

The Forum of Federations Handbook on Digitalization in Public Administration of Federal Countries

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(Ed.)

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This book is an ambitious collaborative effort and one of the first comprehensive books to systematically explore the intersection of the digitalization of public administration and federal systems. Amidst the acceleration of digital transformation driven by advances in information technology, rising citizen expectations and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments worldwide are being challenged to adapt. However, for federal states with a complex division of powers between the central government and constituent entities, this challenge is even more complex. This book was born from a collaboration between the Forum of Federations and the Centre on Governance at the University of Ottawa. By examining nine federal or quasi-federal states (Austria, Brazil, Canada, Germany, India, Mexico, Spain, Switzerland and the USA), this book aims to answer key questions: Is federalism a barrier or a driver of digitalization? Does digitalization lead to centralization or decentralization? What strategies are used to address the challenges of implementing digital policies in multilevel systems? Through a comparative approach, this book not only captures the current situation but also offers valuable lessons for policymakers, practitioners and academics.

The book opens with a very strong Chapter 1, written by the editors. This chapter not only presents the background and methodology of the research but also establishes a clear analytical framework. The authors propose two causal mechanisms: first, how digitalization affects federalism (as the dependent variable), and second, how federalism affects digitalization. They also identify four key domains impacted by digitalization: intergovernmental relations, collaborative action, policy implementation and accountability. This framework serves as a common thread connecting all chapters.

Chapter 2 (Austria) by Peter Bußjäger highlights an irony: although Austria has a relatively good digitalization ranking in the EU, coordination between the federal government and the Länder remains weak, particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter critically examines the issue of official secrecy that hinders transparency and notes that digitalization actually reinforces centralization in some sectors, such as financial administration. Chapter 3 (Brazil) by Kubota *et al.* takes a different perspective, focusing on the education sector. Brazil has a unique tripartite federal system (Union, states and 5,568 municipalities). This case study demonstrates that while the federal government is leading digital initiatives, administrative capacity at the local level is severely



skewed, creating gaps in service quality. The association of education secretaries (Undime and Consed) plays a crucial role as a “lubricant” in federal relations.

Chapter 4 (Canada) by Champagne, Gomes and Lecours examines open government policies. They find that while all provinces have their own open data portals, fragmentation is a major problem due to the lack of a pan-Canadian framework to ensure data compatibility. The Open Government Canada Working Group provides a promising example of collaboration, but it has yet to fully address structural barriers. Chapter 5 (Germany) by Sabine Kropp provides an in-depth analysis of the “cooperative federalism” that hinders digitalization. A study of the Online Access Act and the Digital Pact in School Policy shows that while the federal government attempts to promote uniform standards, the Länder have veto power and tend to maintain their own independent solutions, resulting in very slow progress (“progress at a snail’s pace”).

Chapter 6 (India) by Choudhary and Abrol describes the digitalization journey in the world’s largest democracy. Using case studies of Tripura, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, they show how the disparity in capacity between states is extreme. Initiatives like India Stack (open APIs) offer examples of successful federal collaboration, but the lack of a coherent legal framework for data governance remains a significant challenge. Chapter 7 (Mexico) by Martz *et al.* presents one of the most compelling success stories: the implementation of digital birth certificates. The chapter brilliantly explains how bilateral negotiations between the federal government and 32 states, facilitated by the National Conference of Governors, overcame political and technical resistance. This success then laid the groundwork for the digitization of other services, such as professional licensing.

Chapter 8 (Spain) by Mario Kölling analyzes quasi-federal “autonomous states.” Interestingly, the digitization of public administration in Spain has been a relatively depoliticized area, enabling successful intergovernmental cooperation, driven primarily by European Union frameworks and funding. Chapter 9 (Switzerland) by Tereza Cahlikova offers a unique perspective on the “laboratory of federalism.” With a bottom-up approach and strong cantonal autonomy, digitalization has been uneven but innovative. The authors conclude that federalism is seen as an opportunity rather than a barrier, although coordination for transversal services such as e-ID remains difficult. Chapter 10 (USA) by Reddick and Perlman focuses on providing broadband access to Native American communities. They use Deil Wright’s theory of intergovernmental relations to analyze federal grant programs. Their findings suggest that tribal communities have a dual status (sovereign yet dependent) that does not fully fit Wright’s coordinative, inclusive or overlapping models, requiring theoretical modifications.

Chapter 11 (Conclusion) by Thomas, Knüpling and Chebenova brilliantly synthesizes cross-case findings. They identify common drivers (e.g. the pandemic, international standards) and barriers (IT talent shortages, the urban–rural digital divide and inadequate regulation). They also outline a key lesson: that federalism can be a facilitator through autonomous innovation and formal/informal coordination but also a barrier through interoperability issues and capacity differences between regions. The book concludes with a future research agenda, including the impact of AI and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI).

The book’s main conclusion is that there is no single answer to whether federalism hinders or promotes digitalization. The answer depends heavily on the institutional context, political culture, coordination mechanisms and leadership. Digitalization does not automatically lead to centralization; in many countries (Germany, Switzerland and Spain), regional autonomy is maintained or even strengthened. However, the success of digitalization in federal states is largely determined by the ability to balance national standards with local flexibility, as well as investment in administrative capacity at all levels of government. This book firmly rejects the “one size fits all” narrative and offers a nuanced understanding that federalism is a complex arena in which digitalization is mediated, not simply hindered or facilitated.

This book makes significant contributions to at least three areas: federalism studies, digital public administration and comparative policy. First, it fills a gap in the literature by systematically treating digitalization not as a neutral technical phenomenon but as an institutional variable interacting with power structures. Second, it enriches theories of intergovernmental relations by showing how digital technologies create new forms of dependency and collaboration. Third, methodologically, the proposed analytical framework (digitalization affects federalism vs federalism affects digitalization) provides analytical tools for future researchers to design more rigorous comparative studies. The book also paves the way for cross-sectoral research, as digitalization has been shown to permeate all policy areas.

Strengths: First, the geographical coverage is broad yet in-depth. Nine countries provide rich variation without sacrificing analytical depth. Second, the coherent structure. Each chapter follows the same guiding question, making it easy for readers to make comparisons. Third, the use of concrete case studies (e.g. e-voting in Switzerland, digital birth certificates in Mexico) keeps the discussion from becoming too abstract. Fourth, the book is open access, making it accessible to readers in developing countries. Fifth, the involvement of practitioners (such as those from the ITU and government officials) adds an applied dimension often lacking in purely academic literature.

Weaknesses: First, although Spain is included as “quasi-federal,” some readers may question the comprehensiveness of the representation of purely federal countries like Australia, Nigeria or Belgium. Second, the greater focus on domestic digital policy lacks depth in addressing the dimensions of cybersecurity and data privacy as cross-border issues in federal systems. Third, some chapters are more descriptive than analytical, especially those that rely heavily on interviews with limited samples. Fourth, given the speed of technological change, some findings may quickly become outdated (e.g. e-ID policies or AI standards), although the analytical framework remains relevant.

This book is highly useful for a wide range of audiences. For policymakers and government practitioners, it offers a wealth of lessons from other countries, helping them avoid common mistakes and adopt best practices in designing digital strategies that fit their federal structures. For academics and graduate students, it is a must-read for the study of federalism, public policy and digital administration, complete with a theoretical framework and future research agenda. For civil society activists and journalists, it provides an understanding of why digital services differ across regions and how advocacy for interoperability and transparency can be pursued. For researchers in developing countries, the case studies of India, Brazil and Mexico are highly relevant for understanding the challenges of digitalization amidst socioeconomic disparities and unequal state capacity. Overall, this book is a *tour de force* that will shape discussions on digitalization and federalism for years to come.

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