

Administrative Burden, Equity and the Citizen Experience: A Multi-Level Conceptual Model

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ABSTRACT

Administrative burden—the learning, compliance, and psychological costs citizens encounter when accessing public programs has become an important lens for understanding how government institutions shape citizen experiences and policy outcomes. This paper develops a multi-level conceptual model that connects administrative burden with equity and the citizen experience across individual, organizational, and institutional levels. The model proposes that burdens are not distributed uniformly; rather, they interact with citizens' socioeconomic resources, demographic characteristics, capabilities, and prior experiences with public institutions, potentially reinforcing existing inequalities. At the organizational level, administrative procedures, frontline discretion, communication practices, and digital service design influence how burdens are experienced and mediated. At the institutional level, policy rules, governance arrangements, and broader administrative systems determine the structural conditions under which burdens emerge and persist. The model further conceptualizes citizen experience as both an outcome of administrative burden and a potential mechanism through which burden affects trust, participation, program uptake, and perceptions of government legitimacy. By integrating these levels, the framework moves beyond viewing administrative burden as an individual inconvenience and instead treats it as a multidimensional governance phenomenon with significant implications for distributive and procedural equity. The paper offers a theoretical foundation for future empirical research and provides a basis for identifying administrative reforms that reduce unnecessary burdens while improving fairness, accessibility, and citizen-centered public service delivery.

Keywords: Administrative burden; Equity; Citizen experience; Public service delivery; Multi-level governance

INTRODUCTION

Public administration is increasingly evaluated not only by the efficiency and effectiveness of government programs but also by the quality of citizens' experiences when interacting with public institutions. Citizens encounter governments when applying for social benefits, accessing public services, complying with regulations, obtaining licenses, or participating in administrative processes. Although these interactions are often necessary for implementing public policy, they can impose significant costs on individuals. These costs are commonly described as administrative burdens, encompassing the learning costs associated with understanding rules and procedures, the compliance costs required to complete administrative tasks, and the psychological costs generated by stress, stigma, uncertainty, or perceptions of unequal treatment. Administrative burden therefore represents an important dimension of the relationship between citizens and the state.

The concept of administrative burden has gained prominence because seemingly routine administrative procedures can substantially influence whether citizens are able or willing to access public programs. Complex eligibility requirements, lengthy forms, repeated documentation, limited information, digital barriers, waiting times, and interactions with frontline officials may discourage eligible individuals from seeking services. Consequently, the design and implementation of administrative procedures can affect policy outcomes even when formal eligibility rules remain unchanged. Administrative burden is thus not simply a technical issue of bureaucratic efficiency; it can shape access to public resources, citizen behavior, and perceptions of government.

A particularly important concern is the relationship between administrative burden and equity. Administrative requirements may appear neutral because they apply formally to all citizens, yet their effects can vary considerably across social groups. Individuals with greater financial resources, higher levels of education, stronger digital skills, flexible employment, or greater familiarity with government systems may be better positioned to navigate complex administrative processes. Conversely, citizens with fewer resources may experience disproportionately high costs in meeting the same requirements. Administrative burden can consequently reproduce or intensify pre-existing socioeconomic and institutional inequalities. From this perspective, equity requires more than equal treatment; it also requires attention to whether administrative systems create unequal capacities to access public services and exercise citizenship rights.

The citizen experience provides a complementary perspective for understanding these dynamics. Government encounters are not merely procedural transactions; they influence how citizens perceive the competence, fairness, responsiveness, and legitimacy of public institutions. Difficult or degrading administrative experiences may reduce trust and satisfaction, discourage future engagement, and create perceptions that government services are inaccessible or unfair. Conversely, transparent procedures, accessible information, respectful treatment, and responsive service delivery can reduce unnecessary burdens and strengthen citizens' confidence in public institutions. Understanding administrative burden therefore requires consideration of both measurable procedural costs and citizens' subjective experiences of navigating government.

Existing approaches often examine administrative burden at a particular level of analysis. Some studies emphasize individual characteristics and citizens' capacity to navigate administrative processes, while others focus on organizational procedures, frontline implementation, or institutional policy design. A multi-level perspective is necessary because administrative burdens are produced and experienced through interactions among these levels. Policy rules establish formal requirements, organizations translate those requirements into procedures and service practices, and citizens encounter these arrangements within the context of their own resources and circumstances. The resulting experience can therefore differ substantially across individuals and settings even when the underlying policy is formally identical.

This paper addresses this gap by developing a multi-level conceptual model of administrative burden, equity, and the citizen experience. The model integrates individual, organizational, and institutional dimensions to explain how administrative burdens emerge, how they are differentially experienced, and how they influence broader outcomes. At the individual level, socioeconomic resources, knowledge, capabilities, and prior experiences shape citizens' ability to navigate administrative requirements. At the organizational level, administrative procedures, communication, frontline discretion, and service design mediate citizens' encounters with government. At the institutional level, laws, policy rules, governance structures, and broader administrative norms establish the conditions within which burdens are created and distributed.

The central argument of the paper is that administrative burden should be understood not simply as an unavoidable cost of public administration but as a governance outcome with important equity implications. The distribution of administrative costs can influence program access, citizen satisfaction, trust, participation, and perceptions of governmental legitimacy. A multi-level framework can consequently help researchers and policymakers identify where burdens originate, why they affect groups differently, and which interventions may reduce unnecessary costs without compromising accountability or policy objectives.

The paper contributes conceptually in three ways. First, it brings together administrative burden and citizen experience by treating citizens' interactions with government as a central mechanism linking administrative processes to policy and governance outcomes. Second, it places equity at the core of the analysis by examining how administrative requirements interact with unequal resources and capabilities. Third, it connects individual experiences with organizational and institutional structures, providing a framework for understanding administrative burden as a systemic phenomenon rather than solely an individual-level problem. The subsequent sections develop the conceptual foundations of the model, explain the relationships among its key dimensions, and discuss implications for research, public management, and citizen-centered administrative reform.

ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN, EQUITY AND THE CITIZEN EXPERIENCE

Administrative burden is not a consequence of complex procedures but a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by interactions among citizens, public organizations, and institutional arrangements. To explain these interactions, the framework integrates Administrative Burden Theory, Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, Equity Theory in Public Administration, and the Citizen Experience perspective. Together, these perspectives provide a foundation for understanding how administrative requirements are created, experienced, distributed, and translated into broader perceptions of government.

1. Administrative Burden Theory

Administrative Burden Theory provides the primary theoretical foundation of the study. Administrative burden refers to the costs individuals experience when interacting with the state and accessing public programs. These costs are generally conceptualized through three dimensions: learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs.

Learning costs arise when citizens must obtain information, understand eligibility requirements, identify appropriate procedures, or determine how to navigate administrative systems. Complex regulations, unclear communication, fragmented information, and limited institutional guidance can increase these costs. Compliance costs involve the time, effort, documentation, travel, financial resources, and other activities required to complete administrative processes. Psychological costs include stress, frustration, stigma, uncertainty, loss of autonomy, and feelings of being treated unfairly.

The theory is particularly relevant because administrative burdens can influence whether eligible citizens successfully access public services. Importantly, these costs are not necessarily accidental. Administrative requirements may be deliberately designed to control eligibility, prevent fraud, manage public resources, or achieve policy objectives. However, burdens can also emerge unintentionally through inefficient procedures, organizational fragmentation, poor communication, or inadequate service design. The theoretical framework therefore distinguishes between necessary administrative controls and avoidable or excessive burdens.

2. Street-Level Bureaucracy and Frontline Implementation

The second theoretical foundation is Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, which emphasizes the role of frontline public employees in translating formal policies into actual service experiences. Public officials who interact directly with citizens frequently operate under conditions of limited resources, time constraints, ambiguous rules, and competing organizational demands. As a result, frontline workers exercise discretion in interpreting and implementing administrative requirements.

Street-level discretion can either increase or reduce administrative burden. A frontline employee who provides clear information, explains procedures, assists with documentation, and responds respectfully may reduce learning and psychological costs. Conversely, inconsistent interpretation of rules, poor communication, excessive procedural demands, or perceived disrespect may increase citizens' burdens.

This perspective adds an organizational and relational dimension to Administrative Burden Theory. The citizen experience is influenced not only by formal policy requirements but also by how those requirements are implemented in everyday encounters. Consequently, the model treats frontline administration as an important mediating mechanism between institutional rules and individual experiences.

3. Equity as a Theoretical Dimension

Equity constitutes a central component of the framework. Although administrative requirements may formally apply equally to all citizens, individuals possess different levels of resources and capabilities for meeting those requirements. Education, income, digital literacy, access to transportation, language skills, social networks, time availability, and familiarity with public institutions can affect citizens' ability to navigate administrative systems.

The framework therefore distinguishes between formal equality and substantive equity. Formal equality implies that citizens are subject to the same administrative requirements, whereas substantive equity asks whether citizens have comparable opportunities to meet those requirements and obtain the intended public service. A procedure that imposes the same documentation requirement on everyone may have very different consequences for a citizen with stable employment and digital access compared with someone who has limited resources or difficulty navigating digital systems.

From this perspective, administrative burden can function as a mechanism through which existing inequalities are reproduced. Citizens with fewer resources may face greater difficulty completing procedures, leading to lower rates of program participation or service access. The framework consequently proposes that the relationship between administrative burden and outcomes is differential rather than uniform.

4. Citizen Experience Perspective

The citizen experience perspective shifts attention from administrative systems alone to how citizens perceive and interpret their interactions with government. A citizen's experience includes perceptions of accessibility, fairness, transparency, responsiveness, respect, convenience, and procedural clarity.

Administrative burden can directly shape these perceptions. Long waiting periods, repeated requests for information, confusing instructions, and difficult digital interfaces may generate frustration and dissatisfaction. Psychological burdens may be particularly important because negative administrative encounters can affect citizens' perceptions of whether government institutions value and respect them.

The framework consequently conceptualizes citizen experience as both an outcome and a mechanism. It is an outcome because administrative processes shape how citizens perceive government. It is also a mechanism because these perceptions can influence subsequent behaviors, including trust in government, willingness to participate in public programs, future engagement with institutions, and perceptions of governmental legitimacy.

5. Multi-Level Conceptual Model

The four theoretical perspectives are integrated into a multi-level model consisting of institutional, organizational, and individual levels.

At the institutional level, laws, policies, eligibility rules, governance arrangements, accountability requirements, and administrative norms establish the formal conditions under which burdens arise. Institutional choices determine what citizens must demonstrate, how often they must interact with government, and what documentation or verification is required.

At the organizational level, public agencies translate institutional requirements into operational procedures. Organizational capacity, administrative design, communication practices, digital systems, staffing, and frontline discretion influence how formal requirements are experienced in practice.

At the individual level, citizens encounter these administrative arrangements according to their own resources, capabilities, circumstances, and previous experiences. These characteristics influence their ability to absorb learning, compliance, and psychological costs.

The interaction among these levels produces the citizen experience. Positive administrative design and supportive implementation can reduce unnecessary burdens, whereas complex institutional rules combined with weak organizational capacity may amplify them.

The conceptual relationship can be expressed as:

Institutional Conditions → Organizational Processes → Administrative Burden → Citizen Experience → Governance Outcomes

This relationship is moderated by individual and group-level characteristics, while organizational capacity and frontline discretion may mediate or modify the intensity of administrative burden.

PROPOSED MODELS AND METHODOLOGIES

This study proposes a multi-level conceptual and empirical approach to examine how administrative burden affects equity and the citizen experience. The methodology is designed to capture the interaction between institutional rules, organizational practices, and individual citizen characteristics. Because administrative burden is simultaneously experienced at the individual level and produced through organizational and institutional arrangements, a multi-level research design is appropriate.

1. Proposed Conceptual Model

The proposed model positions administrative burden as the central explanatory variable linking government processes to citizen outcomes. Administrative burden is operationalized through three dimensions: learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs.

The model can be represented as follows:

Institutional Conditions → Organizational Processes → Administrative Burden → Citizen Experience → Governance Outcomes

The relationship is influenced by individual and social characteristics that may increase or reduce citizens' ability to manage administrative requirements.

The major variables include:

- Institutional-level factors: policy complexity, eligibility requirements, regulatory intensity, accountability mechanisms, and administrative rules.
- Organizational-level factors: service design, administrative capacity, communication quality, digital accessibility, procedural clarity, and frontline discretion.
- Individual-level factors: education, income, digital literacy, time availability, prior administrative experience, and access to social support.
- Administrative burden: learning, compliance, and psychological costs.
- Citizen experience: accessibility, convenience, fairness, responsiveness, satisfaction, and perceived respect.
- Governance outcomes: service uptake, trust in government, continued participation, institutional legitimacy, and willingness to engage with public institutions.

The model assumes that administrative burden mediates the relationship between institutional and organizational conditions and citizen outcomes. Equity-related characteristics moderate the relationship because different citizens may experience different levels of burden from the same administrative requirement.

2. Proposed Multi-Level Model

A Hierarchical Linear Model (HLM) or multilevel regression model is proposed to empirically test the framework. Citizens are nested within administrative organizations, which may themselves operate within different policy or institutional environments.

The basic structure can be expressed as:

Level 1 – Individual Citizen:

Citizen characteristics → Experienced administrative burden → Citizen experience

Level 2 – Organization:

Organizational capacity + service design + frontline practices → Administrative burden

Level 3 – Institutional/Policy Environment:

Policy complexity + regulatory requirements + governance arrangements → Organizational processes and administrative burden

A simplified empirical relationship can be represented as:

$$\text{Citizen Experience}_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Administrative Burden}_{ijk} + \beta_2 \text{Individual Characteristics}_{ijk} + \beta_3 \text{Organizational Factors}_j + \beta_4 \text{Institutional Factors}_k + \mu_j + v_k + \varepsilon_{ijk}$$

where i represents the individual citizen, j represents the organization, and k represents the institutional or policy environment.

This approach makes it possible to determine how much variation in citizen experience is attributable to individual characteristics versus organizational and institutional factors.

3. Proposed Research Design

A mixed-methods research design is recommended because administrative burden has both measurable and experiential dimensions. Quantitative methods can identify patterns and relationships, while qualitative methods can explain how citizens and frontline officials experience and interpret administrative processes.

The proposed research can be conducted in three stages.

Stage 1: Quantitative Survey

A structured citizen survey can measure:

- Learning costs;
- Compliance costs;
- Psychological costs;
- Accessibility of services;
- Perceived fairness;
- Satisfaction with administrative processes;
- Trust in public institutions;
- Service uptake or completion;
- Digital accessibility; and
- Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics.

Likert-scale items can be used to measure perceptions of burden and citizen experience. The survey should include citizens who have recently interacted with a public agency to improve the accuracy of responses.

Stage 2: Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with citizens can provide detailed evidence regarding how administrative processes are experienced in practice. Questions can focus on difficulties in understanding procedures, completing documentation, interacting with officials, using digital services, and resolving administrative problems.

Interviews with frontline public employees can provide an organizational perspective on how administrative rules are interpreted and implemented. This component can help identify whether burdens originate from policy requirements, organizational constraints, or frontline practices.

Stage 3: Organizational and Policy Analysis

The study can also examine administrative forms, eligibility requirements, service portals, policy documents, procedural guidelines, and organizational practices. This analysis would identify the formal sources of administrative burden and allow comparison between intended administrative requirements and experienced administrative costs.

4. Measurement Framework

Table 1: Proposed measurement framework

Construct	Key Dimensions	Possible Indicators
Administrative Burden	Learning costs	Difficulty understanding rules, information search, procedural uncertainty
Administrative Burden	Compliance costs	Time, documentation, travel, financial and procedural effort
Administrative Burden	Psychological costs	Stress, frustration, stigma, uncertainty, perceived disrespect
Equity	Resource differences	Income, education, digital capability, time, access to support
Citizen Experience	Service quality	Accessibility, responsiveness, clarity, convenience
Citizen Experience	Procedural fairness	Equal treatment, transparency, voice, respect
Governance Outcomes	Institutional responses	Trust, satisfaction, participation, service uptake, legitimacy

EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

To empirically examine the proposed conceptual model, the study can employ a factorial survey experiment designed to test how different forms of administrative burden influence citizen experience and whether these effects vary according to citizens' socioeconomic and administrative capabilities. An experimental design is particularly useful because it allows researchers to isolate the effects of specific administrative features while holding other conditions constant.

1. Research Objective

The experimental study aims to determine whether variations in administrative procedures affect citizens' perceptions of accessibility, fairness, satisfaction, trust, and willingness to engage with public services. It also examines whether the effects of administrative burden differ across citizens with different levels of resources and administrative capacity.

The central research question is:

How do different levels and types of administrative burden influence citizen experience and perceptions of equity in public service delivery?

2. Experimental Design

A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial experimental design is proposed. Participants would be randomly assigned to hypothetical public-service scenarios that vary across three dimensions:

1. Administrative complexity: low vs. high;
2. Service support: limited vs. supportive; and
3. Digital accessibility: accessible vs. difficult.

For example, participants may be presented with a hypothetical application for a public benefit or government service. The low-burden condition would involve a short application, clear eligibility information, minimal documentation, and accessible digital support. The high-burden condition would involve multiple forms, extensive documentation, unclear instructions, and additional procedural requirements.

The factorial structure makes it possible to assess both the independent effects of administrative burden and the interaction between burden and organizational support.

3. Experimental Groups

Table 2: Experimental condition based on various dimensions

Dimension	Low-Burden Condition	High-Burden Condition
Administrative complexity	Simple forms and clear instructions	Multiple forms and complex instructions
Documentation	Minimal documentation	Extensive documentation
Service support	Clear guidance and assistance	Limited guidance
Digital accessibility	Simple and accessible interface	Complex and difficult interface
Expected experience	Lower learning and compliance costs	Higher learning and compliance costs

Participants would receive one scenario based on their randomly assigned experimental condition. Random assignment would help ensure that differences in outcomes can be attributed primarily to the experimental manipulation rather than pre-existing differences between participants.

4. Statistical Analysis

The experimental data can be analyzed using factorial ANOVA or multivariate regression analysis to estimate the effects of administrative complexity, organizational support, and digital accessibility.

A regression model may be expressed as:

Citizen Experience = $\beta_0 + \beta_1$ Complexity + β_2 Support + β_3 Digital Accessibility + β_4 Interactions + β_5 Individual Characteristics + ε

Mediation analysis can then determine whether perceived administrative burden explains the relationship between experimental conditions and citizen experience.

Moderation analysis can assess whether individual characteristics alter the strength of the experimental effects. For example, the analysis can determine whether digital accessibility matters more for participants with lower digital confidence.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The proposed experimental framework indicates that administrative burden is likely to have a significant influence on citizens' perceptions of public services. The analysis focuses on the effects of administrative complexity, organizational support, and digital accessibility on perceived administrative burden, citizen experience, perceived equity, and trust in government.

The results are organized around the three principal dimensions of administrative burden: learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs. The analysis also examines whether these effects differ according to individual-level characteristics and whether administrative burden mediates the relationship between administrative conditions and citizen outcomes.

Effect of Administrative Complexity

The experimental comparison suggests that participants exposed to a high-complexity administrative process would report greater difficulty understanding eligibility requirements, completing forms, identifying necessary documentation, and navigating procedural steps.

Participants in the low-complexity condition are expected to demonstrate lower learning costs because information is presented clearly and the number of procedural requirements is limited. In contrast, participants exposed to complex procedures are expected to spend more effort interpreting requirements and determining how to complete the process. This finding supports the proposition that administrative complexity is an important source of learning burden. It also demonstrates that complexity can affect citizens before they actually receive a service, because uncertainty about procedures may discourage individuals from completing an application.

Compliance Costs

The results further indicate that high-burden administrative procedures are associated with greater compliance costs. Participants exposed to multiple forms, extensive documentation requirements, repeated verification, and additional procedural steps are expected to perceive the application process as more time-consuming and difficult.

Compliance burden is particularly important because it converts administrative requirements into tangible costs for citizens. Even when citizens understand what is required, they may lack sufficient time, transportation, documentation, technological access, or other resources to complete the process.

The analysis therefore supports the argument that administrative efficiency should not be assessed solely from the perspective of government organizations. A procedure that is inexpensive for an agency may nevertheless impose substantial costs on citizens.

Psychological Costs

The experimental conditions are also expected to produce differences in psychological burden. Participants exposed to high administrative complexity are likely to report greater frustration, stress, uncertainty, and perceptions of being poorly treated.

Psychological costs appear particularly relevant to the citizen experience because they extend beyond the objective time or effort required to complete an administrative process. A process can be technically functional while still generating feelings of anxiety, confusion, or lack of respect.

The findings therefore suggest that citizen-centered administrative reform should address not only procedural efficiency but also the emotional and relational dimensions of administrative interactions.

Multi-Level Interpretation

The findings can be interpreted through the three levels of the proposed conceptual model.

At the institutional level, policy complexity and formal administrative requirements establish the conditions under which burdens emerge.

At the organizational level, service design, communication, digital accessibility, administrative capacity, and frontline discretion determine how those requirements are implemented.

At the individual level, citizens' resources and capabilities determine their ability to navigate and absorb administrative costs.

The interaction of these levels explains why the same administrative process may be relatively easy for one citizen and highly burdensome for another.

Overall, the proposed analysis supports the central argument that administrative burden is a multidimensional and equity-relevant feature of public administration. The expected pattern of results can be summarized as follows:

Table 3: Proposed multi-level conceptual model

Factor	Expected Effect on Administrative Burden	Expected Effect on Citizen Experience
High administrative complexity	Increases burden	Negative
Extensive documentation	Increases compliance costs	Negative
Poor communication	Increases learning costs	Negative
Limited frontline support	Increases psychological and compliance costs	Negative
Accessible digital design	Reduces burden	Positive
Strong organizational support	Reduces burden	Positive
Greater individual resources	Reduces experienced burden	Positive
High administrative burden	—	Lower satisfaction and trust

The results consequently reinforce the proposed multi-level conceptual model. Administrative burden is not simply an individual inconvenience; it emerges from the interaction between policy design, organizational implementation, and citizen capabilities. Its consequences extend beyond immediate service access to influence perceptions of fairness, satisfaction, trust, and institutional legitimacy.

These findings suggest that administrative reform should focus not only on reducing the number of procedures but also on improving communication, simplifying citizen interactions, strengthening frontline assistance, and designing services that account for differences in citizens' resources and capabilities.

The following table provides a comparative analysis of the major dimensions of the proposed model, contrasting low-burden and high-burden administrative conditions and highlighting their implications for equity and citizen experience.

Table 4: Comparative Analysis of the major dimensions of the proposed model, contrasting low-burden and high-burden administrative conditions and highlighting their implications

Dimension	Low-Burden Administrative Model	High-Burden Administrative Model	Equity Implication	Expected Citizen Experience
Policy Complexity	Simple and clearly defined rules	Complex and difficult-to-understand rules	Citizens with lower administrative literacy face greater disadvantages	Greater clarity and confidence vs. confusion and uncertainty
Learning Costs	Clear information and guidance	Fragmented or unclear information	Information gaps disproportionately affect disadvantaged citizens	Easier navigation vs. frustration

Compliance Costs	Minimal documentation and procedural steps	Extensive forms, documentation, and repeated verification	Citizens with limited time and resources face higher costs	Convenient vs. time-consuming
Psychological Costs	Low stress and uncertainty	High stress, frustration, stigma, or anxiety	Vulnerable groups may experience stronger negative effects	Respectful and comfortable vs. stressful
Digital Accessibility	Simple, accessible, user-friendly systems	Complex interfaces and limited digital assistance	Digital exclusion may increase inequalities	Convenient vs. difficult to access
Organizational Support	Responsive staff and effective assistance	Limited guidance and inconsistent support	Citizens with fewer support networks are more dependent on public assistance	Supportive vs. discouraging
Frontline Discretion	Consistent, transparent, and citizen-oriented discretion	Inconsistent or unpredictable implementation	Unequal treatment may emerge across citizens or locations	Fair and predictable vs. uncertain
Administrative Time	Short processing and waiting periods	Long processing and repeated visits	Time costs are particularly significant for citizens with inflexible employment or caregiving responsibilities	Efficient vs. burdensome
Procedural Fairness	Transparent requirements and respectful treatment	Opaque procedures and limited opportunities for explanation	Formal equality may produce unequal practical outcomes	Fair and legitimate vs. unfair
Citizen Satisfaction	High satisfaction with service delivery	Low satisfaction	Disadvantaged citizens may experience lower satisfaction	Positive vs. negative
Trust in Government	Greater confidence in public institutions	Reduced confidence	Repeated burdens can weaken institutional trust	Higher trust vs. skepticism
Service Uptake	Higher likelihood of completing applications	Greater risk of abandonment or non-participation	Administrative barriers may exclude eligible citizens	Greater participation vs. disengagement
Institutional Legitimacy	Government perceived as accessible and responsive	Government perceived as inefficient or unresponsive	Unequal experiences can weaken perceptions of legitimacy	Stronger legitimacy vs. weaker legitimacy
Overall Equity	Greater opportunity for substantive access	Greater risk of unequal access	Burden may reinforce existing socioeconomic inequalities	More inclusive vs. exclusionary

The comparison demonstrates that administrative burden has implications extending beyond procedural efficiency. A low-burden administrative model emphasizes simplicity, accessibility, transparency, assistance, and respect. Such characteristics reduce the learning, compliance, and psychological costs associated with government interactions and are likely to generate more positive citizen experiences.

Overall, the comparative analysis indicates that reducing unnecessary administrative burden while maintaining legitimate accountability requirements can improve both administrative effectiveness and substantive equity. The most effective approach is therefore not simply to minimize all administrative requirements, but to design them so that they are proportionate, understandable, accessible, and responsive to differences in citizens' circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Administrative burden is an important but often overlooked dimension of public administration because it shapes how citizens experience government and how effectively public policies reach their intended beneficiaries. This paper has developed a multi-level conceptual model linking administrative burden, equity, and citizen experience across institutional, organizational, and individual levels. The framework demonstrates that administrative requirements are not experienced uniformly; rather, their effects depend on the interaction between policy design, organizational implementation, and citizens' resources and capabilities.

The analysis highlights three principal forms of administrative burden: learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs. Complex rules and unclear information increase learning costs, extensive documentation and

procedural requirements increase compliance costs, and stressful or stigmatizing interactions create psychological costs. Together, these burdens can influence citizens' perceptions of accessibility, fairness, satisfaction, and responsiveness and may ultimately affect trust in government, service uptake, participation, and institutional legitimacy. The proposed experimental methodology provides a basis for testing these relationships empirically. By manipulating administrative complexity, organizational support, and digital accessibility, researchers can assess how specific administrative conditions influence perceived burden and citizen experience. The inclusion of equity-related moderators and mediation pathways can further identify which citizens are most affected and how administrative burden translates into broader attitudes toward government.

Overall, the paper argues that administrative burden should be understood as a governance and equity issue rather than merely an efficiency problem. Public institutions that reduce unnecessary burdens and design services around citizens' diverse circumstances are more likely to improve accessibility, fairness, satisfaction, and trust. Future research should test the proposed model across different policy sectors and institutional contexts using mixed, longitudinal, and experimental methods. Such research can contribute to the development of public administration systems that are not only efficient and accountable but also equitable, accessible, responsive, and genuinely citizen-centered.

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