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Mapping bureaucratic overload: Dynamics and drivers in media coverage across three European countries

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Abstract

Bureaucratic overburdening has emerged as an important theme in public policy and administration research. The concept signifies a state where public administrators are overwhelmed with more tasks and responsibilities than they can effectively handle. Researchers attribute this phenomenon to several key factors, such as an increasing assault on the public sector, a growing volume of policies to enforce, and "external" shocks. These studies converge on the perception that the public sector's capacity to effectively implement policies and to address societal problems is progressively diminishing. However, there is a clear knowledge gap regarding the breadth, dynamics, and pervasiveness of this issue, as existing research often narrows its focus on the implementation of specific policies or policy sectors. This paper addresses this research gap by mapping the frequency of bureaucratic overload reports in newspaper articles from Italy, Ireland, and Germany, spanning two decades from 2003 to 2022. In the second step, we describe the drivers of overload that we coded in a random sample of articles. Our research reveals that the overburdening of public administration is indeed an escalating problem resulting from an "explosive" cocktail of external and internal challenges that simultaneously affect public authorities.

Keywords: administrative capacity, bureaucratic overload, external shocks, media, policy growth.

1. Introduction

Policy stocks are rapidly expanding across nations and sectors. This surge has been scrutinized from diverse analytical angles, featuring concepts like "policy accumulation" (Adam et al., 2019), "rule growth" (Jakobsen & Mortensen, 2015), or "policy layering" (Daugbjerg & Swinbank, 2016). This burgeoning policy landscape places an increasingly overwhelming workload on the authorities responsible for the execution and enforcement of such policies and consequently, brings about changes in the implementation practices and effectiveness of public authorities. Many factors are said to propel this trend. Internally, administrative systems suffer from the reduction of public finances, services, and staff, coupled with the failure to expand these resources to meet increasing policy demands proportionally (Lobao et al., 2018; Lourenço, 2023; MacCarthaigh et al., 2023). Externally, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the refugee crisis have amplified pre-existing deficiencies within the public sector (Ansell et al., 2021; Lenz & Eckhard, 2023).

When policy growth surpasses the corresponding expansion of administrative capacities, it can lead to a direct burden on actors responsible for implementation. Bureaucratic overload is thus understood as "progressive depletion of administrative capacities when policy stocks grow faster than capacities" (Fernández-i-Marín et al., 2023). This leads to a situation where implementing bodies, such as local administrations, governmental entities,

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regulatory agencies, and others, find themselves unable to implement policies properly and effectively, resulting in an overall decline in policy performance (Gratton et al., 2021; Knill et al., 2023; Limberg et al., 2023). In the end, we can anticipate that when these adverse effects of policy growth become salient, they have the potential to erode citizens' perceptions of government effectiveness and fairness (Hinterleitner et al., 2023; Norris, 2011).

Surprisingly, this link between policy growth, overload, and public salience has not been comprehensively explored to date. Existing research often limits its scope to examining specific policies or focuses on specific policy sectors, leaving a void in our broader understanding of the challenges and trade-offs induced by the systematic expansion of policy stocks and their growing complexity (Sager & Gofen, 2022). To scrutinize this link, this paper addresses public salience of bureaucratic overload in a comparative perspective by asking how widespread the problem of bureaucratic overload is publicly perceived, which trends can be observed over time, and which drivers are associated with bureaucratic overload in the public debate.

We approach these questions descriptively, aiming at scrutinizing the prevalence of media reports on bureaucratic overload in European newspaper outlets, which allows for a more comprehensive and dynamic view of the salience of overburdening in the public sphere across different contexts and over time. Additionally, our investigation explores the drivers that are most ascribed to the condition of bureaucratic overload in the articles. The aim is to gain not only an idea of whether overload is reported but also what type of drivers for overload are mostly discussed by the media. Understanding the public representation of what drives bureaucratic overload is important, as internal reasons for overload can exert a quite different effect on how overload is perceived by the public compared with reports of external drivers.

We find that the reporting of bureaucratic overload has substantially increased over the last decades—despite accounting for changes in the total number of articles published. According to the newspaper articles examined, this trend is driven by a combination of different factors, such as an increasing number and complexity of policies requiring implementation and cuts in administrative capacities. In addition, we see that the number of crises hitting the public sector has gained importance. During the first 10 years of our study period (2003–2012), external crises constituted just 10 percent of all factors mentioned in the context of bureaucratic overload. Interestingly, this figure almost doubled in the subsequent decade, rising to 19 percent.

Our findings contribute to the existing literature in different ways. While bureaucratic overload may seem a plausible and intuitive consequence of rule growth exceeding the available capacities, it has yet to be systematically examined. Since several contributions in this special issue build upon the challenges arising from this mismatch (Haag et al., 2024; Zink et al., 2024), it is essential to establish a foundation for these further analyses by documenting the extent of bureaucratic overload over time and across countries. Therefore, the paper shifts the perspective on bureaucratic overload from the predominant focus on individual policies in existing research to a broader examination of implementation shortcomings within the broader spectrum of public administration.

Theoretically, the paper reinforces recent insights that administrative shortcomings are not merely a product of limited resources (Haag et al., 2024). Rather, they emanate from the dynamic interplay between the growth in administrative tasks for implementation and maintenance on the one hand *and* the stagnation of administrative capacity on the other. The findings also describe trends in the saliency of bureaucratic overload, which appears to be intensifying and becoming more prominent over time. It is also a widespread phenomenon that is *not* confined to any particular policy domain or country. Yet, the occurrence of bureaucratic overload differs from one context to the other, and it can be driven by external crisis events that are becoming increasingly influential in exacerbating overload.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: We begin with a short overview of existing empirical assessments of bureaucratic overburdening (Section 2). In the next step, we discuss the reasons for bureaucratic overburdening, as mentioned in the literature. In the following Section 4, we introduce our case selection and measurement approach. Hereafter, we turn to our empirical analysis and discuss our empirical observations in light of the theoretical expectations. Section 5 concludes.

2. Bureaucratic overload and its existing empirical assessment

Bureaucratic overload has consistently been a focal point in public policy and administration literature, explored from various angles and research perspectives. In the literature on street-level bureaucracy, and red-tape in particular, overload has been a central factor (Bozeman, 2000; Gofen, 2014; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Kaufmann & Tummers, 2017; Lipsky, 2010). The literature on street-level bureaucracy examines how frontline administrators deal with and operate in a high-stress environment caused by scarce resources, high external demand, and red tape (Davis & Pink-Harper, 2016; Lipsky, 2010). Therefore, research has addressed different coping mechanisms (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022; Fowler, 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Tummers et al., 2015), and individual motivation (Bakker, 2015; Shim et al., 2015) employed by street-level bureaucrats as strategies to manage overload. These strategies may range from rationing services, shirking responsibility, and automating responses, to simplifying complex issues (Tummers et al., 2015). However, the majority of this research is actor-centered and focuses on the individual level. It also does not account for changes in overload over time or the prevalence of resulting implementation deficits. These blind spots are primarily due to the fact that most scholarly contributions on street-level bureaucracies and coping practices are single case studies based on qualitative data gathered via personal interviews.

Red-tape literature on the other hand does account for the organizational level and most broadly defines it as pathological or burdensome administrative rules. It includes perspectives on the organization, individual-level bureaucrats, but also on the clients and regulates on the receiving end of public policy (Bozeman & Feeney, 2014; Brewer et al., 2012; Kaufmann et al., 2019; Linos & Riesch, 2020; Pandey, 2023; Pandey et al., 2007). It has been studied in the contexts of organizational effectiveness (Pandey et al., 2007), or organizational risk culture (Bozeman & Kingsley, 1998). As red tape is understood as "rules, regulations, and procedures that remain in force and entail a compliance burden for the organization but have no efficacy for the rules' functional object" (Bozeman, 1993, p. 283), it therefore neither accounts for the dimension of policy growth or implementations deficits.

In a similar vein, rule ecology (Bozeman, 2000; Kaufmann & van Witteloostuijn, 2018; van Witteloostuijn, 2003) also focuses on the organizational level, and mainly associates institutional drivers with endogenous growth dynamics. It underscores that bureaucratic rule-making is an inherently self-evolving process. These growth dynamics are multifaceted, encompassing the need for increased control and increased coordination efforts for existing rules, which again manifest in the proliferation of new rules. Additionally, the creation of new rules is also creating new problems, that must be solved with further rules (Kaufmann & van Witteloostuijn, 2018; March et al., 2000; Van Witteloostuijn & De Jong, 2008). In the absence of counter-balancing mechanisms, the result would be an unchecked proliferation of rules. Nevertheless, organizational learning processes have the potential to mitigate this cascading development (Adam et al., 2017; Boone et al., 2002). While the rule ecology literature is examining the impact of policy growth on policy implementation, the focus is confined to a theoretical and analytical perspective characteristic of the sociology of law and organization.

Finally, implementation research has traditionally centered on individual policy analysis, emphasizing policy-specific execution rather than the holistic organizational perspective of implementation bodies dealing with the entirety of policy stocks. This perspective fails to consider interdependencies across policies and organizations that account for the prevalence of implementation deficits. In this regard, the issue of bureaucratic overload has been largely overlooked in implementation studies. While the majority of these studies do account for the role of administrative capacities, these are typically discussed as static factor, ignoring their sufficiency in light of policy growth; and at the macro-level underestimating variation (Börzel, 2021; Knill et al., 2023; Limberg et al., 2023). Hence, the current discourse mainly addresses administrative capacities as an aspect of organizational design for effective implementation, rather than recognizing and addressing the challenges of bureaucratic overload.

In contrast, bureaucratic overload arises as a consequence of an expanding "gap" between the growth of policies and the available administrative capacities for effective implementation (Bozeman, 2000; Dasgupta & Kapur, 2020; Hinterleitner et al., 2023; Knill et al., 2023). Characteristic factors include the escalating complexity of legal domains with often vague implementation guidelines, or increasing workloads over time, driven by the rapid pace of new legislative initiatives, and bureaucratic backlog. The rapid influx of legislative changes results in implementation challenges in administrative practices, excessive administrative interactions, redundant reviews, and constant alterations that hinder a comprehensive overview. Consequently, implementing bodies struggle to execute policies correctly and efficiently, leading to an overall deterioration in policy performance, or the selective implementation of policies, undermining substantive improvements (Adam et al., 2017; Limberg et al., 2021; Tummers et al., 2015).

Given this gap in the literature, only a few notable exceptions study bureaucratic overload empirically. Kaplaner and Steinebach (2023), who examined coping patterns using a quantitative dataset from over 2000 environmental inspection reports published by the German state of Baden-Württemberg. They found that under the pressure of a high workload, environmental inspectors tend to prioritize dealing with closer over more distant industrial plants. Likewise, Dasgupta and Kapur (2020), using a nationwide survey and time-use diaries from local rural development officials in India, also provided substantial quantitative evidence. Their findings suggest that public officials are increasingly overburdened and that those with fewer administrative resources find it more difficult to successfully administer rural development programs.

In addition to these studies, researchers have recently begun to explore overload issues with regard to *sectoral policy performance*. Fernández-i-Marín et al. (2023), for instance, investigate whether additional policies could lead to a decline in environmental quality improvement. They find that new policies, which impose more workload on the administration without a corresponding increase in resources, can lead to overall *lower* levels of policy effectiveness. From this perspective, bureaucratic overload can be seen both as a process but also "tipping point" after which the creation of new policies does more harm than good.

Despite the valuable insight gained from these studies, they all bear a common shortcoming: the focus on distinct, individual policies or policy areas. While these investigations may uncover the extent of overload within specific sectors, they are less equipped to understand the *systemic* challenges arising from administrative overload. Such a broader perspective can—at least in part—be found in the research on implementation and compliance in the European Union (EU) context (Haag et al., 2023). Early studies in this context were particularly interested in whether the national administration could keep pace with the increasingly rapid progress of integration and the policies coming from the supranational level (Falkner et al., 2007; Knill, 2001).

To answer these questions beyond individual EU policies, scholars have started to assess the *infringement procedure* according to Article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Börzel, 2021). These infringement procedures are the central instrument of the European Commission to enforce these treaties against noncompliant member states. The central aim of these studies is to gather a better understanding of the prevalence of poor implementation by comparing the frequency of infringement cases both across different member states (Sedelmeier, 2008; Zhelyazkova & Yordanova, 2015) and over time (Börzel & Buzogány, 2019). However, as acknowledged in this strand of literature, infringement cases are merely the "tip of the iceberg" (Hartlapp & Falkner, 2009, p. 292). In other words, the total number of infringement procedures against member states only provides limited information about the actual implementation deficits at the national level.

This limitation partly arises from the Commission's reliance on information from member states. For example, Börzel and Buzogány (2019) demonstrate that the vast majority of infringement cases are triggered because member states either fail to report implementation to the Commission or they face complaints from national opposition parties, among other reasons. Additionally, the initiation of these proceedings is strongly influenced by political considerations, and over time, the Commission has substantially shifted its approach toward member states. Pircher (2023) demonstrates that the Commission shifted from a normative approach based on management tools in the 1980s and 1990s to a more regulative approach with enhanced enforcement activities. In other words, it is difficult to determine whether potential increases in infringement cases are due to stricter enforcement practices or (indeed) an increasing number of policy maladministration and -implementation. Consequently, as Adam and Knill (2018) underline, "it is hardly possible to infer the shape, size, and change of the remainder of the iceberg—to continue the metaphor—that is hidden beneath the surface, based on the mere observation of the tip" (p. 230).

In conclusion, the issue of bureaucratic overload has been recognized and examined from diverse research perspectives. However, existing empirical studies often fall short in their scope, tending to concentrate on individual policies or specific areas, or using indicators that only give a crude approximation of the difficulties inherent in a country's administrative system. Owing to these characteristics of current studies, it is challenging to determine (i) the actual prevalence of bureaucratic overload, that is, whether it is (indeed) a widespread phenomenon or one limited to certain areas, and (ii) whether it indeed exacerbates over time, as suggested by existing scholarly work on the topic.

3. Drivers of bureaucratic overload

After having established the gap in the literature as to the prevalence and increase in bureaucratic overload, we next want to bring together the various drivers for overload that have been discussed in previous research. To achieve this, we have structured the most prominent causes along two distinct dimensions: an internal dimension and an external dimension. By separating the drivers along these dimensions, we can discern whether they are a consequence of the inherent workings of the politico-administrative system (internal) or a result of external factors beyond the control of administrative entities. This differentiation is crucial in understanding the implications of the phenomenon, as it allows us to ascertain accountability and determine whether the government can be held responsible for certain challenges or if they are influenced by external circumstances beyond their control (James, 2011; Piatak et al., 2017; Rudolph, 2003).

3.1. Internal drivers of overload

The first driver relates to policy growth. As explained above, we expect the *constant growth in the number and complexity of public policies* to be a central driver of administrative overload. Supported by a vast theoretical and empirical core of literature, policy growth is acknowledged as a current trend across policy sectors and democratic systems (Adam et al., 2017, 2019; Kaufmann & van Witteloostuijn, 2018; Peters et al., 2011; Van Witteloostuijn & De Jong, 2008). Public administrations continually receive new tasks and areas of responsibility from national and supranational decision-makers that need to be examined, managed, and implemented. These amendments and policy growth are an important mechanism for meeting societal demands, as the needs of modern and diverse societies are changing. They might also be an expression of party ideology and a potential reshaping of the political agenda (Jakobsen & Mortensen, 2015).

The effects of policy growth on administrative overburdening can be understood through different mechanisms. First, the continuous expansion, modification, and adoption of policies do *not* coincide with increased administrative capacities. Rather, they occur alongside stagnant or decreasing public sectors, as described earlier. This reinforces the significance of the aforementioned argument. Additionally, the perpetual expansion of policies contributes to a continuous increase in the complexity of the policy portfolio. The growing body of regulations hinders evidence-based policymaking, as adding new policy elements results in increasingly intricate policy mixes (Adam et al., 2019, 2022).

Next to changes in the workload, there can also be changes in the capacities. *Retrenchment or austerity* addresses the issue of lacking administrative capacities. While sufficient administrative capacity constitutes the basis for the effective application, implementation, and enforcement of policy measures (Adam et al., 2022; Limberg et al., 2021; Zhao, 2023), many Western democracies display patterns of retrenchment and a declining or stagnating number of public service employees over the past decades (Lobao et al., 2018). For instance, due to fiscal constraints, governments have implemented cost-saving measures and privatization in the public sector, aiming to alleviate pressures on other sectors of the economy. The withdrawal of finance and services as well as the downsizing of staff thus play a crucial role in bureaucratic overburdening (Lobao et al., 2018; Raudla et al., 2015; Vaughan-Whitehead, 2013).

These constraints severely limit the availability of resources required for these agencies to fulfil their obligations and meet growing demands. Consequently, public agencies find themselves operating with reduced effectiveness, leading to delayed service delivery and an impaired capacity to effectively tackle complex problems and challenges (Barbera et al., 2021; Ferry & Murphy, 2018). Furthermore, the withdrawal of staff, whether through workforce reductions or attrition, can significantly exacerbate bureaucratic overburdening. With reduced staffing levels, the remaining personnel are burdened with increased workloads. This situation can create immense stress, contribute to burnout, and diminish staff morale, further impeding the quality and efficiency of administrative processes. The cumulative effect of these factors adds to the already strained capacity of public agencies to fulfil their responsibilities and effectively serve the needs of the community (Esteve et al., 2017; Shim et al., 2015).

The last, "residual" critique on bureaucracy effectiveness is strongly associated with *bureaucratic misconduct*, laziness, or slack. Scholarly work discusses these concerns, especially slack, as a catalyst for organizational inefficiency that leads to detrimental outcomes for organizational performance (Wei, 2022). This argument, particularly prominent in the principal-agent theory literature, presupposes that an administration, if not appropriately overseen, will inherently gravitate toward inefficiency and mismanagement (Jankauskas et al., 2024).

3.2. External drivers of overload: Exogenous shocks and crises

Regarding the external drivers of overload, the increasing frequency and magnitude of exogenous crises contribute to the exacerbation of administrative overburdening (Knill & Steinebach, 2022; Raudla et al., 2015; Zhao, 2023). Crises impose collective stress on administrative systems, as they challenge established organizational routines and necessitate management and coordination skills, as well as flexibility. Moreover, crises often reveal problems and vulnerabilities within bureaucracies (Ansell et al., 2010; Eckhard et al., 2021; Lenz, 2024). For instance, during recent crisis events, administrative bodies were faced with managing exponentially increasing infection rates, necessitating the tracking and monitoring of cases, or handling the reception, registration, and assistance for a significant influx of refugees. The sheer escalation in workload and the overwhelming volume of cases substantially contributed to administrative overburdening (Boersma et al., 2019; Kuhlmann et al., 2021; Lenz, 2023). Simultaneously, public administrations are expected to continue to effectively fulfill routine tasks, such as processing social support requests and managing short-time work allowances (Schuster et al., 2020). Particularly during times of crisis, however, these allowances may experience a significant surge in demand, reaching unprecedented volumes and placing an additional strain on administrative systems.

In addition to these direct impacts of crises on administrative overburdening, it is important to also consider the potential adverse consequences of the crisis on retrenchment and policy growth (Barbera et al., 2021; Di Mascio & Natalini, 2015; Knill & Steinebach, 2022). To deal with crisis-induced overburdening, governments often resort to cost-cutting measures, which can result in reductions in public services, layoffs, and budgetary constraints (Ansell et al., 2010; Barbera et al., 2021; Sutter & Smith, 2017). Previous research on the financial crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the invasion of Ukraine, confirm that crises trigger significant in expenditure, employment, and wages (Barbera et al., 2017; Esteve et al., 2017; Pandey, 2010; Vaughan-Whitehead, 2013). Furthermore, as crises often surpass the scope of existing legislation, they require the expansion of legal frameworks and measures to adapt to new circumstances and address future challenges more effectively. As a result, existing research recognized crises as relevant drivers of policy growth (Albright & Crow, 2021; Knill & Steinebach, 2022).

4. Methodology

To comprehensively capture and analyze the phenomenon of administrative overburdening, this paper explores the salience of bureaucratic overload by examining media coverage of bureaucratic overload in European newspaper articles. Therefore, we perform a content analysis of newspaper articles in Italy, Germany, and Ireland. All three countries are advanced democracies and were selected as they are typical cases for the trend of increased accumulation und stagnation of capacities (see Fernández-i-Marín et al., 2023).

At the same time, these countries exhibit differences in terms of administrative traditions and overall government capacities. Germany and Italy fall under the Continental European administrative tradition, characterized by legalistic, rule-based approaches to public administration (Peters, 2021; Steinebach, 2023). In contrast, Ireland aligns with the Anglo-Saxon tradition, characterized by a management-oriented approach. In terms of general governmental effectiveness, both Ireland and Germany consistently outperform Italy based on various international metrics (Hanson & Sigman, 2021). Identifying consistent patterns of bureaucratic overload across these diverse contexts would imply that the challenges we identify transcend differences in administrative tradition or government effectiveness, potentially representing more universal issues faced by modern public administrations. However, it is important to note that our theory primarily focuses on advanced democracies and rule growth as a consequence of free competition. For example, findings by (Aschenbrenner et al., 2023) suggest that autocracies behave fundamentally differently in this context. Therefore, it may not be a universal phenomenon but rather specific to mature democracies.

Relying on Factiva, a subscription-based database of news articles, we were able to access newspaper data from all three countries over a period of 20 years from 2002 to 2022. We selected two newspapers per country: *The Irish Examiner* and *Irish Independent* for Ireland, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Welt* for Germany, and

Corriere della Sera and *La Repubblica* for Italy. With the selection of newspapers, we tried to account for the ideological orientation of the newspapers on the left and right to achieve a balanced selection. The more (center-) left leaning newspapers are *The Irish Examiner*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Repubblica*, while the *Irish Independent*, *Die Welt*, and *Corriere della Sera* are classified as (center-) right and associated with conservative positions (for discussion, see e.g., Knill & Steinebach, 2022; Gratton et al., 2021; Eurotopics, 2023).[1]

To identify the relevant articles, we conducted an initial search using a selection of search terms and operators in the respective language (German, Italian, and English) that we defined as relevant in our discussion. These terms included keywords related to public administration, implementation, and deficits. We have also utilized the option to predetermine the geographic scope of our search inquiries. We configured the settings so that we only obtain articles pertaining to domestic issues within the respective country. Drawing from the initial search results, we engaged in an iterative process, where a subset of the articles was selected to fine-tune our search terms and operators. This evaluation and refinement cycle was performed twice. This iterative procedure allowed us to progressively enhance the precision and comprehensiveness of our search. For example, we recognized that numerous articles in our selection referred to decisions made by administrative courts. Yet, these references did not specifically pertain to instances of bureaucratic overburdening. Likewise, we retrieved numerous articles discussing the concept of "stress tests" within the banking sector. Instituted in response to the 2007 banking crisis, these rigorous assessments are a regulatory requirement for European banks to be periodically undertaken. Yet again, these articles did not delve into the theme of overburdening within the context of the public sector.

Following this refinement process, we conducted a final search with the adjusted search term list and operators (see Fig. 1 and Table A1 in the online Appendix). We obtained a final sample of 4790 articles, of which we

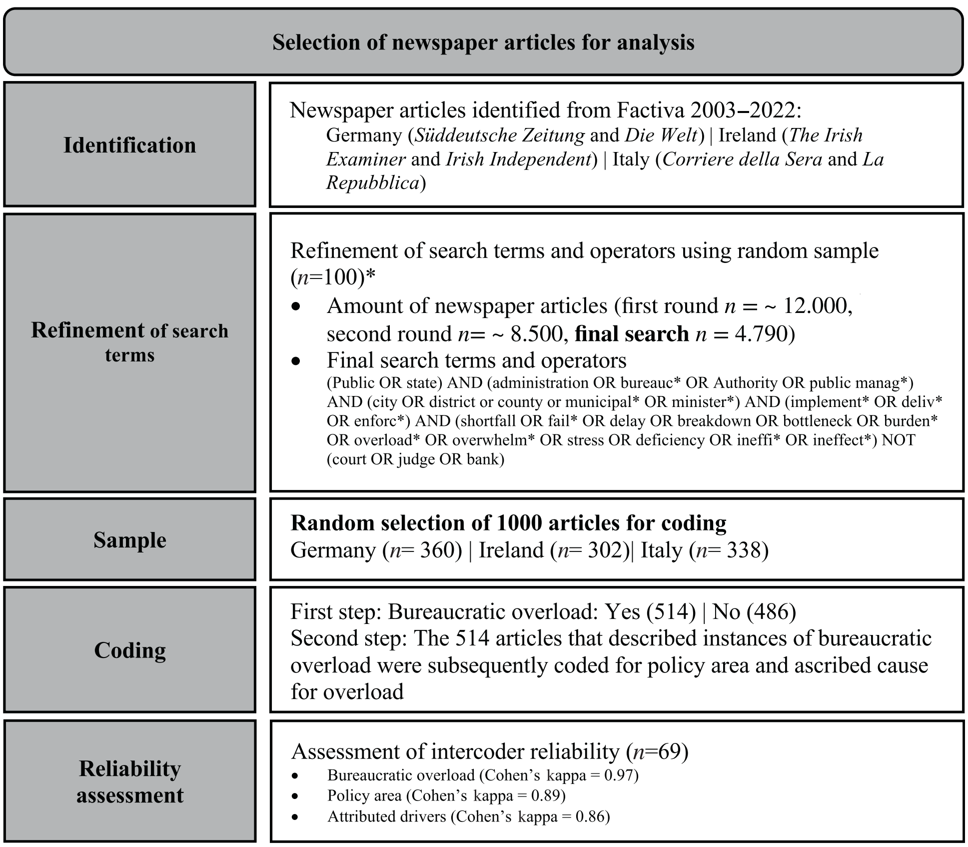

Figure 1 Research strategy. *Note*: Asterisk indicates that we purposefully chose 100 articles, approximately 30 articles per country, as sample for the refinement. We analyzed these articles to modify our search term list by including additional relevant words and refining or restricting certain terms to improve the accuracy of our search. The wording of search terms and operators in the other languages can be found in the online Appendix.

drew a random selection of 1000 articles for the analysis and coding process (338 articles for Italy, 302 articles for Ireland, and 360 articles for Germany).[2]

4.1. Coding process and reliability

We constructed a coding scheme based on our theoretical expectations. First, we identified whether each article reported some sort of administrative overburdening or not (Overload: yes | no). If the article discussed overburdening, we further coded the specific policy area affected using the topics of the comparative agendas project (CAP) (Bevan, 2019) to differentiate between policy issues. The areas listed by CAP are *Macroeconomics*, *Civil Rights*, *Health*, *Agriculture*, *Labor*, *Education*, *Environment*, *Energy*, *Immigration*, *Transportation*, *Law and Crime*, *Social Welfare*, *Housing*, *Domestic Commerce*, *Defense*, *Technology*, *Foreign Trade*, *International Affairs*, *Government Operations*, *Public Lands*, and *Culture*. Finally, we coded the drivers for administrative overload based on our theoretical discussion above, differentiating between tasks and complexity, lack of capacity, mismanagement, and exogenous change. To ensure consistency and reliability, any discrepancies or uncertainties were resolved through discussion and consensus among the coders during the process.

To test intercoder reliability, multiple coders independently assessed a subset of articles (Neuendorf, 2017). The overall agreement in coding decisions differed along the different coding categories. With regard to identifying whether a given article reported some sort of administrative overburdening or not, we find an agreement of 98.5% with a Cohen's kappa of 0.97. For the policy area, we have an agreement of 86.5% with a Cohen's kappa of 0.89 (cf. Fig. 1). Regarding the reasons for driving overload, we have an agreement of 83.6% with a Cohen's kappa of 0.86. According to Cohen, we thus achieve an overall intercoder reliability with very good agreement (0.81–1.00) (Cohen, 1960). Figure 1 summarizes our research strategy.

It is important to highlight that our manual coding process revealed a substantial rate of *false* positives. As shown in Figure A2 in the online Appendix, our in-depth investigation of 1000 randomly selected articles (further elaborated below) indicates that around 50 percent of the articles identified via our search terms do *not* pertain to bureaucratic overload (Yes = 514 | No = 486). The baseline incidence of false positives exhibits minor variations between the countries compared: approximately 60 percent in Ireland, 50 percent in Germany, and 40 percent in Italy. The false positives are primarily due to ambiguous language and the expansive context of bureaucratic overload. As an example, the article "How household charge is likely to go down drain" published in 2012 by the Irish independent mentions our key search terms (here: authority, minister, country, burden, authority, public, implementing) but, in fact, describes the public discussion surrounding the creation of roundabouts as a way to increase road safety. However, it is important to highlight that these false positives are *not* exhibiting a temporal trend. This signifies that while we may face challenges in assessing the *baseline* volume of articles on bureaucratic overload, the trends over time remain unaffected. In simpler terms, we are confident that the overall pattern observed—an increasing number of reports on bureaucratic overload over time—is *not* skewed by an uptick in inaccurately identified articles.

5. Empirical analysis

Upon finalizing the coding process, we undertook a comprehensive empirical analysis. This entailed collating and distilling the coded data taken from the chosen articles, thereby highlighting patterns, trends, and essential findings pertinent to administrative overload within the three analyzed countries.

5.1. Bureaucratic overload in newspaper reports

Figure 2 (left side) presents the total number of articles identified in the first step. The figure reveals a clear upward trend in the number of articles covering bureaucratic overload throughout the 20-year period from 2002 to 2022. As shown in Figure 2 (right side), this finding also holds taking the articles covering bureaucratic overload as a share of the number of articles published in the respective time period. Likewise, we can observe the trend when looking at the countries individually (see Fig. A1 in the online Appendix).

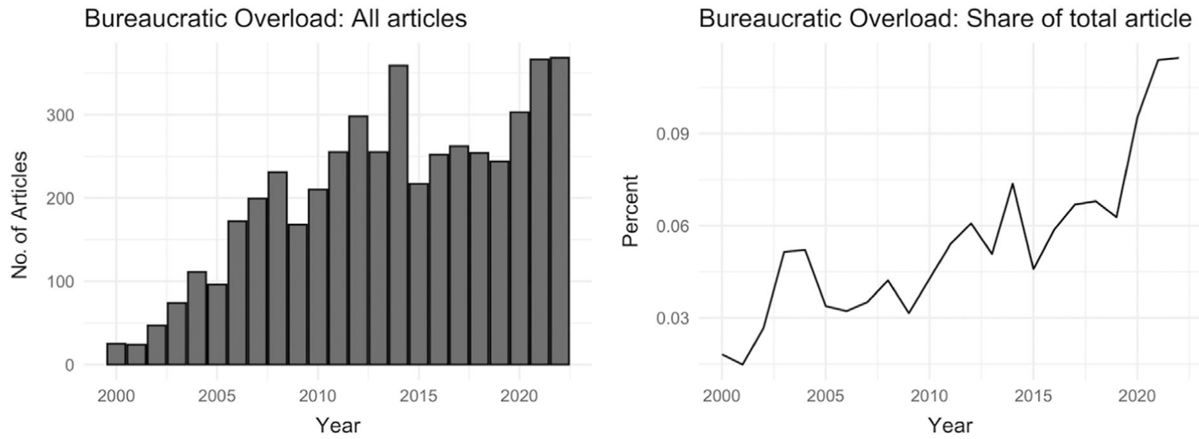

Figure 2 Bureaucratic overload in newspaper articles.

5.2. Drivers for bureaucratic overload

To identify the drivers of bureaucratic overburdening we coded the subset of articles that *accurately* identified administrative overload. From the 1000 articles randomly selected for in-depth analysis, 514 captured the issue of bureaucratic overburdening. As discussed above, we can anticipate different drivers for the observed trend in bureaucratic overload based on the existing literature. We identified the different drivers as follows:

1 *Lack of capacity or resources* when overburdening was discussed due to too few financial or personal resources. These constellations were typically identified in the context of retrenchment or austerity reforms.

Exemplary statements:

The shortage of staff in childcare facilities is now posing enormous problems for the municipalities in the Munich district. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, *April 9, 2014)*

While the city has grown by ten percent in recent years, the administration has not been expanded accordingly. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, *July 25, 2016)*

2 *Tasks and complexity* when overburdening is attributed to an increasing stock of policies up for implementation or excessive workload resulting from a dense web of complicated and mutually contradicting policy provisions.

Exemplary statements:

The federal government must continue to fund school social work beyond 2013. Social workers are necessary as they serve as 'education package navigators,' they must guide parents, students, and teachers through the complex regulations. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, *March 1, 2016)*

'What [meaning: the regulations] that has been imposed upon Northern Ireland is irrational, it is oppressive, it is burdensome and, actually, frankly ridiculous,' he told an Assembly committee. (…) At this stage, we're potentially looking at around 400 staff (for the checks) and a very high number of vets being required, he said. (The Irish Examiner, *March 11, 2021)*

3 *Exogenous changes* when external changes are said to affect the administration's workload. This is often the case in crisis situations where, for instance, a huge number of arriving refugees or a massive increase in infection cases overwhelms public authorities.

Exemplary statements:

> *The number of asylum applications has increased significantly. However, (…) this is not a contradiction to the decreasing numbers of refugees. Rather, it shows that BAMF, thanks to thousands of new employees, is increasingly able to process so-called old cases. (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 9, 2016)*

> *But they are also a reminder of the impact has had on the services of a range of state and semi-state bodies as well as local authorities, as the pandemic forces backlogs which will have to be faced once life returns to even some semblance of normality, to say nothing of the backlogs that Covid will have caused in the health system. (*The Irish Examiner*, May 17, 2021)*

4 *Mismanagement* refers to scenarios where administrative bodies are depicted as being overwhelmed, primarily due to internal inefficiencies in their operational procedures. Mismanagement, as a category, acknowledges instances where the bureaucratic machinery fails to function optimally due to internal shortcomings. These shortcomings could result from procedural bottlenecks, poor communication, or a lack of well-defined responsibilities.

Exemplary statements:

> *Poor cost planning and delays in implementing a major road improvements programme by the National Roads Authority have been blamed for an almost 200% increase to €15.6 billion in the cost of the project over a two-year period. (*The Irish Examiner*, June 30, 2021)*

> *The report, published by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), criticizes the councils for not bothering to check drinking water supplies despite a legal requirement to do so. (*The Irish Examiner*, January 25, 2007)*

As the four categories are *not* mutually exclusive, for instance, having too many tasks (overload) or being under-resourced (too few capacities) are actually two sides of the same coin, where necessary, we assigned multiple reasons to a single newspaper article (see discussion below). Figure 3 presents the share of reasons indicated referring to the (1) lack of capacity; (2) task and complexity; (3) exogenous change, and (4) mismanagement. Note that this share refers to the total number of reasons indicated, not the share of article.

Figure 3 illustrates that the primary factor (∼33 percent) associated with administrative overload is the burgeoning inventory of policies awaiting implementation, paired with the heightened complexity inherent to policy provisions. At the second position ranks the lack of administrative capacity (∼32 percent). In fact, it is *not* surprising that these two aspects are more or less "on par." The perception of an overwhelming workload can be viewed either as the consequence of an excessive number of tasks (policies) or as the result of too few people and finance (capacities) to accomplish these tasks. This is further substantiated when we observe the *co-occurrence* of stated reasons within a single article. As detailed in Table A2 in the online Appendix, the most frequently paired reasons are concerns about administrative capacity and the growth and complexity of policy. In combination, these findings underscore the significance of both limitations in terms of resources, personnel, finances, and infrastructure, as well as the mounting demands and intricacies associated with implementing and managing complex policies. By contrast, the remaining two aspects—mismanagement and exogenous shocks—were discussed much less as potential reasons for overload. 20 percent of the cases identified mismanagement as a contributing factor, while exogenous shocks were cited in 14 percent of the articles. This pattern underscores a notable inclination toward attributing overload to internal drivers, highlighting a significant disparity with the emphasis on external factors. Thus, the focus on internal drivers suggests a persistent struggle with ongoing challenges, while the limited attention to external shocks reflects their infrequent but high-impact nature.

This observation, while offering valuable insights into their overall importance, does not pinpoint which aspects have been more responsible for the recent increase in bureaucratic overload. To observe temporal variation, we therefore look at the proportion of reasons discussed in the context of bureaucratic overload over time (Fig. 4). In essence, the figure shows the increasing prominence of the crisis factor over time. While internal factors, such as the lack of capacity in the public sector, are constant problems that organizations must grapple with, exogenous shocks intensify over time. In the initial decade of our investigation period (2003–2012), external crises accounted for a mere 10 percent of all factors discussed in relation to overload. However, this number nearly doubled, reaching 19 percent in the following decade. The first significant spike coincided with the financial crisis in the late-2000s, followed by a steady uptick during the refugee crisis. After a brief respite, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a significant increase in discussions surrounding the crisis factor as a reason for the administrative overload. In the online Appendix, we provide different ways of illustration, that is, a smoothened trend line by category (Fig. A3) and waffle charts for the periods 2003–2008; 2009–2014 and 2015–2022 (Fig. A4).

The crucial role of crises becomes particularly evident when we delve into the specific policy areas most burdened by bureaucratic overload (see Fig. 5). Occupying the top position is the catch-all category labelled "government operations." This broad sector comprises a variety of public services and responsibilities, reflecting the overarching strain on the administration. As we relied on the CAP (Bevan, 2019) to differentiate between policy issues, this issue comprises a variety of public services and responsibilities, reflecting the overarching strain on the administration. Following CAP, the topic includes appropriations for multiple government agencies, such as issues related to general government efficiencies and bureaucratic oversight. It is, therefore, cross-sectoral and hence most represented across the media data.

Following on the second and third positions are the policy areas of "health" and "housing," respectively. Each of these areas faced its unique challenges heightened by different crises. The health sector experienced a significant surge in its workload due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, public administration's primary responsibilities were the implementation and enforcement of restrictions, alongside tracking infection chains, a role that substantially increased the bureaucratic burden. Similarly, the housing sector faced significant external challenges. The housing sector areas was operating at or near capacity in many areas for years, driven by urbanization, regulatory constraints, and problems with infrastructure development. External events like the refugee crisis, whit a sudden influx of displaced individuals then place additional pressures on the housing sector.

5.3. Cross-country differences

In the previous section, we focused on an aggregate analysis of bureaucratic overload. Nonetheless, examining the variations across different countries could also yield insightful observations. Figure 6 essentially replicates the previous Figure 4 but disaggregates the data at the country level.

The graph illustrates notable cross-country differences with regard to the reasons for bureaucratic overload. Primarily, the factor of "tasks and complexity" appears to be a significant concern in Germany and Italy. However, it is overall less of an issue in Ireland, where the "lack of capacity" is predominantly cited as the principal source of overload. Furthermore, perceptions of "mismanagement" also exhibit stark variations across countries. In Germany, mismanagement is less commonly pinpointed as an issue contributing to overload. However, in Ireland, instances of "mismanagement" are frequently cited as a cause of bureaucratic stress. This perception is even more pronounced in Italy, where "mismanagement" is often highlighted as contributing to bureaucratic

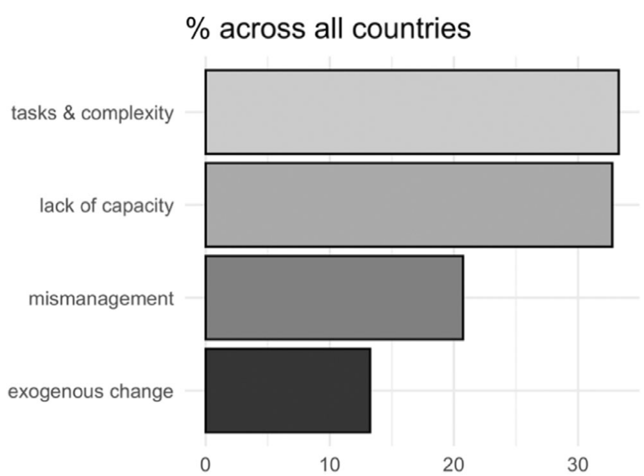

Figure 3 Reasons of bureaucratic overload mentioned (aggregate).

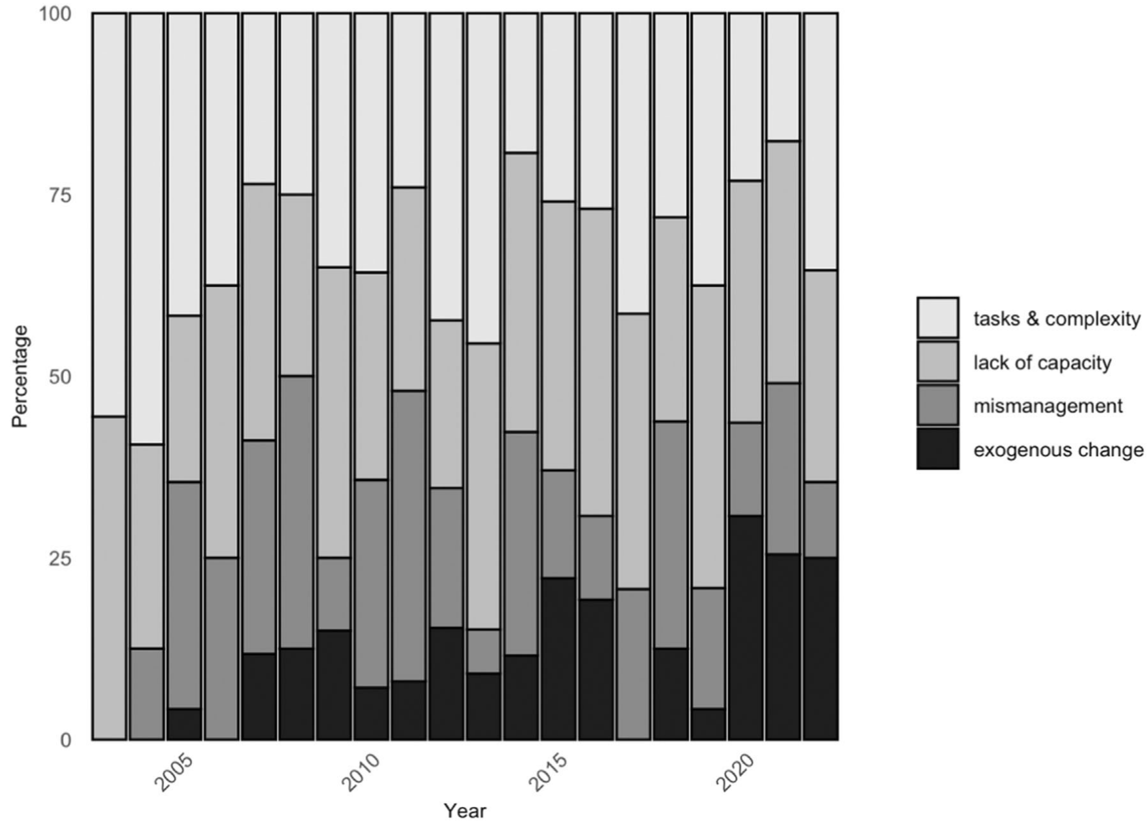

Figure 4 Reasons of bureaucratic overload mentioned (over time).

overload. These observations suggest differing national perspectives on the role of management efficiency in influencing bureaucratic workload.

Intriguingly, these variations extend to crisis patterns as well. In our investigation period, about four major "crises" occurred: the sovereign debt crisis: that began in 2009, with the most acute phase occurring from 2010 to 2012. The refugee crisis with the peak of the crisis in 2015 when a significant influx of refugees and migrants came to the EU from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. The leave-vote by the British electorate in 2016, leading to officially left of Great Britain from the EU in 2020, with a heavily debated transitioning period. And the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 and lasted about 2 years.

In Germany, the crisis category saw a very modest uptick during the European sovereign debt crisis, followed by a remarkable surge during the 2015 migration crisis where Germany emerged as a major destination for many migrants. This substantial increase in the number of asylum seekers put immense strain on Germany's administrative capacity (Bogumil et al., 2016). Conversely, Italy registered peaks during the 2007 financial crisis and the European sovereign debt crisis, where the country suffered substantially more due to its economic structure, high debt levels, and vulnerabilities in the banking and Eurozone systems (Barbera et al., 2017). The migration crisis, by contrast, seemed to have a less profound impact. In Ireland, crisis-induced peaks were also triggered by the financial crisis, where the country suffered from a collapse of the property market and banking sector. Furthermore, Ireland's administrative system was strained by UK's exit from the EU. The uncertainty surrounding Brexit created significant administrative challenges for Ireland, especially in trade, customs, and border management (Murphy & O'Brennan, 2019; Reeves & Palcic, 2017). These observations underscore the nuanced and dynamic nature of bureaucratic overload, conditioned by specific national contexts and crises.

Indeed, one prevalent trend emerges across all countries in the aftermath of COVID-19. The pandemic's reverberations had a profound and almost universal impact worldwide, manifesting in bureaucratic overload, health care strain, economic challenges, and social disruptions. Unlike other crises that might have affected

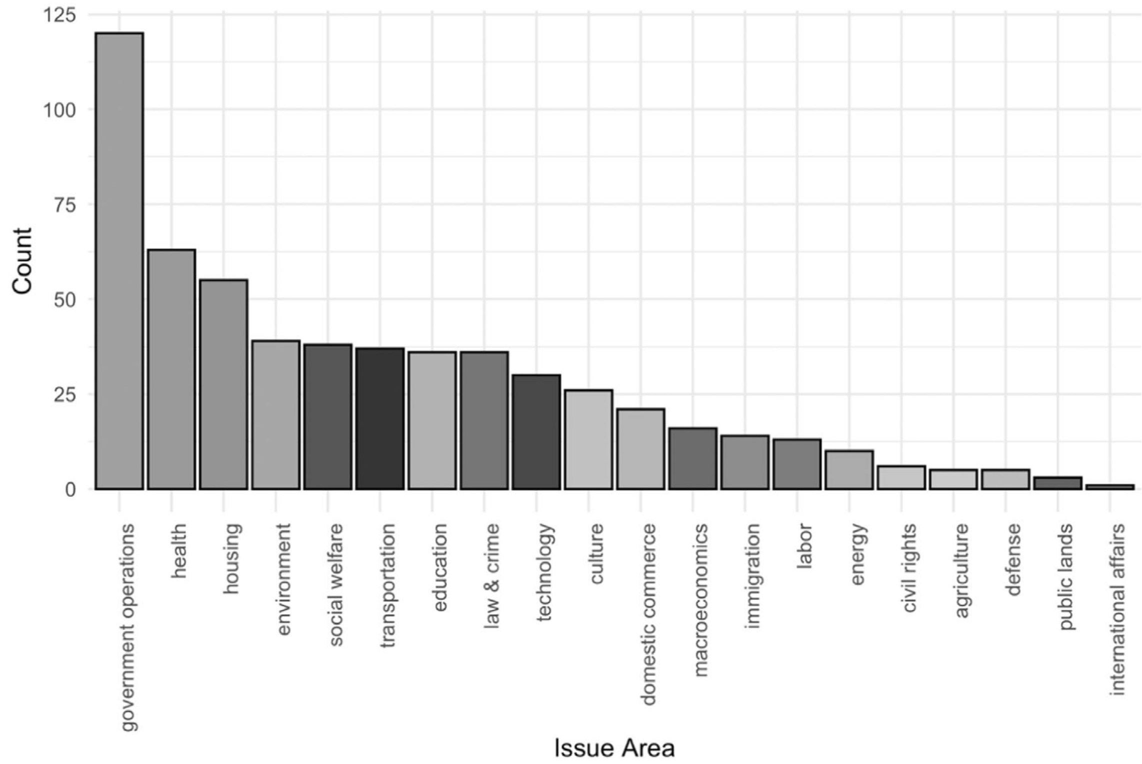

Figure 5 Bureaucratic overload by policy area.

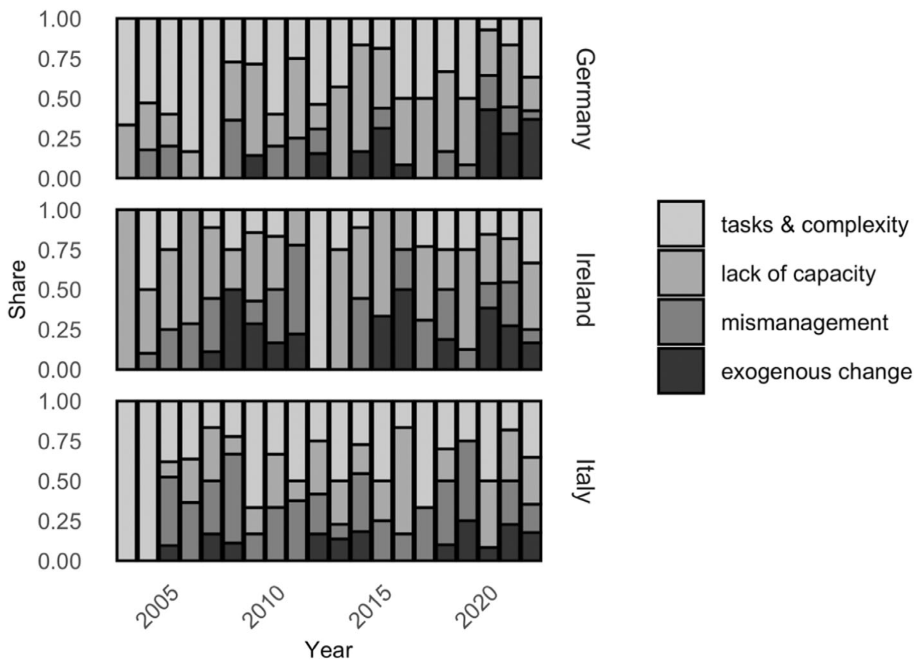

Figure 6 Reasons of bureaucratic overload mentioned (over time, disaggregated).

specific regions or sectors more severely, the scale, scope, and nature of the COVID-19 pandemic set it apart as a truly global crisis that left virtually no country untouched. Its far-reaching consequences underscore the interconnectedness of nations and the imperative for collective, collaborative responses to global challenges (Boin et al., 2021).

6. Discussion

We started this paper with a critical observation: while an increasing body of research acknowledges the challenges posed by bureaucratic overload, current studies tend to concentrate predominantly on individual policies or specific domains. These limitations pose a considerable hurdle to ascertain the actual pervasiveness of bureaucratic overload – that is, whether it is a widespread occurrence, or an issue confined to certain areas, and whether the issue escalates over time, as suggested by the existing body of literature on the topic. This paper seeks to present a comparative exploration, offering an initial description of the scope and public perception of bureaucratic overload in the media. It sheds light on the temporal trends that have unfolded and the primary drivers propelling these developments.

We used text analysis on media reports of bureaucratic overload in three different countries over a 20-year period to evaluate the extent of coverage and the associated drivers. Thus, instead of examining the actual prevalence of bureaucratic overload, we opted to rely on media coverage for two main reasons. First, the feasibility of obtaining comprehensive data that encompasses various sources and incidents of bureaucratic overload is limited. The existing literature relies heavily on single case studies and qualitative approaches (cf. Knill et al., 2023; Zhao, 2023), and even in the rare instances when large datasets are available, the focus lies on phenomena such as rule growth or oversight (Limberg et al., 2021; Lourenço, 2023), or individual job-stress (Dasgupta & Kapur, 2020; Shim et al., 2015), rather than offering broad coverage of organizational instances of overload. Therefore, we argue that media reports provide the best cross-national time trend available. Second, and most importantly, media reporting on bureaucratic overload raises citizens' awareness of the challenges faced by government institutions, potentially leading to increased public scrutiny and demands for accountability. Negative or sensationalized coverage undermines trust, creating a perception of inefficiency and incompetence (Marcinkowski & Starke, 2018; Porumbescu, 2017). While our approach may not offer a perfect representation of the salience of bureaucratic overload, it nevertheless provides a valuable and broad-based insight into the public perception and discourse surrounding this issue.

We find that most importantly, the issue of overload, although varying in intensity across different countries, is undeniably ubiquitous. Overload is *not* confined to specific policy areas. Instead, it permeates various administrative branches, highlighting the universal nature of this challenge. Second, our findings align with recent developments suggesting that administrative failure does not solely result from inadequate capacities (Haag et al., 2024; Knill et al., 2023). Rather, the findings indicate a complex interplay among the expansion of administrative tasks, stagnant capacities, and mismanagement, bridging existing branches within the public administration literature (e.g., Dasgupta & Kapur, 2020; Kaufmann & van Witteloostuijn, 2018; Pandey et al., 2007). The mounting complexity and volume of tasks coupled with limited resources significantly intensify bureaucratic stress. Last, our study reveals an influence of external crises events on bureaucratic overload. While external crises may not be the most prominent drivers of bureaucratic overload compared with internal factors, this discovery still carries dual implications. On the one hand, the expected increase in the frequency and severity of crises will further exacerbate bureaucratic overload in the future. Conversely, it may underscore the growing vulnerability of administrations, already strained by limited capacities and a profusion of complex tasks, to sudden environmental changes.

The present study also has several important limitations that need to be taken into consideration while interpreting the findings. First, our methodology and research design bear several limitations. Newspapers are not unbiased mediums and might be influenced by various factors, including editorial policies, political affiliations, and other subjective considerations. There might be *reporting bias* in our data regarding the salience of certain policy topics (Ciuk & Yost, 2016, p. 45). For instance, crisis events could amplify media attention, providing visibility for state action, while instances of mismanagement might attract attention due to the individual failures involved, which are more captivating for media coverage than systemic complexities. We tried to at least reduce some of this media pressures by incorporating newspapers spanning a diverse range of ideological stances. The heterogeneity of sources allows for a more balanced representation of the issue at hand.

Moreover, we chose a manual coding approach given the nuanced nature of our research question. Although this method has certain disadvantages when compared with natural language processing algorithms, it grants us the interpretive capacity necessary for comprehending the subtleties and nuances in media reporting on bureaucratic overload. Considering the breadth of the phenomenon—its sector-spanning, topic-spanning, and cause-spanning character—we believe that manual coding is the most suitable approach for the descriptive intent of this paper. The challenges posed by the complexity of the bureaucratic overload phenomenon are also apparent in the imprecision of article identification, where, despite employing multistage and detailed selection procedures, we still had to eliminate a significant number of false positive articles. However, the share of false positive articles was consistent across time, strengthening the robustness of our identified trends. To mitigate subjectivity or human error in our manual coding, we ensured to test for indicated intercoder-reliability, although complete elimination of such issues can never be fully ruled out.

Lastly, with regards to generalizability, our analysis is limited to newspaper articles spanning a specific time frame and three European countries—Ireland, Germany, and Italy. While this might limit the comprehensive understanding of bureaucratic overburdening, our focus on representative or typical cases allows us to capture the prevalent trend of increased accumulation. At the same time, the diverse administrative traditions in these countries suggest that our findings may transcend differences in administrative practices or government effectiveness, potentially reflecting more universal challenges faced by public administrations. However, we cannot make assertions about the generalizability to autocratic countries or extreme cases, as their behavior regarding overburden may differ (Aschenbrenner et al., 2023), particularly in terms of media coverage (Stier, 2015).

Acknowledging these limitations, future research could enhance the scope of these findings. Methodologically, future research could employ new approaches such as transformer-based language models or machine learning. By leveraging these sophisticated techniques, researchers could also expand the scope of the study to additional countries and languages, fostering a more global understanding of the issue. Theoretically, future research could place additional emphasis on external pressures exerted on public administrations by international or supranational actors. Public administrations and policymaking, in particular, face multilevel pressures, with international or supranational organizations playing increasingly influential roles, providing a potential avenue for future research.

7. Conclusion

This paper contributes to our understanding of the salience of bureaucratic overload in public discourse, providing valuable insights into its prevalence across diverse contexts and temporal dimensions. Our observations underscore that bureaucratic overload is not only a pervasive issue but is also escalating in its criticality. The multifaceted factors contributing to this challenge are identified through the analysis of newspaper articles, shedding light on task inflation, capacity deficits, mismanagement, and the increasing impact of various external shocks and crises on public institutions. The descriptive findings of this paper contribute to literatures on street-level bureaucracy and sectoral policy performance as they introduce crucial insights into how bureaucratic overload manifests and evolves. By elucidating the drivers and implications of bureaucratic overload, this paper provides a valuable resource and combines previous research from different perspectives and methodologies (e.g., Dasgupta & Kapur, 2020; Kaufmann & van Witteloostuijn, 2018; Pandey et al., 2007).

The paper also holds practical implications. The findings emphasize the intricate interplay among the expansion of administrative tasks, stagnant capacities, and mismanagement and show, that these issues are not merely systemic; they are increasingly recognized and emphasized in the public discourse. Consequently, sustaining rule growth and policy complexity becomes crucial. Integrated policy-making processes should account for existing capacities (Knill et al., 2021; Trein et al., 2019) Exploring diverse solutions to alleviate bureaucratic overburdening is imperative. In particular, leveraging e-government and information and communication technology to automate administrative tasks presents a promising solution. To comprehensively grasp their potential and challenges, additional consideration and scrutiny are essential (Cordella & Tempini, 2015; Tummers & Rocco, 2015; Yu et al., 2023).

To conclude, this research uncovers the widespread nature of bureaucratic overload, its progression over time, and its intricate contributors. As such, the findings constitute a pivotal basis for substantiating the significance of the other papers in this special issue on policy growth and will hopefully inspire further research around the practical strategies to alleviate bureaucratic overload.

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Conflict of interest

None of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] Eurotopics is a news aggregator published by the German federal government agency "Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung." It aims at presenting a diversity of opinions, ideas and moods in Europe. For this purpose, it classifies European media outlets based on their political position.

[2] A potential concern with our approach is that random selection from the sample could result in a limited number of observations from the early years, which have fewer total observations, thus basing our overall findings on the examination of only one or two articles. To address this issue, we have coded a disproportionately larger share of articles from the earlier period as compared to the later period. We achieved this by conducting an extra round of random draws specifically for the period prior to 2005.

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