



Leadership and Digital Governance Innovation in French Local Authorities: A Post-NPM Perspective on Open Data

Hamid Bachir-Bendaoud¹

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of leadership in adopting and implementing digital governance innovations within French local authorities based on a case study (2022-2024) of a shared open data project. Using the post-New Public Management (post-NPM) framework, the analysis highlights the importance of hybrid political and administrative leadership in overcoming organisational resistance and coordinating the players involved. However, the transition to fully post-NPM governance remains incomplete. The study, therefore, highlights the need to rethink organisational structures, resources, and cultures if these innovations are to have a lasting impact on local practices.

Keywords: Public Innovation, Open Data, Post-NPM Governance, Leadership, Local Authorities, Digital Transformation

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¹  Lecturer in Management Science (Aix-Marseille University – CERGAM, France), hamid.bachir-bendaoud@univ-amu.fr

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital innovation is now a strategic lever for transforming the public sector (Attour & Chaupain-Guillot, 2020; Porcher et al., 2024). From a post-New Public Management (post-NPM) perspective, such innovations aim to enhance service quality, increase efficiency, promote transparency and citizen participation, and foster public value creation (OECD, 2021). Open data, defined as the release of non-personal public data, occupies a central role within these new forms of governance.

However, implementing digital innovations often encounters significant resistance, particularly within local French governments, which are shaped by bureaucratic logic, heterogeneous organizational cultures, and complex power relations (Agger & Sørensen, 2018; Bachir-Bendaoud, 2024). While existing studies have emphasized the importance of contextual factors (Carassus et al., 2014; Queyroi et al., 2022), the internal determinants of innovation, especially the role of leadership, remain debated (Favoreu et al., 2020; Porcher et al., 2024). The complementarity between political and administrative leadership, as well as their respective influence on the adoption and implementation of innovation, continues to raise questions, particularly within French local authorities that have been relatively understudied from a post-NPM perspective (Torfing & Triantafillou, 2016; Melo et al., 2022). This article adopts this perspective to examine the role of leadership in the dynamics of digital innovation within French local authorities. It explores how leadership styles and the interplay between political and administrative dimensions influence the adoption and implementation of these innovations in the context of a transition toward post-NPM governance. More specifically, how do leadership styles and the articulation between their political and administrative facets shape the adoption and implementation of digital governance innovations in French local governments?

The analysis draws on insights from the literature on digital innovation in the public sector (Zhang et al., 2014; Porcher et al., 2024), post-NPM transformations (Christensen, 2012; Bryson et al., 2014), and public leadership. The study is based on a case study (2022–2024) of a joint open data project involving a French inter-municipal cooperation body (EPCI) and its thirteen member municipalities, conducted within the framework of the legal obligations stemming from the 2016 Digital Republic Act. The article is structured as follows: first, a conceptual framework combining perspectives on innovation, post-NPM governance, and leadership; second, a methodology section focused on the case study; third, the presentation of empirical findings; and finally, a discussion of the implications for contemporary local governance.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section outlines the theoretical foundations of our research by first examining the challenges of digital innovation in French local governments (1.1) and then addressing the role of leadership as a key internal factor in public sector innovation (1.2).

2.1. Digital Innovation in French Local Authorities: Toward post-NPM Governance Through Open Data

Digital innovation uses digital technologies to transform public administration's organizational, decision-making, and relational modes (Zhang et al., 2014; Beuve et al., 2021).

Open data constitutes a central lever in this process by promoting the release of non-personal public data for transparency, efficiency, and citizen participation. An evolving legal framework supports this movement, notably the 2016 French Digital Republic Act, which mandates the proactive publication of various categories of local data (Warusfel, 2018). Far from being a purely technical issue, open data represents a shift toward more collaborative governance, characteristic of the post-New Public Management (post-NPM) paradigm, which emphasizes the co-production of public services, value creation, and local embeddedness (Moore, 1995; Bryson et al., 2014). In this logic, public data is no longer seen as an exclusive resource of the administration but as a common good to be shared, interpreted, and collectively mobilized (Moore, 1995; Christensen, 2012; Pasquier & Villeneuve, 2018).

However, the adoption of digital innovations by local governments is often hindered by organisational and cultural resistance (Moore & Hartley, 2009; Porcher et al., 2024). These transformations are particularly complex in French local authorities, which are historically shaped by rigid bureaucratic structures, a diversity of stakeholders with sometimes conflicting interests, and a strong aversion to risk (Favoreu et al., 2020; Cohard & Bories-Azeau, 2021; Bachir-Bendaoud, 2024). In such contexts, innovation initiatives' success largely depends on public institutions' ability to tailor these changes to local realities. Nevertheless, digital governance innovations remain underexplored in academic literature despite their potential for modernization. This gap is especially pronounced in French local governments, where governance is often viewed as a fragile balance between political, administrative, and civic actors. This article seeks to address this gap by analyzing the role of leadership in adopting and implementing digital governance innovations within French local governments.

2.2.Leadership as a key factor in innovation

Research on public sector innovation typically distinguishes between external factors (regulatory, political) and internal factors (organizational), among which leadership plays a key role (Lewis et al., 2018; Favoreu et al., 2020; Porcher et al., 2024). Leadership should not be understood solely as an individual attribute; rather, it represents a structuring role that enables the mobilization of actors, the management of tensions, and the guidance of change. In the context of local authorities, political leadership, exercised by elected officials, provides strategic vision, arbitration, and democratic legitimacy. Political leaders facilitate innovation integration into public organizations by legitimizing reforms and mobilizing institutional support, particularly from senior management and intermediate levels (Damanpour & Schneider, 2008; Sørensen, 2013). Administrative leadership, exercised by senior managers and department heads, also plays a decisive role in sustaining and adapting innovations to organisational realities. By drawing on specialized skills, particularly in operational coordination and communication, these actors are essential to innovation processes (Queyroi et al., 2022; Porcher et al., 2024).

Although leadership has been extensively studied (Bass, 1985; Howell & Avolio, 1993), the link between leadership and innovation in the public sector remains relatively underexplored (Lewis et al., 2018). Moreover, debates persist regarding the respective importance of political and administrative leadership and the type of leadership most conducive to innovation. For instance, a quantitative study by Favoreu et al. (2020) involving 118 French local authorities suggests that governance innovations are more strongly influenced by internal factors such as

organizational culture and resource availability. According to these authors, administrative leadership and the presence of steering structures exert a more limited influence, with political leadership relegated to a secondary role. Other studies, by contrast, emphasize the critical role of political leadership (Sørensen, 2013) or the need for a synergistic relationship between political and administrative leadership (Carassus et al., 2014; Lewis et al., 2018). This complementarity is seen as essential to aligning strategic vision with operational expertise. In this context, the leadership capacities of political leaders and senior civil servants emerge as key drivers of innovation dynamics. It is also likely that certain relational configurations between elected officials and public managers either facilitate or hinder public innovation. Consequently, several scholars highlight the importance of further investigating the collaborative or conflictual relationships between political and administrative leadership to understand their concrete effects on implementing digital governance innovations better (Boukamel & Emery, 2018; Melo et al., 2022).

Finally, leadership styles significantly influence innovation dynamics. The transformational leadership model (Bass, 1990), characterized by vision, engagement, and intellectual stimulation, appears more aligned with post-NPM reforms than the transactional style, which emphasizes control and compliance. This article builds on this perspective by analyzing how these forms of leadership, through their interactions, can either support or constrain the adoption and implementation of digital governance innovations within French local authorities in transitioning toward a post-NPM model.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. An action research study within an inter-municipal structure

This research is based on a longitudinal case study (2022–2024) conducted through an action research approach (David, 2000) within the French inter-municipal structure of Cergy-Pontoise, which brings together 13 municipalities. Adopting an interpretive perspective (Dumez, 2016), the study focuses on the adoption and implementation phases of the innovation, which are more accessible in the short and medium term, drawing on the three-stage innovation model (Rogers, 2003; Damanpour & Schneider, 2006). The selection of this EPCI is justified by its inter-municipal configuration, which is conducive to the study of mutualization dynamics and collaborative governance. The investigation is framed by the legal context of the French Digital Republic Act (2016), which mandates local governments to open certain datasets. Ten out of thirteen municipalities are subject to this requirement, yet none had initiated an open data strategy at the time of the study. However, creating a Digital Affairs delegation in 2020 signals a political will for transformation.

3.2. Data collection and analysis strategy

Data collection primarily relied on participant observation: 11 internal and inter-municipal meetings were attended, combining dynamic observation (Journé, 2005) with a structured field diary (Excel-based) that progressively organized the data into descriptive, methodological, and theoretical notes, systematically cross-referenced with official meeting minutes. A statement of intent was prepared to reduce biases related to the researcher's involvement, and a peripheral observer stance was maintained (Mitchell, 1993). Data triangulation was achieved through documentary analysis and 15 semi-structured interviews, allowing for the collection of various forms of discourse and expression (Denzin, 1978). The

documentary analysis included internal and external sources: regulatory texts, strategic documents, different versions of the open data platform, briefing notes, internal reports, training materials, and studies on open data implementation in other local authorities.

Interviewees were selected based on their involvement in the innovation process: elected officials engaged in strategic decision-making, administrative managers responsible for implementation, technical and IT experts, and representatives from municipalities both subject to and exempt from the legal obligation. Data analysis was conducted iteratively using NVivo 12, based on a coding framework designed to identify key actors, tensions, and influencing factors in adopting and implementing the innovation.

4. RESULTS: LEADERSHIP AS A LEVER (OR BARRIER) TO INNOVATION

The adoption and implementation of the "open data" innovation within the Cergy-Pontoise intercommunal structure (EPCI) rely on the complementarity between political and administrative leadership, which is characterized by a hybrid style combining transformational and transactional dimensions.

4.1. Adoption is driven by transformational political leadership (post-NPM logic)

Data analysis highlights an initial phase (October 2022 to May 2023) marked by adopting the Open Data project, driven primarily by transformational political leadership. Until then, like other municipalities within the agglomeration, the EPCI had lagged in applying the 2016 Law for the Digital Republic. The lack of sanctions or concrete incentives for enforcement has fostered institutional inertia, delaying adoption. In this regard, interviewed elected officials justified the delay by citing competing priorities and concerns over project costs, complexity, and data control, thereby revealing tensions between legal obligations and operational constraints. As one elected official noted:

"Open data is not a priority. [...] We don't have time to look closely at the cost or our capacity to carry out this project given its complexity, and that's not even mentioning data control." (Elected official, 2023)

In response, the president of the agglomeration, supported by a vice president and a councilor in charge of digital affairs, asserted a strong political commitment grounded in a shared vision that transcended local interests. This visionary leadership provided the project with enhanced legitimacy, greater visibility, and effective political advocacy. It was expressed through mobilizing discourse, integrating the project into a broader digital strategy, and aligning with key priorities of the political mandate (transparency, local democracy, modernization). After a preparatory phase, the joint open data project was presented to the community board in May 2023, following a transformational leadership logic. As explained by one elected official:

"I think the elected representatives in charge of digital affairs, along with the president, played a major role in the adoption of this project. [...] The arguments in favor of open, participatory, and transparent governance, close to citizens, and of building more resilient cities given budgetary constraints convinced nearly all of the elected officials." (Mayor and community vice-president, 2023)

Due to the separation of roles between elected officials and administrative staff, the latter focused on preparing materials in coordination with the elected official overseeing the smart city initiative. Political sponsorship thus emerged as a key driver, not only for initiating

innovation but also for building a shared meaning around it. In a post-NPM context, the democratic legitimacy of elected representatives plays a key role in fostering change. By the end of this phase, nine municipalities were subject to the legal obligation, and one additional voluntary municipality had joined the project, paving the way for its implementation. Given other pressing local concerns, only one municipality withdrew, with its mayor deeming the project non-essential.

4.2.Implementation: complementarity of leadership but incomplete Post-NPM transition

The implementation phase (May 2023 – July 2024) unfolded in two stages: technical design and political validation. Administrative leadership (exercised by the Smart City Director) played a key role in translating political goals into technical solutions, adopting a "small steps" strategy to overcome resistance (such as lack of data culture and limited resources). This leader facilitated coordination across levels by acting as a mediator between the inter-municipal authority (EPCI) and the municipalities.

However, the implementation of open data remained largely shaped by an instrumental logic inherited from New Public Management (NPM). Obstacles emerged due to the project's technical complexity, the challenges of inter-organizational collaboration, and tensions between transparency requirements and data protection obligations.

"I'm not an IT specialist, I'm a lawyer. We're being asked to publish as much data as possible, but we've never worked with open databases shared with other municipalities, so my priority is ensuring law compliance." (Public manager2, 2023)

"We don't have any additional resources to structure and update the data. [...] What are we supposed to do? I won't take responsibility for deciding which data gets published." (Public manager1, 2023)

To address these challenges, the project manager adopted a "small steps" approach: presenting the project in town halls and proposing a closed co-construction process, excluding citizen or stakeholder consultation, while reassuring participants that only "accessible, usable, and high-value data for the territory" would be included.

"This hesitation stems from a lack of data culture. [...] I chose a small-steps strategy by presenting the project's benefits to interested municipalities. [...] I also reassured them that the platform would not be open and clarified that only accessible, usable data with added value for the territory would be selected, with a validation process suited to all." (Project Manager, 2024)

"The aim for us is simply to comply with the legal obligation, while being accountable to citizens for our management." (Public manager5, 2024)

In this context, transparency through open data was primarily envisioned as a tool for external reporting, institutional communication, or regulatory compliance. Furthermore, data analysis highlighted the necessary complementarity between administrative and political leadership. After the project manager's intervention, only the central city rejected the shared solution, preferring its proprietary system. This resulted in a prolonged impasse due to the lack of a clear hierarchy between the EPCI and the city. The central city's IT department remained opposed until a political intervention by the president of the metropolitan authority, who also served as mayor, ultimately endorsed the shared solution.

“Cergy chose to reject the proposed solution, opting for its own provider, even though it incurred additional costs. [...] Unfortunately, I didn’t have the authority to impose the shared system, so we were stuck for several weeks until the president stepped in.” (Project Manager, 2023)

The second stage of the implementation process involved securing political validation from elected officials formalized through adopting the "Open Data" agreement. A platform Proof of Concept (PoC) was presented to municipalities and local representatives to collect feedback and finalize parameters. However, some elected officials voiced concerns regarding data ownership and control.

“Who controls the data being published? [...] We must retain control over the information we release, as some of it holds strong political significance.” (Elected official, 2023)

Due to the project manager's obligation of political neutrality, further intervention by elected officials was required. To address lingering doubts, the president proposed a transactional compromise that guaranteed data ownership would remain with the municipalities. This enabled the agreement's adoption by nine legally obligated municipalities and one voluntary participant but also signaled a retreat from the post-NPM ambition of open and collaborative governance.

“I have a role in making proposals, but no decision-making power. The president’s intervention in favor of decentralized data ownership was decisive.” (Project Manager, 2024)

“The departments producing the data upload their own content directly to the platform via a dedicated access point [...]. Each municipality retains full ownership of its published content.” (Open Data Agreement, 2024)

Ultimately, in July 2024, the "Open Data" partnership agreement was adopted by the agglomeration's deliberative assembly and by nine of the ten municipalities legally subject to open data obligations. Though not bound by the regulation, one additional municipality chose to participate voluntarily.

5. DISCUSSION

This study contributes to renewing approaches to local public innovation by highlighting the differentiated yet complementary roles of political and administrative leadership in adopting and implementing a digital governance innovation, in this case, an inter-municipal open data project. It aligns with existing research on digital innovation dynamics in the public sector (Zhang et al., 2014; Porcher et al., 2024) and on organizational transformations within local governments (Carassus et al., 2014; Favoreu et al., 2020).

5.1. Toward a systemic and relational understanding of leadership

Our findings confirm that leadership is a key factor in public innovation trajectories (Sørensen, 2013), provided it is approached systemically as a relational phenomenon embedded in multi-level governance dynamics. The success of the open data project examined in this study relies less on hierarchical authority than on the ability to combine various leadership styles and levels.

In this regard, the study qualifies the findings of Favoreu et al. (2020), who assign a predominant role to administrative leadership. Here, the combination of political and

managerial legitimacy proves decisive, anchoring the innovation within a meaningful and feasible framework. Political leadership, particularly exercised by elected officials responsible for digital transformation, emerges as central in initiating change, fostering stakeholder buy-in, and embedding the project within a long-term strategic vision. Administrative leadership, in contrast, plays a key role during the implementation phase by ensuring operational coordination and resource management.

This complementarity becomes even more essential in an inter-municipal context marked by the absence of a direct hierarchical link between staff from different local authorities, necessitating a governance model based on cooperation and trust. Furthermore, our findings reveal an alternation between transformational and transactional leadership styles depending on the project's temporal phases. The former dominates in the early stages by mobilizing engagement and building a shared vision aligned with post-NPM principles. The latter takes precedence during implementation, helping to structure interactions, negotiate compromises, and secure deliverables. These observations support a contingent approach to public leadership (Carassus et al., 2014), where leadership styles are not mutually exclusive but are combined to address the specific challenges of the innovation in question.

5.2. Post-NPM governance under strain: Between normative horizon and institutional inertia

Beyond the issue of leadership, this study questions the progress of a transition toward a post-New Public Management (post-NPM) model of governance within French local authorities. While the discourse surrounding open data aligns with a rhetoric of transparency, citizen participation, and public value creation (Moore, 1995; Osborne, 2006), its implementation, in our case, remains largely instrumental, serving purposes of reporting, institutional communication, or regulatory compliance (Hood, 1991). These findings echo the critical perspectives of Heald (2006, 2012), who argues that data openness does not inherently lead to greater transparency, particularly if it is not accompanied by genuine efforts to make information intelligible.

A particular structuring factor is the issue of data ownership. While the literature promotes a vision of public data as a common good (Janssen et al., 2012; Meijer et al., 2012), the resistance observed in our study reflects competing logic of territorialized power and the preservation of local prerogatives. Data thus becomes a strategic asset, both a resource for governance and an object of political and symbolic rivalry.

These tensions underscore the limits of a linear transition toward open governance. Innovation does not impose itself automatically; it confronts organizational inertia, an administrative culture still marked by hierarchical structures and entrenched siloed practices. In this context, leadership appears less as a driver of immediate change than a lever for medium- and long-term transformation. This temporal dimension is critical: the transition to a post-NPM model should not be an abrupt shift but a gradual, contested, and sometimes reversible process.

6. CONCLUSION

This study, based on fieldwork conducted on a shared open data project, analyzed the role of leadership in adopting and implementing digital governance innovations within French local

authorities. It highlights the importance of hybrid governance, built on the complementarity between political and administrative leadership, in overcoming obstacles related to inter-municipal coordination, institutional resistance, and power dynamics surrounding data governance.

Our findings indicate that public innovation cannot be conceived as a linear or disembodied process. Instead, it unfolds within long-term political, organizational, and cultural dynamics, where leadership plays a structuring role by initiating change and guiding its trajectory. This approach sheds light on the tensions inherent in projects aligned with the post-New Public Management (post-NPM) paradigm, especially when the rhetoric of open governance clashes with technocratic appropriation and territorial fragmentation. In this respect, our research contributes to renewing the analysis of local public sector modernization by emphasizing the role of actors, governance styles, and temporalities in shaping digital innovation. It also calls for reconsidering the conditions necessary for the genuine institutionalization of open governance beyond mere symbolic commitments or regulatory imperatives.

However, this study presents certain limitations. It is based on a single case study and focuses on one category of determinant (leadership) and a specific type of public innovation, namely digital governance. A broader geographical scope, incorporating other local authorities subject to the same open data obligations (such as regions or departments), would strengthen the robustness of the findings and enrich the understanding of the dynamics at play. Moreover, our analysis is limited to the adoption and implementation phases without addressing subsequent stages such as appropriation, institutionalization, or impact assessment regarding performance. Further exploration of these aspects would help identify more precisely the factors that foster the consolidation of such innovations while shedding light on the diverse paths local governments may take in response to contemporary digital imperatives.

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