</i> on Digital Society and Value-Based Digital Government 2020, Council of the European Union – <i>Digital Europe</i> , EC 2023. ANNEX to the Commission Implementing Decision amending the Commission Implementing Decision C (2023) 1862 final on Digital Europe Programme 2023-2024. – <i>Digital Compass 2030</i> , EC 2021. The European way for the Digital Decade. – <i>EU (2024)</i> . European Union: Regulation, 2024/1689. <i>Artificial Intelligence Act</i> . – OECD (2019), <i>The E-Leaders Handbook on the Governance of Digital Government</i>
National	– <i>Swedish Government</i> ; digitalization strategy (skr 2017/18:47) – DIGG; Uppdrag att främja offentlig förvaltnings förmåga att använda artificiell intelligens (Mission to promote the public administration’s ability to use artificial intelligence], I2021/01825/ DIGG (Agency for digital government) – <i>Vinnova</i> , Post- och telestyrelsen, Vetenskapsrådet och Myndigheten för digital förvaltning: Regeringsuppdrag att föreslå ett strategiskt program för digital strukturovandling (Government directive to propose a strategic program for digital structural transformation). Rapport 17 maj 2021 (Report, 17th of May 2021) – SALAR; Utveckling i en digital tid (Development in a digital age], Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions SALAR) – <i>AI Sweden</i> ; An AI Strategy for Sweden, AI-Sweden, Latest update: 2024-04-08
Regional	– <i>Regional strategies</i> on digital transformation from 4 regions*
Local	– <i>Municipal strategies</i> on digital transformation from in total 17 municipalities*

\* Selected regions and municipalities are listed in Appendix A.

the Swedish Innovation Agency (Vinnova), which have been given special responsibility for the digital transformation of public administration in Sweden. Among the national documents, there are also strategies linked to SALAR – an interest organization for municipalities and regions – and AI Sweden, an NGO that brings together public, private, and non-profit organizations to promote the development of AI systems in public administration. The selection of regions and municipalities has been made to capture both size (number of inhabitants) and variation in socio-economic conditions.

In this article, we have analyzed international and supranational policy documents, with particular focus on Sweden. We did so for several reasons: Sweden ranks high in various international comparisons of the degree of digital transformation of the public sector (OECD, 2019). The multi-level political relations in Swedish politics are complex and dynamic (Lidström, 2018). Sweden is a unitary state based on a significant degree of local and regional self-government. Sweden’s public administration is distinguished by independent municipalities and regions with autonomous negotiating relationships and networks with national and supranational actors (Montin, 2014). As shown, Swedish regions and municipalities have produced documents included in our analysis. Thus, we argue that Sweden a) has the potential to show (in comparison to many other countries) complex and multifaceted policy and transformation features, and b) is a relevant context for studies of policies on digital transformation. The analysis is based on strategies at four policy levels, as shown in Table 3.

The analysis of policy articulations is conducted by coding the policy documents through a qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is characterized by limiting the analysis to specified aspects in existing written or oral documented material. Qualitative content analysis is, as in this case, particularly suitable for identifying patterns and discursive structures in policy documents. The method is beneficial when the research questions concern complex development

processes that involve political ideas and policy guidelines (Boréus, 2017, ch. 2 & 4; Schreier, 2012). In our case, documentation is made of pre-specified aspects that highlight constitutional, democratic, and ethical considerations in the selected policy material. The processing and documentation utilize an analysis scheme (see Annex), which is carried out by reading and making notes on the extent to which the designated aspects appear in the documents.

In this work, the analysis was supported by the Nvivo software to document concepts, expressions, and positions in the selected documents. Analytically, articulations in the empirical material have been documented according to the four parts of the model shown in Figure 1: input, throughput, output, and feedback. In processing the material, the identified articulations were interpreted into four categories: ‘many,’ ‘some,’ ‘few,’ and ‘none.’ It is worth acknowledging that these categories represent rough measures of the extent of the articulations in the material. It should be emphasized that the interpretation of the material has been carried out at an overarching level, even though the analyzed texts were processed multiple times, both through close reading by the researchers and with the support of text-analytical tools in NVivo. For example, that the analysis does not include interpretations of the intensity of preferences in the documents, and that the coding relied on broad categorizations. The qualitative approach identifies overarching patterns and discursive structures. The conclusions of the analysis should be regarded as preliminary, and we argue that more studies are needed on the substantive aspects of policymaking for digital transformation in the public sector. We therefore consider the chosen approach appropriate for this type of initial, exploratory analysis of a policy area undergoing rapid development.

## 4 Analysis and Results

This section analyzes articulations in the analyzed policy documents. Articulations are illustrated with quotes from the documents. In the running text, evaluations are made based on the categories—no, few, some, and many—to roughly characterize the occurrence of the articulations in the material.

### 4.1 General Observations

Most policy documents contain introductory sections that address overarching perspectives, fundamental positions, and general analyses of external trends. These sections often highlight societal developments, frequently expressed in visionary terms. Such preambles are typically dominated by conclusions that portray developments as inevitable and beyond influence. Some examples:

*Digital technologies are now imperative for working, learning, entertaining, socialising, shopping and accessing everything from health services to culture (Digital Europe, p. 1).*

*Digitalization is the single biggest factor of change in our time and affects the whole of society (SALAR, p. 4).*

*Digitalization is not optional (Municipal strategy, Avesta, p. 3).*

AI Sweden outlines the most straightforward strategy concerning overarching societal values in several sections. Notably, the introduction states:

*This Strategy is based on a strong sense of urgency and an analysis summarized in a set of fundamental standpoints and perspectives that must be recognized by any politician, business leader, decision-maker, civil servant (AI-Sweden, p. 7)*

And later on in the strategy:

*As an EU member state, Sweden has in practice focused on regulation rather than enabling innovation. The dynamics in the two other relevant continents, North America and Asia are clearly different which has resulted in faster development (AI-Sweden, p. 10)*

The documents presents many depictions of digital transformation as profoundly formative for the overall societal development:

*The development and implementation of digital key technologies are progressing in parallel and in collaboration with the development of other strategically important areas for transformation, such as electrification, automation, and circular economy (DIGG, p. 17).*

*Digitalization is on its way to fundamentally transform our society. It has become one of the most essential tools for continued efficiency and renewal of the entire public sector (Municipal strategy, Ångelholm, p. 4).*

In summary, the strategies are framed by descriptions or assumptions that digital transformation in public administration is accelerating and necessary in modern society. The documents often articulate a positive vision of the future, where digital transformation is seen as having the potential to solve many of the public sector's future challenges. The introductory and principle-based proclamations are also formative in how the strategies, further on, address issues concerning input, throughput, output and feedback processes.

## 4.2 Input

The studied policy documents lack positions on democratic issues on the input side. In the material, there is only one document, the OECD's Handbook, which extensively expresses such an ambition. In the OECD document, a recommendation is given to strengthen the role of citizens in the digital transformation of the public sector within the framework of representative democracy:

*Formalise the institutional frameworks and mechanisms for encouraging and enabling citizen participation and collaboration, by incorporating them under existing rules for representative democracy (OECD, 2019, p. 71).*

It is otherwise rare that the citizen's role as a voter or active member of society is highlighted as a strategic issue to legitimize and anchor the digital transformation. In some cases, it is possible to find wording in the studied documents that at least suggestively highlights such a perspective:

*Enhance social participation and inclusion by reinforcing digital policy dialogue with citizens to promote social cohesion and active participation of civil society in democratic political discourse (Berlin declaration, p. 8-9).*

*A Union legal framework laying down harmonised rules on AI is therefore needed to foster the development, use and uptake of AI in the internal market that at the same time meets a high level of protection of public interests, such as health and safety and the protection of fundamental rights, including democracy, the rule of law (EC, 2024, p. 2, Recital)*

*When we develop digitalization, we do so through participation and co-creation with the business and user groups affected by digitalization in a participatory process (Regional strategy, Region Halland, p. 3).*

*Ångelholm will create new digital arenas and methods of communication that contribute to dialogue and that make more people engaged and active in the municipality's development (Municipal strategy, Ångelholm, p. 8)*

It should be said that formulations of this kind are found in only a few of the strategies and thus only indirectly and generally indicate the importance of democratic anchoring of the digital transformation among citizens or voters on the input side. Instead, the citizens are mainly regarded as service recipients concerning measures that may be digitalized. Many articulations in the material emphasize the importance of digital transformation for the ability to deliver services to citizens. The European Commission expresses this as follows:

*User-friendly services will enable citizens of all ages and businesses of all sizes to more effectively influence the direction and performance of public affairs and improve public services (Digital Compass, p. 11)*

All strategies from municipalities and regions emphasize digital transformation as a kind of service democracy:

*Users of both e-services and digital care services have increased in Region Stockholm. In addition to e-services offered through healthcare, residents can use various apps and smart devices for well-being and health (Regional strategy, Region Stockholm, p. 6)*

*It can be about making everyday life easier for the citizens who have contact with the municipality, promoting innovation and participation, or increasing the quality and efficiency of operations (Municipal strategy, Östersund, p. 3)*

In many cases, articulations warn critically that digital systems can lead to increased exclusion for some citizens in society. This kind of articulation explicitly point out that growing digital exclusion not only risks creating inequalities in the use of public services but also that the opportunities of citizens to influence the development of society are unequally distributed between different groups of citizens:

*Digital skills will be a necessity to strengthen our collective resilience as a society. Basic digital skills for all citizens and opportunities for the workforce to acquire specialized digital skills are a prerequisite for active participation in the Digital Decade (Digital Compass, p. 4)*

And in one of the local strategies:

*Digital exclusion means that some citizens wholly or partially lack access to the digital part of society. This may be because they lack digital skills or access to equipment, computers, connectivity (Municipal strategy, Svedala, p. 3)*

Concerning human rights, more comprehensive values and positions can be observed at the international and national levels but lack articulations at the regional and local levels. It is characteristic that articulations of fundamental human freedoms and rights are part of international and national policy documents. Articulations on how these principles should be translated into practical or operational policies are missing. A few examples can be found in the wording of the Berlin Declaration, in the EU AI Act, in the OECD document, and from some national actors:

*We strive for a digital transformation in which every person recognizes that fundamental rights and freedoms laid out in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union as well as shared fundamental values like respect for others, transparency, privacy and authenticity of information (Berlin declaration, p. 4)*

In a section on General-Purpose AI, the AI Act notes the following:

*...the ways in which models can give rise to harmful bias and discrimination with risks to individuals, communities or societies; the facilitation of disinformation or harming privacy with threats to democratic values and human rights; risk that a particular event could lead to a chain reaction with considerable negative effects that could affect up to an entire city, an entire domain activity or an entire community (EC, 2024, p. 29, Recital)*

*Creating an area of security and stability, respecting the rule of law, protecting fundamental human rights and ensuring the separation of powers are crucial (OECD, 2019, p. 19)*

*For individuals, digital competence is strongly linked to the opportunity to participate in society, have access to public and private services, communicate, and exercise their democratic rights. (Vinnova, p. 24)*

### 4.3 Throughput

At the outset, the policy documents only pay limited attention to overall articulations on how digital transformation affects internal administrative processes and working environments. In a few examples, digital transformation processes are highlighted as an opportunity to create time for employees to focus on essential tasks and move away from monotonous or repetitive tasks. The following quotes are exceptions in the material:

*Developing relevant policies to support a workplace culture that promotes a healthy and appropriate use of digital technologies and work-life balance, namely through co-creation and collaboration with the civil society (Berlin Declaration, p. 15).*

*Halmstad Municipality shall have a good digital work environment that is systematically assessed and evaluated (Municipal strategy, Halmstad, p. 7).*

Regarding issues of transparency in public administration, policy material from national, regional, and local actors weakly represents this issue. However, if the outlook is broadened, issues on transparency hold significant importance in policy considerations made in the EU's principles and the OECD Handbook. The articulations are characterized by being broadly

linked to issues of accountability, and even in this regard, the formulations are often vaguely expressed. Overall, there is a lack of specified conditions on how systems and system development should be made more transparent. The international and national actors express themselves more precisely. The OECD Handbook is the document that deals most extensively with issues of transparency. In several places, principles and guidelines are presented to ensure transparent systems and processes in public policy. Also, in the EU documents issues on transparency are frequently articulated. Below is an example:

*In order to introduce a proportionate and effective set of binding rules for AI systems, a clearly defined risk-based approach should be followed. That approach should tailor the type and content of such rules to the intensity and scope of the risks that AI systems can generate. It is therefore necessary to prohibit certain unacceptable AI practices, to lay down requirements for high-risk AI systems and obligations for the relevant operators, and to lay down transparency obligations for certain AI systems (EC, 2024, p. 7, Recital).*

In the regional and local strategies, there are a few formulations about transparency and, where applicable, in a vague and general way:

*Transparency is needed in how algorithms have been applied and monitored, as well as in regulation and the possibility of blocking functions (Regional strategy, Region Stockholm, p. 39)*

*The municipality of Linköping shall promote self-service through good visibility, openness, and transparency of information and decision-making documents that build trust. (Municipal strategy, Linköping p. 7)*

The material contains many articulations concerning threats to individual privacy, cyber-security, and data protection. By and large, all analyzed documents include at least some formulations on these topics. Thus, the issue of ethical security is included in most of the policy documents:

*People should be provided with non-discriminatory access to online services and enjoy the implementation of principles such as secure and trustworthy digital spaces, work-life balance in a remote work environment, protection of minors, and ethical algorithmic decision-making (Digital Compass, p. 12).*

*Trust and security in public interactions and enabling everyone to move safely and securely in the digital world (DIGG, p. 44)*

*The individual's integrity, security, and rights are fundamental, and the municipality's ability to meet new technology and change customer behavior with new services will depend on the ability to handle security issues (Municipal strategy, Nacka, p. 4)*

All documents contain assessments dominated by articulations about the digital transformation's great potential to achieve cost savings and economic effects. Its contribution to economic values in public administration is considered a sufficient condition for securing funding for systems and expertise:

*Properly managed, digitalization can contribute to creating a more efficient and innovative welfare system. (SALAR, p. 6)*

*By harnessing the opportunities of digitalization, societal services can be improved, quality can be enhanced, and operational processes can be streamlined. (Municipal strategy, Jönköping, p.7).*

Articulations emphasizing the importance of public management occur frequently in the material, with management seen as a generally significant factor for introducing and developing digital models in public administration. In the OECD's Handbook, a special section is devoted mainly to management issues for digital transformation as part of internal policy processes for financing, project management, procurement, standardization, etc. Hence, in many places, the documents consist of arguments about the importance of leadership for innovation and ensuring the involvement and understanding of the personnel affected by the possibilities of digital transformation:

*Sweden (...) has a history of successfully managing change both within organizations and for society at large. The culture of early delegation with a lack of management involvement can on the other side lead to slow AI adoption and poor prioritization (AI Sweden, p. 8)*

*Management is crucial in balancing efficiency and innovation and driving change where digital technology is utilized (SALAR, p.13)*

Finally, there is a notable absence of positions on digital transformation regarding increasing digital learning and skill development among public employees. This absence of articulations is partly due to the fact that the documents are on a general level and that detailed guidelines are often missing concerning everyday problems.

#### 4.4 Output

When it comes to issues related to the public encounter with citizens and users, this type of problematization is absent in the material. The documentation does not address any issues associated with a process of transformation where street-level bureaucrats have become system-level bureaucrats. The closest we can come to formulations that at least somewhat touch upon these types of issues are the following from the EU AI Act:

*Where appropriate, to collect relevant information necessary to perform the impact assessment, deployers of high-risk AI system, in particular when AI systems are used in the public sector, could involve relevant stakeholders, including the representatives of groups of persons likely to be affected by the AI system, independent experts, and civil society organisations in conducting such impact assessments and designing measures to be taken in the case of materialisation of the risks (EC, 2024, p. 26, Recital).*

Some articulations could be found bearing on ethical aspects associated with the increasing use of digital tools in the public sector. The Berlin Declaration presents principles and proposals to increase awareness and knowledge about the content and development of digital transformation. The Berlin Declaration clarifies several principles to foster digital empowerment and digital literacy among citizens and businesses. The objective is to raise awareness about the potential benefits of digital transformation for public services, such as user-friendliness and coordinated decision-making, as well as risks related to data management and personal privacy. Articulations on equality, gender equality, the rule of law, and legal certainty occur in the material but cannot be said to have a prominent place. Overall, we can find articulations regarding these issues in a handful of documents, and below are some examples:

*Creating an area of security and stability, respecting the rule of law, protecting fundamental human rights and ensuring the separation of powers are crucial (OECD, 2019, p. 19)*

*Diversity, non-discrimination and fairness means that AI systems are developed and used in a way that includes diverse actors and promotes equal access, gender equality and cultural diversity, while avoiding discriminatory impacts and unfair biases (EC, 2024, p. 8, Recital)*

*All individuals, women and men, girls and boys, regardless of social background, abilities, and age, should have the capability and opportunity to contribute to and participate in the digital society (Swedish Government, p. 9)*

*Gender equality and equity need to be given increased attention and consideration as society and our surroundings become increasingly digital (Municipal strategy, Jönköping, p. 8).*

Apart from a few exceptions, there is a lack of articulation on issues related to the direct and everyday meetings between street-level bureaucrats and individuals and organizations in society. This underlines, once again, that the analyzed documents are at a principal level, and the principles are rarely operationalized in considerations related to the daily work of public administration.

#### 4.5 Feedback

In analyzing policy processes within the public administration (throughput), it was possible to note many articulations concerning transparency often connected with opportunities to demand accountability for completed activities. With a focus on feedback functions or processes for public scrutiny, the problem of a responsibility and accountability gap is only addressed to a small extent. However, some overall articulations can be identified. An overarching position, expressed with similar wording in most policy documents, is outlined in the Berlin Declaration:

*Promoting an AI ecosystem based on European values and rules that unlocks the social and economic benefits of this technology for European citizens and businesses through fostering responsible, accountable public welfare and human-centred development and use of transparent and explainable AI (Berlin Declaration, p. 13).*

**Table 4.** Summary of Policy Articulations.

Policy Articulations – Graded As ‘many’, ‘some’, ‘few’ and ‘no’ Articulations	
<i>General</i>	– many articulations expressing digital transformation as an inevitable societal process
<i>Input</i>	– few articulations concerning democratic legitimacy – few articulations of specific guidelines to ensure civil rights
<i>Throughput</i>	– many articulations on the significance of digital transformation in streamlining public administration for increased efficiency and management – some articulations on policy values on transparency and accountability – few articulations on specific needs of skill development
<i>Output</i>	– few articulations on policy aspects on equality, gender equality, and legal certainty – few articulations on output legitimacy concerning issues in the relation between improving public services to citizens – many articulations concerning ethical issues on threats to individual privacy, of cybersecurity and data protection – no articulations on ethical issues when robots replace humans in the front-line or in the transformation from street-level to system-level bureaucracy
<i>Feedback</i>	– some articulations concerning constitutional control and public scrutiny (the EU AI Act is an exception with detailed regulation in some respects) – few articulations on issues of democratic and citizen accountability

The EU AI Act (EC, 2024) provides more detailed information on fostering responsible, accountable, explainable, and secure artificial intelligence in the public sector. Some articles, such as those on risk management (Article 9), surveillance risks (Article 75), and protection of fundamental human rights (Article 77), specify these types of control mechanisms. In the OECD’s Handbook, a special section emphasizes what is called the importance and implications of the Governance of Digital Government with the following wording:

*Strengthen the regulatory frameworks in line with the objectives of digital government policies and initiatives through co-ordinated ex ante impact assessment and ex post evaluation across the government (OECD, 2019, pp. 93–94)*

Even in regional and municipal strategies, responsibility issues are addressed in a general manner. It is often described that the administration should work transparently and based on general principles of administration practices without clarifying how the processes to ensure accountability should be designed. It is also characteristic that the responsibility for developing digital systems is delegated from elected politicians to senior regional or municipal officials:

*The governing documents should clearly communicate to the organization, residents, users, customers, suppliers, partners, and other stakeholders what is expected of administrations and companies. These governing documents form the basis for holding individuals accountable when we do not operate according to what has been decided (Municipal strategy, Göteborg, p. 1)*

*The Regional Office’s IT and Digitalization Function is responsible for regional coordination within the civil service organization, as well as overall responsibility for the organization’s development, knowledge, support, and engagement (Regional strategy, Region Halland, p. 6).*

Hence, the material, with one exception - the EU AI Act - rarely discusses opportunities to maintain fundamental public values in the long term through various forms of public scrutiny—auditing, monitoring, and evaluations. The absence of formulations on public scrutiny underscores the character of the documents, which often lack precise statements on how the digital transformation should be implemented in practical terms.

## 4.6 Summary

In Table 4, the main findings from the analysis are summarized.

The analysis of policy documents showcase that the digital transformation in public administration is considered necessary, urgent, and inevitable. The articulations represent policies for digital transformation that should prioritize innovation rather than regulation. The analysis also concludes that the articulations are often broadly formulated, overarching, vague, and generally expressed, with a frequent lack of operationalization. The mapping and analysis briefly show that the studied policy documents essentially (1) lack clarified principles and guidelines on the input side (democratic legitimacy, civil rights), (2) have frequently occurring positions regarding what happens throughout in the black box, weakly expressed articulations on (3) the output side and (4) the feedback mechanisms. There are some exceptions for articulations on the

output side and concerning feedback mechanisms with stronger articulations regarding privacy, security, data protection, and, to some extent, with the EU AI Act's regulation of specific constitutional control mechanisms.

## 5 Conclusions and Discussion – on a Public Ethos and Future Research

This paper has addressed the question of to which extent a public ethos is articulated in policy documents supporting digital transformation in the public sector. In the analysis, we (1) mapped policy documents from political actors in a multi-level setting and (2) explored the extent to which constitutional, democratic, and ethical principles are articulated in these documents.

First, the analysis reveals that articulations of public ethos in terms of constitutional, democratic, and ethical principles are given low priority. The policy documents avoid regulatory governing instruments such as legal certainty or public scrutiny. Rather, the documents prioritize 'furthering' instruments that enhance technological innovation and efficiency. The analysis shows that the studied policy documents reflect a prevailing technological optimism where digital transformation is desirable and necessary. Technological optimism dominates the policy discourse, while constitutional, democratic, and ethical considerations receive comparatively limited attention.

Second, the analysis reveals an imbalance between the democratic and bureaucratic dimensions of public ethos. The policy documents lack articulations concerning civic participation, party political debate, and guarantees to ensure public and media scrutiny. Characteristics also include unclear articulations of politically controversial issues on social justice, such as gender equality and discrimination, as well as judicial aspects, such as legality and legal certainty. Notably, the articulations on the democratic side apply principles on issues such as cybersecurity, individual privacy, and data protection. Regarding the bureaucratic side, the documents are characterized by an emphasis on functional rationality and efficiency in producing goods and services. Weaknesses regarding the bureaucratic ethos consist of values linked to professionalism and accountability in the public encounter on the front line of public administration.

A democratic deficit thus characterizes policies on the digital transformation of the public sector, and it is generally difficult to find democratically anchored visions and ideas that address fundamental questions about what the new technology will achieve concerning basic societal values. Like other policy fields, public policies regarding the digital transformation of the public sector are characterized by a dominance of neoliberal-influenced governing techniques. They are strong on efficiency but thin on democratic values. The political or democratic content in policy documents mainly concerns individualized ethics for personal integrity and cybersecurity. Otherwise, policymaking is dominated by process values such as efficiency, transparency, and accountability. Hence, the analysis indicates that policy documents consist of vaguely formulated political visions of what is desirable in promoting digital transformation in the public sector. Instead, the policy is based on an essentialization of digital transformation, which is considered urgent, natural or self-evident.

Overall, it should be noted that this paper represents a preliminary analysis. The analysis was done based on only one country, the number of selected policy documents was limited, and the theoretical orientation was somewhat reduced to create a comprehensible and focused analysis. In other words, both breadth and depth are needed in future research on digital transformation processes in public policies. This underscores the need for more research and expanded public debate on the political and democratic implications of digital transformation.

Let us zoom out momentarily and consider the broader academic landscape. In that case, this paper can be said to argue for the need for future research to emphasize the specific characteristics of the public sector in the digital societal transformation. In the introductory section of this paper, we noted that a large number of studies have explored overarching constitutional and democratic issues (see e.g., Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Carlsson & Rönnblom, 2022; Padden, 2024; Wirtz et al., 2019), as well as analyses of particular problems associated with governing the digital transformation (for an overview, see Öjehag et al., 2023). Rich and complex research fields have long been developed that address the concept of digital transformation with critical analyses that move in a borderland between technological development and analyses of societal processes concerning, e.g., the digital divide, weaknesses in transparency/accountability, injustices at frontline discretion (Brockmann, 2017; Bourgault, 2020; Busuioc, 2021; Criadoa et al., 2020; van Dijk, 2020; Tummers & Rocco, 2015; Wessels, 2023).

Our contribution to this research can be linked to the approach that characterizes this paper, consisting of two main tracks. First, a normative framework of public policy where democratic and bureaucratic values should be balanced against each other. Second, a system-based perspective where the different parts of the policy process - input, throughput, output, and feedback - are considered comprehensively. We argue that research on digital transformation in the public sector has at least partially overlooked to conduct (1) policy analyses from a comprehensive perspective that includes input, throughput, output processes, and feedback mechanisms and (2) analyses that consider a balanced public ethos. We believe that the importance of conducting such policy analyses has clear practical and everyday implications for how digital transformation unfolds in the public sector.

In this context, we see the need for further research in at least three areas: *Firstly*, the outcome of the analysis in this paper shows that policies are decided and developed with weak articulations on political and democratic anchoring. Furthermore, digital transformation is described as a rapidly expanding and inevitable force in societal development. Thus, research has long identified the need to introduce political reforms to adapt and develop the constitutional frameworks of nation-states and their administrative and legal principles. Imagining such reform processes without party politics and open political debate is difficult. Therefore, further research is needed on the conditions and opportunities for the participation of individual citizens, civic organizations, and political parties in the digital transformation of the public sector. Research on digital transformation in public administration should serve as a critical counterforce to the often technologically optimistic and entrepreneurially fixated perspectives that have dominated the policy field so far.

*Secondly*, the analysis also reveals that process values, such as skill development and public scrutiny, are weakly articulated in the analyzed material. Indeed, some research illuminates those issues, especially analyses linked to problems of transparency and accountability. However, further research is needed on skill development/learning and public control mechanisms. In the prevailing technologically optimistic spirit, it is considered symptomatic that neither policy documents nor research has paid much attention to the management of constitutional control and systematic evaluations of the ongoing digital transformation of the public sector.

*Thirdly*, it has been observed that the policy area largely lacks problematization and proposals for measures addressing the effects of digital transformation on the frontline of public administration. The transition concerning digital discretion, i.e., when robots replace humans as decision-makers at the frontline of administration, is weakly articulated in the policy material. This means that strategies and development work concerning, for example, legal certainty, non-discrimination, personal integrity, and ethical issues have not yet been established in this policy field. It can also be expressed by noting that policy documents need to adequately address how digital transformation may impact the treatment of vulnerable and marginalized populations. Thus, the need for further research includes questions such as:

- When does digital transformation need to be complemented by human oversight and control?
- How can established professional norms and practices at the frontline be accommodated when designing algorithms and automated systems?
- What does it mean to combine professional expertise with developing the ability to secure fundamental ethical approaches practically?

*In summary*, while the conclusions made from this study highlight how the opportunities for digital transformation are represented in policies, they also underscore the need for a more democratic and ethically grounded approach to policymaking. By addressing the gaps identified in this study, policymakers can strive for digital transformation to enhance public services while upholding democratic values and societal well-being. Addressing these challenges requires careful planning, stakeholder engagement, investment in technology infrastructure, and a commitment to organizational change. It also ensures that any digital transformation initiative align with broader and responsible policy goals and priorities, such as improving service delivery, enhancing transparency, public scrutiny, and increasing efficiency in public administration. More clearly than so far, digital transformation policies should mark a public ethos to reinforce, not weaken, the constitutional, democratic, and ethical principles of public administration.


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## ORCID iDs

Jörgen Johansson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6155-511X>

Michel Thomsen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8463-4486>

Maria Åkesson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9439-0764>

## Note

1. Bovens and Zouridis (2002, p. 180) distinguish between 'screen' and 'system' levels. System-level refers to more advanced systems (compared to screen-level) that can handle case management and make decisions without human interaction. This paper primarily utilizes the concept of system-level bureaucracy.

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## Annex

### Scheme of Analysis

Policy Document X				
Variable	Policy process	Policy categories	Documenting specifications	Grading*
<i>Introduction Preamble</i>		General articulations expressed in introductions of policy documents	Manual reading of document; notes on visions, overarching societal perspectives, policy challenges, view on development of digital technologies, aspects on the democratic vs. bureaucratic principles	
<i>Input</i>		Democratic legitimacy (representative democracy, elections, civic participation, political opinions) Civil rights	Search in documents in NVivo and manual reading/documentation words/stemmed words and synonyms : - democracy/legitimacy, citizens - political parties/elections - participation, civil society, - media, opinion, debate, communication - civil/human rights - freedoms of... expression, information. assembly, demonstration, association, worship/religion, press,	
<i>Throughput</i>		Efficiency, productivity, administrative tasks (flexibility), rational management	Search in documents in NVivo and manual reading/documentation words/stemmed words and synonyms: - efficient, productive, instrumental, rational, cost/benefit, leadership, management, budget, fiscal	
		Transparency and accountability (internal)	- transparent, public access, accountable, - skill development, learning, knowledge, competence, work organization/work environment	
		Skill development		
<i>Output</i>		Equality, gender equality, legal certainty	Search in documents in NVivo and manual reading/documentation words/stemmed words and synonyms: - ethics, justice, equality, gender, equity, discrimination, legal certainty, legality	
		Legitimacy in the public encounter	- privacy, integrity, security, cybersecurity, safety, individuals, personal, threats, ransomware, phishing, face recognition,	
		Individual privacy, cyber-security and data protection	- public service, users, public encounter, bureaucrats, public officials,	
		Transformation from street-level to system-level bureaucracy		
<i>Feedback</i>		Constitutional control and public scrutiny	Search in documents in NVivo and manual reading/documentation words/stemmed words and synonyms: - accounting, control, feedback, evaluation, public court proceedings,	
		Accountability (external)		

\* Grading in four categories No, Few, Some and Many