

# Public sector challenges in different administrative regimes: Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand

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## Abstract

When public sector challenges are manifold, the citizens act as an important source of performance feedback on government practices. In this article, we explore current public sector challenges as perceived by citizens of five countries (n = 4,182)—Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. We analyze to what extent citizens rate a list of public sector topics as major challenges for the public sector as a whole, and for cities and municipalities. The findings indicate that citizens from all five countries are concerned about high-quality public infrastructure and an efficient and effective public service provision. However, some differences regarding the rating of public sector challenges were identified among the countries. For example, Danish citizens score transparency about public performance substantially less challenging than citizens of other countries. Based on a detailed discussion of our findings, we provide directions for (comparative) public administration research and policy development.

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## Key words

government performance, citizen satisfaction, citizen survey, service quality, effectiveness

## Extra Information

The data and research protocol can be found on: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/UV928>

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## Introduction

Public sectors face numerous challenges because of the changing social, political, or economic conditions of the country [1]. At the same time, addressing all these challenges at once is



restricted because of the scarcity of resources. Although these challenges require policy changes and public reforms, deciding on which issues to focus on is difficult as different public values need to be compromised. While politicians and bureaucrats might be biased and ideologically driven in assessing the need for reform [2], [3], [4], citizens use public services and are thus an important source of performance feedback on government practices and priorities. Continuously adjusting to the citizens' opinions and user-based experiences can improve the government's understanding of the citizens' expectations, which will ultimately lead to the advancement of public services [5], [6], [7], [8].

Moreover, as the social, political, or economic conditions that influence political challenges can vary for each country, it is valuable to learn how public sector challenges are perceived differently by citizens of different countries. Such a comparison can contribute to a better understanding of challenges that are common across all countries and the ones that are specific to each country. This allows for the implementation of policies that are better adjusted to the local social, political, or economic conditions.

Consequently, we explore current public sector challenges as perceived by citizens and compare them across five countries. We analyze to what extent individuals evaluate a list of public sector topics as challenges for the public sector as a whole, as well as for cities and municipalities. We draw a representative sample of citizens (n = 4,182) from Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, and compare our findings across different administrative traditions [9]. Then we provide directions for public administration research and policy development based on a detailed discussion of our findings.

### **Public sector challenges: Toward citizen-driven public management**

Citizens are the most relevant stakeholders of the public sector in evaluating government performance [10]. According to Van de Walle (2004: 31), “*what matters is not the quality as such, but the way in which this quality is perceived*”, meaning that public perceptions and satisfaction with administration and government are decisive in guiding officials and for successful policy-making. Placing the citizens at the center of the analysis enables us to receive information about how the quality of services is perceived [11], and how much they trust the government [12]. Similarly, in order to help governments prioritize public management reforms, we ask citizens about their perceptions on major public sector challenges.

Some public sector topics seem to be global challenges, while others might be related to very specific contextual conditions. Thus it is very important to consider the context of the country when exploring public sector challenges. Table 1 provides an overview of selected characteristics of the public sectors in Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand.

### **Data and Methods**

To explore public sector challenges as perceived by citizens, we took a representative sample of citizens from Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. The respondents were approached with the use of a professional panel provider (Qualtrics Panels) and were sampled according to the criteria of representativeness such as age and gender. The questionnaire could be answered in German, Danish, Dutch, or English. In total, 4,182 respondents completed the survey (complete cases). Table 2 provides an overview of the sample characteristics.

**Table 1: Characteristics of five countries**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Austria</b>	<b>Denmark</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>The Netherlands</b>	<b>New Zealand</b>
Inhabitants [13]	8.952 million	5.850 million	83.129 million	17.533 million	5.113 million
Administrative tradition	Germanic administrative tradition ( <i>Rechtsstaat</i> )	Scandinavian administrative tradition	Germanic administrative tradition ( <i>Rechtsstaat</i> )	Germanic administrative tradition ( <i>Rechtsstaat</i> )	Anglo-American administrative tradition
General government expenditure (2020) [14], [15]	56.7% of the GDP	53.4% of the GDP	50.8% of the GDP	48% of the GDP	42% of the GDP
General government gross debt [16], [17]	101	50	77	66	55
Confidence in national government [18]	63%	72%	65%	78%	63%
Trust in government, 2021 [19]	61%	65.2%	60.5%	58.5%	63.5%
Status of digital government [18]	0.452	0.652	0.398	0.450	.564
2022 E-Government Development Index [20]	0.8801 (20 <sup>th</sup> rank)	0.9717 (1 <sup>st</sup> rank)	0.8770 (22 <sup>nd</sup> rank)	0.9384 (9 <sup>th</sup> place)	0.9432 (4 <sup>th</sup> place)
WJP Open Government Index 2022 [21]	0.71	0.87	0.79	0.83	0.81



**Table 2: Sample characteristics**

	Count ( <i>n</i> )	Mean Age	SD Age	% of those who finished higher education
<b>Austria</b>	<b>898</b>	<b>40.2</b>	<b>16.3</b>	<b>34.2%</b>
Diverse	5	28.4	11.8	40.0%
Female	453	39.7	16.0	37.3%
Male	440	40.9	16.5	30.9%
<b>Denmark</b>	<b>707</b>	<b>42.7</b>	<b>17.3</b>	<b>34.1%</b>
Diverse	5	23.0	5.0	20.0%
Female	345	42.1	16.5	38.6%
Male	357	43.6	18.0	30.0%
<b>Germany</b>	<b>1573</b>	<b>49.8</b>	<b>16.8</b>	<b>37.2%</b>
Diverse	0			
Female	807	49.8	17.2	34.1%
Male	766	49.8	16.5	40.5%
<b>The Netherlands</b>	<b>578</b>	<b>43.0</b>	<b>16.9</b>	<b>40.0%</b>
Diverse	3	39.0	6.0	0.0%
Female	289	40.2	16.1	39.4%
Male	286	45.9	17.3	40.9%
<b>New Zealand</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>42.5</b>	<b>18.1</b>	<b>39.9%</b>
Diverse	8	33.9	15.9	37.5%
Female	269	38.5	16.9	37.2%
Male	224	47.7	18.4	43.3%
<b>Grand Total*</b>	<b>4257</b>	<b>44.8</b>	<b>17.4</b>	<b>36.7%</b>

\* The number of observations in the figures might be slightly lower, due to some missing values.

To measure the perceived public sector challenges, we focused on recurring topics in the public administration literature. We prepared ten items to make the survey questions sufficiently detailed, but also straightforward to answer. The following ten topics were included in the survey: (1) attracting competent public sector employees, e.g. [22], [23], (2) keeping up to date with new technological developments, e.g. [24], [25], (3) keeping public employees motivated, e.g. [26], [27], (4) involving citizens in decision-making processes., e.g. [28], [29], [30], (5) reporting performance transparently, e.g. [31], [32], (6) preserving a good reputation, e.g. [33], [34], (7) representing all groups in society (e.g. migrants, older people, etc.), e.g. [35], [36], (8) maintaining a good public service quality, [37], (9) maintaining public infrastructure (e.g. public buildings, roads, bridges, etc.), e.g. [38], [39], and (10) working efficiently, [40].



For these topics, respondents were asked to assess the extent that they consider these topics as major challenges for the next three years, using a 9-point scale (ranging from (-4) *No challenge at all* to (+4) *A very big challenge*). We added numerical labels to make comparisons across different languages more standardized.

As public challenges can be very different for the local municipality level, compared to the overall regional or national level [1], [41], the sample of respondents was randomly split. Group A was asked to assess the biggest challenges of the country's public sector as a whole for the next three years and Group B was asked to assess the major challenges of the administration of the municipality or city where they lived in for the next three years.

## Findings

In this article, we discuss some major insights. For all figures reported herein, we have ranked perceived challenges based on the overall sample mean, from *biggest challenge* to (relatively) *least a challenge*. This means that we can understand what the main challenges are from a cross-country perspective from the order of the topics. Mean values are illustrated with a dot, along with the 95% confidence interval around the mean. Moreover, we have also marked the middle line (i.e. the scale option '0').

Since all the means are on the positive side of the scale, all ten topics are considered as challenges for the public sector, with (1) maintaining public infrastructure well, (2) working efficiently, and (3) maintaining a good public service quality as the biggest challenges according to citizens. Preserving a good reputation, representing all groups in society, attracting competent public employees, and public employees' motivation are seen as challenges by all groups of citizens, however, to a lesser extent than the other topics.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the perceived challenges in a cross-country comparison. In comparison, German citizens perceive the challenges as stronger than citizens of the other four countries. In contrast, Danish citizens rate all challenges as less substantial. For people in Germany and New Zealand, public infrastructure is the biggest challenge for the next three years, whereas Austrian and Dutch citizens are most concerned about the efficiency of public tasks. Danish citizens consider maintaining a good quality of public services as the biggest challenge.

German citizens are especially concerned about technological development, whereas Austrians and Dutch see potential in the areas of citizen participation and transparency. Again, Danish citizens rate these items as less of a challenge from a comparative perspective. In particular, transparent performance reporting is considered the least challenging issue in the Danish public sector.



**Figure 1: Public sector challenges in a cross-country comparison**

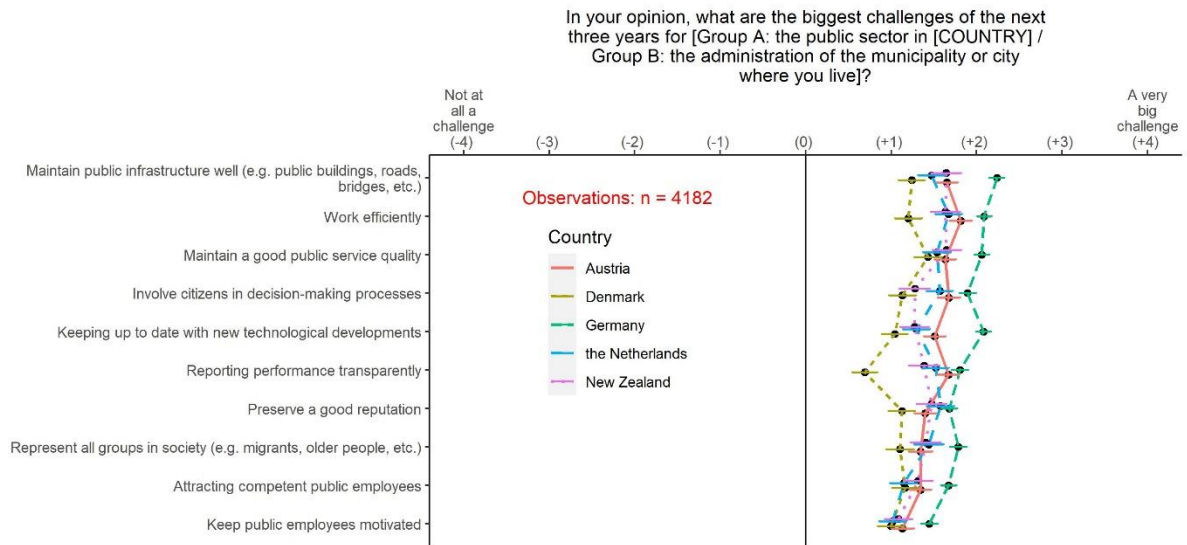
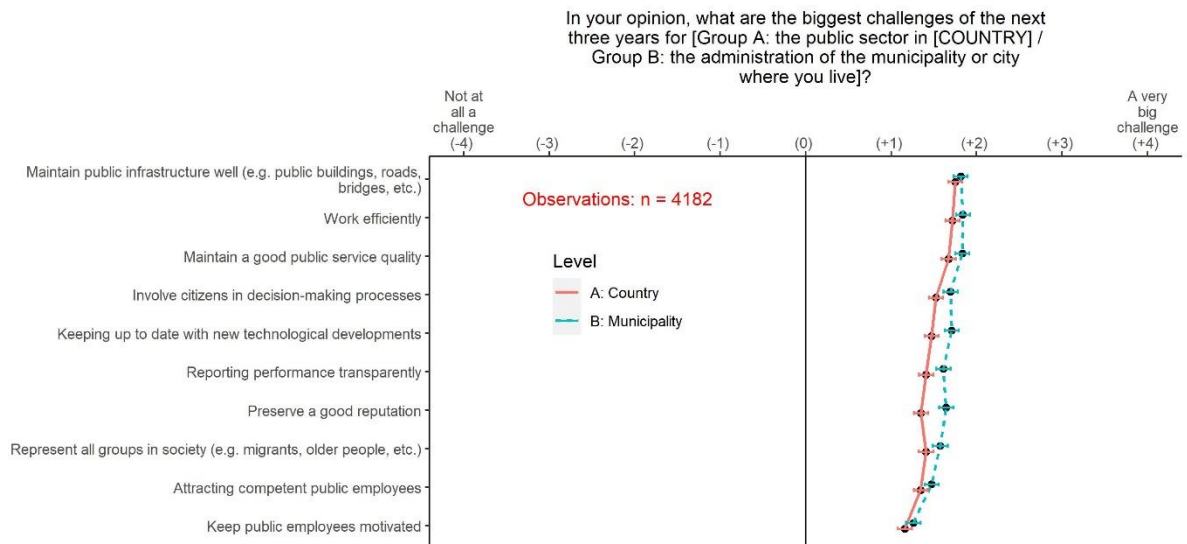


Figure 2 illustrates the findings of both groups when comparing the challenges in the public sector in general and the challenges in the administration of the municipality or city where the respondent lives in. As no substantial differences were identified, we combined the answers of both groups to analyze the differences between other groups based on demographics.

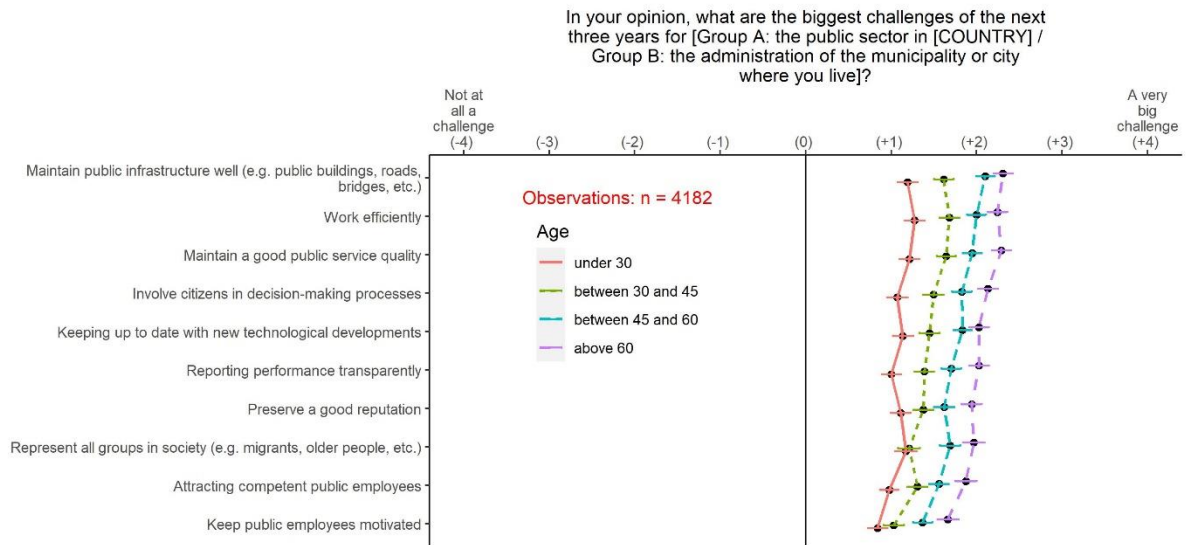
**Figure 2: Public sector challenges - country versus municipality**



In an exploratory approach, we compared different groups for various demographics. However, it is interesting to point out the differences of opinions based on the respondents' age (Figure 3). A consistent pattern indicating that older individuals perceive challenges as more substantial than younger ones can be observed.



**Figure 3: Public sector challenges by age group**



## Discussion and Conclusion

We discuss four key findings in detail that are especially interesting from a public management perspective and provide directions for public administration research and policy development.

First, respondents from all five countries are concerned about the provision of a high-quality public infrastructure and an efficient and effective public service provision. This corresponds with the two central goals of the New Public Management (NPM) reforms in public organizations [42], [43], [44]. Although scholars point out that NPM reforms can relate to the crowding out of other reforms and values [45], [46], [47], these findings indicate that the citizens' perception about the need of reform is consistent with the NPM goals to promote quality, efficiency, and effectiveness in public service delivery by importing practices and norms from private sectors.

Thus, further research is recommended to investigate how public values such as equity and impartiality can be combined with managerial values in public organizations. In addition, a pertinent research area comprises studying the citizens' expectations regarding the maintenance of public infrastructure. For example, it would be interesting to study if the citizens' concerns are related to the climate-friendly adaption of public buildings. Besides, it could be asked whether the perceived challenges are related to the means of transport used by citizens (both New Zealand and Germany have a high number of vehicles per inhabitant). Further research is required to know if car drivers care more about well-maintained roads than those who commute by train, and what the possible behavioral consequences of the maintenance of public transport infrastructure are.

Second, an interesting pattern can be observed in terms of the scoring of topics as public sector challenges. Accordingly, the topics perceived as the biggest challenges refer to the ones about increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery. As already mentioned, this perceived need for reforms corresponds with the ideas of the NPM, and the citizens' role as customers of public service [8]. The second group of topics that citizens are concerned about comprises citizen involvement, leveraging modern technology, and government transparency. These are issues that are in line with the ideas of an open government and consider the citizens'



role as active co-producers of public services and policies [29], [48]. The third group of topics relates to higher purposes of the public sector and public workforce, which are less substantial challenges according to citizens. According to public value governance [49], the government takes the role of a guarantor of public value. Future research might connect these public sector challenges to citizens' perception of good governance, and understand how valuable the government's efforts in enhancing accountability, effectiveness, and legitimacy are to citizens [50].

Third, some national differences with regard to the scoring of public sector challenges were identified. While Austrian, Dutch, and New Zealand citizens show similar patterns in their scoring of public sector challenges, Germans are the most pessimistic about the various public sector topics and Danish citizens score the topics as substantially less challenging than citizens of other countries. In particular, German citizens perceive technological advancement as a substantial challenge for the public sector, and Danish citizens score transparency about public performance as substantially less challenging than citizens of other countries. This might be because of the country's development toward a digital government. While the extent to which Germany is digitalized is below the OECD average, Denmark has been consistently ranked the highest for the global development of digital government and is considered a prominent example of digitalization [51]. In general, when comparing the countries' characteristics (see Table 1), the Danish sector performs best in financial terms, trust in the political-administrative system, and confidence in the national government. Along with the objective performance indicators, citizens provide an additional source to measure the government's performance, and their perceptions of public sector challenges seem to confirm these indicators. It would be interesting to study if rankings like the digital government index support the citizens' decision-making on the country's performance, or if they base their decisions on their own experience with the government.

Finally, there is a clear generation effect across all five countries, where younger generations are less pessimistic about the various public sector topics. This might be explained by the citizens' experience with the government and public service delivery which means that worries about the public sector increase with age. In any case, the findings indicate that public sector topics are perceived differently across age groups. This has implications for public management in terms of information provision, communication, and service delivery. A stakeholder approach might thus be useful to identify the needs and expectations of different groups of citizens with respect to socio-demographic characteristics [5].

### **Author bios**

Lisa Hohensinn is an assistant professor at the Institute for Public Management & Governance, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria. She has been a visiting scholar at Stanford University, Suffolk University Boston, and University of Mannheim. Her research interests include digital government, government openness and transparency, public trust in the political-administrative system, and comparative public management.

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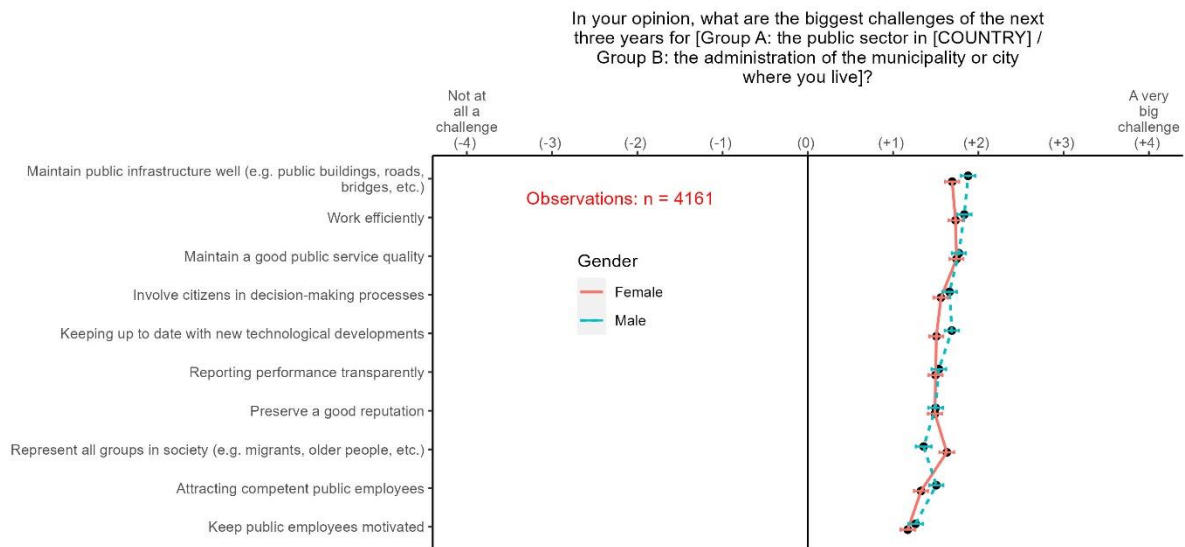
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## Appendix

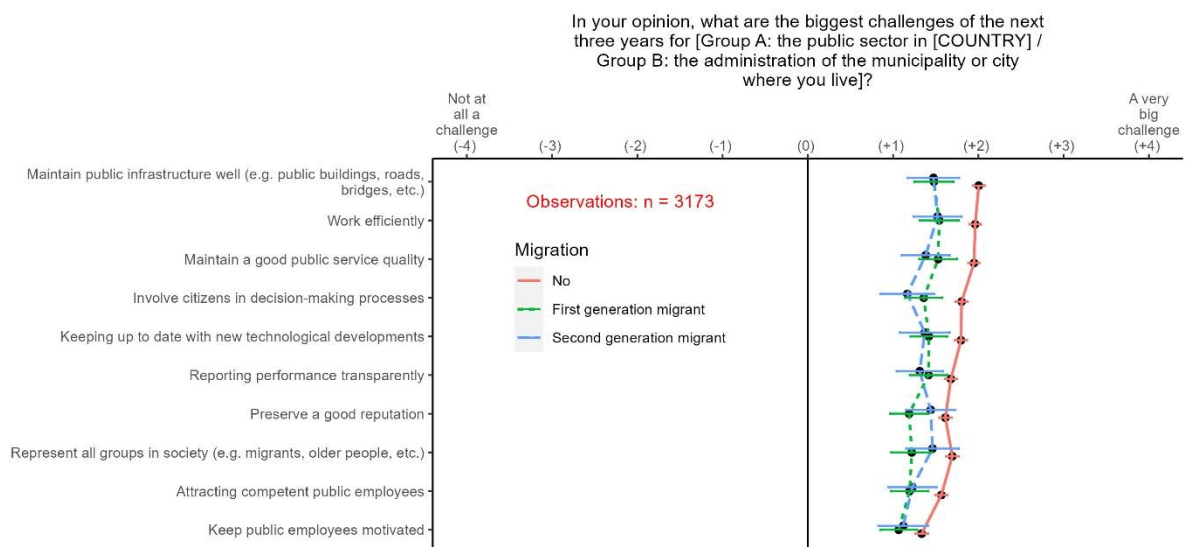
In this appendix, we also provide other representations of the data, while more figures (also in German) can be found on: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.25880950>

The data and research protocol can be found on: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/UV928>

**Figure 4(A): Public sector challenges by gender**

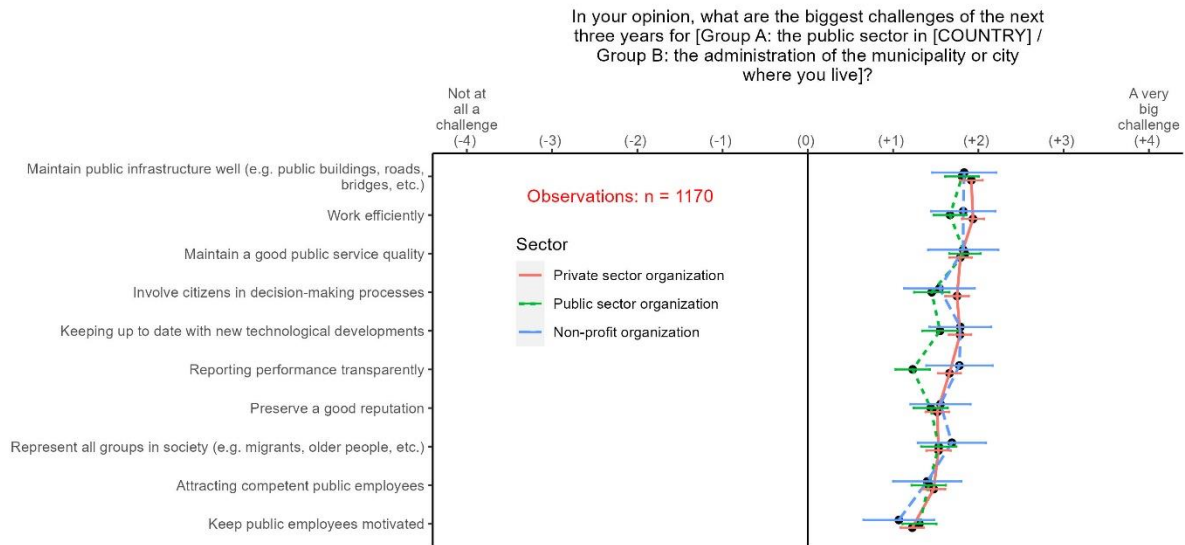


**Figure 5(A): Public sector challenges by migration background**



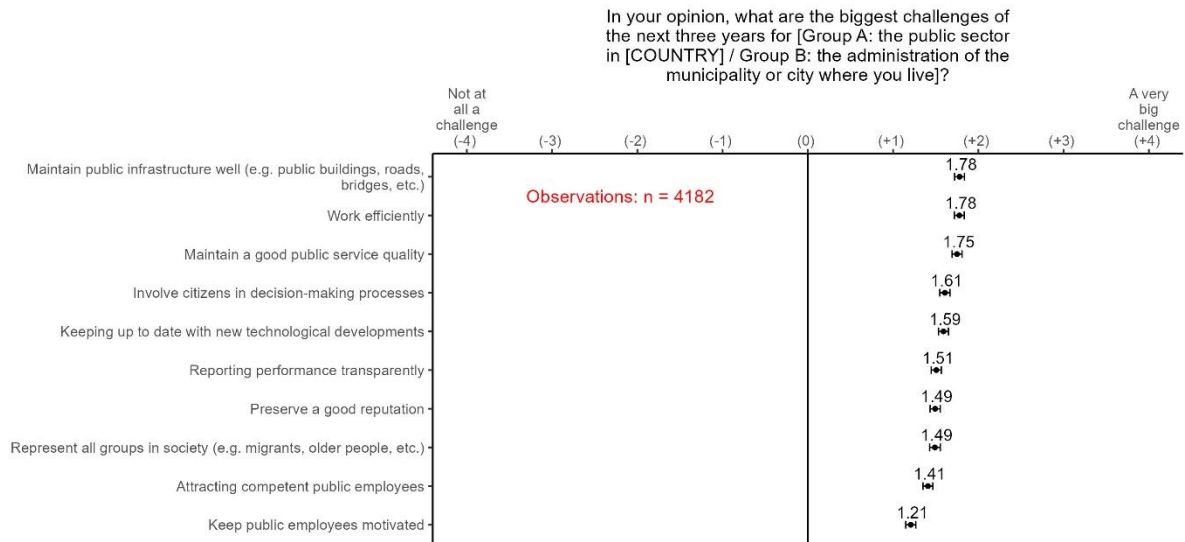


**Figure 6(A): Public sector challenges by sector of employment**



Note: not in every country, sector of employment was asked.

**Figure 7(A): Public sector challenges, in scale mean values with 95% confidence intervals**



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